How should readers and critics approach the idea of “Indian literature” – or, for that matter, “world literature”? This wide-ranging conversation explores that question. It also asks how a genuinely comparative study of the regional traditions in various Indian languages can be conceived. Within the context of these two questions, it delves into more general issues: Can literary criticism be seen as part of a collaborative project in which historians, philosophers and social scientists participate as potential interlocutors or even partners? How are “theories” such as postmodernism and philosophical realism relevant to the study of Indian literature and culture?

Satya P. Mohanty, Professor of English at Cornell University, has written extensively about philosophical and literary realism as well as contemporary approaches to Indian literature. He is also well known for his critical introduction to the 2005 translation of Fakir Mohan Senapati’s ground-breaking realist novel Chha Mana Atha Guntha (Six Acres and a Third; University of California Press, 2005; Penguin-India, 2006), first serialised in Oriya in 1897-99. Set in a village in colonial Orissa, the novel traces the rise and fall of a rapacious landlord, Ramachandra Mangaraj. Far from fitting into the stereotype of the sleepy little village as the timeless essence of an ancient and pre-modern Asian civilisation, however, the village in Chha Mana Atha Guntha emerges as the site of profound changes to combat cultural chauvinism.

“One key empirical thesis I’d urge scholars to consider is that Indian modernity does not begin with colonial rule and that its elements can be discerned much earlier, in many different strands of culture and society.”

From Indian literature to world literature: In conversation with Satya P. Mohanty, Professor of English, Cornell University. BY RASHMI DUBE BHATNAGAR & RAJENDER KAUR

Satya P. Mohanty. His work on debates about realism took a new turn with ‘Colonialism, Modernity and Literature’, an anthology of essays in which scholars working in a variety of traditions of literary realism made cross-regional and transnational comparisons using Fakir Mohan Senapati’s novel ‘Chha Mana Atha Guntha’ as a point of departure.
unleashed by the Permanent Settlement of 1793 in the territories of Orissa, Bengal and Bihar.

Mohanty’s work on debates about realism took a new turn with Colonialism, Modernity and Literature: A View from India (henceforth CML). This anthology of essays is notable for the fact that scholars working in a variety of traditions of literary realism – English, Hindi, Telugu, Assamese, and Latin American Spanish – made cross-regional and transnational comparisons using Senapati’s novel as a point of departure. Mohanty’s editorial introduction in CML suggested to social scientists and literary critics that early realist novels in Indian vernaculars of the colonial period can give us insights into alternative modernities that do not necessarily adhere to the model provided by Euro-American modernity, which is closely tied to the rise of capitalism.

(The following is an extract from an interview that was done during October and November 2011. The two interviewers teach literature at American universities: Rashmi Dube Bhatnagar is a Visiting Fellow at the Humanities Centre of the University of Pittsburgh, and Rajender Kaur, the current president of the South Asian Literary Association, is Associate Professor of English at William Patterson University. The full interview, which also includes an annotated bibliography, appeared earlier this month in the United States in South Asian Review, and will be published online in June, together with a Hindi translation in Pratilipi: http://pratilipi.in/)

We wanted to begin by asking you about your new edited volume, Colonialism, Modernity, and Literature: A View from India, which offers a model for comparative Indian literary studies. It seems like it has taken several years to produce this collection, and the inspiration for it came from the talks U.R. Ananthamurthy gave at Cornell in 2000.

Yes, it has been exciting to collaborate with scholars from various linguistic traditions in India as well as American critics who specialise in European and Latin American literatures. But the inspiration definitely came from U.R. Ananthamurthy and his humane and cosmopolitan vision of literary studies. Our collection of essays is dedicated to him. His talks at Cornell dealt with a number of subjects but were based in part on a comparative study of Fakir Mohan Senapati’s Chha Mana Atha Guntha (1897-99) and Rabindranath Tagore’s Gora (1907-09), both of which had influenced Ananthamurthy.

We’d like to return in detail to the implications of your work on Indian literature, but can we ask you first about the connections between your theoretical work and your translation and interpretation of Indian texts? You’ve been working on philosophical realism for over two decades now, and have recently started writing about literary realism. Can you tell us about the connections you see between “theoretical realism” and literary realism?

I think the best way to understand the connections between philosophical or theoretical realism and literary realism is to focus on what each says, explicitly or implicitly, about knowledge – about how we come to know things, especially in the social realm. Can we ever be objective in our understanding of social phenomena? Can we overcome socially produced distortions, especially those created by the dominant ideologies, and arrive at more accurate accounts, accounts that can be considered reliable?

Let me develop this idea by explaining how I, a literary critic, first became interested in philosophical realism – and in these questions in particular.

In the mid-1980s I was working, like many others around me, to integrate the tantalising claims of post-structuralist theory with the various traditions of materialist and social-critical thought with which we were all familiar – Marxism, feminism, etc. But I came to realise that while post-structuralism, as we knew it in the context of literary studies, raised interesting questions it had no way of providing adequate answers to some of them.

The deepest of these questions arose from poststructuralism’s critique of foundationalism, exemplified in Derrida’s deconstruction of the Husserlian concept of “presence”, a concept that had taken for granted that there may be a bedrock level of experience or observation where we can be absolutely certain that we know something. Poststructuralism’s critique of foundationalism was enabled, as was the case with earlier developments in analytic philosophy, by the recognition that no such bedrock level of experience exists, since everything – an individual’s personal experiences to scientific observations in the laboratory – is available to us only in profoundly mediated ways. Everything, as philosophers of science say, is necessarily theory-dependent.

The first major question that arose from this recognition is this: Since all knowledge is so profoundly mediated, isn’t objective knowledge impossible to achieve? Isn’t all knowledge relative to a given perspective? Isn’t, as the argument sometimes goes (see Lyotard on this topic), a kind of epistemological relativism the most reasonable position to adopt?

This is the question I wrote about in the late 1980s – on relativism, and whether it was a viable and desirable epistemological stance (my essay on this, “Us and Them”, appeared in The

“Senapati is a (philosophical) realist writing in a mode that has postmodernist characteristics.”
Yale Journal of Criticism in 1989, later anthologised in a few places). Writing this essay led me to an examination of recent versions of philosophical realism, which posits that objective knowledge is possible – but that our early twentieth century notions of foundationalist certainty need to be abandoned and our notion of objectivity needs to be reconfigured, made more hermeneutical and reflexive. On this view, genuine objectivity is not mere neutrality. We achieve objectivity by looking at the epistememic implications of different subjective perspectives, of our cultural biases, ideologies, and social locations. In exploring these issues, I was learning from debates in analytic philosophy surrounding the work of Thomas Kuhn, the historian and philosopher of science.

So both philosophical realism and literary realism are concerned with some form of objectivity?

Yes, there clearly is a similarity between philosophical realism and literary realism because the latter, much like the former, often seeks a more objective view of (social and cultural) reality, and realist writers often talk about how they are trying to correct the representations of the dominant genres and conventions. You see evidence of that view in, for instance, George Eliot’s call to go beyond what she calls “fancy” (a fanciful representation is so “easy”, she says) and in Senapati’s implicit critique of Lal Behary Day’s static, orientalist (“easy”) representation of the Indian village. Early realist writers say they are trying to achieve greater fidelity to things as they are – that is, going beyond existing representations that are ideological or distorted for some other reason. Their concern is with greater objectivity or greater truth than what the hegemonic perspectives allow us to glean – but it is not with some notion of absolute descriptive fidelity to nature. The best realist writers tend to provide an analysis of reality, and their descriptions of the world are meant to support their analysis.

LITERARY POSTMODERNISM

While there is a clear analogy to be drawn between the project of philosophical or epistemological realism and that of some strands of literary realism, no necessary connection exists between theoretical postmodernism (which includes what we call poststructuralism) and literary postmodernism. Literary postmodernism refers to the textual, and in particular narrative, features and conventions that literary historians have identified as having emerged after the decline of literary modernism. Literary postmodernism is a term drawn from literary history whereas theoretical postmodernism is an epistemological, and more generally philosophical, stance or view.

You can be a postmodernist novelist or poet, and that is how editors may categorise you to fit you in the appropriate anthology. But whether you are a postmodernist in the philosophical sense would not be clear from that fact alone. A writer can be using postmodern literary conventions while pursuing a philosophical-realist project – a project that seeks to unmask social distortions and reveal a more objective version of reality. You can adopt the narrative modes of [Thomas] Pynchon or [Salman] Rushdie and simultaneously pursue George Eliot’s goals in writing fiction. You can play with and even subvert conventions of literary realism and still be a philosophical realist at heart. In the mid-1980s, Kum Kum Sangari wrote a superb analysis of Rushdie and Garcia Marquez along these lines, urging readers to reconsider their notion that the latter’s use of magical realism is anti-realist. And if you read Jennifer Harford Vargas’s 2009 essay on García Marquez in Economic and Political Weekly (EPW), you will see the same basic thesis. Both critics argue in effect that magical realist writers often have a realist epistemology, which means that they are trying to get closer to objective social reality.

This is one of the reasons why Fakir Mohan Senapati’s novel Chha Mana Atha Guntha, written in colonial India in the late 1890s, is such an interesting text. It is written in an allusive, parodic mode that suggests what we literary critics call postmodernism, but underneath that mode – and indeed through those very subversive narrative conventions – Senapati develops a rich descriptive and analytical account of colonial Indian society and culture. So he is a (philosophical) realist writing in a mode that has postmodernist characteristics – and this is sixty or seventy years before the advent of the postmodernist novel in the West!

There is a stageist mentality in debates around literary realism that operates on a linear notion of time within which each piece of literature builds on its immediate predecessor. Yet you seem to align yourself with non-linear notions of literary-historical time by stating in your critical introduction that the realism...
of ‘Chha Mana Atha Guntha’ “is closer to the reflexive postmodernism of a Salman Rushdie than it is to the naturalism of a Mulk Raj Anand”. Would you agree that the stageist notion of literary realism belonged to an earlier era?

Yes, we definitely need to go beyond naive models of progress and development in literature and culture. So instead of seeing the history of the Indian novel as one of steady progress toward greater and greater sophistication, from crude realism to self-conscious postmodernism, magical realism, etc., we have to become more aware of the levels of analytical and epistemic work that realism of various kinds have done, as they have engaged their times – their realities – in textual-specific ways.

Another – and more complex – model can be derived from the way literature often anticipates the discoveries of critical social science. This is certainly true of the realist novel in India. Vasudha Dalmia makes this point about Premchand in her preface to the English translation of Godaan. Dalmia and others are right: literature often anticipates by decades the insights and findings of historians and social thinkers, and we literary critics can help build a multi-disciplinary project that will explore what we may call, echoing E.P. Thompson’s 1966 Times Literary Supplement essay, the “literary view from below”. (Thompson’s famous manifesto was titled “History From Below”, as you know.)

By the way, the 2006 special section of EPW that Harish Trivedi and I co-edited alluded to that historiographical project by using the phrase “literary view from below” in the title – and so did the two comparative Indian literature conferences that we co-organised (with the political scientist Manoranjan Mohanty) in India and the U.S. – at the University of Delhi in January 2007 and at Cornell in May 2008.

So, realism in 19th century India is a literary mode that is sometimes used to explore the working out of an anti-colonial critical consciousness from subaltern perspectives? You are drawing our attention to the realistic projects underlying the narrator’s voice and tone, mode of satiric commentary, withholdings and silences and disclosures. Where can this kind of analysis of realism take us? What can it make us see?

I don’t want to generalise too quickly about all realistic novels, since there is a lot more historical and textual work that needs to be done. But one strand of this kind of analysis will certainly tell us a lot about subaltern agency, and take us beyond the kind of hyperbolic scepticism we often hear about when subaltern thoughts and ideas are discussed in literary-theoretical circles. So while it may be wise to suggest that in some contexts, for reasons that may be partly obscure, the subaltern’s perspective is rendered invisible by the dominant discourses about it, an overly general –decontextualised – scepticism about subalterns is unwarranted. The question about subaltern agency can never be purely, or primarily, a theoretical one. There is a lot of empirical knowledge that we lack, and we need reflexive and context-sensitive theoretical tools to gain access to some of it. Here is where the work of historians and other social scientists is so important. There isn’t a trace of that hyperbolic scepticism in such classic works as Thompson’s on the “moral economy of the crowd” (1971) or in James Scott’s on “weapons of the weak”. And take a look at how careful and reflexive Eric Hobsbawm is when he writes about “grassroots history”, grounding scepticism in real contexts of research, ideological prejudice, and theoretical method (the essay, first published in 1985, is called “History From Below – Some Reflections”). So the kind of exaggerated scepticism we often see in some post-structuralist circles is not the only form scepticism can take. There are alternatives to a general, broad-brush sceptical stance. Here is where literary critics can make useful interventions. Before literary critics conclude that the subaltern cannot, in fact, speak, or that we won’t be able to understand what s/he is saying, it would be good to ask, for instance, what literary forms – drawing on oral performative traditions – show us about the kinds of
critique that have been developed in our rich regional, vernacular literatures. Reading the Asamiya writer Hemchandra Barua together with Fakir Mohan Senapati can help focus our analysis of this, as is suggested by Tirotomà Mishra’s critical essay in CML. (Or you could extend the analysis of orality and the novel across continents by doing a comparative study of the narrative mode of Senapati’s novel and that of Amos Tutuola’s 1952 work *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, which is based on Yoruba folktales.)

**CULTURAL CHAUVINISM**

Most of the textual analyses in ‘Colonialism, Modernity, and Literature’ have a comparative focus. Your introduction to the volume says that a genuinely comparative approach to Indian literature – literature produced across regions and linguistic traditions – can help us avoid the problems caused by regional insularity and cultural chauvinism. Can you say a bit more about that?

Cultural chauvinism is toxic for the student of literature. I think some forms of cultural chauvinism in India originated during British rule as a kind of mimicry, initially a defence against cultural denigration by the colonial masters. The irony is that the defence (“my culture is also great, much like those of your European nations”) in fact drew on the ugliest forms of ethnocentrism and the racist logic found in 18th and 19th century Europe (“we are culturally superior to them, the barbarians, the ‘mlecchas’ – and the languages of our less civilised neighbours are worth less than our Sanskritised Aryan languages”). Think, in this context, about the French aristocrat Gobineau’s racist theories but also about the race-based assumptions in Matthew Arnold’s views about “national” literary cultures (e.g., his essays on Celtic literature). Even more relevant are the debates in 18th century England over the need to “standardise” English by classicising it. Spurious linguistic theories were closely tied to race- and class-based anthropological theories, and it is these ideas that are marshalled by ideologues in India a century later. Intellectual historians have looked critically at these ideas (e.g., about “Englishness” or “Frenchness”) in the European context, but not enough attention had been paid to the role they played in India. At least one historian, Joya Chatterji, has argued that in some parts of India cultural chauvinism developed in the 19th and 20th centuries as communist sentiments hardened into ideologies about identity, and so chauvinism has a basis in the class interests of the newly rich zamindars, who were mostly upper-caste Hindus. As early as 1968, Broomfield wrote insightfully about the cultural attitudes of this parvenu class. Clearly, much more work needs to be done on this topic by progressive critics and historians.

The tragedy for readers of literature is that chauvinism as a form of mimicry produced a distorted view of literature, turning it into a crude ideological weapon – “my literary history goes back farther than yours”; “this great author from the past belongs to my linguistic tradition, not yours,” etc. This ideology is toxic even for those readers who belong to the literary traditions that are ostensibly being championed or praised. Unfortunately for everyone, versions of this kind of chauvinism have often become the default position in the study of our regional literatures since Independence. Instead of studying literature, we engage in an unsavoury ideological project – superficial idolatry of authors replaces careful analysis and interpretation of texts, and it produces a deliberately insular focus on one’s own linguistic tradition based on the assumption that literary criticism is an ongoing competition among different traditions vying for prominence. This ideology sanctions, and perhaps even requires, ignorance about other modern literary traditions in India – although, of course, it can easily coexist with knowledge of Sanskrit or European literatures. The earliest histories of regional literature and monographs on individual authors published by the Sahitya Akademi in Delhi provide ample evidence of the kind of phenomenon I am talking about, and it will take several Ph.D. dissertations to analyse those early trends from the perspective I am suggesting here.

We don’t yet have an adequate – and adequately tactful – moral language to talk about chauvinism as a cultural or ideological phenomenon, so all we do is raise an eyebrow or exchange looks when we see it manifested in public – at a conference or in publications. But brave attempts to identify it have been made by leading literary figures. See Girish Karnad’s 2001 article in *The Hindu*, for instance, as well as his 2009 piece titled “Tagorolatry” in *The Book Review*. At stake here, as Karnad points out, is the question of how to define the canon of “Indian literature” as well as the responsibility of editors of literary anthologies. But there is also the more general issue of how to interpret individual works of Indian literature, since a chauvinist perspective produces distorted readings of texts and authors. Imagine trying to read Dickens with the primary goal of showing how great English culture is! Or reading Tukaram with the sole purpose of celebrating the greatness of Marathi culture, and Sarala Das, who wrote subaltern versions of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in the 15th century, to exemplify the glorious literary history of Odisha! Such attempts would be wrong-headed because they prevent us from seeing the rich cultural crosscurrents that shape medieval and early modern Indian culture, the culture of the Natha yogis and the itinerant bards who roamed from region to re-
igion creating a truly new moment in the subcontinent’s history. To read Tukaram and Sarala Das in narrowly literary-historical terms is in effect to clip their visionary wings, to be blind to the subversive social power of their work. But our modern version of cultural chauvinism may convince students of literature that this is exactly how both writers should be read since this is how literary histories in other regions are being written.

My point in my introduction to CML is not that literary histories are not important but that detailed textual interpretations and, in particular, cross-regional comparative studies are more urgently needed now to combat chauvinism. It has been over 60 years since Independence and we may need to take a short break from writing both national and regional literary histories to focus more directly on texts, and on comparative cultural themes. Some of the best essays on the idea of “Indian literature” – whether by Aijaz Ahmad, Sisir Kumar Das, Amiya Dev or K. Ayappa Paniker – point to the need for more comparative studies as well. I especially like Paniker’s idea that we need to focus on textual clusters that define socio-cultural movements across linguistic regions. (Kavita Panjabi’s new edited collection, Politics and Poetics of Sufism and Bhakti in South Asia, may do just this kind of work. It was published in India only a few weeks ago and all I have read is the table of contents, but it looks fascinating.) What Amiya Dev calls “literary history from below” – perhaps also echoing the project of the British Marxist historians – would be valuable, but first we need to get away from the insular model of literary history by producing more comparative textual analysis across linguistic traditions. A more adequate literary history will be possible once we have transcended not only the artificial opposition between high and low culture but also the huge wall conventional literary history erects between different – though related – linguistic traditions.

Incidentally, the rise of the discipline of Comparative Literature in Europe was itself a reaction against the blinkered vision produced by exclusively national literary studies. Hugo Meltzl, founder of the first journal of comparative literature in the 1870s, talks about the need for a journal like his to counter the cultural tendency of every nation to “consider itself... superior to all other nations”. He calls this tendency the “national principle”, popular in 19th century literary studies in Europe. (Needless to say, healthy forms of cultural self-esteem and fellow-feeling, which include love of one's community and one's neighbours, do not require a belief in the superiority of one’s community over others. Jingoism or chauvinism is an unhealthy cultural development and it should not be confused with genuine pride in one's culture and community.)

Meltzl’s anti-nationalist vision was a necessary antidote to the dominant traditions of literary studies in his time, but unfortunately the comparative focus of his discipline did not develop much beyond its Eurocentric origins, even after such inspiring 20th century movements as third-world de-colonisation and socialist and feminist internationalism. There are the beginnings of a new debate about world literature among scholars in the West, however, and I feel that students of Indian literature can contribute a great deal to the vision of a genuinely de-colonised and egalitarian idea of “world literature”. But that idea should emerge from detailed textual and cultural interpretations, from empirical knowledge of cultures in history, rather than from idealist speculations about Literature (with a capital L) or the kind of sweeping self-glorying narratives we often get from purely literary histories, especially those devoted to a single tradition.

How do we prevent the world lit you speak of from getting commoditised and flattened in world lit courses?

The term “world lit”, as I use it, is a goal of critical practice, of cross-cultural conversations. It does not refer to a canon of literary works. Even Goethe, when he initially came up with the term “Weltliteratur” in the early 19th century, thought of it less as a body of literary works – fixed or growing – and more as the process by which critics and general readers learn how to live consciously and intelligently in a pluralised cultural space, a space shaped by increased travel and cross-cultural contact through translations and criticism. Remember how dazzled Goethe was by Kalidas’s Sakuntala, which he read in translation? His famous quatrain about Kalidas was written in 1791. So naturally, Goethe invoked the virtues of cultural openness and tolerance while discussing world literature and praised the attempt made by writers and scholars “to understand one another and compare one another’s work” across national boundaries.

“There are the beginnings of a new debate about world literature among scholars in the West.”

U.R. ANANTHAMURTHY. The inspiration for ‘Colonialism, Modernity and Literature’ came from him, and the collection of essays is dedicated to him.
Our universities today can contribute to the cultivation of these virtues, but I am not sure that the best way to do this is to produce the one definitive anthology of world literature that all students should read. A better way to begin is to deal with textual clusters of the kind we discussed in the context of Indian literature, and to show through comparative analysis how thinking “across cultures” is a difficult but necessary – and enormously rewarding – activity.

Part of the challenge is to change our reading habits, which are shaped by the habits of the cultures in which we have grown up.

Let me suggest something very simple, but something that I think is essential. One way for academic critics to contribute to this process of changing our sedimented cultural habits is by resolving to write and speak lucidly, avoiding unnecessary jargon. This change in our customary manner of speaking and writing may make us more rigorous, in my view, since it will make our ideas more accessible to non-academic readers and we have to respond to their queries, critical comments, and even imaginative reconstructions of what we are proposing. Such a change in our language is essential especially if we are striving to create more democratic spaces for criticism where “high” and “low” discourses are not kept separate and insulated from one another.

Imagine the pedagogical possibilities for a second: students in our classes could be more like performers and audience members at a pala or nautanki performance, responding to the texts from cultures not their own with humour and openness, unafraid to take risks and to make mistakes, extending the text’s implications in new ways.

A central theme of CML is alternative modernities and you have also explored that theme in your analysis of the ‘Lakshmi Purana’. What is the importance of alternative modernities for our current project of world literature?

The recent work on alternative modernities, which I have been reading and learning from, is part of an interdisciplinary project that originated in conferences and publications on “Multiple Modernities” and “Early Modernities”. It is inspired by work done by people like the sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt and, later, by the important interventions of Sheldon Pollock and others. In postcolonial studies, of course, Dilip Gaonkar and Dipesh Chakravarty brought the theme to prominence, and Charles Taylor did valuable work as well. In India, scholars at Banaras Hindu University led by Sanjay Kumar, Archana Kumar (both from the English Department) and Raj Kumar (from Hindi) have organised major conferences on this subject over these past few years, and this year they are collaborating with scholars from China (and Indian historians of China, such as Kamal Sheel) to put together innovative seminars extending those themes. The basic idea is that the dominant form of modernity we know today, as it has been defined by the rise of capitalism in Europe, is not the only kind of modernity the world has known. In fact, part of the excitement of intellectual projects like this is to produce, through historical and cultural research, reasonably cogent pictures of a non-capitalist modernity.

I’ve argued in a few places that while this project is a fundamentally interdisciplinary one, the study of literature can make a special contribution to it. In periods that we traditionally call “pre-modern”, literature often provides the best evidence of non-dominant layers of culture and thought, alternative values that may remain invisible if we look only at the socio-economic trends. Read through the lens of alternative modernities, literary texts open up new historical archives and suggest tantalising perspectives on a past we thought we knew well. And, of course, the corpus that is traditionally considered literary will itself change – for we will include in it mahapuranas in Sanskrit and kathakali folk performances in Malayalam, orally transmitted proverbs in Tuka’s Marathi as well as vivah geet (wedding songs sung by women) in 19th century Bhojpuri.

Can this emerging interdisciplinary focus on alternative modernities contribute to our understanding of what world literature is? I am sure it can. But a lot depends on whether more literary scholars become interested in this subject and whether we are willing to shed our disciplinary inhibitions and work between and across cultural and disciplinary boundaries. One key empirical thesis I’d urge scholars to consider is that Indian modernity does not begin with colonial rule and that its elements can be discerned much earlier, in many different strands of culture and society. If it is likely that there are various forms of modernity, the concept of modernity can be disaggregated – that is, its constituent features can be taken apart and imaginatively re-examined in new combinations in different social and cultural contexts. (I suggested this in my introduction to CML.) Literary and cultural critics can explore the emergence of modern ideas, values, and cultural forms through close textual analysis, especially if we remain both historically imaginative and philosophically precise. Such analysis can complement, and even inspire, related work done by anthropologists, sociologists, and historians on cultural ideologies and social institutions.

We find immensely energising your critique of cultural and moral relativism, your advocacy of a cross-cultural learning that is not the literary equivalent of making polite conversation, but is instead a vigorous engagement with difference. The cultural interpreter is not afraid to disagree or pass judgment. This is a position not of indifferent tolerance but of the recognition that difference is in fact the very condition of engagement.

Yes, the challenge is to go beyond what you call “indifferent tolerance”. We’ve all learned about the dangers of ethnocentrism, but relativism – which is not its opposite but merely its mirror image – does not take us too far. Its
very logic produces indifference, as many critics of relativism have argued. We need to go beyond both ethnocentrism and extreme forms of cultural relativism and take the risk of making judgments, of being wrong, of revising our views by examining where and how we went wrong. This cannot be a purely theoretical project. Even though our theoretical presuppositions sometimes contribute to our skewed judgments, the solution cannot be found purely at the level of theory.

As I – and so many others – have argued, it helps in such a situation to have a belief in a non-positivist, supple, and complex notion of objectivity as an ideal of inquiry. That is what I find attractive in philosophical realism. A belief in objectivity as a revisable ideal, and in the fact that even our best current beliefs are corrigeble, produces the kind of humility we need as students of culture, especially of phenomena that overlap and cross cultural boundaries. One of the many advantages of the present moment is that the long intellectual shadow of the Age of European Empire seems to be receding a bit, and we have remarkable opportunities to work across cultures to learn from one another. We can retreat from this challenge and embrace a form of generalised scepticism – “How can we ever really understand other cultures?” “How can anyone really know anything?” But I think such questions aren’t genuine ones if they are pitched at this level of abstraction. Sceptical questions become useful if they are grounded in clearly defined intellectual contexts, contexts where (for instance) the sources and causes of our errors can be localised a bit more, made specific enough to understand and, where possible, eliminate.

Once you consider the epistemic guidance provided by the ideal of objectivity (and the related notion of “error”), the literary-critical conception of “realism” becomes less useful for the purposes of textual interpretation. Literary realism is a vague and ambiguous term, sometimes pointing to generic conventions while at others its object social reality and the many textual ways it is both mediated and interpreted. Analytical realism points to more than the accretion of mimetic details. It encourages us as readers, and as professional critics, to look at the epistemic work that is done by literary and cultural forms, styles, modes, and conventions. What underlies the concept is a “cognitivist” view of literature and culture, a view that is sharply at odds with the kind of overly general – and often a priori and decontextualised – scepticism that is popular in some literary-critical circles.

I suppose it won’t come as a surprise to you that I think of “world literature” as a realist and cognitivist project – much more than just a canon of important texts. It implies, as Goethe suggested, a sustained epistemic engagement with other literatures and cultures, and part of what we achieve through such engagement is a greater awareness of our own cultural and historical situatedness. Translations make such a project possible, but it is more fundamentally a hermeneutical process: it involves the kind of focussed cross-regional and cross-national comparative interpretation we discussed earlier in the context of Indian literature. In my view, work on “world literature” will have to be necessarily interdisciplinary, and it will draw on a very flexible conception of what literature is. The non-relativist cross-cultural project implied by the idea of “world literature” – of unlearning deeply ingrained prejudices and learning new ways of thinking – will end up taking us out of the spaces traditionally reserved for literature. I’ve placed “world literature” within quotes to indicate that it is a bit like any good slogan, useful to refer to the future that we want but haven’t yet fully imagined. That future is shaped by our social and political ideals, not just literary ones. And good slogans – like “Another World Is Possible!” or “We Are the 99%” – help by providing a general sense of direction.

“The full interview can be read online.