

## Transgressive Indigenity

Soni Wadhwa

A textbook study of indigenity would look something like this: pick an author from the already labeled native histories within traditions of national literatures, look for her treatment of majority-minority relationships and politics, then look for the tropes that project nature in a particular light and bingo! you have your own intervention in the growing body of studies around native literatures. This strategy has several merits: bringing out for consumption those various names that deserve attention and study is only one of them. However, my premise is rooted in the question of the already accepted definitional approach to the study. One of the things that have now begun to lurk around the studies of native literatures is the crisis of naming. Who should be called native or fourth world or first peoples or autochthonous? Or, who can claim that status or category? Do these questions gain different nuances when the speaker is from that supposedly native and non-native identity? Does our way of doing lit-crit change when we deal with this category?

Such nasty questions apart, the problem still remains: who is indigenous? Australian legislation alone can come up with at least 67 definitions (Roach and Egan 27). While it has been an extremely difficult question to answer, the gist of definitional paradigms thus depends on two things: subaltern status and first occupancy. It gets quite murky when despite so many definitions and paradigms, the authorities seem to have given up or left a far more open ground for inclusion with the criterion of self-determination forming a major component of naming and claiming: one is indigenous if one simply claims to be so. It gets even murkier with the question of literature. Does indigenous literature come from indigenous people only? How strongly is the idea of indigenity predicated on group identity? This paper aims to capitalize on the ambiguities spotted by these questions, and use them to locate indigenity in a different sense, that is, in all its gestures and movements of crossing the limits (of naming, of definitions).

Let us begin with an alternate understanding of the situation. Indigeneity, like the notions of identity, tends to get trapped within the limits of boundaries. It gets predicated on collective or group rights, and is therefore, at several times, merged with ethnicity. However, the rise in the theoretical studies of identity has also been the narrative of critiques of the notions of identity. Identity has given way to multiple identities and these have begun to be understood as existing in a spectrum. Naming is understood also in terms of the baggage of compartmentalization that comes with it. What has begun to be increasingly clearer is that naming and rooting identity in that naming is a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, walling in and walling out.

A gesture in transcending these boundaries, problematizing them, pointing out their impotence in the face of subversive contexts, breaking free of the shackles of given identities becomes a gesture in transgression. Michel Foucault in among the first uses of 'transgression' as a conceptual, linguistic, philosophical category used it to understand alternate sexuality. His framing of the concept is very relevant here to locate identity-based context of indigeneity. Transgression becomes a category of experience: it enables one to articulate that which lies between names or any other sets of entities or recognition. Here is a rather long statement by Foucault on the subject:

Transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage, but perhaps also its entire trajectory, even its origin; it is likely that transgression has its entire space in the line it crosses. The play of limits and transgression seems to be regulated by a simple obstinacy: transgression incessantly crosses and recrosses a line which closes up behind it in a wave of extremely short duration, and thus it is made to return once more right to the horizon of the uncrossable. But this relationship is considerably more complex: these elements are situated in an uncertain context, in certainties

which are immediately upset so that thought is ineffectual as soon as it attempts to seize them. (33-4)

What Foucault suggests is that the mechanism of transgression is not about oppositions or mockery. It does not in itself seek to disturb the notions and entity of foundations and thereby origins. Otherwise, it would be a violation and violence of some kind. On the contrary, transgression is some sort of innate force that identifies the presence of excess within limits and the things which are limited and defined by such limits. That excess bursts open somewhere on the thresholds, and oozes into the supposedly other categories. Foucault says: “Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being -affirms the limitlessness into which it leaps as it opens this zone to existence for the first time” (35).

These thoughts quite aptly summarize the fecund possibilities of transgression - its limits, its limitlessness, and above all, its liminality. Like heterotopia, among others of Foucault’s musings, transgression becomes a metaphor and an idea to engage with the spaces between the spaces. In the context of literary history, historiography and criticism, transgression gains enormous proportions of disturbances in the way it begins to reveal the fissures among categories. This sense of transgression is of immense use while strategizing the location between given identities.

Chris Jencks’s simple rendering of transgression with an extensive study of the concept is much closer to my project of understanding indigeneity here. As he puts it,

To transgress is to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention, it is to violate or infringe. But to transgress is also more than this, it is to announce and even laudate the commandment, the law or the convention. Transgression is a deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation. Analytically, then, transgression serves as an extremely sensitive vector in assessing the scope, direction and compass of any social theory . . . (Jencks 2)

A sense of continuum is essential to understand transgression. A little later Jencks quotes John Jervis: “Transgression . . . involves hybridization, the mixing of categories and the questioning of the boundaries that separate categories” (4). It is this sense of transgression that proves useful here to work with the question of identities and identity-based literature. In the category of indigenous literatures, it helps to combat the essentialist approach of defining the content by the biological, historical, or biologically historical being of the author.

Let me elaborate on this notion of transgressive indigeneity with the help of the Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988, and is considered one of the most important voices of Arabic literature. The question is why read particularly him in an act of transgression? A little bit of it has got to do with his identity, and another bit has got to do with his aesthetics. Here is an author - a twentieth century Muslim, writing in Egypt and writing in Arabic, though that’s an oversimplified view of who he is! So we see that his rootedness in that particular time and place does not in any way categorize him as an indigene. That explicatory and interpellating category could in fact be reserved for the tribal populations, and other such marginalized groups. So in the politics and strategies of naming, Mahfouz does not come across as bearing any such status.

But what he writes could be seen as problematizing identity-based origins of aesthetics, especially with reference to two of his works: *Khufu’s Wisdom* and *Arabian Nights and Days*. Both the novels deal with very different materials and if history is a part of making identity and indigenous identities, then it is relevant to say that both the novels deal with very different moments in history. And it is what Mahfouz does with these historical materials that is worth pausing at.

Let us take the case of *Khufu’s Wisdom* first. It is one of his novels about ancient Egypt. A time that is accessible to us only in its presence in museums, and historical and archaeological research. It is a time that

has been the source of immense creative speculation, as *The Mummy* film series in popular culture would easily point out. It is also a very highly romanticized area of especially world history. It has touched us in many ways - the legends around Tutankhamun have even scared us, the legends around Nefertiti have charmed us. High school students, especially in the US for instance, are asked to write about it in their rhetoric and composition classes, under the topic, "Was Egyptian Civilization a Black Civilization?" So it is a very contested area. Because we do know much specifics about the people of its times, there are many who would like to clam that ancestry and history for themselves. If Africa is equated with the Black presence, and since Egypt is part of Africa, then simple equation would tell us that its peoples were the Blacks. However, to attribute such a glorious phase of human achievement and beauty to the Blacks does not arguably bring out a simple closure. Since the facts about the bodies of the ancient Egyptians are not conclusively established, we have all sorts of people claiming that site for different purposes. As if it were open to arguments. Whoever can argue well takes away ancient Egypt as ancestry.

Enter Naguib Mahfouz in such a situation. *Khufu's Wisdom* is among his earliest works. He has also written at least two more novels about ancient Egypt. But this one is exceptionally simple. Khufu is the king. It is prophesied that instead of his own son, somebody else would inherit his throne. He kills that other newborn baby but that is what he thinks. That little boy grows up and becomes a brave soldier in Khufu's very own army and even saves him from being murdered by his own son. Khufu, in his wisdom, makes him the king. There is a lot more going on and this is only the gist of it. So here is a twentieth century Arab writing about a moment from several centuries ago, without any personal, supposedly indigenous-identity-based access to it and yet he comes up with a magnificent tale. Nothing that Mahfouz writes is overdone. We see examples of contemporary writers who spew out pages after pages of research on the readers while writing about a historical period. As if research were a virtue in itself. As if the knowledge

that you collected in the process of writing your novel were important in itself and deserved to stand alone. The ease with which Mahfouz writes his story is refreshing. Khufu could have been any king, ruling anywhere. Rituals, hierarchy and gods of his times aside, he is a king plagued with questions of how a king ought to rule. Mahfouz's creative handling of Khufu and his wisdom is layered with complexity. Though we understand that the people were bronze or brown in colour, it is not rubbed in our faces. Mahfouz renders his tale with an ease that is easy to be allured by.

But what is relevant here is the way in which indigenuity or the idea of origins becomes a question that is left alone. How did Mahfouz distill that part of history into a narrative that is not forced? This is where indigenuity in all its transgression could be seen at work. Some things need not be a prerogative of origins-based identity. There is something else that makes identity a shared concept, a shared being.

The most obvious question that arises is how to site this transgression in Mahfouz. In the novel, one of the characters quotes Kheny: 'artists are a sex between female and male'. Perhaps that is true for the other aspects of identity formation and retention too.

In other words, the whole world is a diaspora world. Could it not be possible that the whole world is the indigenous world too? Aren't we all indigenous in ways that play with the titular vocabulary of indigenuity? Aren't we all indigenous in ways that alter our equations with naming? Aren't we all somewhere between indigenous and non-indigenous? The so-called indigenous literature could also be about the aesthetic, the formal ground and the indeterminacy of both to name and categorize texts. The problem of interpretation and the essentializing shackles of naming and their dangers are too oppressive anyway. It is not a fabrication of far-fetched projects in philosophy and literature. Consider the larger interdisciplinary findings and view:

“[T]he out-dated, oft-repeated essentialist notions of the minority law that define what an ‘authentic’ minority is gives minority activists little choice but to homogenize and nationalize their identity politics. Only minorities that manage to conform with the expectations of the minority law are taken seriously as real minorities in national and international arenas” (quoted in Roach and Egan 31).

What Kingsbury highlights is the mechanism of exclusion inbuilt in the project of politics of indigenous groups. If some people are indigenous to a place, aren't others by default alien and encroaching?

Let us briefly consider *Arabian Nights and Days*. On those of us who have had any kind of access to the *Arabian Nights*, even as fairy tales, Mahfouz's book works like a charm. It is one of Mahfouz's later works, and critics often categorize it with his phase of existential quest. Among other things, it is about an almost magical-realist treatment of *The Arabian Nights*. It is important to note that it is “almost magical-realist” because one would require a much greater familiarity with a critical vocabulary to understand and possess Arabic literature. It is surely a twentieth century treatment of classical texts, possibly in the vein of postmodern rewriting, but postmodern might be a dangerous term to apply here. What Mahfouz does is that he takes the characters from the classical tales and gives them his own twists and turns. It is again a very subtle way of doing narratives from the margins. Again, Mahfouz's simplicity is charming. His retelling of Richard Burton's text simply disarms you as a reader and lovingly pulls you into itself.

Therefore, Mahfouz becomes an iconic case of transgressive indigeneity. He receives two different traditions - legends around ancient Egypt and the Egyptian tradition of *The Arabian Nights* and renders them into stories of generic being. He gently takes the stories that belong elsewhere in time and history and churns out precious pieces of world literature.

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