Prologue

The Slush Pile

In the mid-1990s, working as a part-time editorial assistant at Granta in London, I was, for a very short time, in charge of the slush pile. The pile consisted mostly of short stories that had been sent in to the magazine; they came unsolicited and without representation by a literary agent. The submissions largely came from the United States and Britain but also from places like Bangladesh, Canada, India, Kenya, Nigeria, and Singapore—together sometimes referred to as the British Commonwealth or, lately, the Anglophone world. I found myself reading stamps and return addresses as carefully as the stories and concluded that they made a story of their own.

I read solicited manuscripts, too, most of which came from first-time American and British writers, all of whom had agents. But it is the slush pile I was most impressed by, the collective bulk of it, lying in stacks that lined one side of the office. On several Saturdays I was asked to come in to read through it, that immovable feast. I was given few formal instructions about what to do, but I knew I was supposed to make the pile smaller, if for no other reason than to create room for the new submissions that were continually streaming in. Someone gave me a stack of little mimeographed rejection slips. It was assumed that if I came across a gem I would pass it on to the editor. Unfortunately, on the few Saturdays I worked on the slush pile, that never happened, but the experience gave me a different way to think about the nature of what is often called “postcolonial literature.”
As I sifted through the pile and read through the stories, it became apparent just how different these writers’ relationships to the English language were. The pile offered an array of Englishes, but it also offered an array of literary representations from vastly different societies. It seemed too simple to think of this literary democracy that was the slush pile as evidence of a vibrant Commonwealth or Anglophone world of letters. Instead, I started to think about what was behind some of this English, such as the other languages in its midst, and the realms of literary production in different parts of the world. In the case of India, whose cultural and political history I had been studying at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), English was just one of more than a dozen important literary languages with long histories of their own, including Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Marathi, Malayalam, and Bengali, to name a hefty handful.

In those days, from the Granta office in Islington, I used to take the tube from Angel station; two stops later, Russell Square, and a short walk over to SOAS. Between trendy Islington and stately Russell Square, I would change from the Northern Line to the Piccadilly Line at King’s Cross Station, surely one of the world’s most impressive confluences of people, nationalities, and languages. Where, I wondered, did literature begin? In a place? In a language? Over that year, I started to see in concrete terms how publishing was about the politics of language and location.

I also saw in the offerings of the slush pile a politics of desire. It made me consider what literature was before agents and publication, before texts are made great and become known. I became increasingly curious about the writers of these submissions themselves and how they might live in a non-English milieu or a multilingual one, yet write in English, and sometimes desire to be published abroad. Did their stories have to be told in English? Or was it just that the desire to be published internationally was very strong? Was what I was seeing in the slush pile the old Naipaulian quest, writers desperate to connect to a bigger, wider, better literary world, writers whose very sense of self and being in the world depended on it? Was it not possible to be a writer at home? Or was the very meaning of writing in English still, after years of supposed independence, to aim for London?

Some of these questions have been at the center of postcolonial studies for many years. Its central paradigm—indigenous resistance to colonial domination and, in literary terms, of “writing back to empire”—has necessarily and productively emphasized “the postcolonial”
as a conversation between Europe and its others. It has largely been the story of how writers of colonized or formerly colonized nations re-appropriated European colonial languages—English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese—as a form of political resistance and cultural critique. This paradigm forged new understandings of the nature of knowledge, culture, and power in diverse colonial and postcolonial contexts. It also became a way to begin to understand the neocolonial world in which we live.¹

Yet the premise of the postcolonial critique has been that the traffic in ideas moves from the centers to the peripheries and back again. I believe this premise, based as it is on a single model of resistance, limits our understanding of how colonial languages become indigenized and begin to create their own circuits of knowledge and power. Part of the problem with the postcolonial paradigm is that it has become so linked with issues of migration and transnationalism that the focus has remained on and in many respects has strengthened an East-West dialectic. What, I wondered, had happened and was happening to English in India after colonization? How and why did it sustain itself as an Indian language, and to what extent was it part of Indian cultural life? These questions are pertinent not only to the story of English in India, but to the disparate processes of the globalization of English happening around the world.

I became convinced that I would not find the answers only by reading and analyzing Indian English texts or by comparing them to other bodies of literature. The texts mattered, but so, I started to believe, did the place from which the writing emerged. For one, I needed more tools that would enable me to see—literally—the ground of literature. As a result, I turned to anthropology as a way to question the role of language in colonial discourse, the relationship between history and ethnography, and eventually between language and textual production.² I realized that rather than only study literature, I needed to immerse myself in the larger world of the production of literature in India.