

## **Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, imagined and real**

*Written for 'Dispersed Trajectories: Feminism, Postcolonialism, and the Way Ahead', a conference held in Oxford 19 June 2006, in honour of Rajeswari Sunder Rajan*

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I'm sitting in an airport lounge heading for the hot South & look up at the flight departures board wishing I was heading East. There's a plane for Heathrow leaving in half an hour. But I won't be on it, and I know that I will be missing Raji's conference, something that in every way I would not ever want to do. So I reflect that instead I will be haunting it, haunting my old haunts in my mind as it goes on, haunting it with these words which I send to you now, a phantom presence of an old Oxford ghost ventriloquised through Ankhi's voice, as is only appropriate given that Ankhi is happily my successor at Wadham College. As my spirit circles Raji's event, homing in on its zones of intensities, its competitive rivalries, its fierce and its generous exchanges, I have to keep in mind my p's and q's as I know that Raji has little tolerance for what you might call my ghost writing, the kind of writing with which these days increasingly I find myself preoccupied or more accurately constantly, overwhelmingly possessed.

Raji by contrast keeps me on the straight and narrow; something she has been doing since she first came to see me is it ten years ago now? on a visit to Oxford when her son Kaushik was studying at Wolfson for his D.Phil. She seemed then very different from the usual kind of person from India who came to see me when visiting Oxford, and something about our conversation stayed with me, lingering for days afterwards, something about the way in which she talked very directly and made incisive comments on each topic onto which the conversation moved, but something more about the breadth of knowledge, priorities and preoccupations that she brought with her. I had read two of her books then, *The Lie of the Land* and *Real and Imagined Women*, and from the way we talked I didn't need to read anything more to know that she knew. That here was someone very special whom I could relate to immediately in terms of the ways in which she linked theoretical debates to the world of the real and the political priorities of a radical left that contested the dogmas of the patriarchal left as much as the patriarchal state. How I managed to survive her approval on that first encounter is a complete mystery to me, having seen many times subsequently the ways in which various well-known male academics of all stripes and persuasions were quickly cut down to size by Raji and sent packing.

In any case, when soon after Routledge asked me whether I would be interested in starting a journal of postcolonial studies, one of the very first people I thought of as someone I would like to work with as an editor was Raji. I remember very clearly the day when we sat outside on the balcony of the SCR upstairs at Wolfson on one of those characteristic English summer days when it is sunny but you still feel slightly chilly—we

sat outside looking over the river and at the punts slowly coming and going, planning our journal, its radical political priorities and agendas. Everything we talked about, we agreed on quickly. I think it would be true to say that no one more than Raji was responsible for creating the particular milieu of *Interventions*, the panache with which it challenged the then predominately literary emphasis of postcolonial studies and created a cultural and political space for debate which means that today it is read by people across the arts and social sciences, and receives contributions from people in an astonishing range of different disciplines. *Interventions* has achieved the kind of interdisciplinary perspective and dialogue between people in different disciplines in the mode, which is being so effectively crushed in Britain today by the abject monodisciplinarity of the RAE. Luckily, however, publishing is not entirely determined by RAE criteria, and so *Interventions* has managed to establish a social and political para-institutional third space which is testimony to Raji and the kind of work that she does. Along with the other editors, particularly Alison Donnell, she has worked remorselessly on behalf of the journal, shaping up the contributors as fiercely as she shapes up her own graduate students. Or myself, for that matter. I sent Raji my chapter on 'Gender and Colonialism' for my book *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, and never have I received such a remorseless, acute and challenging critique of every statement or observation that I made. In many ways, I think, it is the best chapter of that book and what strengths it has are entirely due to Raji.

It was Raji who made me see the central importance of feminism to postcolonialism, that in some sense the values of postcolonialism really are those of a transnational feminism. That's why it is in many ways, as Gayatri Spivak's work also demonstrates very importantly, it is feminism that has really kept pushing postcolonialism, transforming it beyond its initial theoretical moment of 'colonial discourse analysis', turning it into a theoretical and political practice in which the interests of women, certain sorts of subaltern women in particular, come first. This makes sense of why it tends to be noticeably only certain men of the left who attack postcolonialism. What they don't like about it is that in many ways the postcolonial is a women's discourse, for women, about women, and above all that it prioritises women and their concerns. Raji also pushed me towards seeing that the postcolonial is indeed that, that is, that it is *post*-colonial, shifting the emphasis from colonialism to postcolonialism, from the experiences of the past towards contemporary issues of gender and development. That it is really about the struggles that continue after the moment of decolonization, amongst those, women again, for whom the capture of the state apparatus did not bring about a dramatic transformation of the quality of their lives. Raji has always made it clear that postcolonialism is about real rather than imagined women, women who make the impossible demand for difference *and* equality, and that what postcolonialism seeks above all is real and substantial justice, justice for ordinary people in the everyday world.

Raji herself is someone who has always written about India but has for a long time remained marginal to it institutionally while all the while remaining very much actively involved in it. She has in a sense herself become a kind of international dissenting feminist rebel, a kind of intellectual outlaw articulating and supporting the interventions of other subaltern rebel women who have challenged the practices of the family and the

state. People are sometimes taken in by the benign way that Raji looks before they experience the full force of her articulation of feminism not as a theoretical abstraction but as a performance in the *Jetztzeit*, the now, an acting out of the impacts of the real and the demands of those who have to bear the brunt of its force.

A few years after we had started working together on *Interventions*, the Oxford English Faculty was persuaded to advertise a post in Postcolonial Studies. I persuaded Raji to apply, and she soon became the very first person appointed in the Faculty to teach Postcolonial Studies. The fact that there was nowhere on the undergraduate syllabus where it could be taught, nor any postgraduate course in that area, would have daunted many others, but Raji very quickly got the Faculty into shape so that she now leaves with those courses established. It was wonderful for me when Raji came to Oxford—up to that point I had been doing the kind of work I do more or less in complete isolation, a solitary figure in the English faculty who was widely reported to have strayed by mistake several years ago somewhere into the depths of the Indian Institute and never to have found his way out. After Raji arrived we suddenly had what you might call intellectual mass; very soon she was surrounded by clusters of adoring graduate students, and we started our biweekly postcolonial seminar. When she arrived, Raji found Oxford a very strange place, I think. I remember her complaining to me early on how very inconvenient it was that the libraries were dispersed all over the city, tiny as it is. Her happy solution was to get her graduate students to go and fetch all her library books for her—I firmly believe that Raji has never, in fact, set foot inside the Bodleian—certainly I never saw her there. Raji's extraordinary abilities at networking and knowing who was who and more important whether and when they would be passing through Oxford meant that our seminar developed into an informal institution, bringing together an extraordinary group of students from English and many other disciplines, from all over the world. Every other week in Wadham College, where we used to meet, the porters at the gate and the fellows in their gowns on their way to dinner would look slightly puzzled as they witnessed a third-world invasion, with which they knew rather vaguely that I seemed to be associated. Raji's ability to foster her graduate students, to feed them and to care for them and for them to care for her was quite extraordinary. Her devoted graduate students would do anything for her—she had a constant array of helpers who could be called in at any time by day or night. In meetings, many a time, we would sketch out something that we urgently needed, and then begin to wonder how we would ever manage to do it. 'B—will do that' Raji would announce firmly—and sure enough within 24 hours it would indeed be done.

I want to thank Raji for her love and companionship, her generosity, warmth, toleration of my deficiencies and of my inefficiency, of my habit of disappearing off-line for weeks on end while Raji would still be firing on all barrels throughout. Though personal, and based on warmth, we have always had a singularly intellectual relationship, of a kind that has been for me unique. It is one that I will continue to treasure in the years ahead when we are once again both working together—and if you can't join us there, you can follow our activities on our new joint website, the address for which suitably enough is [www.nyupoco.com](http://www.nyupoco.com)

So Raji, I'm greatly looking forward to the next phase in our friendship and intellectual solidarity in New York, from which I send you my most comradely greetings and my warmest love.

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