

## “This is for you”: Emotions, Language and Postcolonialism

Rukmini Bhaya Nair Speaks with  
Dorota Filipczak

**Dorota Filipczak:** Professor Nair, you have arrived in Poland as a linguist, but you are also a postcolonial critic and a poet, which is always the most intimate identity. I would like to ask you about the way these different roles inform each other. As a linguist you are a self-conscious user of languages. How does it affect your poetry and your criticism?

**Rukmini Bhaya Nair:** I think you have problematized the question of the “self” of the writer in such an unavoidable way that I must now confront it head-on—and the dangers of self-inflicted injury in such a situation are apparent! I must begin by confessing that I find the notion of a single, primary identity or role quite difficult to accept. You have spoken about my being here at a conference on linguistic pragmatics, and this is a disciplinary area that studies the multiform, multivalent uses of language. Taking my cue from this, I want to suggest that it is the nature of language use, which always has to adapt itself to current circumstances, to change subtly

from moment to moment. Use is an itinerant, a beggar, knocking at the door of language. It does not have a “room of one’s own,” so to speak. This affects our conceptions of the self as well. I think that the hierarchy of the self, predicated on the uses of language, is, in essence, rickety. Even if one intentionally constructs oneself, let’s say, first as an academic, then a mother, and then a poet, language simply does not allow one to freeze these identities. So poetry too, like any other use of language, becomes a persistent questioning of identity. And I think this is most marked in the case of women! I do not know about Poland, but being a woman in India often means you have to adjust minute-to-minute to somebody else’s notion of who you are. This constant calibration of who you are sensitizes you to what you are not. And writing, whether as a postcolonial critic or linguist or poet, is all about investigating this calibrated ambiguity. Exploring what you are not is exploring what you are. Ambiguity flowers at the heart of language.

**DF:** Let me ask you a more personal question. Were you born into an Anglo-Indian legacy? What made you choose English as a medium of your poetry? I would like to know what your original language is and how many languages you actually speak, and to what extent they influence the syntax and vocabulary of your poems.

**RBN:** I often say we do not choose our languages any more than we choose our parents. To answer your question more specifically, my mother came from Goa, and was born into a Catholic family, though she was not a believing Catholic from quite early on, while my father came from Bengal and was Hindu but not a believing one either. So, you could say faith in questioning, and questions of faith, were interlocked in my ancestry! As I've mentioned, my parents had different religions and spoke different languages. My mother's background was Goan and Portuguese, and my father's background was Bengali. It was an unusual marriage. When my parents got married in the 1950s, my mother was excommunicated by the Cardinal in Bombay for marrying a Hindu! Religious conflict and language difference therefore almost seemed fated to later enter my writing: for example, when I wrote a long poem like *The Ayodhya Cantos* which used old myths and legends to tell the political story of the barbaric destruction of a sixteenth-century

mosque by Hindu fundamentalists in 1992.

The fact of the matter is you put any language that is available to use when you need to, just as you eat the food that is put on the table when you are a child without asking whether there is better food available elsewhere. In my case, the common language that my parents happened to have, through the historical contingencies of colonialism and postcolonialism, was English. English was the food served up on my parents' rather unusual table. I ate it, I used it—and that was that.

It was only later, in high school and college, that I became aware of the politics of using English as a means of self-expression. Speaking more generally, though, my case is not that unusual. A culture of linguistic hybridity is actually taken for granted in India, given the complexity of the language context. As you know, India houses—if that's the right word—not only one sixth of the world's population but one sixth of the world's languages. It has twenty-two or twenty-three official languages and most of the world's living scripts, still used by millions. So, like other Indians, I grew up in a world of enormous language potential. Under these circumstances, the fact that my parents came from different states made English, which is also undeniably an elite language, a "natural" choice for me as a writer. But, of course, there was something unnatural about this decision as well.

Its postcolonial status makes English a double-edged sword in the hands of an Indian writer. English is a language whose colonial roots are still fresh in the memory, and it can alienate you from large numbers of the citizens of your country, while at the same time making you available to the world as a “representative spokesperson” for India. This continues to be the irony of using English in India.

**DF:** What kind of English did you speak at home?

**RBN:** That is what you do not know until you grow up! In India, I used English in my childhood as if it was a native language. I read and dreamt and studied in it without it ever occurring to me that the hybrid tongue I spoke was not “native speaker” English! In my schooldays, I knew few native speakers, indeed none at all except for a few nuns in the convent where I studied. My English was learnt from books and films and television and, most crucially, from other deluded Indian native speakers like myself! It was certainly not “English” English, but it was only when I went to England in my early twenties that the paradox struck me forcefully: my English was not the same as that of the good people of Cambridge. And yet, these people complimented me, saying: you speak such good English! The truth is that you do not confront these questions of language

ownership until you go to another country, another culture.

English is so internalized by many in India that you have the confidence to write in it like Rushdie. So what he does—and I do it, too—is to adopt the strategy of creating layers of meaning within a text. Some of these are available to a monolingual English speaker and other meanings to a bilingual or trilingual speaker. Here’s an example: in *Shame*, Rushdie calls the three generals in the novel Raddi, Phisaddi and Bekaar, meaning rubbish, laggard and useless, and only sub-continental speakers of Hindi/Urdu know this. For most Western readers, these are just names of generals. So, all the time in India, you are listening to a medley of languages in your head.

**DF:** How would you comment on Rushdie’s language and style?

**RBN:** Several years ago, I wrote an article which Rushdie, I believe, quite appreciated and it described “history as gossip” in Rushdie’s work. The notion here is that not everybody is aware of the nuances of gossip. With gossip as a form of historical story-telling, you have to be aware of the readers of texts as both insiders and outsiders. The more of an insider you are, the more you “get” the story. This is a helpful insight even for linguistic research. You can say: I will look at gossip as a genre, or “sensationalism” as language strategy, and

then you have an entry point into the study of complex texts such as Rushdie's. You make a strength of what could have been a weakness. You could think of a gossip-based grammar of narrative as quite unsophisticated. On the other hand, you could choose to listen to the whispers of all these other tongues within English, and realize that the very being of English today comprises the fact that it is richly sustained by all the other contact-languages.

**DF:** I'm intrigued by the concept of literature as gossip. This would be one of the phenomena in Canadian literature by women as well, since women are stereotypically connected with gossip. So it is interesting that Rushdie could be read in a gossip mode.

**RBN:** That is right, the gossip has intimacy. In fact, Robin Dunbar, the evolutionary biologist, has a theory about it. In the early history of our species, he speculates, while the men were out hunting, women gossiped and told stories. This activity constituted a form of moral judgment and the setting of ethical boundaries. It created communities on the basis of "social grooming," like braiding hair. In this sense, gossip can be seen as an interwoven and sustaining activity which creates ethical discourse, so if it is a "woman's thing," it also reflects a high moral standard. This is obviously relevant to the Rushdie case since the battle over the fatwa

was widely analyzed as a clash over moral ideologies.

A lot of postcolonial theory, too, consists in asking similar questions: What is the ethical position that a postcolonial theorist must adopt? Do the kinds of theory we produce essentially perform an emancipative role, due to which postcolonial societies seek to free themselves from the self-contempt and lack of self-esteem that a colonial regime inevitably imposes on its conquered peoples? How do we break free of these mental blinkers that continue to obscure our vision? What, ultimately, makes the postcolonial experience postcolonial?

I think of these enquiries as another strand in my own work. For instance, when I wrote *Lying on the Postcolonial Couch: The Idea of Indifference*, I argued that the world élite, schooled in English even when they come from the "Third World" have often fully absorbed the European legacy of modernism and postmodernism in art and literature. They have that privilege, so they know that Derrida's thesis about persistently burgeoning difference and polyphony is rooted in such an understanding. But in postcolonialism, I suggested in my book, the emphasis was not so much on difference but on *indifference*. Distance is created in colonial and postcolonial contexts by rendering oneself indifferent to the polyphony of the other, the "native" tongue(s). Postcolonialism as an emancipative doctrine is really concerned with the

use of linguistic resources and written resources to recover these “lost” differences. The task before postcolonial nation-states is to freely think and sing in our “native” languages again. Against this background, the decision of the Indian government after independence was gained in 1947 to institute “linguistic states” or administrative units based on India’s different languages is understandable, as is the confusing notion of having over twenty official languages! When Frederic Jameson spoke, rightly or wrongly, of the typical form of Third World Literatures being the “national allegory” perhaps it was also this imperative he had in mind.

My own archival work on the rise of the colonial system in India from 1757, when the decisive battle of Plassey took place, to 1858, when “the Crown” officially took over from the East India Company, provided me with an important insight here. For, in this historical examination, we find that this formative century was a period of much literary writing by the British in India. Everybody, starting with Warren Hastings to the articled clerk and the foot-soldier, seemed to have been writing poetry at this time. Why? My answer is that they were taking on a performative role, they were actually undertaking a crucial cognitive task through such literary practice. These poetic effusions were fantasy rehearsals for the eventual establishment of empire. In this poetry, the early colonizers

routinely compared themselves to Greeks and Romans, for example. This literature produced in the alien heart of empire thus served to convince the future rulers of India of their own moral and civic superiority. Off the top of my head, an example: “This land as at present it stands / Has no church or steeple / Its lands are low-lying lands / And its people are low, lying people.” Through witty poetic means of this sort, persuasive justifications were created for the colonizers’ right to govern, to disregard the language of the “natives,” their religions and their moral positioning. Postcolonial theorists, my work tries to show, attempt to reclaim this literary space, often using English, the erstwhile colonial language. That is why “hybridity” is such an important word in their vocabulary. If you look at the history of colonization, it is remarkable how so much of the contentiousness is in fact linguistic. It is all about the way language is used as a weapon or for defence, as an armour, an emotional and emotive shield against criticism.

**DF:** We were talking about Rushdie earlier. Let me go back to *Shame* at this point, a work so strongly concerned with exploring forbidden emotions. You seem to connect with Rushdie emotionally and intellectually. How would you describe this relationship?

**RBN:** Well, in the eighties when I was a graduate student at

Cambridge, there occurred a significant literary moment. In 1978, Said published *Orientalism* and then just two years later came the publication of *Midnight's Children* in 1981. For me and for others of my generation, both of these iconic books created what I can only call an inauguration. This was the birthing of "postcolonial studies" as a powerful new force in the literary field. Before this moment, there was really no entity called "postcolonialism" in my own thinking, but now I had to confront the thought and language of these two major innovators. I had to self-consciously ask myself what it meant to use language as a situated poet and theorist. Also, I have to say that when I considered Said's work in *Lying on the Postcolonial Couch*, his academic views were relatively easy for me to accept, but it was not so easy to accept Rushdie the fabulist as a commentator on Indian writing. He seemed to adopt a patriarchal stance and he came so very strongly to the defence of writing in English. These things bothered me. Still, I knew that "not accepting" Rushdie's views by simply ignoring them, by preserving a mutinous silence, was not an intellectual option. I had to respond to him in writing. So, in my mind, I created a counter-narrative. I argued that if Rushdie fashioned himself as a grand old patriarch, as did others, we could also see him as a writer who was very much a prodigal son. Rushdie himself speaks of "Jocasta's children" as the ones who

are judged "disloyal" to their roots, implying that he is one of them. I am currently finishing a book on Rushdie where I try to deal with his putative patriarchy, while admitting that he is clearly a major writer. Disentangling these paradoxes is the work of the critic. Take Kipling, for instance. He is a great writer whose political stance on colonization you may not agree with. With regard to my own work, too, people often say to me in interviews, "well, you are such a difficult writer." And I reply, "but I am not a difficult person!" Or, it could be the other way around. In order to grow as a disciplinary formation, postcolonial theory must seek to identify and discuss all these textual and emotional tensions in the writing of formerly colonized societies like the Indian.

**DF:** Let me continue to engage with emotions. What is ahead of us, as you say, is the reassessment of emotion, providing it with the importance it should have. Would you say more about that? I am not naively recreating the grid Said exposed: emotion vs. intellect. I am talking about emotion that will disrupt the authority of linguistic structure.

**RBN:** Now that you mention Said, I recall that he uses the example of Flaubert's picture of the Oriental woman (in *Orientalism*), and he remarks that she never spoke; she never revealed herself or her personal history. Non-revelation of self and silence are at the core

of Flaubert's image of the Orient as a commentary on emotional life. When the psyche of an Oriental woman is explored it is the ultimateness of her silence that is intriguing. For me, this woman is not only part of Flaubert's fiction; she is an imaginative trope, which could be explored even in the native literatures of India. How is the signifier "woman" constructed and reconstructed in writing? Emotion itself has belonged to the realm of women, as has gossip. But I feel we should negotiate these dichotomies not necessarily in terms of what it means to be a woman or a man, but also in terms of what it means to be human. That is why I constantly go back to the theme of human evolution in my work and ask the—perhaps unanswerable—question of how we came to be what we are. To live in an emotional ambience, to my mind, is finally connected with being human and not just with being a woman. The modern dichotomy between an emotional woman and a rational man who did not need to talk about affect seems to me spurious. It's a literary trap. After all, it was the so-called "rational man" who attributed affect to a woman's nature, so whether it is Emma Bovary or some other wonderfully imagined female character, attribution and attributes play a key role in stereotyping. This has happened, of course, across literatures and cultures. However, preserving this dichotomy between an experiential being and a thinking being

could be highly misleading because experiential thought is an attribute of both sexes.

Thus, to describe somebody as a "feminist writer" or a "woman writer" is to deny the fact that what we write as feminists and as women is for *everyone*, just as the lessons of postcolonial theory are not just for the postcolonial world but for the "developed" world as well. Feminism and postcolonialism are emancipatory doctrines. That is what they have in common. So, as a writer, I feel I must try and understand what the universalist notion "everyone" might mean. How does this "everyone" inhere in a singular individual or in a character in a text? If you write in English in India, do you really write for everyone? Won't you face the charge of being "inauthentic" because you simply do not possess the linguistic means to depict the everydayness of your society, its individuality, its local specificity? Conversely, if you write in, say, Bengali, are you available to the world? Yet, when you write "for everybody," the concept of an audience simply dissolves, as Wittgenstein might have said. How do we interpret this conundrum? Shakespeare, we accept, belongs to the wide world, as does Tagore. My point is that intellectual traditions, as they have been constructed by modernity and colonialism, should not divide us. If you are an Indian writer you do not write for Indians only. For example, I've read Dostoyevsky and Gogol and

Tolstoy only in translation, and it never struck me that these authors were just for the Russians! For me, it is quite liberating to realize that our common intellectual heritage comes from everywhere. It may be specific, but it does not have to be limiting. If we read with a sense of the cultural barriers always being up, then most of the intellectual inheritance of the world would not be available to us. In the age of the Internet to keep these barriers up will be even less possible and, indeed, not desirable.

**DF:** Let me stay for a moment with your comment on intellect and emotion because I would hate to lose that. It strikes me as something that came up in the feminist philosophy of religion.

**RBN:** Absolutely.

**DF:** Pamela Sue Anderson, a feminist philosopher and contributor to *TMI* came up with a concept of “rational passion” collapsing the opposition between the privileged element of reason and a negatively constructed element of desire excluded from philosophical discourse. Could it be said that people from the former peripheries of empire are the ones who also collapse the binary oppositions Said specified?

**RBN:** I think that is a very pertinent observation. The act of bringing emotion back into discourse

significantly takes place as a philosophical strategy in literature as well. Again, to recall Flaubert’s silent woman or the figure of the subaltern in Gayatri Spivak’s famous essay on the postcolonial dilemma “Can the Subaltern Speak?” we could ask: Is it possible to recoup the speech of the subaltern, who has been silenced for various historical reasons, via fiction, via poetry? In fiction, after all, you can get emotionally close to the characters in a way you simply cannot in real life. In a text, emotional barriers are removed by sleight of hand and the text permits nuanced intimacy.

The point made by me in *Narrative Gravity* was: Why did these “useless” literary forms—fiction, poetry, drama—survive across time in all cultures? What was their evolutionary purpose? When you listen to an interesting story or watch a gripping film, I noted that your pulse rate goes up, your eyes are transfixed, your facial and body language alters frequently, you cry and laugh although you know very well that the projected experience is not “real.” Yet you produce these visceral reactions. The question in *Narrative Gravity* was: Why do we do this? My answer was that it is really an epistemic means of learning, of experience acquired at a low cost. You do not actually have to climb a mountain or fall in love to understand these things; the textual experience gives you a huge intellectual and experiential reservoir. In my view, this emotional reservoir is



why these fictional or poetic forms are so privileged across cultures. These emotional feats are also intellectual feats because you have to think to “get” the very complex causal chain of a narrative, you have to empathize with “other minds” and deeply understand the true importance of pretence and metaphor.

As for poetry, as I mention in my book *Poetry in a Time of Terror*, on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the radio channels in the United States were flooded with poetry. Again, why? Surely it was because it was people’s immediate emotional means to articulate something inexplicable. And to me this articulation of the inexplicable is also one of the great intellectual feats that humankind undertakes. You need emotion to resolve a crisis, because crisis is always emotional. Further, there does not exist a human culture without stories or poetry, because these are primary means for hypothesis formation and inference-making. All intellectual feats are thus emotionally imbued. The two elements cannot be separated because without passion you cannot embark on an intellectual endeavour. In the case of specific intellectual histories such as the South Asian or Indian, the argument is also similar: you have to struggle emotionally to create a robust intellectual vocabulary for “the subaltern.”

**DF:** This explains to me why I have been dealing with postcolonial literature. It is because it voices emo-

tions such as anger, despair or joy. It starts as an outcry.

**RBN:** Yes, it is a shout! But it is also, most crucially, about the emotion of hope, said to be at the bottom of Pandora’s box, because hope creates a future as well as desire for that future. Creating the future is an intellectual task because the future does not exist. It is a counterfactual entity and you call it up, paradoxically, by appealing to memories of the past. You recreate all those connections which have been erased. Without hope for this imagined future, you cannot be a postcolonial writer.

**DF:** What about the connection between emotions, language and story-telling?

**RBN:** We have spoken of story-telling and its possible evolutionary role. An equally basic connection between language and emotions has also haunted me for some years now. Unlike the other critical sensory apparatuses of touch, taste, hearing, smell and vision which are fully “cooked” within about a year of birth, my hypothesis is that emotion takes a long time to develop, as does language. In linguistic studies by Lennenberg and others, language has been shown to take about three to four years to develop. These “language milestones” are well described. What I am trying to track down in my research now are “emotional milestones” and how language

and emotion grow in tandem to give us the “grammars” of our cultures. The idea of these “stages” is that you are unlikely, let’s say, to develop the emotion of shame before you have a basic repertoire of emotions such as fear or anger. Similarly, you will have to have the experience of expectation before you can experience disappointment. There is thus something of a “logic” to emotional development even if it is not very strict. Also, language choice, tone of voice, contextual familiarity and many other parameters all influence emotional growth, making us the variable “adults” that we come to be.

**DF:** How do you see your poetry *vis à vis* the work of other women writers in India? Are there any emotional affinities between you and other women writers?

**RBN:** There has been a great deal of recent effort to bring together women writers on different forums. I myself have formed friendships over years with many such writers, for example, with Bama, a Dalit writer who comes from the underprivileged caste. The big question in Dalit literature is: How does one forge a whole new language for self-expression? For, it so happens that the established and rich literary languages of India such as Marathi or Tamil contain terms for the lower castes which are highly derogatory. So, the task of Dalit writers, male and female, is not simply to

reuse these languages, rich as they are, but to invent a fresh semantics. The friendships I have formed often have to do with linguistic issues.

I’d like to emphasize, too, that women writers in India today are such a critical force because they do not in fact confine themselves to commentary on women’s issues alone. They write boldly and experimentally in Assamese and in Telugu, in a whole exciting array of Indian languages, and not only about sexuality, but about philosophy and about science. They even write science-fiction. At the other end of the spectrum, the interpretation of myth and legend is another thing that binds together women writers in India. How do we use the rich lore of oral myths and ancient legends we have inherited in the current context? For example, in my poem “Gargi’s Silence,” I am concerned with the motif of a woman in the ancient Upanishads who is not allowed to ask any questions of her guru.

These encircling questions—and the lack of them—define some of the ways in which affinities and friendships are formed amongst women writers and readers in contemporary India. We often have poetry readings which are amazingly multilingual, so this in itself is education. At such sessions we learn to appreciate the poetics of languages we do not know! Then, because we have at least twelve scripts in widespread use in India, the fact is we always feel a little

illiterate, whether we are men or women! Even if you can read five of these scripts, there are so many other languages and scripts you do not know. I always say we Indians had to invent reincarnation because you need several lifetimes for all this frantic language activity. Also, we could ask why most of the production by women writers in India is still in the form of poetry. Here, I suppose that women often write poetry rather than fiction because women's labour is often unpaid and round-the-clock, so we must grab those limited, interstitial moments. Other genres that have come to seize our attention in India are biography and auto-ethnographies, those untold stories of women, of Dalits, of entire communities. In this way, we are experimenting through genres and forms to express our inner lives.

Going back to previous issues in this conversation, I once wrote a poem about the history of the world. Now this seems a very "colonial" thing to do, to attempt to write a homogenizing history of "everyone." But my purpose was to emphasize that the recorded history of the world is a history of unremitting violence, especially violence against women who dare to ask intellectual questions such as Gargi in Indian myth, whom I've mentioned, or the Greek mathematician, Hypatia. I would say the story of Hypatia is international: it would resonate well with "postcolonial" Indian women today.

**DF:** Gayatri Spivak used an interesting phrase in a review of your book *Lying on the Postcolonial Couch*. She said you had given postcolonialism a decent burial. How do you envisage the future after postcolonialism, if there is an after?

**RBN:** The post of postcolonialism?

**DF:** Yes.

**RBN:** Well, that remark of Spivak's is in direct response to the opening sentence of my book, which goes like this: "Postcoloniality awaits consignment to oblivion." But to take the thought further, thank you for bringing up this point, for it is a metaphor I have always wanted to tease out—this rather Christian image of a "decent burial" which is, to me, a little bit at odds with traditional practices on the Indian subcontinent. Let me explain. The notion of a "burial" is interesting in an Indian context because it is a verbal transformation of the practice of "cremation" or the burning of the dead, which is the commonest form of death ritual in India. But if cremation is indeed the image we have in mind, then we have the presence of flames and fire, adding up to a very different image from an earth-burial.

The emotional impact of postcolonialism must reside, at least partly, in the images that it summons up. Burial in the Indian context conjures up reincarnation, cremation and even, perhaps, the

phoenix rising from the flames. Now, I gauge Spivak to be sympathetic to the idea of “burying” the postcolonial and moving on. We do not need the ghost of postcolonialism hovering around forever like the ghost in *Hamlet*, but if I am the one giving postcolonialism a burial, decent or otherwise, who exactly am I? Am I a ceremonial priest? The question is: Who is entitled to bury or to cremate? Women, Indians, theoreticians, poets, religious pontiffs? All or none? Or is the burial in question a phantom act, a phantasmagoric literary performance, a *tour de force à la* T.S. Eliot writing in *The Waste Land* of the sunken Ganges and the “burial of the dead”? The echoes of the potent metaphor of burial are everywhere and we need to think through them: How, if at all, do we bury postcolonialism? We know, after all, that postcolonialism is, at the very least, a phase of history and no phase of history is ever quite dead. I could, for instance, mention an endless succession of past scholars or poets and query whether they are dead, and I must say that I’d be very uncomfortable if I had to definitely respond: Yes, certainly, they are dead and buried! So perhaps I was mistaken in *Lying on the Postcolonial Couch*. Too premature a burial is no good thing. Maybe we should not be talking about burials at all but of births!

**DF:** Yes, you have changed the perspective by means of intercultural

translation. The burial is never final. I would now like to ask you about your comment on Derrida’s sentence about the impossibility of translation. Do you believe it as a poet or linguist?

**RBN:** Is translation impossible? The idea behind translating, whether we speak of texts or thoughts, is to ideally achieve something like “perfect” articulation even if we are dealing with only one language. But the idea of achieving perfection is, to my mind, impossible if language is our medium. To me any great masterpiece is flawed. And it is through these flaws that you encounter perfection. *Hamlet*, as I see, is flawed in this sense; it contains a lot of tacky language, it exhibits much incongruity and “madness” as well as an awesome transcendence in its expression. If someone translated *Hamlet*, she would first have to take on board this idea of flawed perfection. So, I think the idea of a perfect translation is as impossible as the idea of perfect linguistic articulation. Someone once remarked in jest that a good translation has virtues that the original does not possess. It moves away from fidelity, and creates an object of interpretation. It plays the language game consummately, which requires an understanding of the “rule” that you cannot draw a perfect grid for anything in language. You can only say “roughly” what you mean; you cannot ever speak “exactly,” because even in mathematical formulas there

is room for interpretation. I would add that in India especially we are comfortable with this idea of, if you like, “unconsummated” translation. These matters are discussed by several Indian translation scholars in my (edited) book *Translation, Text and Theory: The Paradigm of India*. In India, we live in translation. We are natural-born translators. That means, too, that we live with the idea of an enabling “imperfection.” And if the imperfectness of translation is endemic to the postcolonial condition, to the Indian context, I would maintain that it is also endemic to being human. How could we talk otherwise, we strangers who have just met, you from Poland and I from India?

**DF:** Now that you are in Poland I would like to ask you if you are familiar with any Polish poetry, in translation obviously.

**RBN:** A friend of mine, Keki Daruwalla, a well-known poet himself, once gave me a book edited by Miłosz. It was called *A Book of Luminous Things*. A lot of the poems in the book were poems in translation that Miłosz had collected from all over the world. Now, what makes this poetry Miłosz selected *not* get lost in translation? As I see it, what is translated in this marvellous anthology is not so much language-specific matter like puns but images, such as the old woman with white hair in one of the poems Miłosz collected, to whom her

companion says: “your hair is like pearls.” The answer to why this poem was chosen is obvious. It was because of its sheer luminosity, the luminousness of the imagery which shines through different language filters. I remember, in this context, my own poem “Genderole,” addressed to a very famous Indian philosopher of the ninth century, Shankara, who talked about how we are all one, *advaita*. I must explain here that in Sanskrit you traditionally write all the words in a sentence or verse together, without gaps between them. So I wrote this poem in English about being a woman where all the words were strung together too, thus challenging Shankara, my imagined reader and the famous monist who believed “all are one” to now read me in this graphemic style, particularly because his own texts contain so many derogatory references, like those of Aristotle’s, to women’s lack of intellect. When this poem was then translated into Swedish, I thought to myself: O blow, how are the Swedes ever going to understand this poetic duel? This poem is so impenetrably embedded in culture. But when it was read at Linköping University, the discussion I had with the audience afterwards was great. This is a tribute to the translator and the role of translation itself for it showed how the translation coaxed the audience to understand not only the text, but why I’d deliberately made language a barrier in that poem. My view is that you cannot get equivalence in

translation, however hard you aim for it but you can certainly bring to birth an idea, a speech event; you can share “illuminations,” to borrow a word from Walter Benjamin, also speaking here of translation. Luminous things are luminous in excitingly different ways and we have to be prepared to take on these differences. Miłosz expresses this breadth of vision when he takes poems from all over and illuminates different things. We understand our common humanity better through this altruistic gesture of Miłosz. I have read Szymborska, too, with enormous admiration. In her case, her voice is so direct, her ideas are so smart and moving that they seem to easily penetrate the barriers of translation and allow us to reach the heart of her poetry. Yet, there can be little doubt that I lose the flavour of Polish when I read Szymborska and that is a profound loss. This sense of loss is inevitable in poetry which uses the most intimate language, as you pointed out at the very beginning of this conversation, but loss characterizes all communication. Sometimes a text uses a language I am familiar with, yet fails to touch me; at other times, I know that a text is “foreign” and

yet I can feel a deep empathy emanating from it and this seems to extend my emotional and intellectual reach. For me, it is this that is the great, intercultural reward of reading Miłosz and Szymborska, albeit in translation. They remind us to be human in every dimension. And this is another reason why I will never say my work is only for Indians. It is for them but not only for them. Even if a single Indian did not read me, I would still very humbly say to you, to my unknown audience, to everyone: “this is for you.”

**DF:** Thank you. It has been a very profound and luminous interview.

**RBN:** Thank you for saying this!

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