

## 24. Report on the Committee on South Asian Literatures and Culture

ICLA Standing Committee for Research on South Asian Culture and Literature

Report (2018-2019)

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**I. Brief Description of the events on South Asian Literature and Culture held during the year 2018-19:**

**INDIA**

- (i) XIV CLAI Biennial International Conference on *Studying South Asian Narratives through Pluralist and Dialogic Frames*, March 11-14, 2019.

This Conference dealt with the theme of the ICLA Standing Research Committee on South Asian Literature and Culture, aiming to consolidate the conversation on the methods of literary and artistic research in and study of the plural culture of South Asia, with the emphasis on narrative as an expressive and appropriative mode. As comparatists, our focus in this conference was not on themes or content of individual narratives or a pair of narratives, but we sought to encourage the study of difference and otherness, the rationale of the comparative approach, by using linguistic and cultural pluralism as frames for reading of and research on, narratives in South Asian Languages.

The conference underlined the issue that histories of various forms of contact (trade, travel, pilgrimage, conquest, colonization) characterize the geopolitical space known as “South Asia”, revealing it as a field which can be fruitfully understood only through a comparative method. Presentations and detailed discussion took place on various aspects of South Asian narratives, viz. resistance, literary historiography, multilingualism and cross-cultural literary tradition and artistic transactions. Eminent scholars from South Asian countries, viz. Sri Daya Dasanayake from Sri Lanka and Prof. Mashrur Shahid Hussain from Bangladesh presented their views on the subject during the conference.

**(ii) Global Southern Epistemologies**

The workshop on Global Southern Epistemologies was held in The English and Foreign Languages University Hyderabad, financially

supported by a British Academy grant, during 12-14, December, 2018. The British Academy grant was awarded to Prof. Rebecca Gould (Principal Investigator) Dr. Sherin B.S. (The English and Foreign Languages University) and Dr. Emmanuelle Santos (University of Birmingham). This facilitated the participation of established academics and editors from the UK and India to meet early career researchers from the global south to discuss funding opportunities and publishing possibilities, with a larger focus on the concept of the global south. The workshop at EFLU considered the ‘south’ as a counter term for hegemonically constructed epistemologies in academia. There were 31 ECRs from India and seven from the rest of the Global South. The Primary Investigator for the Grant was Prof. Rebecca Gould, University of Birmingham. Prof. Robert Young (NYU), Prof. Pablo Mukherjee (Warwick), Prof. Khadeeja Zinnenburg ( Birmingham) and Dr. Emmanuelle Santos ( Birmingham) included the speakers from the UK. They were joined by Prof. Udaya Kumar (Jawaharlal Nehru University), Prof. Kalyan Kumar Chakraborty (former Chairman, Lalit Kala Akademi), Prof T. Vijay Kumar (Osmania University), Prof. Chandra Mohan (Secretary, CLAI), Prof. Ipshita Chanda (EFLU) and Dr. Sherin B.S. (EFLU). Structurally, the Global Southern Epistemologies international workshop was laid out in two formats. The workshop sessions engaged with Early Career Research Scholars to aspire for larger visibility and readership as well as accessibility to resources for research. The public lectures, took up the political viability of categories like the ‘postcolonial’ and the ‘decolonial’ and extended the south as a domain of counter hegemonic endeavours.

### **(iii) Poetic Imagining(s) of South Asia: Borders and Nation**

A two-day international conference on “Poetic Imagining(s) of South Asia: Borders and Nations” was organized by the Institute of South Asian Studies at the South Asian University, New Delhi on 22-23 April 2019. The conference, inaugurated by Dr. Kavita A Sharma, President, South Asian University, initiated a dialogue between creative writers and literary scholars on the one hand and sociologists and anthropologists on the other to develop alternative conceptualizations of the politics of nationhood, borders, and representations through critical reading of literary narratives while drawing on the diverse scholarly traditions and activisms from within the Global South.

Forty-two scholars from Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka presented papers at the conference. There was also a paper by a scholar from Japan. Professor Yoshika Ashiwa from the University of Hitotsubashi read a paper on 'Buddhist Temples and Modern Allegories in Post-conflict Sri Lanka'. A plenary conversation held between Professor Fakrul Alam (Pro-Vice Chancellor, East West University, Dhaka) and Professor Abhi Subedi (Professor, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu) reminded the audience of the commonalities between South Asian writings, both written in English and a wide range of South Asian languages including vernacular modes of expression. They also touched upon the ancient and contemporary traditions which inform in more nuanced ways how South Asia may be imagined, without letting go of the everyday realities about fluidity of borders within this region.

## II. **Brief Description of ongoing Research Projects:**

### **BANGLADESH**

Prof. Mashrur Shahid Hossain reported:

The research-based projects on Comparative Literature in the context of South Asian Literature continued. The ongoing one, funded by the University Grants Commission, Bangladesh, is a comparative study on the lyrics of world national anthems with a view to exploring how and why violence and ethnocentrism informs national anthems. A significant portion of this project is dedicated to four South Asian national anthems: *Amar Sonar Bangla* (My Golden Bangla) of Bangladesh, *Jana Gana Mana* (Minds of the People) of India, *Pak Sarzamin* (The Sacred Land) of Pakistan and *Sri Lanka Matha* (Mother Sri Lanka) of Sri Lanka. It inquires if national anthems otherize the neighbors and if the concerned nation still cherishes the spirit of the age the anthem was penned and composed. The other project, funded by the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, JU, is on Comparative 'English' Literature. Coordinator: *Prof. Mashrur Shahid Hossain, Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka, Bangladesh, March, 2017.*

### **Sri Lanka**

Prof. Senath Walter Perera reported

As Chair of the Gratiaen Trust which administers the Gratiaen Prize for Sri Lankan Writing in English, helped organise a Workshop on Creative

Writing in Collaboration with Common Wealth Writers held in two segments in May and October 2018.

“Beyond Post-Truth Anuk Arudpragasam’s *The Story of a Brief Marriage*  
“Literature, Culture and Society in the Age of Post Truth IACLALS  
Conference Pondicherry, 6-8 February 2019.

As Chair of the Gratiaen Trust, held talks at the Seagull Foundation in Calcutta in 2018 and confirmed a Workshop for Sri Lankan participants to be held in Colombo in 2019 led by a team from Seagull on editing creative work in English.

*Late 2017 was on the Jury for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in English*

### **Bhutan**

Prof. P. BaburajHarishree reported:

The international conference on the theme: Traversing from Local to Global: Journey of Literature across Time and Space (19-20 April 2019) held at Yonphula Centenary College in collaboration with the Centre for Archaeology and Historical Research, Sherubtse College. The conference was attended by delegates from India, Bhutan, Yemen and Nepal, representing an important aspect of South Asian Literature and Culture. Presentations were made on a wide range of topics pertaining to the sub-themes. The topics ranged from myth, folk tradition and allegorical movie to horror and science fiction as trans-realistic genres that combine the elements of history, gothic and speculative science fiction with reference to noted writers such as Murakami. The intellectual deliberation on diverse themes facilitated thought-provoking discussion on the ever-expanding dimensions of literature. Moreover, the broad theme helped the presenters and the audience to map the journey of literature carrying local and global perceptions across time and space, to understand its role in shaping human sensibilities. The diverse perspectives seen through the lens of myriad literary works not only enlightened the audience, but also infused inspiration in them to explore the unexplored works of literature. Thus this first-ever international conference on English Literary Studies was a success story.

### **III Publications:**

(a) A major publication entitled *Culture, History and Politics: South Asian Narratives* edited by Jasbir Jain, E.V. Ramakrishnan and Chandra Mohan, published by Rawat Publications, Jaipur, June 2019, came to light. The book is a collection of essays which explore the

region's shared pasts, formulative histories and its plural culture. Despite the distinctiveness of each people and nation, the spilling over of religions and languages across political borders weaves a complex web of commonalities.

The contributors to this volume have discussed issues such as aesthetics, the coming into being of new faiths, encounters with outsiders as the people have journeyed through conflicts of various kinds and the need and impact of philosophies such as Sufism. The authors/contributors include: Mashrur Shahid Hossain, Neekee Chaturvedi, Krishna Gopal Sharma, Abhimanyu Singh Arha, Ameena Kazi Ansari (Shared Inheritance); Jasbir Jain, Sangeeta Sharma, Chandra Mohan, Urmil Talwar, S. Asha, Manorama Tripathi and Senath Walter Perera (Histories of Resistance and Reconciliation) and E.V. Ramakrishnan, Devika Khanna Narula, Rachel Bari, Tutun Mukherjee and Bandana Chakrabarty (The Gendered Voice). A perceptive introduction – South Asia Imagined and Real has been written by E.V. Ramakrishnan.

The volume's special significance lies in the comparative perspective that these eminent scholars from Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India engage with. The essays, both individually and collectively, are a valuable contribution to South Asian Studies, an area whose strategic importance has long been on the political map. As such the book will be of great interest and use to research scholars and academicians of Comparative Literature, Cultures and Interdisciplinary Studies.

- (b) Prof. Senath Walter Perera: "Confronting Issues and Challenges in the Marketplace: Contemporary Sri Lankan Fiction in English." *English Studies in the Marketplace*. Ed. Fakrul Alam, Muhammed Shahriar Haque and Zohur Ahmed. Dhaka: East/West University, 2018. 58-69.  
"Critical Introduction to and Bibliography of Sri Lankan Writing in English for 2017" *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 53.5 (December 2018): 710-21
- (c) ***Socio-literary Cultures in South Asia*** (New Delhi: Niyogi Books), 2019.

*Socio-literary Cultures in South Asia* by Anisur Rahman presents seventeen studies on authors, texts, and issues under three sections that represent different secular traditions, imaginative landscapes and realistic configurations. It examines social, political, secular and cultural texts from five South Asian sites—

India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka—to represent a larger kaleidoscope of ancient and modern heritages. It appraises personal and collective histories in terms of time, memory, and myth, spells out stages in the formation of canons and identities, and considers the problematic of survival in the maze of ideological formulations in different South Asian locations. Drawing upon a rich variety of verbal and performance texts, the book examines the vitality of authorial imagination, hybrid thought patterns, and indigenous expression. The merit of the book lies in how it develops a larger view of South Asia as a veritable cultural space marked for the richness of its diversity rather than the illusion of its unity.

(d) ***Indigenous Imaginaries: Literature, Region, Modernity***  
(New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2017)

*Indigenous Imaginaries* argues for a redefinition of humanities from a comparative perspective anchored in the regional literary traditions of South Asia. These indigenous traditions have negotiated hegemonic structures of power over centuries through creative engagements with differences and pluralities. The central argument here concerns the need to reconfigure epistemologies that do not accommodate the creative and critical priorities of a multilingual society. Translation functions throughout this volume as the telos of a dialogic, interdisciplinary mode of cognition that questions the exclusivist claims of Euro-centric formulations of modernity. Among the authors discussed here are Rabindranath Tagore, Vaikom Muhammad Basheer, Jean Arasanayagam, Amitav Ghosh and Mahasweta Devi. The essays evaluate the emergent cosmologies of the global South that seek a vocabulary of criticism beyond the binaries of premodern/modern, modern/postmodern, region/nation and global/local.

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