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Cultural Misunderstanding in Translation: Multicultural Coexistence and Multicultural Conceptions of World Literature

I.

To make ourselves understood, we had both resorted [...] to the very terms that world leaders and statesmen use at great, global conferences, the universal, irresistible metaphysic of modern meaning [...].¹

This quotation, characteristically by an Indian, the author Amitav Ghosh, points to a problem central to current discussions on such topics as translation, cultural, textual and literary transfer, and intercultural communication in today's global society. But is "the only language we had been able to discover in common"² really a global language that, according to Ghosh, is based on the scientific and military supremacy of the West?³ Does it really provide, together with the flood of standardized signs in media, in publicity and marketing, a general background for communication which will gradually make translation redundant?

Certain positions of cultural relativism in modern ethnography have been arguing against these kinds of universalistic tendencies by pointing to the variety of cultures and their specific characteristics even though it has become impossible to talk about cultures in terms of authentic, self-contained wholes. The so-called post-colonial discourse has replaced this liberal concept by the idea of cultural difference, thus postulating a changed paradigm for cultural encounters that also has an impact on cultural politics. Samuel Huntington claims, in the context of his widely discussed and much criticized theories about the "clash of civilizations", that the main axis of international conflict on a world scale will be the difference of cultures rather than of nations and between political and economic systems or standards of development: "For the relevant future, there will be no universal civilization, but instead a world of different civilizations, each of which will have to learn to coexist with the others."⁴

These theses present a great challenge to the humanities, whose traditional categories of description and (Eurocentrist) concepts of intercultural transfer are in need of revision. Likewise, the discussion on world literature has to part with the idea that the great diversity of literatures and cultures can be regarded as based on a common denominator within a many-faceted "archive" of texts. It has to confront the explosive dynamism of the text itself, arising from its origin in the central or peripheral areas of tension in the context of world-wide cultural interaction.

To discuss world literature today requires a cultural-political perspective. Based on a humanist tradition that goes back to Goethe, German comparative research usually takes too narrow a perspective on world literature, regarding the present as the criterion for a canon of literary masterpieces and believing in universally valid aesthetic norms and anthropological commonplaces about human nature ("*allgemein Menschliches*") to be the only possible common ground of intercultural understanding and translation.⁵ Even though recent studies have acknowledged the necessity of differentiating and extending the European canon and parting with the idea of a European "monopoly of world literature"⁶, the reorientation has not been sufficiently consistent. It may have become clear that the idea of world literature as a contribution to world-wide communication has to be reassessed today under the conditions of media-related international connections, but this is often too easily derived from the notion of a global, standardising tendency of human conditions. "[...] analogous conditions of literary production and reception are emerging throughout the world."⁷ Such an assumption negates the fact that this process is caused by an unequal balance of power between cultures and that it is the Western canon whose aesthetic norms are declared to be universally valid.

A quite different approach to Goethe's idea of world literature has been developed by the Moroccan scholar Fawzi Boubia in the field of Intercultural German Studies. Against the danger of an asymmetrical "assimilation of cultures"⁸ he emphasizes the distinctness especially of marginal literatures and cultures and points to the "communicative function to be attributed to the world literature concept" (285) by means of translation and dialogue. But even this concept seems to me to be inadequate in the light of the world-wide interrelatedness of cultures within the coordinate system of economic and political interdependencies. Intercultural dialogue, as has been shown clearly by the Writing Culture debate in ethnography, is always distorted by Western supremacy.⁹ In this context it is necessary to take a critical approach and develop an altered perspective, as has been done in recent studies on post-colonial theory.

II.

It is, first and foremost, crucial to uncouple world literature and canon formation. Formerly, in the world literature discussion as well as in anthologies, the identity of (national) cultures within a spectrum of individual cultures rather than their differences was regarded as relevant. As pointed out by Edward Said, this demanded the assumption of a dichotomy between familiar and foreign, Western and non-Western, Europe and the Orient.¹⁰ For centuries this assumption set the tone of intercultural contact, literary reception and translation. Its main function was for each culture to define its own cultural identity by the projection of a complete otherness, which was achieved by the construction of an imaginary Orient.

Recent discussions on world literature in the USA and also in so-called Third World countries have been challenging this hierarchical view of cultures and literatures as well as the dominant position of the West. A greater interest is now being taken in the conditions of literary production throughout the world and, consequently, in the historical and political positioning of each text in a field of tension of colonial and post-colonial experience. The new conceptions of world literature are process-oriented rather than canon-oriented and take into account the experience of cultural differences, as represented in an altered text corpus composed not only of European, but also of non-European texts that find "their" counterpart

in colonialism and imperialism and develop their own, often very different, literary modes of expression.

In this light, the world literature debate has been turned by some into a Third-World literature debate. Fredric Jameson, one of its leading (Western) spokesmen, proposes - also with reference to Goethe - a departure from the humanist canon and a cosmopolitan integration of Third-World literatures.¹¹ However, by attributing to these non-canonical literatures a pre-modernist, realist narrative technique, which has been long past and outgrown in our tradition, Jameson sticks to Western literary standards: "The third-world novel will not offer the satisfaction of Proust or Joyce" (65). He thus classifies these literatures as "national allegories" that fail to distinguish between individual and collective, private and public, as do "First"-World literatures.

Jameson's main opponent, the Indian scholar Aijaz Ahmad, criticizes as untenable not only such generalizing views on Third-World literature, but also the very distinction between so-called First and Third Worlds: "we live not in three worlds but in one..."¹². From this condition of a world-wide network of interrelations it follows that each literature is embedded in a complex connection in which it has always been already translated, but translated into Western terminology:

By the time a Latin American novel arrives in Delhi, it has been selected, translated, published, reviewed, explicated and allotted a place in the burgeoning archive of 'Third World Literature' through a complex set of metropolitan mediations. That is to say, it arrives here with those processes of circulation and classification already inscribed in its very texture.¹³

The translation industry and its dependence on metropolitan cultural and literary standards, which influence even the creation of the "original texts" and condition their distribution on the world market, have to be closely scrutinized in order to discuss "Third-World" texts in the context of "one-world" literatures. These processes of translation *preceding* the actual, linguistic translation more than ever point to the political relevance of the world literature debate.

The communication between Third-World literatures as well as their wider relevance depend on the mediatory function of Western languages¹⁴. Ahmad criticizes Jameson for being cynical because he takes into account only those works translated into English and leaves out the numerous literatures in Indian, Asiatic or African languages, which for the most part are not translated and into which no translations are made. Thus, new efforts at developing one's own language - be it Urdu, Wolof, Gikuyu etc.¹⁵, oral tradition, dialect, elements of ritual and representation, and specific narrative situations do not gain access to world literature. Do the constructs of world literature and Third-World literature imply, then, an accumulation of literatures in the metropolitan countries which exists mainly to extend the Western canon and serve the careers of Western scholars?¹⁶

Only regional cultures themselves, hitherto pushed to the periphery and excluded from the canon¹⁷, by means of literary and textual self-projection, can counteract the danger of being administered by Western discourse. As Nadine Gordimer points out, "[o]ne must look at the world *from Africa*, to be an African writer, not look *upon Africa*, from the world."¹⁸ An extended canon including such prominent post-colonial writers as Salman Rushdie, García Márquez, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, V.S. Naipaul and African-American women writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison can only be a first step in the direction involving

such a radical change of perspective. The discussion on world literature must also take into account non-canonical texts, which often explicitly point to cultural differences from their "peripheral" point of view - differences that remain in spite of internationalization. This fact, however, does not lead to the conclusion that cultures and literatures are untranslatable. A radical change of perspective would also permit a modification of the so far one-sided interest of the cultural sciences in problems of representation and modes of cultural symbolization in non-European societies.

In present post-colonial debates the difference of cultures and literatures has become the leading term. The deconstructionist concept has been related to historical reality:¹⁹ deconstructionist rejection of fixed referential meaning and clearly defined, organic cultural entities in favour of process, and of the identical in favour of otherness, have had an important impact on the conceptualization of intercultural transfer, intercultural confrontation and translation. Thus cultures are no longer regarded as homogenous monads, but as refracted by constructions of alterity²⁰ and also by their blending with "foreign" cultures.²¹

Now, what does this mean in terms of the translation of cultures and texts and the world literature discussion? Translations are not based on "original" cultures, for these have always already been represented and "translated". And this is true not only with regard to texts: "I, too, am a translated man. I have been *borne across*", says the protagonist in *Shame*, by Salman Rushdie.²² This situation demands to go back below the level of the literary translation and to look at the conditions of intercultural translatedness, the differences between centre and periphery, Western and non-Western cultures. An approach to so-called Third-World literature is necessary which does not proclaim a common world view but explicitly takes up, and makes productive, the contrast between cultures. In this view, world literature is not to be regarded as a product of internationalization but rather as a critical dimension where the different cultures and cultural conflicts can be represented in their complexity by means of the self-expressions of their subjects and where the latter can come to terms with colonialism and modernization.²³, very much influenced by the impact of an anti-European "Writing Back".

A new perspective of this kind also demands the emancipation (beyond a mere extension of the canon) of new literatures (literatures of minorities, of migrants, of resistance etc.) as well as the development of new literary modes and genres beyond the Western conception of literary autonomy. For instance, there are genres alternative to the European novel such as documentary fiction or narratives of magic realism, as has developed mainly in syncretistic cultures. A good example of such non-European genres is the Latin-American *testimonio*, where - unlike the subjectivity in the European *Bildungsroman* - the individual self-portrayal is rooted in ethnographic histories, or, respectively, the collective community of a local society.²⁴ In non-European literature a reassessment of the oral can be noticed, too, which is to be seen in the predominance of the speaking subject, the inclusion of anecdotes, proverbs, village stories etc.²⁵ Again, what is most important is that "Third-World literatures" develop ways of expressing their resistance against Western "translatedness" although, paradoxically, this is most often based on translation into European languages. But even these literatures, though they do not claim to be world literature and emphasize, in a political context, regionalization against universalization, are subject to the tendencies of world-wide integration and its media.

Arjun Appadurai, the Indian ethnologist and sociologist, who lives in the USA, has developed perspectives for the study of this tendency of post-national globalization and has proposed a landmark theory according to which translation is being replaced by "deterritorialization" and

"displacement", i.e. by the transfer, blending, and shifting of local experience towards new, multiple ethnic and social identities.²⁶ The concept of the nation as the "container" of world literatures and the source and target of translations has become questionable in a world which can be regarded as post-national because of such phenomena as migration, exile, and diaspora. Instead, "post-national" experience originates from a collective imagination of ethnic groups dispersed throughout the world ("imagined communities"²⁷), whose principal means of communication are literature, texts, books, newspapers and films.²⁸

In this light, the concept of translation as well as the methods of comparative cultural studies must be revised.²⁹ The traditional European idea of translation is based on a conception of the text as an unmistakable, individual identity rooted in its cultural origin. Even this basic conception is contradicted by the self-portrayals, texts and experiences arising from very often bicultural identities, like African-American or Asian-American-European etc., which try to reflect the increasingly complex collective self-image in all its refractions, as do, for instance, novels on syncretistic cultural experience and the blending of cultures in the metropolis, e.g. the works of Salman Rushdie.

These texts of "world literature" throw a critical light on those other processes of world-wide exchange which are thought to make translation increasingly redundant: For instance, on the "cross-writing" situation of modern information, science and world culture, i.e. the world-wide communication between multi-lingual authors and a multilingual public sharing the urban resources of electronic media. In this respect, too, (world) literature points to the inequalities and differences which remain despite all appearance of technological and economic standardization and despite the claim of multicultural pluralism. This leads to questions concerning the representation of these cultural differences especially from marginalized perspectives, which are not included in these processes of globalization. For although there is talk of the "free trade zone" in the post-national world,³⁰ this does not result in a "free cultural trade" ("*freier geistiger Handelsverkehr*") as defined by Goethe. Neither does it provide a common ground for the "negotiation" of cultural differences, centering as it does on diversity in global consumer goods production and exchange.

III.

A critical approach to an internationalized modern world of marketing and media is taken, again with reference to Goethe, by Homi K. Bhabha, who is of Indian-English origin and who is one of the main theorists of post-colonialism. He claims that in Goethe's conception of world literature there is a dimension of alterity, even of conflict. On its basis, a "comparative method that would speak to the 'unhomely' condition of the modern world"³¹ can be developed. Bhabha says that Goethe, too, had developed his conception of world literature out of a consciousness of unfamiliarity and conflict, out of the experience of war and cultural dissension, and not on the assumption of a general human consensus. World literature, consequently, is that intercultural category in which "non-consensual terms of affiliation may be established on the grounds of historical trauma" (12). Research on world literature would then imply the study of the manner in which cultures gain self-knowledge by their very projection of otherness:

Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees - these border and frontier conditions - may be the terrains of world literature. The centre of such a study would neither be the 'sovereignty' of national cultures, nor the universalism of human culture, but a focus on those 'freak social and cultural displacements' that Morrison and Gordimer represent in their 'unhomely' fictions." (12).

Bhabha, it seems to me, surpasses by far his chief witness Goethe, who still considered all forms of alterity mitigated by an idea of humanity "homely" to the cosmopolitan.

The meaning of world literature today goes beyond the utopian idea pursued since time immemorial of integrating examples of alterity into the cultural self-image of a society. It is necessary to create an area of "oscillation" between cultures outside the individual societies and nations, an area where the productivity of atonal ensembles, of borderline experiences, contradiction, obstacle and conflict can be discovered instead of creating multicultural syntheses or even "symphonies".³² Consequently, every effort at translation, at an extension of the horizon of world literature, will have to face cultural misunderstanding, but this can be also productive.³³

At the level of intercultural hermeneutics and by the confrontation of cultures and texts, cultural misunderstanding can bring to light the restrictions which cause each cultural "position" both to criticize and to invite criticism. World literature would then appear not as a universal "archive" but as an area for representation and conflict, which demonstrates and comes to terms with the shifting and colliding of regional "locations" and cultural "positions". Examples of world literature would be found in those texts which are situated in world-wide relations and where cultural positions are reflected upon (e.g. Rushdie, Naipaul, Achebe etc.). Their basis is the real experience of alterity and cultural conflict, which far surpasses the merely literary imagination of strange worlds and an imaginary, museum-like "archive" of world literature.

IV.

In order to avoid an academic post-colonialist jargon, I shall discuss an individual text as an example: *In an Antique Land*, by Amitav Ghosh. The Indian Ghosh, who was educated in the USA as an ethnologist and then turned to (novel) writing, has written a special kind of history, serving an ethnological purpose and in the form of a two-fold book of travel. It is about the travels of a slave and his master in the Middle Ages and about the ethnological research trip the narrator undertakes to find material for his reconstruction of the slave's biography. Both levels of the story are put together in the style of a collage - that of the medieval lives and circumstances and that of the narrator's own intercultural experience during his studies -, and this gives the book its particular tension. The result is, rather surprisingly, a kind of reversed ethnography, because the (Egyptian) locals themselves not only ask probing questions on religious cult and foreign cultural practice³⁴ but even challenge these practices and beliefs. Exemplary situations related in the text clearly demonstrate that intercultural exchange is

marked by conflicts that emerge and can be solved in the actual contact between the cultures, and so not only in discourse.

At first, problems arise with regard to language and the refusal of translation, the rejection of a universal language which eliminates all differences. "He doesn't even write in Arabic", the Egyptian imam complains about the Indian ethnologist and writer. When it is objected: "That's true ... but after all, he writes his own languages and he knows English", he replies: "Oh those ... What's the use of those languages? They're the easiest languages in the world. Anyone can write those" (234). The Egyptians' ethnocentrism leads to misunderstanding, even to competition, between the cultures; not at a political or economic level but at the level of the use of signs and symbolism. Where cultural key practices like cremation, the cult of the sacred cow in India or clitoral circumcision in Egypt are at issue, not even a common language is found, whereas there is a common language relating to technological achievements such as weapons, bombs and nuclear power (237). Here translation seems to be superfluous.

Then again, discussing cultural key practices enhances cultural differences and gives rise to self-assertions, which deserve a closer look. Below the level of internationalization, as it were, there opens up a sphere of differences rich in nuance, which poses particular problems of translation and language. For instance, an Egyptian's question whether it is true that in India the dead are cremated is difficult to answer:

since I had not succeeded in finding a word such as 'cremate' in Arabic, I knew I would have to give my assent to the term that Khamees (the Egyptian, D.B.) had used: the verb 'to burn', which was the word for what happened to firewood and straw and the eternally damned ... There was a special word, I tried to explain, a special ceremony, certain rites and rituals - it wasn't like lighting a bonfire with a matchstick. But for all the impression my explanation made, I may as well have been silent. (168)

The Egyptians in reaction try to exert influence on the other culture: "You must put an end to this burning business ... When you go back you should tell them about our ways and how we do these things" (169). One of them, laughing, tries to explain the strange custom by supposing that, obviously, the Indians burn their dead to save their bodies from punishment at the Day of Judgment, a cunning explanation which actually meets with the Egyptians' admiration. This helps to appease the conflict in a humorous and ironic manner.

There remains, however, the ubiquitous difference from Europe: "[...] You've even been to Europe; you've seen how advanced they are. Now tell me: have you ever seen them burning their dead?" (235). The Indian has to answer in the affirmative: "Yes, they have special electric furnaces meant just for that." The Egyptians, laughing and dubbing him a liar, claim that this is impossible, because the Europeans are "advanced, they're educated, they have science, they have guns and tanks and bombs" (235). The Indians have also weapons and bombs, says the Indian, and so do the Egyptians, says the Egyptian. Thus there is again an intercultural competition, this time from the perspective of minorities. The Indian says: "in my country we've even had a nuclear explosion. You won't be able to match that even in a hundred years" (236). With ironic exaggeration, a competition is carried out between two "superseded civilizations, vying with each other to establish a prior claim to the technology of modern violence". (236)

At this point, the cultural conflicts culminate and yet also prove to be productive, for the real difference at the background of this conflict is the reference to, and dissociation from, the

West.³⁵ "At that moment, despite the vast gap that lay between us, we understood each other perfectly. We were both travelling, he and I", namely "travelling in the West"³⁶ in order to set their own cultural self-image against Western standards of modernization and internationalization, because "the West meant only this - science and tanks and guns and bombs" (236).

How can we describe theoretically this kind of intercultural communication, which is certainly problematic, in terms of its cultural-political implications and beyond a mere analysis of dialogue? Is it to be regarded as an example of the inevitability of antagonisms in the relations between cultures in general, a factor that would have to be taken into account by any conception of a "world culture" as well as by new ideas on "world literature"? Claude Lévi-Strauss puts forward some arguments which are of importance in this respect and pleads for a controlled cultural ethnocentrism. Comparing cultures to trains running on different rails and in different directions, Lévi-Strauss stresses the need of cultures for self-assertion and defends it against the shapeless multiculturalism of UNESCO.³⁷ According to him, we have to learn again

that all true creation implies a certain deafness to the appeal of other values, even going so far as to reject them if not denying them altogether. For one cannot fully enjoy the other, identify with him, and yet at the same time remain different. [...] The great creative eras were those in which communication had become adequate for mutual stimulation by remote partners, yet was not so frequent or so rapid as to endanger the indispensable obstacles between individuals and groups or to reduce them to the point where overly facile exchanges might equalize and nullify their diversity. (24, emphasis by D.B.)

This certainly does not mean that cultures should cut themselves off from one another. It is an important condition for a creative and fruitful contact that is called to attention here: the ability to make contrasts productive.

It is however an advocate of cultural relativism in anthropology, Clifford Geertz, who objects to Lévi-Strauss at this point by saying that no world-wide consensus at all is to be expected in fundamental matters, no facile exchange, and least of all a humdrum coexistence of cultures. Instead of opposing cultures as if they were windowless monads, insight into and understanding between cultures should be encouraged in order to gain knowledge of alternatives to one's own norms and way of life. Also, cultural diversity should be judged differently today, especially because cultures are not self-contained organisms but "social spaces whose edges are unfixed, irregular, and difficult to locate."³⁸ Life in a community of this kind certainly neutralizes differences, as Geertz points out. But - as could be objected in Lévi-Strauss' terms - it neither eliminates them nor does it divest them of their significance.³⁹

Multicultural coexistence and multicultural conceptions of world literature explicitly require that differences be maintained. But even though it is necessary to take advantage of obstacles and conflicts that arise in the exchange between cultures, this should only be a transitory phase. It is crucial not to regard these obstacles as fixed barriers of ethnocentrism but as driving forces indispensable to cultural interaction. It is through them that we are called upon to depart from the habit of regarding our own as well as foreign cultural positions, customs, texts, and literatures only in the context of traditions, but to reassess and relocate them.

V.

The post-colonial discussion on world literature also leads to problems of a politics of representation and self-representation. Instead of fixed categories like 'Third World', 'nation', 'identity', 'culture' etc., a "politics of location" (Bhabha) is aimed at.

To define cultural positions requires the acknowledgement and reassessment of an inevitable ambivalence because of the complex overlapping of cultures. Translation, too, must be seen in this respect, as source and target literatures and cultures cannot be clearly defined any more. The assumption of a third space of communication, a "hybrid" space of overlapping (Bhabha), or a third language, are being discussed:

a theory of (Third) World literature cannot be produced either from the position of a Western reader or from that of a 'native', for even the former is a kind of nativism. The theory has to overcome both of these and produce a new position...[40](#)

This "new position" is closely related to the "homeless" existence of post-colonial persons. It certainly cannot be assumed to be an independent third space already there, a "no-man's-land" between the nations. Instead, a leeway of cultural syncretization, i.e. a medium of negotiating cultural antagonisms, has to be created. Cultural difference has to be acknowledged: "Culture does imply difference, but the differences now are no longer, if you wish, taxonomical; they are interactive and refractive."[41](#) This position emphasizes, contrary to the too facile assumption of world literature and world culture as the stages of a multicultural cosmopolitanism already in existence,[42](#) that the "intellectual trade" takes place mostly on the borders and in the border crossings between cultures where meanings and values are not codified but misunderstood, misrepresented, even falsely adopted.[43](#)

Beyond fixed cultural (ethnic, gender-, and class-related) identities, so-called "hybrid" identities are formed by discontinuous translation and negotiation. Thus, former tribal societies translate their traditional "identity", their own national text, into Western forms of information technology, of consumption, fashion etc. (38). New hybrid identities arise similarly in the course of the political and cultural reorientation of former colonial societies: "hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge."[44](#) Hybridity is the key term that marks a sphere in which the cultural other is confronted within the network of cultures and in which different traditions often clash.

I had myself aimed at a "third" space of communication between cultures which would permit the exchange of cultural knowledge.[45](#) Now I feel that I am able to define the "place" of this third dimension accurately: as a sphere of action and representation crucial not only for cultural hermeneutics but also for cultural politics, which opens up when societies expose their self-definition on the post-colonial intercultural field of tension. My thesis is that from there, and only by the detour of negotiating translational resistances, a translation of texts and cultures can be achieved which preserves cultural differences from being internationalized, standardized, and monopolized. In other words: in order not to abandon intercultural understanding to the easiness of the common language of commercial multiculturalism, processes of misunderstanding are to be reassessed. Thus, an important element of

communication is focused upon in a way which also permits a more concrete definition of post-colonial ideas of difference and negotiation.

VI.

Even more pointedly than Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie shows this sphere of "hybrid" refractions of identities in his novel *The Satanic Verses*. It is, however, formed not so much by negotiation between opposing cultural positions as by the ambivalence and division ("*Ent-Zweiung*") inscribed from the beginning into each position itself. It is about the dichotomy of the self because of the self belonging to different cultures, about the division between good and evil, God and Satan, divine revelation and satanic verses. There is no stable "I", no fixed moral position in the existence of Indian migrants to England, in the "hybridity"⁴⁶ of their "metamorphosis", in the face of the gradual transformation of their customs and religious rites in London, the "demon city" (250): "... O most slippery, most devilish of cities! - In which such stark, imperative oppositions were drowned beneath an endless drizzle of greys." (354) The English weather also becomes a symbol of the "moral fuzziness of the English" (354). And Gibreel, the Indian movie star playing the role of Archangel Gabriel, who believes himself to come over London as the Redeemer, the "Transformer" (352) of the city, to come so as to change the empirical (colonial) history into new, fictional forms of history, has above all one objective in mind, which is to bring to light and emphasize differences and conflicts, to find new distinctions in the "much-the-same, nothing-to-choose, give-or-take" (354) of the amalgamated history of the division between colonists and colonized in the multicultural metropolis. This objective has to meet with the realization that the different positions - especially in the age of cultural overlapping caused by the migration process - are always, in themselves, ambivalent and "forever joined to the adversary" (353), be it in the oppositions between colonists and colonized, the "angel" Gibreel and the devil, good and evil, or God and mankind.

Rushdie demonstrates this, as it were, at the highest level possible: Mahound, a synonym for Mahomet, is represented as a totally humanized prophet, a business man who visits brothels, who is willing to compromise and remains flexible in the face of world-wide unbelief: "Here he is neither Mahomet nor MoeHammered; has adopted, instead, the demon-tag the farangis (i.e. the common word for the Europeans, especially the English, used in India, D.B.) hung around his neck." (93). Mahound alias Mahomet, who has been displaced to Jahilia, a fictional Mecca, himself adopts the doubtful attitude towards Islam that has developed because of Western modernization and internationalization and experiences a crisis of his own fundamentalist authority:

In this city, the businessman Mahound, is founding one of the world's great religions; and has arrived, on this day, his birthday, at the crisis of his life. There is a voice whispering in his ear: What kind of idea are you? Man-or-mouse?. (95)

Jahilia, city of profane, money-grabbing business men, forces Mahound to qualify his own message of the existence of an *only* God.

There is a god here called Allah (means simply, the god). Ask the Jahilians and they'll acknowledge that this fellow has some sort of overall authority, but he isn't very popular: an all-rounder in an age of specialist statues. (99)

In the modern conflict of cultures, generalized positions only have a chance of being acknowledged and respected when they are seen in relation to the range of different positions, in this case, to the multitude of foreign, rivalling gods and goddesses. This also means that religious customs must confront the diversity of "the tempting spices of profanity" (103) as well as the power of temptation of other gods and god-substitutes. And so it is Mahound himself who puts forward the contentious suggestion to accept other gods and, particularly, goddesses and thus to depart from the monotheist principle (105).

The religious controversies represented here and elsewhere in *The Satanic Verses* transform the entire tradition of Islamic exegesis and subject it to a cultural translation into other (forbidden) secular forms of representation (106): divine words into human (literary) writing, or even into forbidden images and into film. The religious thoughts and concessions of the fickle prophet, his struggle with angel and devil are arranged - from the perspective of Gibreel, the film producer - like a movie scene; Mahound himself, preacher of the word of Allah, is transformed into a participant in a poetry competition at the fictitious Mecca. Here, as a fictional poet, he finds himself turning the divine words - which bear in them their opposite - into devilish words, into impure, satanic verses. In spite of his revocation of the satanic verses, Mahound is punished by Allah with his wife's death.

It is by changing the mode of representation that God's word is looked at critically. There are several other literary, fictionalizing transformations at work apart from that of Mahound into a poet. The satires of the poet Baal and the faked writings by Mahound's Persian writer Salman cause other divisions, that between Mahound and Salman arising from the fact that the latter contaminates the divine word by faking it on purpose to challenge the prophet and an unquestioned claim to religious authority in general. "He said *Christian*, I wrote down *Jew*." (368) - this fake takes its place in the more general literary tradition of religious satire, as represented by Baal, whose satiric-satanic verses are written in a brothel, where he believes the real religious contradictions are to be found.

Literature itself, we can say, is the protagonist in an extremely pointed process of cultural misunderstanding. The novel reflects on and demonstrates writing and literary fiction as the sources of a misunderstanding that exceeds the actual situation and thus the transitoriness of misunderstanding in dialogues. It is about the consciously false adoption of the Islamic tradition by a (blasphemous) infringement of divine laws which takes place not least in form of "overwriting". Fake and satire are literary modes of representation which, by provoking antagonism, call for discussion without taboo, the poet's task being "to name the unnamable, to point at frauds, to take sides, start arguments, shape the world and stop it from going to sleep" (97). Rushdie realizes, as it were, with *The Satanic Verses* a new conception of world literature, on the one hand by forcing literature to confront the world's explosive problems and on the other hand, by giving a new perspective of the most important canonical text of a world religion, the Koran, which he relates to the world system of other, secular texts. This could even be regarded as a possible constructive answer to the "clash" of cultures as postulated by Samuel Huntington: an experimental "adaptation" of (rigid) Islamic positions in the face of the danger of a collision of fundamentalism, traditionalism, nationalism with modern globalism and its blurring dynamics. The (false) writing down of the verses of Koran becomes a re-writing, which undermines the foundations of Muslim culture. In this sense, for Rushdie the "hybrid" space of cultural confrontation and translation is a border area where it is

possible - contrary to fundamentalist demarcation and isolation - to "re-write" religious dogmata experimentally and provocatively with the objective of their opening and internationalization.

This "re-writing" means to violate taboos and borders, e.g. the Islamic ban on illustration. Thus the field of a politics of representation is evoked: the poet in the novel (Baal) and the author of the novel (Rushdie) both provoke a cultural conflict, and this leads in both cases to massive political sanctions. Baal, the poet,

was sentenced to be beheaded, within the hour, and as soldiers manhandled him out of the tent towards the killing ground, he shouted over his shoulder: 'Whores and writers, Mahound. We are the people you can't forgive.'(392)

Salman Rushdie's own death sentence, which is predicted in the novel, shows the limits of fictional argument, where world literature inevitably reaches into the field of world politics.

VII.

This literary text brings to light the antagonism within one culture between modernization and concurrent religious fundamentalism. It demonstrates the conception of an *international* culture which is not based on the assimilating multiplicity of multiculturalism, but on the explosive articulation of cultural "hybridity" as it grows from the multiple cultural identities of Indian immigrants in England. It is at this "inter" - where cultures overlap - that translation is based, at the "in-between space"[47](#) or "where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences."[48](#) Here cultural meaning is in a state of flux and unequivocal marks of difference (race, gender, religion, class) are neutralized.

The new positions in the discussion on world literature according to Homi K. Bhabha emphasize the ambivalence and transitory function of these syncretistic cultural spaces. They regard translation as part of the field of cultural and social practice, not only as belonging to the sphere of the text. Thus they challenge the interpretation of cultural self-representation which has been dominant in cultural semiotics for several years in the past: cultural meaning then would not be found in *central* cultural practices and texts (as claimed by Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner), but on the borders or, in the face of the lack of clear borders, in a zone of transition. The metaphor of free trade is also challenged. It no longer represents the poet in the "role of a merchant" (Goethe) who offers for sale cultural meaning like a consumer article prepared for use.[49](#) Cultural meaning in today's view is determined by "borderline negotiations of cultural translation",[50](#) and it is developed in the light of cultural difference. The notion of plain dealing is rejected by those who unremittingly pronounce death sentences or resort to violence as in the case of Rushdie or Ken Saro-Wiwa.

What does this mean for the conception of translation? All attempts at cultural and textual translation must work on the assumption of the multitracked, non-synchronous nature of "cultural hybridities"[51](#), not of a one-way road leading from the source text to the target text.

Thus one discovers not only a sphere of "new internationalism" in the sense of the complex practice and poetics of world-wide migration, and the cultural symbolism into which the historical processes of transformation of the (post-colonial) societies themselves are "translated", but also the powerhouses where global multiculturalism is (re-)translated into specific cultural and historical locality.⁵² Post-colonial translation postulates the decentralization and location of (hybrid) cultures across the traditional axes of the translation between separate advanced cultures and literatures.

Location of cultures not only refers to their complex geographical determination but also to their location in the field of (self-)articulation, i.e. the negotiation of the conflict between different interfering voices. Text, sign and language are to be regarded as the practical media of difference, and they are explicitly crossed out and reinterpreted out of new (subaltern) claims for action, this new "location" being for the most part created by post-colonial peoples: it is a place for the memory of colonialism and thus for the construction of the post-colonial subject, which takes place in the discourse of memory, not only in political and economic processes.

The "post-colonial" sphere of translation opens up in the light of incommensurable ways of life and refracted meanings.⁵³ With respect to this complex situation, the paradigm of "culture as text" could similarly be taken to its limits, too. This long standing paradigm has been helping cultural sciences to maintain, on the common ground of cultural semiotics, the possibility of translating one culture into another. Culture *as* translation, on the contrary, is a new paradigm which stresses the aspect of negotiation in the constitution and assertion of cultures as well as emphasizing the problematic search for cultural commensurability and, at the same time, for local-historical grounding.

In order to concretize these deliberations, I shall once more discuss the text by Amitav Ghosh. It spans a contrastive-narrative arc between the cosmopolitanism of medieval history and the intercultural experiences and problems that arise in the course of its reconstruction. It is about the historical subject which emerges from medieval documents (letters, fragments) and appears on the stage of the modern world - a truly post-modern project. The historical subject is "subaltern", a slave, hitherto anonymous, forgotten by history, a marginal being, that lived in a time

*when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine a properly individual human existence are the literate and the consequential: those who have the means to inscribe themselves upon history. The slave of MS. H6 was none of those things.*⁵⁴

Perished in the process of colonization, this slave appears - and this is ingenious in Ghosh's book - as a precursor of post-colonial subjects, whether of Indian or Egyptian origin. Ghosh tries to find, by reconstruction of the slave's name Bomma (from Sanskrit-Hindu Brahma), the main thread for the reconstruction of his life and can thus inscribe his name on world history.⁵⁵

History in Ghosh's view is the history of the division of the world, it is the process of a "partitioning of the past".⁵⁶ Ghosh tries to reconstruct, by means of memorizing strategies, the process of raising barriers between cultures and religions which took place after the invasion of Western hegemony. The medieval Hindu slave served a Jewish master (Ben Yiju), who participated in the Muslim religious ceremonies and at the same time in magic cults, all within the context of a syncretistic religiousness and a reciprocal influence of religions on one another.⁵⁷ Today the global situation is similar and yet different. Although Ghosh finds resemblances between the medieval state of the world, its transnational slave trade (248) and

cultural exchange (55), and global relations today. The antagonisms between cultures and religions are much stronger today: One link, though, has certainly remained until today: the "long history of travel" (173), which connects the business trips between Egypt and India of the slave and his master, the ethnographer's travels and pilgrimages as well as migration for work and the border crossings of the locals as soldiers.

History, as travel which unites and overcomes differences, may be a common denominator which has carried the tendency of border-crossing internationalization up to the present culture of travel. It seems to me problematic, however, to derive from this idea a metaphor of "culture as travel",⁵⁸ as postulated by James Clifford, who has in mind "intercultural connection"⁵⁹ as a landmark image for comparative studies (and, consequently, for the discussion on world literature). Clifford, who also argues on the basis of a text by Ghosh (the short story *The Imam and the Indian*), runs the risk of neglecting the intercultural differences. He does regard travel as a "translation term",⁶⁰ but only in the sense of its global comparability. How cultural differences could and should be made productive is disregarded. In my opinion the perspective of "culture as translation" could be of more use because it calls attention to the processes of transformation resulting from conflict. This includes particularly the non-simultaneity and the contradictions caused by an internationalized sphere of media, technology and consumption, which the narrator in Ghosh's text describes as "sensation of dislocation, as though I had vaulted between different epochs"⁶¹ and which also require continuous acts of translation.

This leads back to the opening question: is there a common language, in which the gains and losses of "free intellectual trade", or in other words, namely cosmopolitanism but also misunderstanding and non-simultaneity, can be both expressed and negotiated? Ghosh doubts this, especially in the face of a generalizing rhetoric which predominates over the dialogue on the particular and the differences:

it seemed to me that the Imam and I had participated in our own final defeat, in the dissolution of the centuries of dialogue that had linked us: we had demonstrated the irreversible triumph of the language that has usurped all the others in which people once discussed their differences. We had acknowledged that it was no longer possible to speak, as Ben Yiju or his Slave, or any one of the thousands of travellers who had crossed the Indian Ocean in the Middle Ages might have done: of things that were right, or good, or willed by God; it would have been merely absurd for either of us to use those words, for they belonged to a dismantled rung on the ascending ladder of Development.

Instead, to make ourselves understood, we had both resorted, I, a student of the 'humane' sciences, and he, an old-fashioned village Imam, to the very terms that world leaders and statesmen use at great, global conferences, the universal, irresistible metaphysic of modern meaning; he had said to me, in effect: 'You ought not to do what you do, because otherwise you will not have guns and tanks and bombs.' It was the only language we had been able to discover in common.⁶²

New concepts and new examples of world literature call attention to new horizons of language and text: to the explicitly ambiguous and negotiable cultural symbolizations. Contrary to the languages of global internationalization, which express and support a growing assimilation of life circumstances, the decentralized literatures of the world are an important medium of difference. They go beyond the scope of traditional views of a pre-defined (Western) common language of a universal culture and literature. They require permanent

mutual processes of translation by way of negotiation of cultural differences, as they are carried out in and are provoked by the literatures themselves.

Footnotes

1 Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*, New York 1993, 237.

2 Ghosh (ann. 1), 237.

3 Cf. Ghosh (ann. 1), 236f.

4 Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?", *Foreign Affairs* (Summer 1993), 22-49, here: 49.

5 Cf. Gregor Paul, "Literarische Universalien und der Begriff der Weltliteratur", *IVG. Akten des VIII. Internationalen Germanisten-Kongresses. Tokyo 1990, Munich 1991, X*, 153-160.

6 János Riesz, "Weltliteratur zwischen 'Erster' und 'Dritter' Welt. Die Verantwortung der Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft (Komparatistik) heute", *Zeitschrift f. Kulturaustausch* 2 (1983), 140-148, here: 145.

7 Horst Steinmetz, "Weltliteratur. Umriß eines literaturgeschichtlichen Konzepts", *Arcadia* 20/1 (1985), 2-19, here: 15.

8 Cf. Fawzi Boubia, "Goethes Theorie der Alterität und die Idee der Weltliteratur. Ein Beitrag zur neueren Kulturdebatte", in: Bernd Thum (ed.), *Gegenwart als kulturelles Erbe. Ein Beitrag zur Kulturwissenschaft deutschsprachiger Länder*, Munich 1985, 269-301, here: 282.

9 Cf. esp. James Clifford, George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley 1986; James Clifford, "Über ethnographische Autorität", in: Eberhard Berg, Martin Fuchs (eds.), *Kultur, soziale Praxis, Text. Die Krise der ethnographischen Repräsentation*, suhrkamp taschenbuch wissenschaft 1051, Frankfurt 1993, 109-157. For the Writing Culture debate and its relations to literary studies cf. Doris Bachmann-Medick, "'Writing Culture' - ein Diskurs zwischen Ethnologie und Literaturwissenschaft", *KEA. Zeitschrift f. Kulturwissenschaften* 4 (1992), 1-20.

10 Cf. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, London 1978.

11 Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", *Social Text* 15 (1986), 65-88, here: 68.

12 Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'", in: A.A., *In Theory. Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London, New York 1992, 95-122, here: 103.

13 Ahmad, "Literary Theory and 'Third World Literature': Some Contexts" (ann. 12), 43-71, here: 45.

14 Cf. Ahmad (ann. 12), 80: "At the level of this greatly expanded archive of books produced in the ex-colonial countries but written in or translated into Western languages, a direct dialogue between, let us say, a Haitian and an Indian novelist could really take place, and something called 'Third World Literature', with its own generic classifications and categorizations, could ensue from that archival nearness; the irony of that operation would undoubtedly be that a Third World Literature would arise on the basis of Western *languages*, while Third-Worldist ideology is manifestly opposed to the cultural dominance of Western *countries*."

15 For the latter cf. the post-colonial manifesto by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Nairobi, London, Portsmouth, Harare 1986, esp. 27ff.

16 Cf. Ahmad (ann. 12), 45: "It is in the metropolitan country, in any case, that a literary text is first designated a Third World text, levelled into an archive of other such texts, and then globally redistributed with that aura attached to it." For the academic "authorization" of the discourse on third-world literature cf. also 92.

17 Cf. Ahmad (ann. 12), 15.

18 quoted by Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature. A Critical Introduction*, Oxford 1993, 74.

19 Cf. Barbara Johnson's claim "to transfer the analysis of difference ... out of the realm of linguistic universality or deconstructive allegory and into contexts in which difference is very much at issue in the 'real world'" (Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference*, Baltimore 1987, 2).

20 Cf. Horst Turk, "Alienität und Alterität als Schlüsselbegriffe einer Kultursemantik. Zum Fremdeheitsbegriff der Übersetzungsforschung", in: Alois Wierlacher (ed.) *Kulturthema Fremdheit. Leitbegriffe und Problemfelder kulturwissenschaftlicher Fremdheitsforschung*. Munich 1993, 173-197.

21 Cf. James Clifford, "Introduction: the Pure Products Go Crazy", in: J.C., *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge 1988, 1-17, esp. 8, 14. - For the accentuation of material and cultural networks instead of isolated homogenous cultures cf. Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*. Los Angeles, Berkeley, 1982.

22 Quoted by Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chicago, London 1992, 188. Cf. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, London 1991, 17, on British-Indian "identity":

Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something also can be gained.

23 Cf. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (eds.). *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London, New York 1989. - Henry Schwarz, "Provocations Toward a Theory of Third World Literature", *Mississippi Review* 17/2 (1989), 177-201, points out the particularly conscious manner in which third world literature develops local tactics of cultural resistance against the global economic world order (198).

24 Cf. John Beverly, "The Margin at the Center. On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative)", *Modern Fiction Studies*, Special Issue: *Narratives of Colonial Resistance* (ed. Timothy Brennan) 35/1 (1989), 11-28, here: 17.

25 *ibid.* p. 17. Cf. Timothy Brennan (in his "Introduction", *Modern Fiction Studies* (ann. 24), pp. 3-8) points to the problem of the different narrative standards in third world literature, which result in rather heroic narrative structures: "The problem ... is how to treat the romantic/heroic without automatically translating it back into cynicism, irony, and decentering" (6).

26 Cf. Arjun Appadurai, "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology", in: Richard G. Fox (ed.), *Recapturing Anthropology. Working in the Present*. Santa Fe 1991, 191-210.

27 Cf. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. London, New York, 1993.

28 Cf. Arjun Appadurai, "Patriotism and Its Future", *Public Culture* 5 (1993), 411-429, here: 414. Cf. also texts and films from the "multicultural" metropolitan towns but also from other places where imagined identities are experienced in Diaspora - an example is an Indian couple which has been transferred into Inner Africa: "This old couple didn't seem to know where they were. The bush of Africa was outside their yard; but they spoke no French, no African language, and from the way they behaved you would have thought that the river just down the road was the Ganges, with temples and holy men and bathing steps." (V.S. Naipaul *A Bend in the River*, New York 1979, 28).

29 Cf. Appadurai, (ann.28), 419.

30 "The fact is that the United States, from a cultural point of view, is already a vast free trade

zone (FTZ), full of ideas, technologies, styles, and idioms (from MacDonald's and the Harvard Business School to the Dream Team) ..." (Appadurai, (ann. 28), 427).

[31](#) Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, New York 1994, 11.

[32](#) Cf. the text by Edward W. Said, "Figures, Configurations, Transfigurations", in: Jeffrey N. Cox, Larry D. Reynolds (eds.), *New Historical Study. Essays on Reproducing Texts, Representing History*, Princeton 1993, 316-330, here: 328ff., which is interesting also with respect to the world literature discussion.

[33](#) Cf. Doris Bachmann-Medick, "Kulturelle Texte und interkulturelles (Miß-)Verstehen. Kulturanthropologische Herausforderungen für die interkulturelle Literaturwissenschaft", in: Alois Wierlacher (ed.), *Perspektiven und Verfahren interkultureller Germanistik. Akten des I. Kongresses der Gesellschaft für Interkulturelle Germanistik*, Munich 1987, 653-664.

[34](#) Cf. Ghosh (ann. 1), 46.

[35](#) On the subject of Western-oriented intercultural competition cf. Madhava Prasad, "On the Question of a Theory of (Third World) Literature", *Social Text* 31/32 (1992), 57-83, here: 61: "Of course, there is as yet no space for the colonial subject outside this space of comparison and competition."

[36](#) Ghosh (ann. 1), 236.

[37](#) Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Race and Culture", in: C.L.-S. *The View from Afar*, Oxford 1985, 3-24, here: 24.

[38](#) Clifford Geertz, "The Uses of Diversity", *Michigan Quarterly Review* 25 (1986), 105-126, here: 123.

[39](#) On this debate on ethnocentrism cf. Geertz (ann. 38); cf. also Richard Rorty, "On Ethnocentrism. A Reply to Clifford Geertz", *Michigan Quarterly Review* 25 (1986), 524-534. Rorty defends an anti-anti-ethnocentrism, i.e. a controlled ethnocentrism in which positions should be self-defined, e.g. as "European", "Christian".

[40](#) Prasad (ann. 35), 77.

[41](#) Appadurai (ann. 26), 205.

[42](#) as postulated by Bruce Robbins, "Comparative Cosmopolitanism", *Social Text* 31/32 (1992), 169-186, here: 170.

[43](#) Cf. Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory" (ann. 31), 19-39, here: 34.

[44](#) "The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha", in: Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity. Community, Culture, Difference*. London 1990, 207-221, here: 211.

[45](#) Bachmann-Medick (ann. 33), here: 661.

[46](#) Cf. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*. London 1988, 427.

[47](#) Cf. Bhabha (ann. 31), 38.

[48](#) Bhabha, "How Newness Enters the World. Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translation" (ann. 31), 212-235, here: 218.

[49](#) Cf. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *West-östlicher Divan. Noten und Abhandlungen*, *Goethes Werke*. ed. Erich Trunz, Hamburg 1949, II, 127.

[50](#) Bhabha (ann. 31), 223.

[51](#) Bhabha (ann. 31), 2.

[52](#) Bhabha (ann. 31), 241.

[53](#) Cf. Bhabha (ann. 31), 125.

[54](#) Amitav Ghosh, "The Slave of MS. H.6", in Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey (eds.), *Subaltern Studies VII. Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, Oxford, New York 1993, 159-220, here: 161. Ghosh here argues as an ethnographer and presents his evaluations of the source material.

[55](#) Cf. Ghosh (ann. 54), here: 167, 187.

[56](#) Ghosh (ann. 1), 340.

[57](#) Cf. Ghosh (ann. 1), 261.

[58](#) Cf. James Clifford, "Traveling Cultures", in: Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A.

Treichler (eds.), *Cultural Studies*, New York, London 1992, 96-112, here: 103 ("Culture as Travel").

[59](#) Cf. James Clifford, "The Transit Lounge of Culture", *Times Literary Supplement* (3/5/1991), 7-8, here: 8.

[60](#) Clifford (ann. 58), 110.

[61](#) Ghosh (ann. 1), 298.

[62](#) Ghosh (ann. 1), 236f.