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Introductory Matters

The Strange Case of Secular India

In 1992, Sara Suleri opened her now classic study *The Rhetoric of English India* with the memorable claim that 'while the representation of otherness has long been acknowledged as one of the most culturally vexing idioms to read, contemporary interpretations of alterity are increasingly victims of their own apprehension of such vexation'.[1] If one of the principal tasks of postcolonial criticism was to question the duality of center and margin, Suleri argues that the almost pietistic commemoration of the 'Other' in a spectacular celebration of alterity has done little to dissociate 'otherness' from its conceptual reliance on this polarization. Instead, concealing the dangerous collusions that are bred in any exchange between master and victim in the colonial setting, the valourization of otherness has actually consolidated the asymmetrical power relationship between metropolitan and peripheral societies. For Suleri then, rather than valourizing their differences, it is in fact more important to confront the complicities between rulers and ruled, so as to understand that telling the story of the Other involves being forced to encounter the narrative of the self and to ask, always, 'just how other' the Other really is (Suleri, 1992, 9).[2] This conceptual terrain, as laid out by Suleri, is vitally important for the investigations in this book, which involve examining precisely such complicities in a context where it might fairly be said that the intellectual and political strength of the narrative of decolonization has collapsed and erstwhile anti-colonial societies have come to increasingly write themselves into empire, rather than oppose or counter it.

With Sara Suleri's searching analyses in the background, my book looks into a colonial and postcolonial rhetoric of binarism, considering in particular the polarized relationship between categories like tradition and modernity, self and other, religion and reason and east and west. I strive to articulate how, what Suleri had identified as the shadowy intimacies between such intractable others, have fared with the maturing of the phenomenon of globalization. That is to say, I ask simply: in what ways has the celebrated dissolution of erstwhile dualities like center and margin in a globalized dispensation

affected foundational colonial and postcolonial ideas about difference? Suleri had exhorted her readers to recognize that it is in the unsettling collusions between colonizer and colonized, when the boundaries between the two are at their most vulnerable, that it becomes possible to apprehend the profound vulnerability of power. A chilling fear, or, terror, as Suleri names it, is the product of such moments of vulnerability. To put it differently, one could say that terror is that act which brings uncannily close seemingly intractable others and in doing so reveals the limits of power. But this terror is also at the same time the spur, according to Suleri, for a certain kind of love – the kind of love that is hungry for the adventures of transgression and keen to encounter the imminent disappearance of the limit, which is about to be transgressed.[3] Terror and love thus appear deeply imbricated in Suleri's radical world-view, which, like the best postcolonial criticism, muddies every line of demarcation between the most jealously guarded binaries and points thereby towards the frailty of power. Yet, in a condition where binaries like self and other, nation and empire and tradition and modernity have been suspended to such a degree that the intimacies between them are neither terrifying, nor a spur to love, but merely normative, banal and ordinary, what happens to the recognition of power's instability?

Suleri's analysis emphasizes the fact that just as no matter what the complicities between victimizer and victim, these positions are not and cannot be reducible to one another. So too, terror and love are not synonymous. They are as much separated by the polarities between ruler and ruled, as they are brought together in their convergences. In other words, just as without the possibility of fear, there can be no keenness of love, so too, without an understanding of the difference between the two, there can be no political imagination. The narrative of this book charts the fate of precisely such a political imagination, as it moves toward a postpolitical context, asking in particular, what happens here to the precariousness of power and to the mutually interdependent lineaments of terror and love, which, according to Sara Suleri, were imbricated in the relationship between erstwhile binaries. This narrative begins *not* a long, long time ago in a faraway land, but in a contemporary occasion, and at the same time as the structural management of postcolonial difference is inducting once marginalized peoples into an increasingly close-knit global system to which there seems no alternative. As it has moved fitfully between the forces of colonialism, nationalism and postcolonial autonomy, the category of difference has become increasingly important for the perception and self-representation of formerly colonized people. Indeed, an especially valid case

in point is the contemporary Indian situation, which is even now, tortuously caught in the problem of how to reformulate postcolonial otherness in the midst of the radically equalizing drives said to be embedded in the best forms of fiscal and cultural globalization.

The previously protected Indian national economy was opened up to the forces of the free market in 1991 and around the same time the dangerous resurrection of Hindu supremacist organizations began to lead the Indian society to spectacularly ascendant fantasies of an emerging imperial complex. The economic part of this process forged a globally recognizable and increasingly technocratic middle class, which, awe-struck by the 'equal' opportunities of the newly-liberated market, no longer believed that problems of inequality and class difference were central to the forging of postcolonial nationhood. In a complementary movement, the cultural-political push toward Hindu supremacy called for the absolute subordination of (religious) difference into a majoritarian uniformity of Hinduized national culture. The mercurial spread and success of the contemporary ideology of Hinduization, or, Hindutva, as it is known, began with the crisis of a form of political and intellectual secularism that was tied to the young Indian republic under the stewardship of Jawaharlal Nehru. The triumph of this ideology moved neck-and-neck with the passing of a proto-socialist economic organization, that Hindu nationalist politics since the 1990s had consistently aligned with a particular kind of postcolonial secularism that continues, even today, to be identified as Nehruvian.[4] At the time of independence and in the wake of the most devastating Hindu-Muslim riots, the subcontinent had seen, Indian secularism was a nodal point around which the tolerance of religious difference was articulated as the principal rule of national belonging.[5] According to Hindu nationalist ideologues of the 1990s, the problem was that at this time the matter of religious tolerance was grafted onto the problem of economic inequality. This made secularism, at best, a watered-down tool for managing religious difference. With the twenty-first century on the horizon, these ideologues thus began to propose that a more efficient management of difference could be achieved not only through a radical overhauling of the standards of postcolonial secularism, but more importantly, in the corollary move to shift the socialist organization of the Indian polity. These intersecting projects would involve subordinating in absolute terms the question of inequality to that of difference and making difference, in turn, subservient to a majoritarian Hinduization of national culture. Thus, the issue of reconceptualizing how to manage difference and inequality came to be at the heart of the project of late-twentieth century Hindutva.

As one of the most valued goals of the Enlightenment, modern secularization had entered the British-Indian context as a primary axis for formulating the national collective, but as it moved in tandem with the multi-pronged forces of nationalism its fate became a constantly shifting one. Indeed, it remains unsettled even to this day. In perhaps one of the most significant works on the construction of secularism in British India, Gyanendra Pandey famously argues that in the more mature years of nationalism in the subcontinent, communalism came to be identified as the polar opposite of secularism. That is to say, it was a strictly anti-national exercise closely related with the politics of religious (especially Muslim) minorities.[6] Secularism, in contrast, came to be recognized as the only legitimate form of national community and henceforth was to be used as the bedrock for the articulation of the independent state as a liberal democratic structure. Embedded in this projected structure was the imperative to organize a diverse body of citizens into majority and minority groups. The overwhelmingly middle-class, upper-caste Hindu men, who were at the helm of engineering the Indian national collective, knew that creating a democratic Hindu majority and therefore sustaining their power would mean marshalling 'Untouchables' (or Dalits), who had traditionally been considered outside the fourfold division of the caste system, into an artificially homogenous structure of Brahminical Hinduness. It would also mean sustaining Muslim difference in relation to a broadly Hindu civic culture.[7] According to the classical-liberal rules of the postcolonial Indian polity however, a democratic majority was to organize itself around a language of tolerance vis-à-vis the constitutionally guaranteed rights of precisely such minority groups. Indeed, it was the acceptance, even protection, one may rightly say, of deviations from a normative Hindu majority that in independent India was given the name secularism.

Contemporary Hindu nationalists argue that such a grammar of secularism can only be an incomplete or pseudo form, for it actually upholds the difference of minority groups in relation to what could have been the uniformity of a pan-Indian civic culture. They further contend that the so-called secularists only recognize minority difference for the purpose of tipping electoral balances in favour of this or that representative parliamentary group.[8] Thus, in so far as Hindutva ideologues call for a radical reconsideration of minority rights in the present political domain, they in fact claim to be proposing a truer form of secularism that will assimilate marginalized communities more properly into the national body. That is to say, instead of a collective grounded in the recognition and acceptance of difference through shifting

political negotiations, they profess to aim for one based on the regularization of differences into a majoritarian conception of national belonging.[9] As I have already suggested, such a uniformly constituted idiom of belonging would require not only an absolutist and indeed violent Hinduization of Indian civic culture, but also an obfuscation of the problem of inequality through the aggressive standardization of a nationally viable economy of desire.

My contention is that Hindutva's impulse towards such aggressive control and regularization of difference means not only a shift in the constitutive economic, political and cultural terms of the Indian polity, but a transformation in the very texture of the language whereby questions of difference had so far been discussed. While the changing constitution of the Indian polity under the auspices of Hindutva has been demonstrated very ably by several scholarly studies, the matter of an altered language of political and cultural self-representation marks the new direction in which I hope to extend these prior studies. I will of course address this question more illustratively in the course of the book, trying to understand it in relation to important changes in what we know as the postcolonial condition, and more specifically, in relation to what Sara Suleri argues about the differences and complicities between oppressors and their oppressed. But first let me say that in order to enter the matter of the changing texture of language, especially in so far as it speaks to the category of difference, I will return my story of Hindutva to the philological beginnings of modern secularization, and in particular, to that historical moment in which language became a human field and a project independent of a divine power. One could argue that these histories were distinctly western in their orientation and therefore had limited influence in the subcontinental situation. However, as rigorously philological minds from Friedrich Nietzsche to Edward Said have shown us, the emergence of a secular-historical project of human self-discovery in the west, had a great deal to do with the philological Orientalist 'discovery' that Sanskrit was of greater antiquity than the Biblical Hebrew.[10] Moreover, this discovery fostered a concomitant interest in encounters with the diversity of mankind as expressed in the variety and historicity of its representative tongues, and so it was deeply implied in a conceptual understanding of difference. It is not surprising then that one of the principal ways in which present-day Hindutva has transformed the texture of secular-political exchange in the subcontinent is precisely by manipulating conceptual formulations of difference, and more foundationally perhaps, by challenging the independence of language from a transcendental power.

Orientalism, Philology and the Idiom of Secularity

During the long eighteenth century, there developed a layered relationship between the loosening of the doctrinaire belief that language was bequeathed to man through divine ordinance and the emergence of philological traditions that heralded the possibility of unifying an infinitesimally diverse humanity through the institution and study of literature. A deep crisis in human self-conception no doubt accompanied this undoing of a godly mandate over language. If there was empirical evidence for another language (Sanskrit) of greater antiquity than the sacred Hebrew, then this meant that there had been a profound mistake about the originary fount of human civilization. At the same time, in the term in which Edward Said puts it in *Orientalism*, perhaps *the* seminal text for describing this particular historical juncture:

> as the study of Sanskrit and the expansive mood of the later eighteenth century seemed to have moved the earliest beginnings of civilization very far east of the Biblical lands, so too language became less of a continuity between an outside power and a human speaker than an internal field created and accomplished by language users among themselves[11]

Radically independent of a celestial home, the production of meaning in this worldly field of language users was no longer dependent on the sacred unveiling of divine omens and godly prophecies and what used to be an immanent truth would henceforth be radically fallible. Also, interpretation would require means that were not exclusively clerical. That is to say, even scriptural works were now to be interpreted by means of technical procedures deriving from the secular science of philology, rather than from the transcendental pulpit of ecclesiastical authority. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that despite emerging from, and crystallizing a condition of (European) *secular* modernity, reinforced by the universalizing sway of scientific reason, philological Orientalism was also at the same time, one of those disciplines that readers of Said will have no trouble recognizing as the 'naturalized, modernized and laicized substitute for (or version of) Christian supernaturalism' (Said, 1979, 122**)**. With disciplinary advancements like comparative knowledge, diachronic analyses, anthropological generalizations and classificatory systems at his beck and call, the philological Orientalist could resurrect from the dead an ancient, classical Orient that had for long been irredeemably distant, veiled and unreadable. He could thus take pride in his role as 'a secular creator, a man who made new worlds as God had once made the old' (Said, 1979, 121). The

new science of philology may appear to have put to flight the arcane story of the sacred, but this element of the sacred was in fact being 'reconstituted, redeployed, redistributed in […] secular frameworks' (Said, 1979, 121). In short, taking the place of the divine protagonist of ancient prehistory was now the unmistakably modern figure of the philological Orientalist, who, with dispassionate objectivity, rather than through the staging of spectacular revelation, taught us like God himself, about the creation and cradle of man.[12]

The demonstration in 1786 by Sir William Jones of the historical kinship between Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and the Germanic languages was of central importance in this milieu. The idea of a harmonious family of languages was on the one hand premised on the concept of a common genesis for mankind, and on the other, it was projected towards the ultimate unification of humanity. Thus, *both premise and project* of philological Orientalism was the possibility of a unified mankind. But there was a problem in this apparently easy circularity. The evidence for Sanskrit as a primal beginning in relation to the other languages of the Indo-European family meant that the Orient was understood as both remarkably intimate, because of its originary claim on humanity, as well as terrifyingly other, because of its remote distance. If this terrifying aspect of the Orient had to be overcome, it would have to be made, as it were, 'in the image' of the modern European world. The philological Orientalist promised to do this through the piercing clarity of secular-historical processes. But these processes, of course, had little significance without being understood in a Manichean relation to a more primitive space and time, which they claimed to have developmentally superseded. It was for this reason that non-European cultural products, evaluated under the rubric of modern historical categories, had to be arranged in relations of hierarchical subordination to the preeminence of their more advanced western counterparts. In short, the crypto-religious impulse that coursed through modern Orientalism at the end of the eighteenth century, resided in the convergence between the academic Orientalist's relationship as creator-god to the very origin of humanity *and* his emphatically modern vision of his role vis-à-vis that ancient past. In this convergence, the Orientalist would 'discover' the Orient, master it and bestow it as a gift unto humanity at large – more particularly unto those colonized societies and cultures that, he thought, had not the mettle to discover their own past.

With this kind of a 'disguised ethnocentric race prejudice', Orientalism, according to Edward Said, had enabled the conceptualization of a single world space inhabited by isolable and hierarchized enclaves of identity expressed along strictly national-civilizational lines (Said, 1979, 149).[13] In an important

extension of Said's work to the specifics of the subcontinental context, Aamir Mufti has shown that what needed to happen prior to the establishment of such an apparently singular space carved out into distinct national enclaves was the uniform codification of heterogeneous expressive forms under the increasingly universal rubric of 'literature'.[14] That is to say, before the nation emerged as the necessary template under which all products of the human imagination were classified, those non-western practices of storytelling, which had come to light in the profoundly intimate, yet deeply unsettling encounter between western languages and the languages of the global periphery, had to be standardized. The structure used was literature.[15] In short, one of the ways in which Orientalism promised to decode the otherness of the east was by reading the plurality of its stories *as* literature and it was in this institution of literature that India appeared, for the first time, as a distinct national unit with its own legitimizing traditions.[16]

India thus materialized on the Orientalist map as a unique national civilization authorized by a continuity of textual forms. But, it was only a sovereign violence of extraction and selection that could have deemed that the most authentic of those forms were to be located in the Sanskrit texts of the Vedic Aryans, rather than, for instance, in writings in Persian, or myriad vernaculars, dialects and proto-languages.[17] Especially illustrative cases in point of this process were nationalist-Orientalist mappings of the *Gita* and the *Laws of Manu* as sources of authoritative tradition plucked from a richly differentiated field of textualities. Both of these works were instituted through the Orientalist knowledge machine as respectively the 'Holy Book' of a singular Hindu civilization and the binding compendium of statutes for an emerging Hindu subject.[18] But, in actuality, the *Gita* was only one amongst many theological possibilities, just as *The Laws of Manu* was an arbitrary selection from amongst a myriad of equally legitimate law books. Part and parcel of the artificial engineering of an authentic 'Indian national' tradition was thus the textual fabrication of a kind of monolithic Hindu essence, which was now to dominate over what used to be remarkably varied practices of ethico-legal, moral and devotional exchange. The Indic national-civilizational complex had been consolidated then, through an assemblage of sacred and secular elements, or, more specifically, through an alliance between an Indian cultural identity and its authorizing form of Sanskritized Hinduism, both so tightly linked, one would be homeless without the other.

The Sanskritization of Indian national tradition was accompanied by the invention of a range of modern vernaculars and it was in and through this

process that 'Hindi' (of a Sanskrit measure) was standardized as the most properly national vernacular. Given its national representative status, Hindi was in hierarchized relations of proximity to the languages, dialects and registers of speech it sought to displace. Most alien to the authority of Hindi as the linguistic and literary crystallization of national consciousness was in fact another north Indian vernacular of similar descent – Urdu. Urdu, like Hindi, was a standardized register of the Hindustani language deriving from the Khariboli dialect and emerged in the eighteenth century under the rule of the late Mughals. But, replacing Persian in 1837 as the language of the colonial state, Urdu was also marked by residual imprints of Indo-Persian mongrelizations. It was thus an outsider to the relationship between Hindus, Indians and Hindi-speakers, which was being engineered as synonymous by the Orientalist knowledge machine. As a result, Urdu became attached through a strictly colonial logic, to a rival Islamic communal, rather than properly national identity. This 'othering' of Urdu in relation to an authentic Indian civilization was rendered complete when after independence (and partition) it was declared the national language of Pakistan. In other words, not only did the competing forms of Hindi and Urdu become the representative tongues of two quickly and bitterly differentiated groups (Hindu and Muslim), but also, just as the politics of Muslim minorities had in the mature period of nationalist struggle been given the name communalism, so too the Urdu language, marked by an Islamic religious identity, was deemed not-quite-Indian. Since it is one elaborated quite fully by more qualified scholars, I will not belabour the point about the divide between Hindi and Urdu and how this became critical for the religious lineaments in the partition of British India. Instead, I will draw attention to the place of the English language in relation to the formation of the ostensibly most legitimate national vernacular[s] of the Indian situation, and more specifically, to the relays between national (Hindi/Sanskrit) and imperial (English) linguistic powers, as they have developed in and through the late-twentieth century transformations of the Indian political context.

Any study that aims to highlight this issue cannot but take into account the superb analyses of Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* in which the author accounts, incisively and expansively, for the tensions and complicities between the discipline of English literature in India and the political and commercial imperatives of British colonial rule.[19] First developed to communicate to natives, ostensibly without an ideological agenda, the mere mechanics of the language, English literary study came into its own in the shifting power equations between the East India Company and British Parliament; between

the Company and elite natives; and between British officials and Christian missionaries. Each of these interested parties had its own template for the use of English literature in the colony. If one thought it should be an administrative-bureaucratic instrument that could be deployed to ensure 'industriousness, efficiency, trustworthiness and compliance in native subjects', another believed it to be an enormous repository of Christian values that would improve the moral standards of non-believers, and still another felt it to be the most legitimate vehicle to prepare primitive minds for the humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment.[20] For Viswanathan's analysis then, the institution of English literature was not as commonly understood, a fully-formed hegemonic tool in the hands of the colonizer. It was, instead, an uneven terrain on which tactical manoeuvres and strategic shifts played out between those groups interested in, as well as resistant to, the strengthening and consolidation of imperial power. On this scalloped surface of literature, empire was simultaneously vulnerable and besieged, defensive and arrogant, and to return to terms introduced early in this chapter, both a source of terror and a spur to love. Most unambiguously put, one could say British Empire *came to be* on the institutional terrain of English literature.[21]

If indeed English literature had its origin in the colonial context, then this fact would actually suspend the intuitive notion that British national formations (such as literature) must precede the work of British Empire. The issue of class is the aporia that for Viswanathan most usefully challenges the idea that it is only a fully formed national culture that can make an imperial culture possible. Indeed, as she astutely demonstrates, it was in fact the realities of colonial oppression that resonated most loudly with the making of British national identity, through the shaping and reshaping of British class conflicts in the imperial era. Following her lead, I elaborate the political aspirations of contemporary Hindutva in the Indian context, with an eye particularly to the question of how, through the aggressive reconfiguring of sites of class-cultural conflicts, it imagines itself as a fully formed imperial programme, while appearing in the guise of a nationalist discourse that is still in its formative stages. I attend in particular to the Hinduizing of an upwardly-mobile Indian technocracy preparing to engage in the global cultural system with the confidence of an imperially expanding group. Highlighting the renegotiation of minority difference in relation to the free-market economic policies favoured by this emerging *beau monde*, I underscore in particular the forming of new kinds of public commentators and self-styled intellectuals who seek to pilot such changes. I put these developments into proximity with