

Interview

Issues in Contemporary Literature

*Mona Sinha & Anupama Jaidev Karir in
Conversation with Pramod K. Nayar*

Pramod K. Nayar is Senior Professor at the Department of English, University of Hyderabad, where he also holds the UNESCO Chair in Vulnerability Studies. He has taught courses in English Literature and Cultural Studies for over 24 years. His areas of interest include Colonial and Postcolonial Literature, South Asian History and Literature, Literary Criticism and Theory, Eco-criticism, and Vulnerability Studies. His most recent books are *Vulnerable Earth* (2024), *Nuclear Cultures* (2023) *Alzheimer's Disease Memoirs* (2021), *The Human Rights Graphic Novel* (2021), *Ecoprecarity* (2019), *Bhopal's Ecological Gothic* (2017), and others. His essays have appeared in *Modern Fiction Studies*, *South Asian Review*, *South Asia, Narrative*, *Celebrity Studies*, *Asiatic*, *Prose Studies*, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, among others.

Mona Sinha (MS): Thank you for joining us on the FORTELL platform, Prof. Nayar. The vast range of your research areas, especially within the frameworks of Postcolonial Literatures and Vulnerability Studies have created conversations and opened up possibilities for new insights to study our contemporary world. You often speak of the need for liberal arts education in the current times. How do you see the future of liberal arts and literature in the age of digitality? How about literary studies as we move past the first quarter of this century?

Pramod K. Nayar (PKN): Both liberal arts and its most significant constituent, literary studies, will continue in the new medium of the digital, evidenced by the last few decades of work ranging from corpus creation to mapping literary texts and contexts. Multimodal access to and interpretations of texts have made for a different experience of

reading in the digital age, evidenced by projects such as the William Blake archives (one of the oldest) to the 1619 Project.

Anupama Jaidev Karir (AJK): You emphasize the ethical and philosophical considerations imperative to literary envisioning of contemporaneity as well as of possible futures. Do you see these considerations as extensions of critical engagement?

PKN: Critical engagement has never been entirely devoid of ethical and philosophical considerations, even during the peak of movements such as Deconstruction, with its obvious penchant for the textual, but whose textual analysis, as well as of the 'world' or the 'real' was informed by the political and ethical, such as the question of host/guest, the foreigner, the mother tongue, etc. In the contemporary, to take just one example, critical engagement now involves attention to the rights of the nonhuman and the 'nature' of the non-living, in a world where the climate crisis has altered the planet for the more-than and other-than human. Further, the philosophical influences now, of posthumanism, Critical Plant Studies, Critical Animal Studies, continue the work started in Theory, of feminism and Marxism, and now having broadened out their fields of focus. Finally, the envisioning of different, alternative worlds with a focus on justice and democracy remains central to approaches to the reading of literature now as it always has been, to varying degrees.

MS: How urgent, would you say, is the need for our liberal arts departments to engage with Ecoprecarity? Can we afford to be behind the curve on this?

PKN: Most Departments already do. Climate crisis is trendy, and trending. So we are definitely not behind the curve on this, at least in many Departments that I am aware of. Also, where the courses may not explicitly address Ecoprecarity, a term I coined in a fit of absence of mind as a book title and which for some reason has become widely, and wildly popular globally, the insistence on examining posthumanism and its environmental aspects (often under the rubric Posthuman/ist Environmentalism) means they are addressing the theme of ecological crisis via animals, plants or artificial beings.

AJK: What do you make of the insistent and irredeemably dystopic turn in climate fiction?

PKN: As critics, including myself, have noted, the question facing the novelist is: how to communicate the urgency, the immediacy, of the

climate crisis? One could write a detailed, slow-moving and realist novel discussing politics, social issues and such that contextualize and are driven by climate emergencies. Or one could frighten the readers by drawing images of terrifying and cataclysmic changes: worlds collapsing, people dying, etc. The realist novel has its pluses, but does its detailing deliver the sense of emergency? Or does the apocalyptic and the dystopian do this better? The jury is out on this, but the sheer quantum of novels produced with dystopian themes indicates that more authors have opted to frighten people out of their complacency.

AJK: In what ways does the planetary imagination challenge the privileging of the human? Does any of the emergent eco-fiction capture the nuances of this discourse?

PKN: Many novels, from Margaret Atwood to Becky Chambers, Jeff Vandermeer and others, and of course Ian McEwan and Kazuo Ishiguro, challenge the centrality of the human when they envision the planetary. Preceding all these is the astonishing work of Octavia Butler that inaugurates several of these themes. These authors ask: what has the self-pronounced centrality and supremacy of the human done to/for the planet *and its other denizens*? Locating the rights of the nonhuman, including now of cyborgs, artificial beings/androids, animals and plants alongside the history of anthropocentric behaviour and attitude, these texts also probe the limits of the human, asking tough questions about transplantations, chimeras and assisted living. Is the human central? If so, what does this entail? Does it mean greater response and response-ability (a term popularized by Donna Haraway and others) towards the planet? Imagining the planet also means, in many poems and novels, seeing the 'planetary in the particular', as David Farrier puts it. I explore this aspect of the planetary imagination and the thematic of scale in my forthcoming book *Postcolonial Poetry and the Environment* (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/in/postcolonial-poetry-and-the-environment-9781350499096/>)

AJK: You've introduced a course on vulnerability studies at NPTEL. What is your position on the idea that the pandemic gave a major impetus to the conceptualization and formulation of vulnerability studies?

PKN: That may have been an immediate impetus, but not the originary point. First, I have worked on Human Rights and Literature for over a decade, with lines of inquiry through disasters, extreme cultures, nuclear

cultures and precarious lives. So while I may not have given it a formal disciplinary name like 'Vulnerability Studies', vulnerable lives and contexts have been a staple of my oeuvre for quite some time, as the titles of several of my books, essays and journalism would show. The NPTEL course evolved alongside similar courses I offered as electives for the MA classes in my Department. Another reason for its appearance, so to speak, the UNESCO Chair, which came to us in 2022, is a 'teaching and research unit', and we are mandated to offer such courses. My friend and colleague, Prof. Anna Kurian, who is also Faculty Fellow, UNESCO Chair, has been offering courses in vulnerability studies, with very specific focus on the Early Modern/Shakespeare, etc as part of the Chair's mandate. The pandemic of course made online teaching a norm, so those of us with some discomfort operating in the virtual mode, adapted.

We have also conducted workshops and organized talks, with a focus on childhood and vulnerability, ageing and vulnerability, and other fields.

MS: The autobiography and biography have always been an established part of the literary canon. How are life-writings any different from these? How significant are life-writings with respect to vulnerability studies and some other emerging areas?

PKN: Stacy Alaimo and others have written wonderfully on what they call the 'body memoir', about autobiographies dealing with environmental toxins. The toxic body memoir and the toxic prosopography—collective biographies—which I study in *Vulnerable Earth* (2024) also point to the devastation of entire neighbourhoods. I find it interesting—and redeeming—that these are not focused only on the individual person, or even the human person, because they pay attention to the nonhuman life forms who are rendered vulnerable due to the toxins industries let into the soil, water, air. The focus on anthropogenic climate change and its impact on entire communities ensures that reading these autobiographies (Dan Fagin's *Toms River*, Sandra Steingraber's *Living Downstream* and others) means widening our perspective to include the more-than human: who do not (as far as we know) pen their life stories. Life writing in climate emergency mode is invariably, as I have argued, prosopography, a collective biography.

AJK: You've spoken of graphic narratives as genres of resilience and possibly redemption. Could you elaborate upon that?

PKN: These are genres of resilience, like traditional literary texts,

because they offer visual and verbal indexes of alternatives: social change, the resistance of survivors (I am thinking here of a text I taught this semester: Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Gorazde*), the battles with the state, genocidal contexts, and so on. These *draw*, and I use the term intentionally, attention to physiognomies, embodied resilience and individual or group resistance, as we see in Orijit Sen's work, or Sacco's. For me the critical literacy these narratives demand of the readers is a huge plus, especially when they are plotting—again, I use the term intentionally—lives, deaths, disasters.

MS: You are also committed to the Indian Writing in English Online project of the University of Hyderabad. Could you tell us more about it?

PKN: IWE Online is the world's first Open Educational Resource on the field, and is funded by the Institution of Eminence scheme of the University. My colleague Prof. Anna Kurian is its principal editor, and we have been assisted ably by brilliant academics like Prof. K. Narayana Chandran of the University of Hyderabad, Prof. Nandana Dutta of Guwahati University, Dr. Graziano Kratli of Yale, and amazing project assistants like Dr. Meenakshi Srihari and Atul Nair. The aim was to put together primary texts, criticism, biographies and pedagogic resources, and maybe some archives, on IWE—all in one place. The project has been a huge success, with over 1.3 lakh visitors, and a range of materials, from teaching notes, illustrated biographies, critical essays, survey essays. We also have interviews, book reviews, audio lectures, video lectures and poetry readings by wonderful poets like Sudeep Sen, Mamang Dai and others. The seminars held under the project's aegis have helped us compile scholarly commentary from the talks of the experts. The materials are rigorously peer reviewed, so as to ensure quality. Despite the thorny issue of obtaining copyright permissions, we have done remarkably well.

MS: How effectively do you think some of the contemporary themes are reflected in the writings of the current crop of Indian writers in English?

PKN: Many of the themes discussed above have been brought into Indian writing in English. For example, the environmental crisis has been a key theme in recent works: I refer here to Sudeep Sen's newest, *Anthropocene: Climate Change, Contagion, Consolation*, the sustained poetry of the environment by Mamang Dai. Also, critical work done on IWE looks back at Mehrotra, Daruwalla, Kolatkar for their themes of

animal lives, ecology and landscape. Posthumanism figures in Manjula Padmanabhan's science fiction.

MS: Short attention spans are an unwarranted by-product of the age of digitality. If we look at genres and forms, how do you see the future of long fiction and poetry?

PKN: Am sure attention spans have come down in the TikTok generation, and this has affected both, reading habits and the Liberal Arts' established practice of sustained and slow reflection as Anna and I have argued elsewhere ('The Liberal Arts in the Age of Illiberalism', *The Wire* August 23, 2022). This does impact critical thinking and the reading habits of people. But the fact that literary fiction continues to sell widely, receive sustained attention implies that the *literary* survives in some form, even in an age of shorter attention spans. The problem is in pedagogy: in inducing students at higher levels to read extended prose or fiction. How is one to speak of character development, plot evolution, multiple points of view and even politics, if the student does not read a novel in its entirety? Poetry has not been a popular genre in any case—witness the dearth of publishers putting out poetry now. It has been a staple in Literature Departments, for very good reasons: it is the most complex usage of language that you can think of, it is more compressed than any other genre, and so on. But more and more I find that *teachers* in Literature Departments are unwilling to teach poetry—somehow they have agreed that it is a 'difficult' genre. When such teachers complain about poor language usage among students, perhaps we should ask why *they* do not wish to engage with higher order language usage, such as poetry. But in the midst of the hopelessness, the major poets continue to produce good work, whether it is Sen and Hoskote here, Ben Okri, Claudia Rankine, Elizabeth Alexander, Ian Wedde elsewhere. Perhaps, as Yeats said, they are still quarrelling with themselves?

MS: In the age of digitality everyone wants to be a producer of content, rather than just being a consumer. How does this impact literary culture?

PKN: Well, there have always been authors who pay and publish, and presses that do so. The digital is a new medium of an older story. All kinds of work will get published, in this 'digital republic of letters', as I may call it. But whether what is published as creative content stands the test of time, acquires readership and credibility, is a moot point. The fact that the big authors continue to write multi-volume works, heavily

literary novels and complex poetry indicates that the randomization of creative content has not really altered the demand for good, sustained and engaging prose or poetry. Cultures of reading feed off and are fed by cultures of production, as we know from the time of print (studied by the remarkable Elizabeth Eisenstein), so while some content would definitely be informed by new forms of digital publishing, the old-fashioned literary holds its own, as it always has. People predicted a drastic downward trend in literary production with the advent of television, and now television content relies on the literary! For as long as humans crave storytelling—we are storytelling creatures, as Prof. K. Narayana Chandran has always said—there will be literature. Whether this remains institutionalized or not, that is a different prospect. But the literary is also the space for and of democracy: there is no democracy without Literature, and no Literature without democracy, as Jacques Derrida persuasively argued, for us to imagine other, juster worlds, for instance. It is also the only space—shrinking, with increasing Orwellian control over what can be written, read, laughed at, cried over, angered about—where one can notionally say what we want. It is a ‘strange institution’, yes: but without storytelling, where would we be?

MS & AJK: Thank you for sparing your precious time for us, Prof. Nayar. Your candid insights into the emerging areas of critical concern for contemporary literary studies are invaluable, and will surely enrich the readers of our journal.

PKN: Thank you for asking me to this conversation.

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