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RESPONSE

Who's Afraid Of William Dalrymple?

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RAJEEV K. KINRA

It is striking the lengths to which some writers will go to defend their turf --or even their friends' turf. Ramachandra Guha's latest display of **dyspeptic distemper**, aimed at the evil outsider William Dalrymple, is a case in point.

Ostensibly in response to Dalrymple's review of Pankaj Mishra's new book, *An End to Suffering*, Guha has absolutely nothing useful to say about the actual review, or its validity, much less about Mishra's book. So, instead of offering substantive or factual critique of what Dalrymple actually has to say about Mishra's book, Guha takes issue with a single paragraph in a two-page article, and exploits the opportunity to attack Dalrymple himself in a blustery, hysterical *ad hominem* that smacks of defensive narcissism and self-righteous indignation rather than reasoned argument.

Guha decries what he sees as Dalrymple's "elite-mofussil thesis." At issue is the following paragraph from Dalrymple's review, which Guha claims is "pretty vicious about [Sunil] Khilnani":

In a field still dominated by the St Stephen's mafia and the Doon School diaspora, Mishra is an outsider. He was born in Jhansi and grew up in dusty railway colonies around Uttar Pradesh, before taking a degree in the decaying anarchy of Allahabad University. In contrast to the optimistic platitudes of a diaspora writer like, say, Sunil Khilnani-educated abroad and clearly knowing nothing of the grim reality of the boondocks of Bihar--Mishra does not lecture the world about South Asia from the sanitised safety of an East Coast campus. Instead, he writes as a man who really knows, from hard experience, the provincial India he writes about and in which he still lives for most of the year.

Strip away the colourful language and Dalrymple is simply stating the obvious: that most writers of Indian non-fiction in

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English hail from elite backgrounds; that, while they tend to be the translators of Indian sensibility to the global audience, they are often as far removed from the day-to-day concerns of the Indian masses as are New Yorkers from, say, "the boondocks of Nebraska," or Nebraskans from the urban poor of Chicago; and that Mishra, whose background and talents give him access to both the elite literary-cultural world and the "boondocks of Bihar," possesses a refreshing, somewhat unique perspective as a result.

Guha's response is utterly disingenuous. He bends over backwards to give readers the misimpression that Dalrymple's entire review of *An End to Suffering* was offered solely to promulgate the notion that legatees of elite institutions "must bow down before writers born in the mofussil." He sums this up with a total oversimplification: "Born to privilege, you cannot understand India; reared in a humble home, you must. This is Dalrymple's thesis."

But this is decidedly *not* Dalrymple's thesis, as anyone who takes the time to read the whole review will see. Nowhere does Dalrymple claim that Mishra's background alone somehow makes him a better writer, or that, as Guha implies, only mofussil-born writers can lay claim to intellectual authenticity. (How could he possibly argue that? As I'm sure Dalrymple himself would duly confess: He's bloody Scottish, for God's sake!)

Guha nevertheless scolds Dalrymple with the vapid truism that "it is how a writer tackles his subject that is important, not where he studied or lives." Fair enough. But when ninety percent of Dalrymple's review is devoted precisely to assessing how Mishra "tackles his subject," it is ridiculous to pillory him for also pointing out where Mishra "studied and lives" along the way -- factors which, Guha's high-minded rhetoric aside, *do* indeed matter.



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Still more ridiculous is the fact that, for some reason, the only substantive criticisms which Guha manages to muster don't even have anything to do with Mishra, *An End to Suffering*, or Dalrymple's review. Hoping to prove Dalrymple's knowledge of India "specious," but armed with little more than sarcasm and his own opinion, Guha inexplicably fires away at Dalrymple for unrelated comments made recently in the *Financial Times*, and for a passage regarding Ahmed Ali in the decade-old *City of Djinn*s...yet even *that* attack is erroneous and misplaced, as a short glance at chapter 3 of *City of Djinn*s will demonstrate. Then finally, clutching at straws, Guha dredges up some self-serving (and, better yet, unverifiable) anecdotal "evidence" of Dalrymple's supposed ignorance of Ambedkar (evidence which, like all rumour and innuendo, is all the more effective for being locked safely away in Guha's memory, and can never be refuted, only denied).

He calls Dalrymple's jab at Khilnani "vicious," and I grant that singling him out was perhaps unfair. But was it more vicious than, say, yanking a tiny passage out of a lengthy review, misrepresenting it beyond recognition, and then using it as a springboard to vent Guha's own personal irritation at Dalrymple's successful career? More vicious than taking the opportunity to trash not just Dalrymple's writing and scholarly ability, but indeed his very right to write about India?

Indeed, what really seems to be at issue here is Guha's contention that Dalrymple "instructs us on which Indian writers we may trust and which not." Who is *he* to lecture *us*? This is Guha's thesis.

Leaving aside the scarcely veiled nativist chauvinism expressed by this "us" (should Guha then stop writing holier-than-thou commentary about America, and lecturing the Americans on whether or not to deny him a visa?), I suppose that Guha means that Dalrymple, as a white man, is not free or qualified to express an opinion on the abilities of any Indian writer, or comment on how that writer's background plays a role in his or her writing style. Surely Guha can't really mean that, can he?

Well, apparently he can and does; and in so doing, Guha dusts off a tired reference to "divide -and- rule" --the implication being that the Scotsman Dalrymple is a ghost of India's colonial past, that anything he has to say is tainted by

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that colonial legacy, and that as such he is not to be trusted
to comment on "us."

Now, one can justifiably argue that India has yet to slay its
colonial demons (or *asuras*, as the case may be), and that
one result is that a British writer like Dalrymple (or any
Western writer, for that matter) should accordingly be held to
higher standards of scholarly evidence and cultural
sensitivity. Dalrymple himself surely understands this, and
can take the criticism, so long as it is proffered in intellectual
good faith. But whatever Dalrymple's faults as a travel writer
or historian may be, Guha's brand of vindictive politics of the
personal--much like Farrukh Dhondy's **poisonous polemic**
earlier in the year--does nothing to illuminate them. Indeed, it
is Guha himself whose "argument is mischievous as well as
wrong-headed...calculated to stimulate prejudice and envy
among his readers." None of his attempted "critiques" of
Dalrymple's writings hold up under further scrutiny, and his
mean-spirited hatchet job merely betrays the worst sort of
insecurity and professional jealousy. There is no doubt room
for a reasoned debate on what might be called the
"Dalrymple Phenomenon," but petty and misinformed rants
are certainly not the place to start.

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