

## ❖ DIALOGUE BETWEEN FREDRIC JAMESON AND AIJAZ AHMAD

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### Fredric Jameson

b. 1934

*The following excerpted selection, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," appeared first in Social Text in autumn 1986. The question Jameson addresses is why so few Third World writers were becoming widely read in the West at a time when the canon was opening to European and American women and ethnic minorities. One problem, Jameson suggests, is the insistent social realism of most Third World writing, which resembles the naturalistic literature of a century ago, such as that of Dreiser and Zola. The other problem is that Third World novels are shaped as allegories in which the protagonists' struggle stands for that of their society. Jameson's analysis in terms of literary style and genre was to provoke a sharp response by the poet and theorist Aijaz Ahmad (see pp. 1831–34). Jameson's reply to Ahmad can be found on pp. 1834–36. (For biographical information on Jameson, see p. 1290.)*

### Aijaz Ahmad

b. 1945

*Born in India in the last years of British colonial rule, Aijaz Ahmad was a "child of nationalism," subject to the political tensions of independent India but deeply influenced by British literature and culture. He has been professorial fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi, India, and professor of political sciences at York University in Ontario, Canada. He currently holds the Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan Chair in the Academy for Third World Studies in Jamia Milia Islamia University in New Delhi. A poet as well as a political thinker, he is the author of Lineages of the Present: Ideological and Political Genealogies of Contemporary South Asia (1996), On Communalism and Globalization: Offensives of the Far Right (2002), and Afghanistan, Iraq and the Imperialism of Our Time (2004), which have focused anthropological attention on current instances of neocolonialism.*

*In his controversial 1992 book, In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures (1992), Ahmad criticizes much postcolonial theory as a Western invention that homogenizes the developing world, erasing the unique political behaviors and attitudes that arise in each nation. According to Ahmad, there was a distinct rise in nationalistic behavior in "Third World" countries following World War II as an impulse against the process of globalization, and Western postcolonial theory is often guilty of erasing the individual identities that these nations have struggled to preserve. In the following selection from In Theory, originally printed in Social Text in the fall of 1987, Ahmad takes on his fellow Marxist Fredric Jameson, whose argument that Third World novels operate as national allegories struck Ahmad as theorizing out of their individual existence literary texts from the developing world — including his own.*

## From *Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism*

Many arguments can be made for the importance and interest of non-canonical forms of literature such as that of the third world,<sup>1</sup> but one is peculiarly self-defeating because it borrows the weapons of the adversary: the strategy of trying to prove that these texts are as "great" as those of the canon itself. The object is then to show that, to take an example from another non-canonical form, Dashiell Hammett is really as great as Dostoyevsky, and therefore can be admitted. This is to attempt dutifully to wish away all traces of that "pulp" format which is constitutive of sub-genres, and it invites immediate failure insofar as any passionate reader of Dostoyevsky will know at once, after a few pages, that those kinds of satisfactions are not present. Nothing is to be gained by passing over in silence the radical difference of non-canonical texts. The third-world novel will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce; what is more damaging than that, perhaps, is its tendency to remind us of outmoded stages of our own first-world cultural development and to cause us to conclude that "they are still writing novels like Dreiser or Sherwood Anderson."

A case could be built on this kind of discouragement, with its deep existential commitment to a rhythm of modernist innovation if not fashion-changes; but it would not be a moralizing one — a historicist one, rather, which challenges our imprisonment in the present of postmodernism and calls for a reinvention of the radical difference of *our own* cultural past and its now seemingly old-fashioned situations and novelties.

But I would rather argue all this a different way, at least for now<sup>2</sup>: these reactions to third-world

texts are at one and the same time perfectly natural, perfectly comprehensible, and terribly parochial. If the purpose of the canon is to restrict our aesthetic sympathies, to develop a range of rich and subtle perceptions which can be exercised only on the occasion of a small but choice body of texts, to discourage us from reading anything else or from reading those things in different ways, then it is humanly impoverishing. Indeed our want of sympathy for these often unmodern third-world texts is itself frequently but a disguise for some deeper fear of the affluent about the way people actually live in other parts of the world — a way of life that still has little in common with daily life in the American suburb. There is nothing particularly disgraceful in having lived a sheltered life, in never having had to confront the difficulties, the complications and the frustrations of urban living, but it is nothing to be particularly proud of either. Moreover, a limited experience of life normally does not make for a wide range of sympathies with very different kinds of people (I'm thinking of differences that range from gender and race all the way to those of social class and culture).

The way in which all this affects the reading process seems to be as follows: as western readers whose tastes (and much else) have been formed by our own modernisms, a popular or socially realistic third-world novel tends to come before us, not immediately, but as though already-read. We sense, between ourselves and this alien text, the presence of another reader, of the Other reader, for whom a narrative, which strikes us as conventional or naive, has a freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share. The fear and the resistance I'm evoking has to do, then, with the sense of our own non-coincidence with that Other reader, so different from ourselves; our sense that to coincide in any adequate way with that Other "ideal reader" — that is to say, to read this text adequately — we would have to give up a great deal that is individually precious to us and

<sup>1</sup>I have argued elsewhere for the importance of mass culture and science fiction. See "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* no. 1 (1979), 130-148. [Jameson]

<sup>2</sup>The essay was written for an immediate occasion — the third memorial lecture in honor of my late colleague and friend Robert C. Elliot at the University of California, San Diego. It is essentially reprinted as given. [Jameson]

acknowledge an existence and a situation unfamiliar and therefore frightening — one that we do not know and prefer *not* to know. . . .

. . . Let me now, by way of a sweeping hypothesis, try to say what all third-world cultural productions seem to have in common and what distinguishes them radically from analogous cultural forms in the first world. All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel. Let me try to state this distinction in a grossly oversimplified way: one of the determinants of capitalist culture, that is, the culture of the western realist and modernist novel, is a radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political, between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, of the economic, and of secular political power: in other words, Freud versus Marx. Our numerous theoretical attempts to overcome this great split only reconfirm its

existence and its shaping power over our individual and collective lives. We have been trained in a deep cultural conviction that the lived experience of our private existences is somehow incommensurable with the abstractions of economic science and political dynamics. Politics in our novels therefore is, according to Stendhal's canonical formulation, a "pistol shot in the middle of a concert."

I will argue that, although we may retain for convenience and for analysis such categories as the subjective and the public or political, the relations between them are wholly different in third-world culture. Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic — necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*. Need I add that it is precisely this very different ratio of the political to the personal which makes such texts alien to us at first approach, and consequently, resistant to our conventional western habits of reading? . . .

AJAZ AHMAD

## From Jameson's *Rhetoric of Otherness* and the "National Allegory"

There is doubtless a personal, somewhat existential side to my encounter with this text, which is best clarified at the outset. I have been reading Jameson's work now for roughly fifteen years, and at least some of what I know about the literatures and cultures of Western Europe and the US comes from him; and because I am a marxist, I had always thought of us, Jameson and myself, as birds of the same feather even though we never quite flocked together. But, then, when I was on the fifth page of this text (specifically, on the sentence

starting with "All third-world texts are necessarily . . ." etc.), I realized that what was being theorized was, among many other things, myself. Now, I was born in India and I am a Pakistani citizen; I write poetry in Urdu, a language not commonly understood among US intellectuals. So, I said to myself: "*All? . . . necessarily?*" It felt odd. Matters got much more curious, however. For, the farther I read the more I realized, with no little chagrin, that the man whom I had for so long, so affectionately, even though from a physical

distance, taken as a comrade was, in his own opinion, my civilizational Other. It was not a good feeling. . . .

### III

I have said already that if one believes in the Three Worlds Theory, hence in a "third world" defined exclusively in terms of "the experience of colonialism and imperialism," then the primary ideological formation available to a leftwing intellectual shall be that of nationalism; it will then be possible to assert, surely with very considerable exaggeration but nonetheless, that "all third-world texts are necessarily . . . *national allegories*" (emphases in the original). This exclusive emphasis on the nationalist ideology is there even in the opening paragraph of Jameson's text where the only choice for the "third world" is said to be between its "nationalisms" and a "global American postmodernist culture." Is there no other choice? Could not one join the "second world," for example? There used to be, in the marxist discourse, a thing called socialist and/or communist culture which was neither nationalist nor postmodernist. Has that vanished from our discourse altogether, even as the name of a desire?

Jameson's haste in totalizing historical phenomena in terms of binary oppositions (nationalism/postmodernism, in this case) leaves little room for the fact, for instance, that the only nationalisms in the so-called third world which have been able to resist US cultural pressure and have actually produced any alternatives are the ones which are already articulated to and assimilated within the much larger field of socialist political practice. Virtually all others have had no difficulty in reconciling themselves with what Jameson calls "global American postmodernist culture"; in the singular and sizeable case of Iran (which Jameson forbids us to mention on the grounds that it is "predictable" that we shall do so), the anti-communism of the Islamic nationalists has produced not social regeneration but clerical fascism. Nor does the absolutism of that opposition (postmodernism/nationalism) permit any space for the simple idea that nationalism itself is not some unitary thing with some pre-determined essence and value. There are hundreds of nationalisms in

Asia and Africa today; some are progressive, others are not. Whether or not a nationalism will produce a progressive cultural practice depends, to put it in Gramscian terms, upon the political character of the power bloc which takes hold of it and utilizes it, as a material force, in the process of constituting its own hegemony. There is neither theoretical ground nor empirical evidence to support the notion that bourgeois nationalisms of the so-called third world will have any difficulty with postmodernism; they *want* it.

Yet, there *is* a very tight fit between the Three Worlds Theory, the over-valorization of the nationalist ideology, and the assertion that "national allegory" is the primary, even exclusive, form of narrativity in the so-called third world. If this "third world" is *constituted* by the singular "experience of colonialism and imperialism," and if the only possible response is a nationalist one, then what else is there that is more urgent to narrate than this "experience"; in fact, there is *nothing else* to narrate. For, if societies here are defined not by relations of production but by relations of intra-national domination; if they are forever suspended outside the sphere of conflict between capitalism (first world) and socialism (second world); if the motivating force for history here is neither class formation and class struggle nor the multiplicities of intersecting conflicts based upon class, gender, nation, race, region and so on, but the unitary "experience" of national oppression (if one is merely the *object* of history, the Hegelian slave) then what else *can* one narrate but that national oppression? Politically, we are Calibans, all. Formally, we are fated to be in the poststructuralist world of repetition with difference; the same allegory, the nationalist one, re-written, over and over again, until the end of time: "all third-world texts are necessarily . . ."

### IV

But one could start with a radically different premise, namely the proposition that we live not in three worlds but in one; that this world includes the experience of colonialism and imperialism on both sides of Jameson's global divide (the "experience" of imperialism is a central fact of all

aspects of life inside the US from ideological formation to the utilization of the social surplus in military-industrial complexes); that societies in formations of backward capitalism are as much constituted by the division of classes as are societies in the advanced capitalist countries; that socialism is not restricted to something called the second world but is simply the name of a resistance that saturates the globe today, as capitalism itself does; that the different parts of the capitalist system are to be known not in terms of a binary opposition but as a contradictory unity, with differences, yes, but also with profound overlaps. One immediate consequence for literary theory would be that the unitary search for "a theory of cognitive aesthetics for third-world literature" would be rendered impossible, and one would have to forego the idea of a meta-narrative that encompasses all the fecundity of real narratives in the so-called third world. Conversely, many of the questions that one would ask about, let us say, Urdu or Bengali traditions of literature may turn out to be rather similar to the questions one has asked previously about English/American literatures. By the same token, a *real* knowledge of those other traditions may force US literary theorists to ask questions about their own tradition which they have heretofore not asked.

Jameson claims that one cannot proceed from the premise of a real unity of the world "without falling back into some general liberal and humanistic universalism." That is a curious idea, coming from a marxist. One should have thought that the world was united not by liberalist ideology — that the world was not at all constituted in the realm of an Idea, be it Hegelian or humanist — but by the global operation of a single mode of production, namely the capitalist one, and the global resistance to this mode, a resistance which is itself unevenly developed in different parts of the globe. Socialism, one should have thought, was not by any means limited to the so-called second world (the socialist countries) but a global phenomenon, reaching into the farthest rural communities in Asia, Africa and Latin America, not to speak of individuals and groups within the United States. What gives the world its unity, then, is not a humanist ideology but the ferocious

struggle of capital and labor which is now strictly and fundamentally global in character. The prospect of a socialist revolution has receded so much from the practical horizon of so much of the metropolitan left that the temptation for the US left intelligentsia is to forget the ferocity of that basic struggle which in our time transcends all others. The advantage of coming from Pakistan, in my own case, is that the country is saturated with capitalist commodities, bristles with US weaponry, borders on China, the Soviet Union and Afghanistan, suffers from a proliferation of competing nationalisms, and is currently witnessing the first stage in the consolidation of the communist movement. It is difficult, coming from there, to forget that primary motion of history which gives to our globe its contradictory unity: a notion that has nothing to do with liberal humanism.

As for the specificity of cultural difference, Jameson's theoretical conception tends, I believe, in the opposite direction, namely, that of homogenization. Difference between the first world and the third is absolutized as an Otherness, but the enormous cultural heterogeneity of social formations within the so-called third world is submerged within a singular identity of "experience." Now, countries of Western Europe and North America have been deeply tied together over roughly the last two hundred years; capitalism itself is so much older in these countries; the cultural logic of late capitalism<sup>1</sup> is so strongly operative in these metropolitan formations; the circulation of cultural products among them is so immediate, so extensive, so brisk that one could sensibly speak of a certain cultural homogeneity among them. But Asia, Africa, and Latin America? Historically, these countries were never so closely tied together; Peru and India simply do not have a common history of the sort that Germany and France, or Britain and the United States, have; not even the singular "experience of colonialism and imperialism" has been in specific ways the same or similar in, say, India and Namibia. These various countries, from the

<sup>1</sup>*The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* is the subtitle of Jameson's book on postmodernism. An essay by Jameson on postmodernism appears in Chapter 10, p. 1956.

three continents, have been assimilated into the global structure of capitalism not as a single cultural ensemble but highly differentially, each establishing its own circuits of (unequal) exchange with the metropolis, each acquiring its own very distinct class formations. Circuits of exchange among them are rudimentary at best; an average Nigerian who is literate about his own country would know infinitely more about England and the United States than about any country of Asia or Latin America or indeed about most countries of Africa. The kind of circuits that bind the cultural complexes of the advanced capitalist countries simply do not exist among countries of backward capitalism, and capitalism itself, which is dominant but not altogether universalized, does not yet have the same power of homogenization in its cultural logic in most of these countries, except among the urban bourgeoisie.

Of course, great cultural similarities also exist among countries that occupy analogous positions in the global capitalist system, and there are similarities in many cases that have been bequeathed by the similarities of socio-economic structures in the pre-capitalist past. The point is not to construct a typology that is simply the obverse of Jameson's, but rather to define the material basis for a fair degree of cultural homogenization among the advanced

capitalist countries and the lack of that kind of homogenization in the rest of the capitalist world. In context, therefore, one is doubly surprised at Jameson's absolute insistence upon difference and the relation of otherness between the first world and the third, and his equally insistent idea that the "experience" of the "third world" could be contained and communicated within a single narrative form.

By locating capitalism in the first world and socialism in the second, Jameson's theory freezes and de-historicizes the global space within which struggles between these great motivating forces actually take place. And, by assimilating the enormous heterogeneities and productivities of our life into a single Hegelian metaphor of the master/slave relation, this theory reduces us to an ideal-type and demands from us that we narrate ourselves through a form commensurate with that ideal-type. To say that all third-world texts are necessarily this or that is to say, in effect, that any text originating within that social space which is *not* this or that is not a "true" narrative. It is in this sense above all, that the category of "third-world literature" which is the site of this operation, with the "national allegory" as its metatext as well as the mark of its constitution and difference, is, to my mind, epistemologically an impossible category.

FREDRIC JAMESON

## *A Brief Response*

I can understand many of Aijaz Ahmad's reactions to my essay without, finally, losing the feeling that it was worth doing and that these things were worth saying. The essay was intended as an intervention into a "first-world" literary and critical situation, in which it seemed important to me to stress the loss of certain literary functions and intellectual commitments in the contemporary American scene. It seemed useful to dramatize

that loss by showing the constitutive presence of those things — what I called narrative allegory (namely the coincidence of the personal story and the "tale of the tribe," as still in Spenser)<sup>1</sup> and also the political role of the cultural intellectual — in

<sup>1</sup>Jameson's point is that Spenser's epic *The Faerie Queene* (1594) is simultaneously a knightly romance and an allegory about England.

other parts of the world. To be sure, one then returns to show that US literature also includes its own "third-world" cultures (which escape the categories in which one describes hegemonic culture); and equally clearly, the classical cultures of the East (for example) are no more to be thought of as third-world cultures than the English Renaissance is to be thought of as a first-world one.

As for such categories, they are meant to stimulate the perception of difference by imposing comparisons and comparative operations that do not always suggest themselves automatically in our present academic division of labor, where Lu Xun<sup>2</sup> belongs to Chinese departments and Ousmane<sup>3</sup> (if to anything) to French departments. I believe that we have every interest in developing a kind of comparative cultural study (on the model, say, of Barrington Moore's comparative sociology) in which such disparate texts are juxtaposed, not to turn both into "the same thing," but rather with a view towards establishing radical *situational* difference in cultural production and meanings.

The methodological problem is that such differences can only be established within some larger preestablished identity: if there is nothing in common between two cultural situations, then clearly the establishment of difference is both pointless and given in advance. What this means is that if Identity and Difference are fixed and eternal opposites, we have either a ceaseless alternation, or a set of intolerable choices: presumably there would be no great advantage gained by junking the category of "third world" if the result is that North America then becomes "the same" as the subcontinent, say. But nothing is to be done with sheer random difference either, which either leaves us back in Boasian anthropology or in the empiricist history of "one damned thing after another." The claim of the dialectic as a distinct mode of thought is to set categories like those

of Identity and Difference in motion, so that the inevitable starting point is ultimately transformed beyond recognition; whether this claim can be honored cannot, of course, be decided in advance.

A great many other important issues are raised in this paper, which I can scarcely touch on now, let alone answer. The concept of "national allegory," for example, was not meant as an endorsement of nationalism, although I believe that a certain nationalism does not always play an exclusively negative and harmful role in some socialist revolutions.

As for the term "first world," I hope it is not necessary to say that the priority it implies is not a social one (the burden of my paper was to argue virtually the opposite position), nor is it an intellectual one (particularly given our Roman eclecticism<sup>4</sup> — currently expanding, I'm happy to say, to include a keen interest in contemporary Indian theory), nor is it even, God knows, a matter of production: it is based, far more even than military power, on the fact that American bankers hold the levers of the world system. As for one's feeling that this system, late capitalism, is the supreme unifying force of contemporary history, such a belief — which has been characterized as "monotheism" by some — confirms the descriptions of the *Grundrisse*<sup>5</sup> and does seem to me to correspond to a fact of life. I don't, however, see how my argument can be taken for an endorsement of this gravitational force, which it would be well, however, to take into account if one plans to try to resist it.

I think I can detect some final implication here that "theory" is, in the very nature of the beast, repressive and an exercise of power — although I can't be sure whether Aijaz Ahmad would endorse the full "theoretical" form of this particular position about theory. My own feeling is that such anxiety is particularly misplaced in a

<sup>4</sup>Jameson is gesturing toward the fact that the Roman Empire allowed its subjugated states to keep their own customs as long as they paid their taxes.

<sup>5</sup>Marx's "Critique of Political Economy," a massive manuscript that precedes and underlies *Capital*, not published until 1939, a selection from which appears at pp. 410–11.

<sup>2</sup>Pen name of Zhou Shuren (1881–1936), considered the father of modern Chinese literature.

<sup>3</sup>Ousmane Sembene (b. 1923), Senegalese novelist, poet, film director.

situation in which the "role" of the intellectual (and the very category itself) has never been less influential and in which anti-intellectualism is deeply ingrained in the very spirit of the culture. It seems to me much more productive to insist, as he also does, on the way in which we are all *situated* and determined socially and ideologically by our multiple class positions — something I hope I never seemed to deny. But even speaking from that position (as I could not but do), I still think my intervention was a positive and progressive one, whose implications (on any number of levels) include: the necessity for teaching third-world literatures; the recognition of the

challenge they pose to even the most advanced contemporary theory; the need for a *relational* way of thinking global culture (such that we cannot henceforth think "first-world" literature in isolation from that of other global spaces); the proposal for a comparative study of cultural situations (which I have been clearer about here, perhaps, but for which my code word, in the essay in question, was the slogan, "mode of production"); and finally, the suggestion (which Ahmad seems to endorse) that when we get done with all that we may want to entertain the possibility that we also need a (new) theory of second-world culture as well.

## Gayatri Spivak

b. 1942

*The chief spokesperson for "subaltern studies," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was born in Calcutta and educated at the University of Calcutta and at Cornell University. Her translation of and introduction to Jacques Derrida's Of Grammatology (1967) made her a national figure, and her critical method continues to feature the deconstructive turn. But she is even more widely known today as a postcolonial theorist from a global feminist Marxist perspective. Her social commitments are not merely theoretical: Professor Spivak is active in rural literacy teacher training on the grassroots level in India and Bangladesh. Spivak was the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh before becoming Avalon Professor at Columbia University in 1991. Spivak's books include Myself I Must Remake: The Life and Poetry of W. B. Yeats (1974), In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (1988), Selected Subaltern Studies (ed., 1988), The Post-Colonial Critic (1990), Outside in the Teaching Machine (1993), A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present (1999), and Death of a Discipline (2003). Her work in progress includes a book of essays on identity. The present selection, originally published in Critical Inquiry 12 (Autumn 1985), is here included because of its important place in the history of postcolonial theory. Over the twenty years since it was first published, however, Spivak has changed her position on many of the issues she raised here, and the interested reader must be referred to the revised version, which appears in her Critique of Postcolonial Reason (1999), pp. 112–48.*