

Asia: Reading 'the Signs of Our Times'

Aijaz Ahmad on literature and the world

Saturday 4 November 2023, by [VARMA Rashmi](#) (Date first published: 1 October 2023).

With the publication of *In Theory* in 1992, Aijaz Ahmad threw a spanner into the works of what seemed at the time to be the relentless march of postcolonial theory within departments of English and comparative literary studies in the Anglo-American academy. [1] The increasing power of this purportedly new field of study was made possible, Ahmad would argue, because postcolonial theory had been comprehensively and uncritically hitched to the poststructuralist wagon. In this context, *In Theory's* appearance became an event because it announced, with a bang, the voice of an India-born Marxist scholar based in India and the US whose powerful polemic set about demolishing the theoretical edifice in which Homi Bhabha, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak had established themselves as the holy trinity of the field of postcolonial studies. Ahmad, like Arif Dirlik and E. San Juan Jr., among others, was pointing to the fact that these academics had found a foothold within the Western academy precisely at the moment of the defeat of Third World liberation movements and the decline of Marxism as a theoretical and practical resource that was precipitated by the modish tendencies of deconstruction and colonial discourse theory. [2] For Ahmad, the emergence of the field of postcolonial studies and Third World literature was thus based on the elision of what he considered to be 'the fundamental dialectic - between imperialism, decolonization, and the struggles for socialism'. [3]

Ahmad's blistering critique of erstwhile Third World academics as belonging to the 'comprador class' that was divorced from grassroots movements for socialist transformation was, however, seen even by progressive and Left-oriented scholars as unnecessarily personalised and lacking in generosity. Other insights into how exile and migrancy were being valorised as the archetypal postcolonial condition while 'submerging the class question', [4] and how colonial discourse theory was dismissive of questions of political economy and of politics *per se*, were developed with greater engagement with the field of literary studies by postcolonial studies' internal dissidents such as Benita Parry and Neil Lazarus. [5] But while theirs could be seen as 'interventions' in the culturalist critiques of imperialism that had come to define ways of doing postcolonial studies, Ahmad's ambition was to unsettle the very intellectual ground upon which the theory and field had taken root.

Beyond the polemic, of course, Said, Spivak and Bhabha, among others, had critical differences and were substantially different from each other, but that is not immediately relevant to this piece. It is also important to note that Ahmad was hardly reticent in his attack on a Marxist literary critic such as Fredric Jameson (whom he, in a strange move, designated as a comrade who was also 'a civilisational other') for his theorisation of Third World literature, although in subsequent iterations he acknowledged Jameson's contributions to a materialist dialectical reading of literature in the context of late capitalism and seemed to regret, 'as a matter of considerable personal irritation', that his criticisms of Jameson were opportunistically weaponised by poststructuralist critics hostile to Marxism. [6] In her defence of Said against Ahmad's critique, Parry wrote of her 'distaste for the conduct of an argument which, in deploying recrimination as an analytic strategy, misrepresenting

the substance of alternative enquiries and adducing these to retrograde ideological interests, cannot but recall that device of polemical assassination contrived long ago by traditional Communist Parties in an attempt to disable other left tendencies'. [7] There were others, besides Parry, who were also uncomfortable with his criticisms of individual academics, particularly of Said who was hailed as an important voice speaking for the Palestinian cause in the American imperium, even as they may have been on board with his criticisms of the transparent careerism and professionalisation of the emergent class of postcolonial theorists that was complicit with the capitalist interests of the academy. So whether or not one reads Ahmad's work as divisive and ungenerous, as Parry contends, it is true that one wouldn't turn to him for citations of Marxist literary theorists who were fighting similar battles against the poststructuralist hegemony on the same ground (some of whom, like Parry, had remained for the longest time outside the folds of formal institutional settings). Nevertheless, what Ahmad posited with such brilliance, erudition and audacity was not just a critique of professionalism but a resolute affirmation of anti-professionalism at a time when the Anglo-American academy had become the site of the making of academic stars, with eyewatering salaries and cult followings. [8] Ultimately, Ahmad, who had taught at various universities in Canada and the US and had spent close to three decades teaching at institutions in India, ended up at the University of California at Irvine when the authoritarian Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi came to power in India in 2014. It was an ironic twist of fate since UC Irvine had hosted key poststructuralists earlier and gave them an important base in the US. It must however be said that to the end, Ahmad refused the frills and seductions of postcolonial theory and its institutional power, even as it had begun to wane by the time Ahmad found refuge in Irvine.

Ahmad's incisive critiques of the institutionalisation of Third World literature as an object of First World interests, 'unthinkable without metropolitan mediations', were crucial in injecting a necessary groundedness and materiality to the study of texts amidst the glib celebrations of the arrival of multiculturalism in the Anglo-American academy. But there always seemed to be a troubling gap in his critical writings, between his magisterial accounts (he frequently referred to the importance and necessity of the sweeping account of history) of the formation of fields of study such as postcolonial theory and Third World, Indian and Urdu literature, and his analyses of particular writers and their texts. Writers as varied as Saadat Hasan Manto, Qurratulain Hyder, Salman Rushdie and others, despite their stunning literary talents, remain for Ahmad unable to transcend the limits of their social location and class formation.

Ahmad's interpretations of Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy's texts are particularly illustrative of this gap. In both, his reading of the ideology of form becomes entangled with his analysis of the ideology of the author. Thus, while his masterful analyses of post-war Anglo-American academic institutions and the contradictions therein, as well as his synoptic account of Indian and Urdu literature, are forceful and insightful, his actual readings of texts seem to abjure the dialectical mode in favour of ideology critique. Ahmad was, of course, well aware that Marx saw Balzac as providing 'accurate and enduring analyses of post-Revolutionary France' despite his royalism. In a similar vein, he notes that Lenin had considered *Anna Karenina* a great novel even in the face of its social conservatism. Tolstoy's accurate and detailed rendition of the dominant ideologies of his time, in which he himself was wholly complicit, only confirms for Ahmad, as he puts it, that 'fictions can only be read within the conditions of their own possibility which are historical, ideological and formal'. It is the formulation can only be read that takes away from literature in particular, and art in general, the utopian possibilities of exceeding and transcending *the conditions of their own possibility*, a limit that Ahmad imposed on his readings and that seems to have haunted his literary criticism.

Ahmad's criticism of Rushdie's *Shame* entails a reading of the novel that sees it as unrelentingly hopeless in its representation of postcolonial Pakistan, which is portrayed as a claustrophobic world with no scope for resistance. [9] While conceding that the novel is written in the mode of political

satire, he can only hear in it 'a laughter that laughs too much', engendered by an author who romanticises his outsider position to mock and parody the East from a distance. Ahmad reads the novel as cynical and as playing to the literary gallery of the postmodernist establishment of the time in its valorisation of exile as a universal condition of modernity and its portrayal of the postcolonial world as intrinsically corrupt and bleak. While satire has long been a crucial literary weapon for emancipatory politics, Ahmad finds that the real-life figures of Bhutto and Zia who are lampooned in the novel were in fact dangerous tyrants, too dangerous to be laughed at. I don't think Rushdie would disagree with the former claim, but the proposition that some tyrants are too dangerous to be mocked seems to deny satire its potency. Rushdie's satire fails because ultimately, for Ahmad, resistance must conform to, and should be mediated via, a particular mode of organised working class politics that he regards as absent from Rushdie's novel. No doubt Ahmad's unease with Rushdie's work emanated from his own involvement with the Mazdoor Kisan Party (the Workers and Peasants Party, later incarnated as the Communist Mazdoor Kisan Party) in Lahore. There, along with other Left stalwarts such as Feroze Ahmad, Eqbal Ahmad and Hamza Alavi, Ahmad had been part of a 'Professors Group' that organised Marxist study circles for the workers. [10] Even so, one could quibble with his reading of *Shame* and its politics of resistance: while the object of Rushdie's satire is the closed world of Pakistan's elites, it is a world that is fraying because of tensions around class and gender. One is further struck by the underspecification of the working class that Ahmad imagines as the protagonist of all emancipatory literature.

Ahmad's analysis of *Shame* falters especially when he makes the mistake that all teachers of literature tell their students not to make – which is to blur the gap between the narrator of a text and its author. On this account, his reading of Rushdie is also oddly poignant in spite of the many pages that he writes excoriating Rushdie for looking at 'the East' from the perspective of Western theoretical and literary traditions. One can't help but notice their biographical commonalities, even as the differences remain critical. Both were born in India (Ahmad in 1941, Rushdie in 1947 – the year of India's independence) and considered it their original home. Ahmad went to Pakistan to complete his college education, only to leave for the US during the student uprisings of the late 1960s. He returned to Pakistan in the early 1970s after obtaining higher education degrees in the US. He was to leave Pakistan again for the US after the coup by General Zia ul-Haq in 1977, eventually making his way 'back' to India in 1985. The coup was of course the historical event that spurred Rushdie to write *Shame*. The resonances intensify in the fact that Rushdie also tried to return to India to live there (a possibility foreclosed by the banning of *The Satanic Verses* in India in 1988) but eventually made his home in the West even as he returned to India unwaveringly in all his fiction. Ultimately, Ahmad's history of having had a Pakistani passport, which he had relinquished, prevented him from gaining Indian citizenship even after decades of living, writing and teaching there.

The differences with Rushdie seemed to unnerve Ahmad far more than the similarities of shared beginnings. He left Pakistan when political corruption and the decimation of the Left seemed all too final, while the narrator of *Shame* (who for Ahmad is none other than Rushdie) seems to have chosen a self-exile enabled by class privilege and family wealth – a deracinated position from which he narrates the tale of corruption and decay in postcolonial Pakistan. This seems to have rattled Ahmad so much that he felt compelled to point out, even against the backdrop of the 1989 *fatwa* issued by Ayatollah Khomeini against Rushdie for blasphemy in writing *The Satanic Verses*, that 'it took a principally *literary* event – the macabre sentencing of Salman Rushdie for selling certain novelizations of Islam to British and American corporate publishing – for protest campaigns against Khomeini to envelop that very literary intelligentsia which had never bothered when that same clerical state had tortured and actually killed countless communists and other patriots.' [11] It was clear by now that Ahmad's sense of solidarity could not be extended to Rushdie who remained for him someone who had turned exile into a lucrative career. We can interpret this withholding of

solidarity to a fellow writer either as signifying a singular lack of generosity or as a dogged commitment to the unknown writers assassinated by authoritarian regimes across the world. But does it have to be one or the other?

On Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize-winning novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), Ahmad wrote one of the most critical reviews in the pages of the left-wing *Frontline* magazine for which he was a regular commentator. [12] Here he generously acknowledges Roy as 'the first Indian writer in English' in whose work 'a marvellous stylistic resource becomes available for provincial, vernacular culture without any effect of exoticism or estrangement, and without the book reading as a translation'. Rushdie's style, on the other hand, is too much of a mishmash of the vernacular and the postmodern and too derivative of the Latin American magical realists to qualify as exemplary. But in spite of the fulsome praise for Roy's style, Ahmad finds her novel to be a 'curious mixture of matchless achievement and quite drastic failings', chief among which was how 'the book panders to the prevailing anti-Communist sentiment, which damages it both ideologically and formally'. For Ahmad, Roy's inclusion of a character such as Comrade Pillai, presumably a fictional figure who symbolises the corruptions of the local branch of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and is complicit in the murderous assault on the 'untouchable' Velutha, demonstrates how she 'has neither a *feel* for Communist politics nor perhaps rudimentary knowledge of it'. Ahmad takes particular exception to the references to E. M. S. Namboodiripad, 'an actual historical figure and a towering presence in Kerala and beyond', declaring them to be libellous and written in 'spite, pure and simple'. [13]

But if Ahmad's objections can seem petty and partisan to some readers, it was on another ground that his critique of Roy converges with his critique of Rushdie – namely, the representation of the erotic as a transcendent form of politics. Acknowledging that Roy writes with great emotional depth and 'with devastating precision' about caste (although finding her less insightful on matters of class), he nonetheless castigates her for suggesting that it is 'private transgression through which one transcends public injuries'. [14] More sympathetic readers might consider this unfair as the novel can also be read as a powerful evocation of a dying provincial feudal order transformed by satellite television, Gulf money and World Bank aid into a world in which an 'untouchable' Paravan like Velutha can not only dare to love an upper-caste woman but also imagine himself as a worker and organise others around him into a class.

In Ahmad's reading, ultimately, both Rushdie and Roy are of necessity tethered to 'the themes and ideologies that are currently dominant in the social fraction' in which they are located and to which they speak. One sees this same tendency to situate the author in their social location and especially their class position in his brilliant account of Urdu literature in the Indian subcontinent. [15] Qurratulain Hyder, for all her literary talents, remains embedded in the bourgeois social class that embraced liberal nationalism as a panacea for the violence and grief of nationalist wars and partitions. As such, on Ahmad's reading, her fiction is unable to transcend the limitations of her privileged inheritances. But there was another side to this coin in Ahmad's belief that 'the most pressing research agendas for literary critics and theorists can arise only out of the situations which they in fact live'. [16] Thus it was that both the writer and the critic must narrate and theorise the lived situations of their class, nation and social location.

In 2000, Ahmad wrote a brilliant essay on world literature and *The Communist Manifesto*. [17] In a period in which 'world literary studies', or what the Warwick Research Collective defines as 'the literature of the capitalist world-system', has come to eclipse older categories of Third World and postcolonial literature, Ahmad's essay should receive a great deal more attention than it has not only for how it demonstrates a more dialectical turn in his critical writings but also for how it posits the utopian possibilities for a genuine socialist transformation via literature. [18] If Marx and Engels wrote their manifesto at a time when capitalism as 'a global unifying force' was becoming visible and demanded critical attention, Ahmad's response came at a time when late capitalist globalisation was

seen as promising to shrink the world through communication technologies and finance capital.

Ahmad's essay engages critically with the hope that Marx and Engels had reposed in the idea that a world literature could become what he describes as 'a progressive force within the socialist project'. For Ahmad, this hope was misguided because Marx seems to have assumed some direct, one-to-one relationship between 'world-market' and 'world-literature'. What was to become evident, and what Marx perhaps missed in earlier writings, was that the 'same globalizing market forces which impose upon the world a historically unprecedented unity' also perpetuate 'economic inequality ... between the core countries of capitalism and the rest', an inequality that is 'still very much on the increase'. In other words, world literature was situated on the constitutively unequal and uneven terrain of the world market, an idea that theorists like Franco Moretti, Fredric Jameson and others were also developing in their theorisations of modernity and world literature.

Ahmad's intervention, however, is unique and consequential for the three main arguments it offers: it underscores the salience of the local, the national and the regional in the formation of global capitalism and in the very idea of world literature; it proffers analyses, with characteristically sharp acumen, of the institutionalisation of world literature through processes of unequal translation and cultural and economic accumulation; and it draws a counter-cartography of the field that could help us to imagine literature as mediating a socialist transformation. The first intervention led him to argue that 'all literatures are above all local and national', and that 'from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature'. [19] In this he is writing against what Marx and Engels thought of as the narrow-mindedness of national literatures that would be rendered more or less impossible by the global expansion of capital. More importantly, Ahmad contends that 'national and local literatures' are not inevitably expressions of 'narrow-mindedness'. Rather, 'they can just as often be genuine expressions of a democratic demand and just cultural aspirations of a people, in a particular place and time, especially in the context of cultural imperialism'. This is a crucial insight that has predictably not gained much traction as it calls on the critic to draw upon immense linguistic, cultural, critical and historical resources and to take important risks, both aspects that were integral to Ahmad's critical practice.

In terms of the second intervention, Ahmad sketches out for us the processes by which world literature has come to displace Third World literature in the Anglo-American academy. But he points out that 'much of what is today seen as "world literature" is in fact produced, through translation and gloss, by the U.S. universities and publishing industry'. [20] In this, he argues, 'the mediating role of English is decisive'. [21] Here we can see traces of movement in Ahmad's thought from his early reflections in *In Theory* where he saw world literature as at worst an 'abstraction' and at best a 'universalist aspiration' in the world's peripheries. [22] In the later piece, he argues, 'something resembling a "world literature" is now part of the cultural experience of the literate classes across the globe, in a way that was unthinkable in Marx's own time but which Marx deduced from the logic of capitalist universalisation itself'. [23]

It is his final intervention – in which Ahmad allows literature to exceed its ideological prism/prison to help us imagine a more equal and just world – that reads like a manifesto for our times. In this, Ahmad sheds his programmatic lens for a dialectical one. He argues that 'for a "world literature" to arise as a "true interdependence of nations", the logic of the "world market" needs to be transcended'. This is because a "'world literature" can only arise if material relations among the different language-literature complexes can be organised in a structure of exchanges that are non-hierarchical, non-exploitative and non-dominative'. [24] Thus, 'for it to serve as an integral part of the socialist project it must be re-conceived not as an accumulation of certain texts for profit but as a social relation among producers scattered all over the globe, in their specific locales, but connected to each other in relations of radical equality'. It is in this formulation that 'world literature' can function akin to socialism itself, as 'a horizon: the measure of a time yet to come'. [25] We can see

here how powerfully the deep formal and theoretical structure of *The Communist Manifesto* manifests itself in Ahmad's own writing.

I want to conclude with a personal anecdote, especially since Ahmad remained a deeply private person even as he was a popular teacher and a brilliant public intellectual. In the early 1990s, my husband who was then a PhD student in the US was conducting fieldwork in India and rented Ahmad's beautiful home in New Delhi while he was on a sabbatical in the US. We spent many lovely months in the house, surrounded by the stunning photographs that Ahmad had taken, and chancing upon floating bits of the manuscript of *In Theory* that he had been working on. The pleasing aesthetic ambience of the house felt especially jarring on the occasions when the landline telephone would ring and a torrent of abuse accusing Ahmad of being a Pakistani agent would assault our ears. One day during our stay, the house was broken into, although not much was stolen. The thieves probably left by the back door when we made an unexpected return. We immediately called Ahmad in the US to inform him about this incident. His first reaction, before he inquired about any loss of his possessions, was to ask us to make sure that the police did not harass the two women workers who cleaned the house. As he had feared, as soon as we filed a police report, the cleaners were hauled into the police station and rudely interrogated until we intervened.

This incident imprinted itself on our minds as evidence of the fact that Ahmad lived his life as he wrote about it. He remained the quintessential outsider and figure of exile from the multiple places and positions he occupied for much of his life, stubbornly committed to working-class politics even as the very terrain of the working classes was shifting and the Left globally was facing unprecedented challenges. As one looks back at his life and work, his words on the nineteenth-century Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib who lived on the cusp of the decline of the Mughal empire and the rise of the British East India Company offer uncanny retrospection on his own life and times. Ahmad had written of the poet that, 'surrounded by constant carnage, Ghalib wrote a poetry primarily of losses and consequent grief' that was 'a poetry also of what could have been possible, but was no longer'. Turning to the question of sensibility in Ghalib's poetry, Ahmad finds in it 'a sensibility whose primary virtue was endurance in a world that was growing for him, as for many others of his time and civilization, increasingly unbearable'. [26] The poignancy of Ahmad's evocative translations of Ghalib's poetic oeuvre is made more intense by the fact that to the end, Ahmad himself acted as witness to a newly unbearable world even as he was an important and fearless voice who taught and mentored generations of activists and students and remained hopeful of a socialist transformation. [27]

In his revised essay on Edward Said for *In Theory*, Ahmad conceded that his disagreements with Said were articulated from a position of solidarity. He wrote of Said: 'Those of us who admire his courage and yet disagree with him on substantive issues also have to carry on our own critical pursuits. Suppression of criticism, I have come to believe, is not the best way of expressing solidarity'. [28] It is in this spirit of criticism that I offer this essay as a tribute to Aijaz Ahmad.

Rashmi Varma teaches English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Radical Philosophy

<https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/reading-the-signs-of-our-times>

Footnotes

- [1] Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992).
- [2] See Arif Dirlik, 'The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism', *Critical Inquiry* 2:2 (1994), 328-356; E. San Juan Jr., *Beyond Postcolonial Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).
- [3] Ahmad, *In Theory*, 9.
- [4] Ahmad, *In Theory*, 12.
- [5] See, for instance, Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *Oxford Literary Review* 9:1 (1987), 27-58.
- [6] Ahmad, *In Theory*, 10; Aijaz Ahmad, 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory"', *Social Text* 17 (1987), 3-25. See Neil Lazarus's wonderfully incisive reading of Ahmad's critique of Jameson in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- [7] Benita Parry, 'Review. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* by Aijaz Ahmad', *History Workshop* 36 (1993), 232.
- [8] It is worth pointing out that Said himself elevated the amateur over the professional intellectual in *Representations of the Intellectual* (London: Vintage, 1996).
- [9] Ahmad, *In Theory*, 130-165.
- [10] For a view from Pakistan, see Raza Naeem, 'The Antinomies of Aijaz Ahmad (1941-2022): From Ghalib to Gramsci', *The Friday Times*, 1 April 2022, <https://thefridaytimes.com/01-Apr-2022/the-antinomies-of-aijaz-ahmad-1941-2022-from-ghalib-to-gramsci>
- [11] Ahmad, *In Theory*, 34.
- [12] Aijaz Ahmad, 'Reading Arundhati Roy Politically', *Frontline*, 8 August 1997, reprinted 21 March 2022, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/cover-story/reading-arundhati-roy-politically-by-aijaz-ahmad/article38458826.ece>
- [13] E. M. S. Namboodiripad (1909-1998) was a stalwart Communist politician who served as the first Chief Minister of Kerala, in the first instance of a democratically elected Communist government anywhere in the world.
- [14] Ahmad offers a similar reading of the representation of Sufiya Zenobia as the embodiment of collective shame that bursts out in acts of private revenge in Rushdie's *Shame*.
- [15] Aijaz Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present: Ideology and Politics in Contemporary South Asia* (London: Verso, 2000).

[16] Ahmad, *In Theory*, 15.

[17] Aijaz Ahmad, 'The Communist Manifesto and "World Literature"', *Social Scientist* 28:7/8 (2000), 3-30.

[18] Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

[19] Ahmad, 'The Communist Manifesto and "World Literature"', 19, 9.

[20] Ahmad, 'The Communist Manifesto and "World Literature"', 23.

[21] Ahmad, 'The Communist Manifesto and "World Literature"', 27.

[22] Ahmad, *In Theory*, 15.

[23] Ahmad, 'The Communist Manifesto and "World Literature"', 15.

[24] Ahmad, 'The Communist Manifesto and "World Literature"', 28.

[25] Ahmad, 'The Communist Manifesto and "World Literature"', 29.

[26] Aijaz Ahmad, 'Introduction', in *Ghazals of Ghalib*, ed. Aijaz Ahmad (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[27] For the most recent reflections by Ahmad on his life and work, see *Nothing Human is Alien to Me: Aijaz Ahmad in Conversation with Vijay Prashad* (New Delhi: Leftword Books, 2020).

[28] Ahmad, *In Theory*, 160.