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STRANGE, AND STRANGER WAYS WITH STRANGERS: ENGLISH IN INDIA REVISITED

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ABSTRACT

It is difficult to find the necessary discursive focus on English in multilingual India. Its aspirational youth still need this language of colonial provenance to keep its otherness from the native cultures of India they nonetheless esteem. This article acknowledges the radical ambivalence English thus creates, beside an analysis of the *others* English engenders in India's globalizing progress. It critiques what academics often practise as a version and variant of Cultural Studies, and how they end by practicing *Stranger* Studies. The concluding part of this article probes the reservations most Indians seem to have about their visitors and guests, and how English inflects their transactions with the 'other' world. A Harold Pinter tableau from *Mountain Language* is read as an object lesson for students who invest in English, unmindful of its undiminished potential still as an imperialist language. When Language fails the Human, it is time we rethink the humanities. The article ends with a reformist hope that no Indian or other state capital will ever be a stage for such an overbearing English scenario the way it appears so blatantly in Pinter's play.

Keywords: English in India, “Stranger” Studies, Harold Pinter’s *Mountain Language*, Guests, Visitors, Others - Language and the Human

When we share public space with people whom we do not know and people who do not know us at all, who among us are the real strangers? We are at a loss to grasp the subtle nuances between everyday profiles of strangers, or those between the different interpretations of such profiles. Unless we know *how* other we are from the norm-setting ‘others,’ and those others recognize this correspondingly, we cannot claim either party to be any more or any less strangers in respect of their others. I sometimes wonder whether this was what Gertrude Stein hinted at when she said: “In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. That is what makes America what it is”^[1]. In my understanding, the *body* in words like “nobody” and “anybody” in Steinese is at once physical and substantive —socially, politically, historically, and culturally produced. Stein was always ahead of our space/body theorists.

Be that as it may, we cannot avoid being in strange places for work and living, for recreation and leisure. Not only because in public places, a culture most suited to the comfort of ‘strangers’ evolves. Shared facilities and non-facilities make for a *public* culture so to speak. And that culture is a little different from what we generally construe to be the shared cultures of select mutually known individuals and parochial groups. It is not uncommon that even in common public facilities like parks, shopping malls, theatres, reading rooms, open grounds, crowded halls, cafeterias and auditoria, we notice signs speaking to us. They designate certain areas as “private,” and some indeed “restrict admission.” Although the co-existence of all the denizens of a city is the touted democratic ideal, we notice that not everyone is welcome to everyone else the same way, for a variety of (sometimes) legitimate and (sometimes) arbitrary reasons. In calamitous times, strangers suddenly erupt onto our familiar national landscape. That much was pretty evident when millions of migrant labourers were forced to trudge across Indian towns and cities under duress during the Covid-19 lockdown. While Indians were discussing Citizenship Rights and

[1] Stein, Gertrude, *The Geographical History of America: Or the Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind*, Random House, New York, (1936) 2013, cit. p. 113.

Amendment imbroglio just a week before all this occurred, they remained deaf to the cries of those who work for their economy. If they cared for migrant labour, they could ask themselves whether the economy works for their workforce as well. Those whom they had called “our dear working class” appeared less civil if absolutely alien to them during the Covid-19 season.

If in calamitous times we are less tolerant towards those we do not know very well, let us ask whether our academic institutions are any better. In our academic workplaces, all of us are “selected” from many applicants following streamlined procedure and due processes. Sadly, even our workplaces are not free from suspicion and dread of ‘others.’ During less calamitous, even happier, times are we secure and feel so? Perhaps suspicion drives all pedagogic acts. The “hermeneutics of suspicion” has such a wide currency and purchase in our teaching halls, although commentators like Rita Felski are rather unsure of its claims as a critical gambit in reading literary texts.^[2] In any case, it is useful to remember that we associate the modern academy as a public space in the many related and extended senses that the *OED* gives *public*. And here, I do not go beyond the very first entry on *public* as adjective which goes like this: 1 (a) “Open to general observation, view, or knowledge; existing, performed, or carried out without concealment, so that all may see or hear. Of a person: that acts or performs in public.” Since the academy also generates and circulates assorted publications as this one, let me also cite the *OED* 1 (b): Of a book, piece of writing, etc.: in print, published; esp. in *to make public*. *Obsolete.*” It may be salutary then for all those committed to an academic calling to remember that their first obligation is towards the public. Signs of division and divisiveness are everywhere. This is good enough reason also to think, as a corollary, that we ought to think less of ourselves as a collective against others. “We” are not other than those who are outside the precincts of our academic felicity. As a matter of fact, the ‘others’ we see as not-us/ non-us outside our walls are precisely those who define us. In short, to be human in fairly decent ways, we ought not to have a language different from that of the others to whom we speak. Only communication will ensure

[2] See Felski, Rita, *Suspicious Minds*, in *Poetics Today* Vol. 32 Num. 2, pp. 215 – 234, 2011.

a community. When limited space crowds out most people anywhere to ensure the security for a select few, we can be sure that someone has an axe to grind in the business of strange-making and excluding *bona fide* participants. Because our buildings insulate us against strangers, our imaginary walls grow taller by the day, and those that we keep away from us keep haunting us. If the barbarians are at the gate, as they say, one day they will certainly reach us, be with us, making it difficult to tell who has barbarianized whom and for how long. When intolerance and apathy divide learners from teachers, no Language will work.

MEEK ADJUSTMENTS

We are unlikely to notice that *adjust/ adjustment* is invoked routinely, almost exclusively, by aggregators and aggrandizers who unconscionably use up our limited common resources. They are unscrupulous. Natural resources are exploited and public amenities accessed by the very few rich and influential people and institutions in power. Having depleted such precious resources, they ask us to be economical and “adjust” accordingly. Space, water, food, oil, funds, jobs, housing, education, public amenities, health, medical care The list grows of things in short supply and this leads to inflation, making even those luxuries of the past look like essential goods and unavoidable services. *We* need to make “meek adjustments.” *We* need to pay cess and surcharge for educating ourselves and our children. It has sometimes seemed to me appropriate to teach a Hart Crane poem called “Chaplinsque” whenever I suspect that a world of strangers termed “authorities” is unknown to our students.

A university classroom is perhaps far too insulated against the atrocities against people whom an insensitive police state and a power-wielding bureaucracy consider strangers. When communication snaps, the community withers away. On disciplining and punishing strangers in modern societies, Charlie Chaplin’s films perhaps provoke more radical thought in students than Foucault or De Certeau. The standard Chaplin movie is quintessentially a *stranger movie*, its cast invariably and unmistakably divided, those inebriated with power and self-pitched against those who are powerless and penurious. The only Language that works

when it does, is that which is authorized by brute convention and inflexible custom; it is plainly Language put paid to speech. No wonder, Chaplin's *silent* movies are occasionally interspersed with minimal captions. If there is an epigraph most befitting the entire Chaplin canon, I would think of no other than the following from Shakespeare's *King Lear*:

Lear (speaking to blind Gloucester)

What, art mad? A man may see how the world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears: see how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places; and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? — Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?^[3]

[...]

And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office. — Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand! Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back; Thou hotly lust'st to use her in that kind For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener. Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear; Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold, And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks; Arm it in rags, a pygmy's straw does pierce it. None does offend, none. — I say none; I'll able 'em: Take that of me, my friend, who have the power To seal the accuser's lips. Get thee glass eyes; And, like a scurvy politician, seem To see the things thou dost not. — Now, now, now, now: Pull off my boots: harder, harder: — so.^[4]

Usurers and cozeners, beadles and whores, waifs and rogues, pimps and politicians, farmer's dogs and beggars; even the stage props look the same in Chaplin: the paraphernalia of authority, whips and lashes, trash and tatters, robes and furred gowns, shiny goblets and dented tins, straws and boots. We shall only search in vain for the cast of characters who might

[3] Shakespeare, William, *The Complete Works*, with Introduction by Peter Alexander, ELBS & Collins, London & Glasgow, 1964, (1989) cit. a p. 195.

[4] *Ibidem*.

be missing in one or other of Chaplin's films. For all its commonplace familiarity, a classic Chaplin scene, however, can still catch the ludic energy of a stray dog scratching its head with its hind leg. The same props for the Real are easy to find in today's topsy-turvy world of trial courts and undertrial incarceration, our public institutions of learning, offices of civic governance and public justice, and the correctional facilities where strangers are routinely targeted and harassed. The Great Image of Authority of today's world was caught on candid camera throughout the twenties and thirties of the last century by such of Chaplin's films as *The Tramp* (1916), *The Immigrant* (1917), *The Kid* (1921), *The Great Dictator* (1930), *City Lights* (1931), and *The Modern Times* (1936), among others. If such movies still have great appeal to our youngest generations addicted to assorted electronic gadgets and entertainment platforms, it is because Chaplin's films celebrate the "little man," as Rudolf Arnheim once so memorably noted, "in a role all of us have played at some time..."^[5]. The fascination for those relentlessly comic gestures and poses is the child-like fancy and thrill we still long for occasionally as adults.^[6] A simple point likely to be missed by readers of Shakespeare and Chaplin is precisely the sum of Hart Crane's "Chaplinesque"^[7]. At once cryptic and elliptic, that line reads: "The game enforces smirks ...". "The game" here is the poor clown's tactic in seeming to agree and be compliant to toxic authority, while the "smirks" enforced by this pretext are evidently self-congratulatory and sarcastic. Nothing underscores the artist's vexed condition of exposure and vulnerability more memorably than *smirks*. Crane and Chaplin, the Poet and Clown, dance on the same big American stage.

Neither the students who read "Chaplinesque" with me nor the poem's helpful commentators, however, feel completely happy with Crane's

[5] Arnheim, Rudolf, *Chaplin's Early Films*, Trans. John MacKay, in *The Yale Journal of Criticism* Vol. 9 N. 2, pp. 311-314, 1996. Retrieved from: <https://biblia.com/bible/esv/ecclesiastes/12/12>, cit. a p. 312.

[6] Arnheim captures the Chaplin gaucherie we delightfully watch: "If someone mournfully sets his elbows on the dining table, they are bound to land in a plate full of food. And table manners lead to all manner of comic manipulation when one makes exclusive use of forbidden ones. Here someone can stir coffee with a knife, wipe the knife on some bread, and the bread will taste like coffee. It also proves difficult to carry a ladder without bowling over passersby. People want to work, eat or pray— the little man must be always fearful and amazed." Ibidem.

[7] See Crane, Hart, *Chaplinesque* from *White Buildings: Poems*, Boni & Liveright, United States, 1926.

interpretation of Chaplin's art but they sense that the difficulty is not merely in understanding the *language* of the poem, very trying though it is at times, but in appreciating the clown-poet's negotiations with a petulant and insensitive world that asks for "meek adjustments" from the artist. The world watches the game of the strangers. How long do they remain the fools they play, and when does their "play" become serious? Power apprehends only equal and opposite power; the police watch for the clown's reactions. If the clowning is mild and obsequious, the game is "art." But when it is not, the Law bans or burns books, or the censors forbid staging plays or doctor filmstrips. Authority is not entertained when the Arts entertain too much, when they hold a mirror up to the slightest truth of its many hideous faces.

MISUNDERSTANDING: LANGUAGE TO BEGIN WITH ...

Let us begin with Language in general, as a phenomenon (not any *bhāṣa* [Sanskrit. Language] of which, in which, we speak to one another). Politics has so greatly vitiated human speech that there is nothing more antihuman than the vile and lethal uses to which its human custodians sometimes put it. No wonder, education now includes ruses even for all those wrong-doers and faultfinders alike. They are taught how better to tap Language's potential for legerdemain and render it less offensive. Such lessons would even make it appear that *Language*, not its users, is eminently blameworthy. When things go terribly awry in public, the offenders quickly add that *Language* betrayed them; that they did not *mean* their action or words this way or that. Not only in party politics but academic affairs, Language is often shown to get the better of its users. It promptly opens the backdoor for the worst offender for a quick getaway. Especially in institutions devoted to the sublime objects of truth-telling and ethical pursuits, we see or hear the most learned professors occasionally getting things terribly wrong and then they blame their indefensible acts and shenanigans on Language, or Language misconstrued, according to them, by the public. The same professoriate and its institutions devise woke euphemisms and continue to affront the dignity of the less privileged and those unfairly treated. Teachers are unforgiving nevertheless when their students err in questions that test truth and lies, accuracy and inaccuracy,

rights and wrongs. Our unfairness to strangers likewise follows a pattern of hate and suspicion when we fault the languages they speak. People completely unknown to ancient Aryans were called *mlēcchās* [Sanskrit. Literally, those who speak incomprehensibly]. Sir Monier Monier-Williams's *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*^[8] adds that all strangers were so described, especially those who spoke no Sanskrit. Perhaps by the same logic, the ancient Romans of the imperial court called the local languages *vernaculars*, languages of slaves, to distinguish them from the lordly Latin. Naturally, the other attributes of barbarians and outcasts applied to those non-Aryans even within India's ancient borders.

In a scathing remark on corporatist education in the US, Gayatri Spivak once pointed to its machinations masquerading as benevolence. (Let us note that higher educational institutions all over the world continue to fashion their STEM curricula on this US model.) Her point is that this benevolent corporatism trivializes the teaching of humanities, but few among teachers realize how deleterious this might be in the education of young talents. To put it rather crudely, Spivak is urging that humanities classrooms not reduce reading to sheer data mining. Imagination has virtually no place in this exercise. Nor does this exercise even see that we are enabled differently by our native cultures to read same texts differently. Trained to scan pages merely for ingratiating data or incriminating evidence, young readers will hardly learn to be compassionate and empathetic. If anything, they end up being callous and supercilious bureaucrats. When they do not fall into an unimaginative cultural essentialism, they are inured to satisfying themselves with quantified data, to be part of a regimented process, rather than look for the tangible quality of human effort and its outcome. Based on sheer quantity, they persuade the public they serve to remain beholden to the great donorship of institutional conglomerates and munificent welfarist governments. Quite appropriately, when they commence so called public "service", they are called *government* servants, whose "service" is beneficial only to the governments they dutifully serve. Agentless and subserving, they expertly use *the passive voice* in the communications they draft. Of course, they feign ignorance and plead non-

[8] Published in 1899.

involvement when, owing to their culpable oversight or sheer negligence, common people suffer or are aggrieved. Were they not acting “under direction” from above?

Since a trivialized humanities pedagogy ultimately affects Language and thinking, how we/ our students understand Others, Spivak makes a further point about *reading* in general, and reading literary texts in particular. Since hers is also a rare profile of herself as a teacher of the humanities and as a quester for human rights in a world conflicted by civil and military violence all over the world, let us turn to her own words:

I would not remain a teacher of the Humanities if I did not believe that at the New York end— standing metonymically for the dispensing end as such— the teacher can try to rearrange desires noncoercively ... through an attempt to develop in the student a habit of literary reading, even just “reading,” suspending oneself into the text of the other— for which the first condition and effect is a suspension of the conviction that I am necessarily better, I am necessarily indispensable, I am necessarily the one to right wrongs, I am necessarily the end product for which history happened, and that New York is necessarily the capital of the world. ... A training in literary reading is a training to learn from the singular and the unverifiable. [9]

Spivak hardly needs a language here *other than English* to tell us and the world about others; or how an education in the humanities will equip young minds in reading relationally in a language that tends to assume imperial sovereignty in lands where it no longer enjoys direct command or absolute power. A few pages later in the same essay, she speaks about the renewed role of the humanities in the world. The strangers in her prospectus will no longer be strangers when “a collectivity among the dispensers of bounty as well as the victims of oppression”^[10] begins to engage in a common educational pursuit. And that pursuit she calls “righting wrongs,” as the title of her essay makes clear. If, as she fears, the

[9] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *Righting Wrongs*, in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* Vol. 103, Num. 2/3, pp. 523- 581, 2004, cit. a p. 532.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 537.

humanities have no role to play, if teachers are not willing to learn from the subalterns they teach, if “the discontinuous divide between those who right wrongs and those who are wronged” is not eventually bridged, we might only grieve with her that Language divides us only to stand, perhaps totter, but it will certainly unite us to fall. Do we still call that Language *ours*?^[11] Do we ever *need* that Language? And if we do, is that what English is, has been doing, in India, home to at least a thousand languages and dialects? In other words, English in a country like India will do a lot better by developing an expertise that can rewrite and hybridize the synergy of *bhāṣās* and imagine itself differently.

STRANGER AND STRANGER STUDIES: ENGLISH TODAY

The more we think of cultures and how we engage with them academically, two things become immediately clear. One: we seem to be more interested in how *others* live than in examining our own lives, and taking good care of ourselves and the others with whom we live. Strangers are enormously intriguing (and exciting for topic-hunters) if they remain at bottom “strangers.” Distance never lent more enchantment to students of Culture than when these unknown folks remained tantalizingly unknown, if unknowable, to them. No wonder, fiction and films love the stranger-*tragic*, the hideous violence, the undignified cruelty of humankind, seen from the safe distance art affords in private spaces. That is to say, as long as strangers remain the perennially oppressed and victimized, and those who study them are seen to contribute to a restorative and reformative bid for socio-cultural justice, strangers are coveted, even lovable. Who doesn’t love their infinitely gentle, eternally suffering, neighbours? (Perhaps that also explains the sheer love of gossip in human lives, the sort of sneaking love we seem to have for the proverbial wretched of the earth, the inordinate pleasures social media afford some of us who read such tales as ‘literature.’) Two: there is a greater suspicion of, and fear for, the *languages* that others speak than of their appearance and habits. We seem to be endlessly fascinated by unknown and unknowable languages and

[11] Ibidem, p. 563.

how they work in unknown human beings. In both, in the stranger-lives and stranger-languages, strangely enough, we find a certain logic. And that logic has curiously to do with a radical ambivalence (are we troubled, or are we reassured?) we feel in the presence of strangers. Both menace and reassurance might well be caused by the startled recognition of our beleaguered selves, pretty much like the sudden glimpse of one's own profile in a mirror at an odd angle.

We sense all this happening somewhat at once, and in varying degrees of involvement, in the Indian study of English as well. Nearly everything a student of English reads in a non-English classroom at advanced levels (Language, Culture, History, Gender, Nature, Climate and Ecosystems, Minorities and Marginalia, Ethnicity, Animals, Media, Disability, Precarity, Vulnerability, Sports and Games ...) as politically nuanced adjuncts to, or extensions of, the 'literary,' is called *Studies*. For a country like India however this is hardly new. We have had very long and multiple religious and secular pedagogic traditions when dealing with cultures, traditions, indeed of learning *from* others. *Kāmasūtra* alone, for example, taught Indians how one might sensibly detach guilt from pleasure, and embrace the "bad objects" of Victorian lawbooks as sources of self-learning and sensual delight. Preparations for what we know as Cultural Studies today began so early among Indians with their first *pāthasālas* [Sanskrit. Centres of learning; indigenous schools for local children], then later with the English "mission" schools and missionary colleges and printing presses where they began learning English along with their *bhāṣās*. Again, it is hardly surprising that in the name of Cultural Studies, what we often practise today the world over are versions and variants of *Stranger Studies*. Like the making of books as Ecclesiastes tells us (XII. 12), there is no end to the making of the "strangers" we study: loners and loafers within and without us. No wonder, Julia Kristeva titles her 1991 book, *Strangers to Ourselves* where she suggests that insofar as we accept a foreigner in our midst, we strengthen our claims to being civilized. A step further ahead, she says, we become *human* only to the extent that we recognize within ourselves the figure of a stranger, one who enriches our unconscious cultural resources as constituting a radical otherness. Citing Freud, she adds:

“The foreigner is within us. And when we flee from or struggle against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious Delicately, analytically, Freud does not speak of foreigners: he teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves. That is perhaps the only way not to hound it outside of us. ... To discover our disturbing otherness [we ought to recognize] *our* uncanny strangeness [so that] we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from outside. The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners.”^[12]

Perhaps it is to keep that foreigner alive and well within us, always, that Stuart Hall once stressed the importance of what he called “the resources of history, language, and culture” in helping us “in the process of becoming rather than being: not,” as he insisted, “‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’ so much as what we might become ...”^[13].

In Other Wor(l)ds . . .

One need not go very deep or far into abstruse linguistics to guess that we understand Language (that is, when we *think* we do) differentially. Ours is not theirs, mine is not his/hers, what I have just said can be put differently, words for now are not the same when uttered or muttered, heard then or later, and that we use and grasp language diacritically. That much should be easy to understand. We show and read gaps between words, among phrases, and use punctuation to mime speech. In short, one word from another, one utterance discretely marked off from another— *in other words*. We also agree that like all of us, the words we utter rarely find an immediate home; that they, like us, often straddle an indeterminate realm between isolation and belonging. That granted, when we listen to others’ words, why is there no better cohesion and clarity?

The first English departments in Indian colleges possessed teachers who were quite conversant in the *bhāṣās*. Some of them were quite distinguished writers in the *bhāṣās* in spite of their English calling and academic commitments. Newer lessons in cultural politics and history give us more examples of dislocations and displacements helping selves

[12] Kristeva, Julia, *Strangers to Ourselves*, Trans. Leon Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, cit. a pp. 191 – 192.

[13] Hall, Stuart, Du Gay, Paul, *Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity’?*, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Sage, London, 2002, cit. a p. 4.

suture identities, always progressive and dynamic in personal experiences. Stuart Hall's conversation with Bill Schwarz (that strangely evolved into his autobiography), has a quite revealing chapter about strange languages shaping stranger identities called "Thinking the Caribbean: Creolizing Thinking." Since Hall's passage is likely to have an inspirational appeal for students of English whose native idioms shape their thinking, let us read the following carefully:

Much of my professional life has been concerned with the politics of who we think we are. I've been riveted by the question of how we can understand the chaos of identifications which we assemble in order to navigate the social world and also how we seek to reach, somehow, 'ourselves'. Of course this arrival never occurs: we'll never be ourselves, whatever that could mean. To recognise that this is so makes the idea of drafting this record of a life a curious thing to do ^[14].

If Hall's English plays that crucial role in reshaping a Creole identity, he also recognizes that no amount of effort will stabilize and settle his identity for good. This is precisely what 'identity' is, a cultural drift. As one complying with a process, an evolution we call *becoming*, a writer is a witness to largescale political upheavals and radical social changes (in Hall's case, being part of a diasporic unsettlement, losing Jamaica, mixing origins and languages as a young black person in white England that has lost an empire ...) where absolute strangers often play crucial roles. Losing *one* self, one's own, one gains a legion. Some of those selves, unashamedly overlap, for-the-nonce-selves in contingencies and emergencies. Not for nothing, then, that Hall's autobiography has the telling title: *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*. Rented or leased, human lives can offer certain advantages only to the writers of English in non-English worlds. And they have seldom spurned the advantages other languages bring them.

[14] Ibidem, p, 63.

Ajnabi, Atithi, etc.

It is hardly surprising that appropriate terms are always difficult to find for people who remain outside our regular day-to-day lives, those with whom our encounters are necessarily brief, even unwelcome, and perhaps limited by the strict business at hand. Our languages register such reservations by allowing themselves to be tactfully imprecise and vacuously ambivalent, trying not to show our discomfort in too embarrassing a light. The fact remains however that *ajnabi* [Urdu. Unfamiliar person, stranger.] and *atithi* [Sanskrit. Guest, a visitor at home.] are better kept at a decent social distance in India. Indians know that their terms of endearment had better be specific and ad hoc. In other words, civility is no unstinted charity. Even as Indians mouth pious platitudes (*atithi dēvō bhavā* [Sanskrit saying. Let me be one for whom the guest is God.]), their intelligent guests know that when they are visitors, they are on sufferance. Again, it is not quite fortuitous that, to the Western mind, one's loss of home/ country is *sinful*. This association is Biblical, as we recall the curse that befalls Satan consequent to his fall from divine grace. His heavenly home gone, he is condemned to eternal damnation as a migrant. Quite appropriately, Salman Rushdie's epigraph to *The Satanic Verses* comes from *The History of the Devil* by Daniel Defoe who attributes Satan's vagabondage to the sin of revolt. The less gifted and unfortunate among our guests are thus distinguished by their access to rights and privileges they can only cite, again, upon our approved concurrence. The line between intruders/ wetbacks and unwelcome guests is a thin one. They are a legion, known internationally by a vague catalogue of names: loafers, immigrants, refugees, the homeless, exiles and émigrés, vagabonds and vagrants, nomads, derelicts, and runaways, aliens and visitors on transit visa For those of us who have not secured immigration clearance at an international port of entry, ministries managing such affairs use the kind phrase "people without papers."

Perhaps the humanities schools have great stakes in such people who come and go, like Prufrock's women, as characters in fiction and drama. If they did not exist, what literature would be written by our melancholic masters of fantasy? Literature of the Diaspora is full of them, all gentle genuflected creatures of the Third World paraded by South

Asian expatriate writers for Anglo-American presses. Let us also see what Language has got to do with such strangers. First, their not having *our* language makes them strangers. They have “no Language, therefore,” in an unfair manner of speaking. If that sounds incredibly daft, here is another: we do not recognize, or care to understand, the ‘mumbo-jumbo’ they speak. Finally, we have not ‘given’ them the Language (the means, legal recourse, access to Law ...) to articulate who they are, and what they live for, in a constitutional format we appreciate. This ‘Languageless’ eviction order modern societies serve to immigrant communities across the world affects all those whose linguistic human rights are routinely and flagrantly abrogated, denied, or violated. They live on the borders, living off measly peripheral grants. Salman Rushdie tells us in “Step Across This Line” how we are all border people at international crossing lines:

Here is the truth: this line, at which we must stand until we are allowed to walk across and give our papers to be examined by an officer who is entitled to ask us more or less anything. At the frontier our liberty is stripped away— we hope temporarily— and we enter the universe of control. Even the freest of free societies are unfree at the edge, where things and people go out and other people and things come in; where only the right things and people must go in and out. Here, at the edge, we submit to scrutiny, to inspection, to judgment. These people, guarding these lines, must tell us who we are. We must be passive, docile. To be otherwise is to be suspect, and at the frontier to come under suspicion is the worst of all possible crimes. ... This is where we must present ourselves as simple, as obvious: I am coming home. I am on a business trip. I am visiting my girlfriend. In each case, what we mean when we reduce ourselves to these simple statements is, I'm not anything you need to bother about, really I'm not: not the fellow who voted against the government, not the woman who is looking forward to smoking a little dope with her friends tonight, not the person you fear, whose shoe maybe about to explode. I am one-dimensional. Truly. I am simple. Let me pass.”^[15]

[15] Rushdie, Salman, *Step Across This Line*, (*The Tanner Lecture in Human Values*) <https://>

A Pinter Tableau

Let us now turn to a few edited excerpts from the opening tableau of Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language* that will help us see what happens when we stop listening to the *ajnabis latithis* of the State. Particularly when the whole system is rigged; when those authorized to protect the lives and property of *girijans* [Hindi. India's mountain people. *Giri*, the Sanskrit for *mountain*] stop listening to *victims*; when protocols deny them their right to speak their language in a capital which the citizens have made for their country; and to cap it all, deny them the right to even demur at this state-sponsored linguistic terrorism. The setting of Pinter's play is a state prison in an unidentified country where the police only speak English.

A line of women. An ELDERLY WOMAN, cradling her hand. A basket at her feet. A YOUNG WOMAN with her arm around the WOMAN's shoulders.

A SERGEANT enters, followed by an OFFICER. The SERGEANT points to the YOUNG WOMAN.

[. . .]

OFFICER (*To SERGEANT*)

... Any complaints?

YOUNG WOMAN

She's been bitten.

OFFICER

Who?

Pause.

Who? Who's been bitten?

YOUNG WOMAN

She has. She has a torn hand. Look. Her hand has been bitten. This is blood.

SERGEANT (*To YOUNG WOMAN*)

What is your name?

OFFICER

Shut up.

He walks over to ELDERLY WOMAN.

What's happened to your hand? Has someone bitten your hand?

The WOMAN slowly lifts her hand. He peers at it.

Who did this? Who bit you?

YOUNG WOMAN

A Dobermann pinscher.

OFFICER

Which one?

Pause.

Sergeant!

SERGEANT *steps forward.*

SERGEANT

Sir!

OFFICER

Look at this woman's hand. I think the thumb is going to come off.

(To ELDERLY WOMAN) Who did this?

She stares at him.

[. . .]

OFFICER

What was the name of this dog?

[YOUNG WOMAN] *looks at him.*

YOUNG WOMAN

I don't know his name.

[. . .]

SERGEANT

Your husbands, your sons, your fathers, these men you have been waiting to see, are shithouses. They are enemies of the State. They are shithouses.

The OFFICER steps towards the WOMAN.

OFFICER

Now hear this. You are mountain people. You hear me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your mountain language in this place. You cannot speak your language to your men. It is not permitted. Do you understand? You may not speak it. It is outlawed. You may only speak the language of the capital. That is the only language permitted in this place. You will be badly punished if you attempt to speak

your mountain language in this place. This is a military decree. It is the law. Your language is forbidden. It is dead. No one is allowed to speak your language. Your language no longer exists. Any questions?

YOUNG WOMAN

I do not speak the mountain language.^[16]

Reading this, and visualizing the stage upon which all this takes place, we will instantly and unfortunately recall similar episodes reported across the public media in India, or any country in the world. In order to prevent unlawful activities by 'our' people, the machinery of law-and-order resorts to the unlawful prevention of free speech, or stymies redressal for undertrials and those on custodial remand, often based on insufficient evidence or unreasonable suspicion by the police. India's human rights record has often been demonstrated by world-watch organizations to be far from equitable even in the states where red political banners fly. What, we wonder, has gone wrong: our Language that fails the *human*, or the other way around?

When Pinter's tableau pushes Indians somewhere deeper into their selves, they cannot help seeing their own English-medium schools that forbid children the use of their first languages; the higher law courts in India that still debate and decree in English; circulars from the Indian government that use only English and Hindi, and a great many advantages only an English higher education bestows on the middle classes. In sum, this is *interdiction*, a word the big dictionary calls "authoritative or peremptory prohibition." Why would any authority interdict people like this? The implication is clearer when we consult the same dictionary that tells us that according to law, restrictions of this kind are usually imposed upon persons who are incapable of managing their own affairs, those clinically perceived to be of unsound mind. Since Indians have suffered various forms of interdiction under colonial rule, it would be rather easy for them to read Pinter's play in English classrooms without the slightest shock. Of course, when Pinter's Officer speaks, Indian students sometimes recall injunctions of their redoubtable drillmasters and curmudgeonly matrons standing before an undisciplined squad of youngsters. English

[16] Pinter, Harold, *Mountain Language*, Faber, London, 1988, cit. a pp.: 13, 15, 19, 21, 23.

still commands that prerogative aloofness and authority in India that keeps its others at a formal, minatory distance.

My discussion of this play in classrooms often leads to a passage I put before my students to consider. Jerzy Kosinsky's is an unusual view of strangers, of their uncanny presence in our midst, that prompts reflection along the following lines:

While we certainly do not know strangers better than we know those with whom we are intimate, we do know strangers in more neatly defined terms. We see strangers as blocks of objective traits identified with what lies in our past. We see them in theatrical terms; the complexity of mutual identification still lies ahead, since we are not yet involved; we respond to them now as to characters in the early stages of a play. We are still discovering; we are not empathizing. Not yet. The barrier between the illusory and the real, between sympathy and empathy, is still definite. At this point, we have not yet begun to care.^[17]

At first, my students were not quite impressed by this passage, but they earnestly reflected on the unusual depth of Kosinsky's nuanced perception. Rather than saying that we are certain that strangers are beyond our caring ken, and that they do not merit our serious attention, what Kosinsky says strikes them as eminently plausible if only because human beings are loath to bang the door shut on those others who are not like us. "We are still discovering" is the cheerful light that the door left ajar casts on the long floor we share with strangers. We also allow a half-formed thought to pass, that (who knows) someday, "mutual identification" might be possible, even unavoidable. Students are quick to remark that this "play" is better viewed as *theatre*, as entertainment. When they entertain themselves in this way (as in a theatre) by entertaining the possibility that those others they see could be themselves in an ugly future scenario, they begin to learn new lessons. Let us mark Kosinsky's key words: *illusory*, *real*. Where else

[17] Kosinsky, Jerzy, *Passing By: Selected Essays, 1962 – 1991*, Paperback, Grove Press, New York, 1992, cit. a p. 228.

but in a theatre do we see one *as* the other simply for entertainment? Do not all players in drama act *for* us?

Let us only hope that *Mountain Language* will never play out the way it does in English in any Indian or other state capital. Or, in any capital city in the world, for that matter. In the unlikely event it does, what language will be left for us anyway to write that play in? We ought to think afresh about the uses of English in a country where it is likely to assume stranger and stranger dimensions for those whose strange ways mainly have links with the academy.

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RIASSUNTO

MODI STRANI E ANCOR PIÙ STRANI CON GLI ESTRANEI: L'INGLESE IN INDIA RIVISITATO

È talvolta difficile mettere a un decente fuoco discorsivo la lingua Inglese nell'India multilingue. I giovani aspiranti hanno ancora bisogno di questa lingua di origine coloniale per mantenere la sua diversità rispetto alle culture native dell'India che comunque stimano. Il presente saggio riconosce l'ambivalenza radicale che l'inglese crea, oltre a considerare gli altri aspetti dell'inglese che questo apporta nel progresso globalizzante dell'India. Viene criticato ciò che gli accademici spesso praticano come alcune versioni e varianti dei Cultural Studies, e come finiscono per fare degli "Stranger Studies". La parte conclusiva dell'articolo analizza le riserve che la maggior parte degli indiani sembra avere nei confronti dei loro visitatori e ospiti, e come l'inglese influenzi le loro transazioni con l'"altro" mondo. Un tableau di Harold Pinter, tratta da *Mountain Language*, viene letto come una lezione oggettiva per gli studenti che investono nell'inglese, incuranti del suo potenziale ancora immutato di lingua imperialista. Quando la lingua fallisce l'Essere Umano, è tempo di ripensare le scienze umanistiche. L'articolo si conclude con la speranza riformista che nessuna capitale Indiana o di altri Stati possa mai essere il palcoscenico di uno scenario inglese così prepotente come quello che appare così palesemente nell'opera di Pinter.

Parole chiave: Inglese in India, "Stranger" Studies, *Mountain Language* di Harold Pinter, ospiti, visitatori, altri - linguaggio ed essere umano