



Indian Association for  
Commonwealth Literature  
and Language Studies

NEWSLETTER

Issue No. 3. 2015

Edited by: M Asaduddin on behalf of IACLALS

## EDITORIAL

### Of ‘Consumable’ Texts and ‘Uncultured’ Books ....

One of the realities of English literature teaching and learning in India is the ubiquitous presence of guide books or “kunjis” which replaced ‘texts’ long ago. The same is true of other domains or subjects as well. Guide books of all kinds litter the book market holding the key to success in the selection process. The vast army of hapless job seekers take recourse to them as a kind of short hand for all kinds of knowledge in a ready-made and easily consumable format. Despite the wide reach and impact of this phenomenon, researchers find it beneath their academic attention to engage with it.

Another reality is that most of us grew up straddling English and a ‘vernacular’ world, consuming texts in Indian languages as well as in English. Many of us grew up reading popular fictions in Indian languages, particularly detective novels. Satyajit Ray’s *Feluda*, Saradindu Bandopadhyay’s *Byomkesh Bakshi*, Ibn-e-Safi’s *Imran*, Surendra Mohan Pathak’s *Sudhir* are all much-loved private detectives and are household names. Vernacular popular and pulp fictions in India are now becoming available in English, spearheaded by Braft Anthology of Tamil Pulp Fiction and other sundry translations by Random House India. How does one distinguish between the ‘popular’ and the ‘pulp’? I am sure, English Studies departments (some are transforming themselves as English and Cultural Studies) will expand the canon to embrace them. How about English pulp/ commercial fiction? Chetan Bhagat whose *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* is said to have sold a million copies (remarkable by any standard, but still falls below Ved Prakash Sharma’s *Wardi Wala Gunda* (which has sold 1.5 million) is not the only phenomenon. He is joined by lesser stars like Shobhaa de, Amish Tripathi and others. The question is – how English criticism, which has a significant investment in ‘literariness’, will accommodate such works, or will it continue to ignore the phenomenon as it has done so far and pretend that it does not exist.

And, did you know that Hitler’s autobiography, *Mein Kampf* has remained a best seller in the Indian market ever since its first publication by Jaico Books in 1988, and quite a few other publishers have begun publishing it and laughing all the way to their banks?

All the above issues, and several others, have been treated in Suman Gupta’s latest book with the quirky, provocative title, *Consumable Texts in Contemporary*

*India: Uncultured Books and Bibliographical Sociology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). The book engages with the study of phenomena related to our reading habits either ignored or not adequately articulated earlier in our literary discourses and histories. Through what he terms "bibliographical sociology", Suman Gupta explores the presence of low-brow literature of different kinds in the contemporary Indian context - their productions, circulations and readerships - to understand current social trends. To be fair, some of the aspects of these phenomena are still emerging and at a formative stage, still gathering definite contours. The primary contribution of the volume, to my mind, is that it brings to our attention a subterranean area of supposedly non-literary production of books and scarcely acknowledged reading habits that have escaped serious scholarly attention. Having set the terms of the debate through the brief introductory chapter, "Keywords and Preliminaries" Gupta launches on his exploration of commercial and pulp fiction in Indian languages and English in the next two chapters. Chapter IV that discusses the phenomenon of Hitler's increasing popularity in India really intrigued me. Is it because of people's somewhat delusional notion that Hitler provided decisive leadership? Gupta speculates on the reasons for the book's continuing popularity. One of his speculations runs as follows: "This can be straightforwardly associated with the powerful position that right wing Hindu communal politics has acquired, especially after the 1980s, which is also the period over which *Mein Kampf* has been increasingly consumed in India" (p.65) But Gupta's reading of the situation is not as simple and uncritical as the quotation suggests. He knows that a reader may read a text with sympathy as much as s/he can read it critically. He also extends his study to embrace both Western Europe and North America where the book enjoys considerable popularity and evocation of Hitler in particular circumstances is not infrequent, making him conclude that societies can ignore such evocations only at their peril: "Arguably, the more carefree such evocations and circulations of Hitler and *Mein Kampf* appear, the stronger the potential for fascist ideological programmes remains." (p. 79)

The next two chapters deal with "value education" that has received increased traction in the last one and half decade and myriad publications related to it. Despite the constitution of India standing as a bulwark against promoting a particular religion in the sphere of education the votaries of value education find a way around for insertion of religion-inspired ideas in text books and other study materials to predispose their readers, mainly students, to a particular way of thinking. Articulations of this kind endeavour to weave a national narrative of Indian civilization through selective amnesia of the different strands of Indian history and indeed cultural strands that animated Indian social life.

To quote from the chapter, 'Mapping Public Sector "Value Education" Publications':

*KTPI [Knowledge, Tradition and Practices of India, CBSE, Class XI and XII] have an inward-and backward-looking, narrowly nationalist thrust. These are devoted to ancient and medieval knowledge, where the boundaries of the "medieval" are largely maintained within the Hindu kingdoms and Hindu system of social organization, cultural expression and disciplinary subscriptions. Significant parts of what is now India were ruled by Muslim statesmen from the 13th century, and in particular during the Mughal period from the 16th to the 18th centuries. However, the medieval sections of KTPI refer to developments under those administration very cursorily and their contribution to Indian "traditional knowledge and practices – and therefore "values" – is registered to a minute extent. (p.166)*

Gupta subjects the project of value education to searching scrutiny and his wry, deadpan narrative voice points out with deadly irony how the school and HE curricula, despite the state's avowedly secular pretensions, sought to accommodate studies on Ramkrishna mission, yoga, Brahmakumaris, Sri Sathya Sai Baba in an effort to bring "ethical" values in the realm of education. In an interesting aside he describes how the IITs and NITs, supposed to be temples of applied and analytical knowledge, became the most enthusiastic recipients of these values supported by considerable state funding. Gupta's reading of the situation is particularly astute when he says, "In the broadest term, the idea is to set up an HE apparatus which encourages students to suspend critical thinking in ideological and political directions in favour of conviction in a static set of putatively "core" national values, and thereafter exhort students to solve the problems of the nation ... by employing the applied skills obtained through education." (p. 169)

Gupta is pretty self-reflexive in his method and often puts on the table the provisional nature of his own method, never pretending full knowledge of the phenomena he is exploring or denying the possibility of other perspectives. That is why he is such a pleasure to read. Informed reader feels that s/he is an equal participant with the writer in exploring these neglected areas. Concluding his arguments, Gupta says: "Implicit in my own rhetorical choices and reasoning then ... are broad social concepts which actuate social concern – but I have generally desisted from making those concepts the vehicle for explicit Zeitgeist-defining

diagnoses and prognostications. Readers who are au fait with broad concepts such as neoliberalism and late capitalism, essentialist and social constructionist identity and identity politics, postcolonialism and globalization and postmodernism will accordingly recognize their bearing on those observations. There are no doubt also broad concepts which I am not au fait with, which could be brought to bear on those observations in ways I am unable to anticipate.' Precisely for this reason there is a lack of finality or definitive statements in the book. But, as said, the phenomena Gupta is dealing with are dynamic in nature and he could only gesture towards the ways they might develop under a set of circumstances. To this extent, the book marks a significant intervention in cultural/English studies in India.

**M Asaduddin**

## CONFERENCE AND SEMINAR REPORTS

### IACLALS ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE, 2015

Within the overwhelming response that the announcement of our annual IACLALS conference in Goa elicited, there were predictably two extreme reactions from members, one excessive jubilation on their abstracts being shortlisted and an equally disproportionate unhappiness and envy from those whose did not. For us at the IACLALS this could very well have put us on a slippery slope with the after-conference hours' planning overshadowing and delimiting every bit of the intellectual investment that we hope all our annual conferences come away richer by. But the 2015, "Space, Place, Travel, Displacement, Exile" conference co hosted with BITS-Pilani Goa campus, was anything but a holiday conference with charged sessions and papers, intellectually provocative plenaries and impeccably managed time keeping and hospitality. It will also be remembered as the conference that saw the release of the first issue of the IACLALS journal.

The keynote address by Maria Couto, distinguished writer (also a Padmashree awardee, a fact she hesitated publicising) on Goan culture, its fraught settlements and its many troubled pasts and present interrogated state politics and the concomitant concerns of capital that lie beneath the Goa most love but few care about. Damodar Mauzo and Elger Noronha our plenary speakers also spoke on Goan identity, writing and history.

This year we received the maximum number of entries for the **CDN Prize** and, from the final five, in a fiercely fought paper battle between Maninder Sindhu, Avishek Parui, Ritwick Bhattacharjee, Sandhya Devesan Nambiar and Aatreyee Ghosh, the prize was won by Sandhya Devesan Nambiar. Once again our warmest congratulations to Sandhya for her richly theorized paper, "We Walk by the Electric Light". The **Meenakshi Mukherjee Memorial Prize** for best published article was awarded to Nilanjana Mukherjee for her reading of D'Oyly's sketches in "Drawing Roads, Building Empire: Space and Circulation in Charles D'Oyly's Indian Landscapes", published in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* Vol. 37, 2, 2014. Congratulations Nilanjana on an incisive paper, one that brought in some critical and original insights into colonial landscape painting.

The BITS-Pilani Goa campus is a sprawling and beautiful space and their conference rooms were state of the art as was their team's super-efficient handling of the entire programme and sessions over the three days. Days and even months before the conference started, Nilak Datta's Google docs were late night grenades that came in steadily, smartly spreading fear in tech phobics (like me, yes), but when these ran into a few glitches some of us were secretly relieved and also grateful as we sought to organize our own unruly pre-conference lives. But a big shout out to Prof Meenakshi Raman, Nilak, Amitendu, Geeta and Basavdatta and their lovely enthusiastic students for ensuring everything came together wonderfully, both during the conference days and also before and after with airport picks and drops all of which were coordinated so well thanks to their organizational competence and detailing. The fact that all the delegates stayed (or could have) in one place, that (first versions of) all papers had been written months beforehand, and that there were perfectly briefed volunteers at every venue meant that this was destined to be a memorable conference.

Many thanks and more to all our delegates who read papers and actually resisted the lure of the Goan beaches to stay and bring alive and bring intellectual rigour to some great sessions and conversations. As many IACLALS regulars admitted, this was a conference where all the sessions delivered and set a high standard for future conferences. But BITS-Pilani Goa gave also threw us a lovely gala dinner with music, food and most importantly dance and drink to celebrate our second night with.

Now as withdrawal sets in we also look forward to planning and working on the 2016 Annual IACLALS Conference and would love to hear from our members on possibilities within their Institutions/Universities for co hosting this wonderful and warm coming together of academics from across India and abroad. Do write in to us if you would like to share and co host this vibrant, intellectually charged academic annual conference with us at the IACLALS.

Until next time then..

**Rina Ramdev**

**Secretary,**

**IACLALS**

## Mizoram Conference On Emergent Identities: Its Literary Representations

The Department of English at Mizoram University Aizawl organized a National Seminar on “Emergent Identities: Its Literary Representations” between 4 and 6 March 2015 under its UGC-SAP DRS–I programme. It was an efficiently organized two days – a brilliant Keynote address, and some exceptionally good Plenary as well as extremely interesting paper sessions. On the third day the participants were all invited as guests to attend the annual Chapchar Kut celebrations held in the Assam Rifles ground.

Day I of the seminar started with Dr Margaret L. Pachuau, as Coordinator of the seminar, welcoming all dignitaries present for the inaugural session. Members present were the Vice Chancellor Prof R. Lalthantluanga, Prof S. Baral, Head of the Department of English, Prof Margaret Zama as Coordinator and Dr Lalrindiki T. Fanai, Co-coordinator of the UGC SAP programme. The Guest of Honour was fittingly the noted Mizo writer and Padmashri awardee Khawlkungi. Dr Pachuau specially mentioned her gratitude to Khawlkungi for gracing the occasion. Even though Khawlkungi spoke in her mother tongue Mizo, which we non-Mizos did not understand, her soft but firm tone in which she delivered her speech was apt to set the tone for the papers to be read out in the seminar. She spoke about her experiences as a writer and as a woman. Dr Fanai later translated the main points of Khawlkungi’s speech. Khawlkungi’s frail body and slight demeanor in the traditional white dress did not dampen her spirits that was so easily evident. The next session had Professor GJV Prasad, from CES JNU New Delhi, delivering the keynote address with Prof Margaret Zama chairing the session. In his inimitable style Professor Prasad spoke about the construction of identity – what is the ‘I’? Why is identity so strongly related to the nation? He spoke about how identity can never be static and also discussed issues of identity politics. He then spoke about literary representations of emergent identity relating it to instances of literature from the Northeastern regions of India. Prof Prasad’s thought-provoking speech set the tone for the diverse and extremely stimulating sessions of the seminar that were to follow. Professor Subir Dhar of the Department of English, Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata, delivered the first of the Plenary lectures in the same session. His was an interesting way of addressing the issue of identity. He spoke of the construction of identity with reference to a parodic article from the internet. This article refers to relieving President Obama of his post and outsourcing the work of the President of the United States to a call center worker in India! He discussed the dual role of parody in such construction of identity. The second of the Plenary lectures was in

the post-lunch session by Professor B.K. Danta from the department of English and Foreign Languages, Tezpur University. His was talk not only addressed the issue of construction of identity but of the role of performance of the self. Prof Danta also spoke of national identity and its relation to the identity of the north eastern regions of India. The session was chaired by Prof Lalrindiki T. Fanai of the department of English of Mizoram University. The day ended with the final session which had four papers on varied aspects of identity – papers on Mizo literature and the issue of identity being addressed in papers by Dr Fanai and Dr Lalthansangi Ralte. While Dr Fanai spoke about a Mizo literary text, Dr Ralte spoke about the Mizo society. Dr Nandini Saha presented a paper on ‘Emergent Identities: Women Dalit Writers from Bengal’. The session ended with an interesting paper on the Borok community by Sheela Debbarma. This session was chaired by the Head of the Department of English Prof S. Baral.

Day II started early amidst the wonderful clime with another interesting Plenary session that invited quite a bit of heated discussion after the lecture, delivered by Professor Sukalpa Bhattacharjee, of the Department of English, NEHU, Shillong. The paper traced a history of the development of the North-east regions of India from the colonial times. Prof Bhattacharjee spoke about identity and its representations in the literature from the North-east. The second day of the seminar saw three parallel sessions with very interesting and wide ranging papers in the pre-lunch session. While Dr Jayita Sengupta’s paper dealt with Sikkimese identity, there were papers on Mizo songs and papers on the delineation of the Naga identity. The post-lunch session had two parallel sessions with yet again some extremely thought provoking papers – Dr Nabanita Ganguly’s paper that dealt with the widows in Bengali fiction being worthy of a mention. The predominant theme in the paper sessions was the voice of the subaltern and its literary representations. All paper presenters, faculty from various states and researchers alike, am sure had a lot to take back home from these rich academic sessions. The day ended with the valedictory, distribution of certificates and a vote of thanks delivered by Prof Margaret Ch. Zama.

A report on the seminar would be incomplete without a mention of the wonderful experience that we were honoured to be a part of, on the third day of the seminar, where the participants were all invited and escorted to the annual Chapchar Kut celebrations in the Assam Rifles ground. It was an experience that we would remember for a long time to come. It was a presentation of the close knit community of Mizoram presenting their traditional dance, music and games for children. The best part of the show was a walk by the toddlers around the ground with their mothers

walking either with them in their laps or holding their fingers and leading them on! It was a resplendent show of beauty in the traditional attire – both by men and women. Last but not the least credit is surely due to the organizers for the comfortable accommodation in the University guest house with the ever ready to serve staff in the kitchen. No complaints but only beaming faces and relaxed participants who returned happy from the wonderful experience of a seminar held in the scenic and sprawling campus of Mizoram University, thrown in with large doses of warm hospitality, is sure to stay with all who were there as a rich and warm academic experience.

*Dr Nandini Saha, Jadavpur University, Kolkata*

### **A BRIEF REPORT ON THE LAUNCH OF PREMIERE OF THE PEER REVIEWED INTERNATIONAL E-JOURNAL “CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION”**

The peer reviewed international e-Journal, “CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION” ([www.caesurae.org](http://www.caesurae.org)) was formally web launched on 17 May, 2015 evening at the Calcutta School of Music, by a team which includes stalwarts in academia like Bill Ashcroft, musicians, writers, poets and academicians. Now what is so significant about this e-journal in today’s world which has e-journals galore?

“Caesurae” means a “pause” in music; it means “an intervention” in conversation. Caesurae is the dialogics of art, music, literature, across the globe. It is an intervention of cultures across time and space. Though the title might offer an Eurocentric vision, the subtitle clarifies it, as "poetics of cultural translation". So it is clear that the e- journal would delve into areas of pause and intervention not only in Eurocentric cultures, but indigenous and global. The vision of this e-journal to a large extent collates with Said's vision in "Travelling Theory", who writes about ideas travelling from their home to various places, as do cultures. On the way, something is dropped or picked up, and new cultural products are formed. So, the journal "caesurae" is to cover “pauses” or “interventions” in cultures in a nutshell. The e journal is intellectual and emotive. It is to bring together creative people from various disciplines and scholars. So we have musicians, artists, photographers, writers along with scholar critics on the same plane.

The launch of the premiere on 17 May, 2015, evening began with a Welcome Address by Jayita Sengupta, the Managing Editor of “Caesurae” and Associate Professor of English, Sikkim University. She spoke about the inception of the e-journal and the wide response that she had had from her peers, senior scholars, musicians and artistes around the globe. Professor Ananda Lal, of the English Department, Jadavpur University, was the keynote speaker. He offered the team members present for the occasion many points to ponder. His take on "caesurae" and "caesura" invited new perspectives which the editorial team could mull over for the forthcoming issues of the e-journal. After the keynote, while the webmaster, young Surjo Sengupta, a First year student of Electronics in KIIT, BBSR, and his assistant Pritha Sen, a student of Computer Engineering, KIIT, successfully web launched the e-journal, all the members and contributors present for the launch joined them on the dais to celebrate the moment of release.

This was followed by an intellectually very stimulating and refreshing panel discussion, comprising Suddhaseel Sen (musicologist and academic, Presidency University), Meena Banerjee (vocalist and music critic), Ramkumar Mukherjee, (Writer and Director, Granthana Vibhaga, Visva Bharati University) Saikat Majumdar (writer and academic, Stanford University), and Debasish Lahiri (Chief Editor of “Caesurae”, poet and academic, Calcutta University) as the moderator. Suddhaseel spoke majorly about the Western reception of Tagore, and how his music and lyrics sparked off new compositions in Europe. Meena Banerjee spoke on the changes and evolution of Indian classical music over the years and its reception. Ramkumar Mukherjee shared his experience of Tagore's translations in kokborok in Tripura, in a translation workshop organized by Sahitya Akademi recently. There was also an intervention between him and Professor Lal from the floor, about words as cultural registers in different places, which one has to bear in mind while translating. Saikat Majumdar spoke on cultural translation in his forthcoming novel, "The Firebird", where literature and theatre share an interface in his fiction resonating with images and cultural metaphors of Kolkata some decades back. His readings from his forthcoming fiction, not only vibrantly illustrated his thoughts on cultural translation, but the very poetics and praxis of the art. Debasish Lahiri summed up the various points of view on, "What is Cultural Translation?" to suggest a "pause", till the board members met again for the next issue. As intellect is best combined with emotion, a short composition by a young group of musicians which included Surjo and Pritha, produced a medley of Western and Indian Classical fusion. Santosh Kumar, (Assistant Professor of Music from Sikkim

University) on his banshori, accompanied by Supratik Chatterjee, (Software engineer, TCS) on tabla, both on the team of “caesurae” as a grand finale to the evening's event, offered a presentation in Raaga Marwa in ektaal and teental. This was followed by a folk and Indian classical fusion, by them, which put one's heart and mind to rest, with a sense of fulfillment.

The bi-annual e- journal is up on the web, and the full text version of Volume 1, issue 1 will be available by the end of June, 2015.

*Jayita Sengupta, Sikkim University*

### **International Conference on Yeats and Kipling: Retrospectives, Perspectives**

2015 marks the 150th birth anniversary of William Butler Yeats and Rudyard Kipling, two of the most enduring litterateurs in the English literary tradition. While Yeats was born in Ireland and grew up to be a major doyen of Anglo-Irish literature, Kipling, born in India, is remembered as a quintessential man of his times, a spokesperson of sorts for the higher purpose of British imperialism and national interests.

Keeping the centrality of these authors in mind, the Department of English, Bharati College, Delhi in collaboration with the Department of English, Saurashtra University, Rajkot and the Oberoi Cecil, Shimla organised an international conference series from the 10th to the 18th of March. Prof. Rupin W. Desai, a well-respected figure in the Indian literary academe, acted as the mentor for this unique conference series, while Dr. Promodini Varma, the Principal of Bharati College, acted as its Convenor.

The Delhi chapter of the series was organised in Bharati College from 10th to 12th March; twenty-six scholars from all over the world revisited the texts and contexts of Yeats and Kipling. Prof. Dinesh Singh, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Delhi, inaugurated the conference series, while Prof. Malabika Sarkar, formerly Vice-Chancellor of Presidency University, delivered a keynote address titled ‘Yeats, Kipling and the Haven-Finding Art’. Stalwarts of the Indian literary academe – such as Prof. Rupin W. Desai, Prof. Harish Trivedi, Prof. Rajiva Verma, Prof. Prashant Sinha, and Prof. Christel R. Devadawson – joined overseas experts – such as Prof. Ruth Vanita, Dr. John Lee, Dr. Alexander Bubb and Prof. Robert S. White – in

deliberating upon a range of aspects pertaining to the politics, aesthetics, and relevance of Yeats and Kipling's works.

The regular academic component of the conference was supplemented by three theatrical performances on the evening of the second day, 11th March i.e. Three diverse performances were presented before the conference participants and college audience. The first was a Shaw's Corner production of Yeats' Purgatory, a stark play dwelling upon the horrifying possibilities of eugenics; Dr. Vinod Bala Sharma, founder of the amateur theatre troupe Shaw's Corner, was the director of the play. The next two performances – Yeats' haunting Words upon the Window-Pane, directed by Dr. Sonali Jain of our Department, and Never the Twain Shall Meet, a skit on Kipling – were in-house, Departmental productions. The audience were gripped by the consummate performance of Shaw's Corner and enjoyed the in-house amateur productions put up by the students of the Department of English of Bharati College.

Lastly, three academic lectures were also organised as extension activities around the Delhi chapter of the series. Dr. John Lee, Senior Lecturer with the Department of English, University of Bristol, and Prof. Robert S. White, Program Leader of the Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions, University of Western Australia, lectured Bharati students on 'Hamlet criticism and Romanticism' and on 'Keats' Life, Letters and Poems' on 9th and 13th March respectively. Additionally, Dr. Subhjit Sengupta, Associate Professor with the Department of English and Culture Studies, University of Burdwan, gave a lecture titled 'Shakespeare's Questioning of the Renaissance Image of Man in Hamlet and King Lear' in the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia on 16th March.

**Anubhav Pradhan, Bharati College, Delhi University**

# **SEMINARS AND SYMPOSIA: CALL FOR PAPERS & CONCEPT NOTES**

## **Envisioning the Indian City: People, Places, Plans**

### **International Workshop**

**Monday 17th – Tuesday 18th August 2015**

**Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India**

Envisioning the Indian City (ETIC) is a UGC-UKIERI Thematic Partnership Project (2013-15) between the University of Liverpool, UK and Jadavpur University, India. The Project (see <http://eticproject.wordpress.com/>) studies Indian cities as crucibles of cross-cultural encounter, with special focus on Goa, Pondicherry, Kolkata, and Chandigarh. Over the past two years, with numerous seminars, research projects, lectures and presentations, and two International Workshops held in Kolkata and Liverpool, the Project has brought together a variety of interdisciplinary approaches to urban studies, cultural history, on-site research, archives, city planning, architecture, the city in art and representation, collective memory and communities in the city.

In the third of our International Workshops, to be held at Jadavpur University on 17-18 August 2015, we welcome presentations on urban encounters and exchanges through individual and community histories and histories of objects (people and things), through city-spaces, buildings, streets, water-bodies, and their transformations (places) and through forms of 'envisioning the city' (plans). The Workshop will be open to reflections to other Indian cities in addition to our designated four in order to allow for comparative reflections and insights.

Themes for papers and panels may include, but are not restricted to, the following:

- Individuals, objects, and communities in the city: traces, stories, anecdotes, histories, intercultural exchanges
- Space and place in the city: localities, buildings, suburbia, streets, docks, water-bodies, representations

· Planning the city: health, sanitation, garbage, networks, roads, the urban sprawl

Presenters are asked to focus particularly on cross-cultural encounters and exchanges between Europe and Asia in developing any of these or other topics, in keeping with the ETIC Project theme.

Please send abstracts (250 words for individual papers and 500 words for complete panels), a brief biographical statement (if proposing a panel, one for each participant), and contact details, to cleoetic@gmail.com or sujaan.mukherjee@gmail.com by 10 July 2015.

Presentations should occupy no more than 20 minutes each. Panels are restricted to 90 minutes.

*Dr Ian H. Magedera, HLC: French. Liverpool L69 7ZR UK*

**In the Name of Chughtai: One Hundred Years of Celebration**  
**Two-Day International Conference (September 22 – 23, 2015)**  
**Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata**

Ismat Chughtai has been believed to have said that the first word uttered by her was ‘why’. The spirit of questioning permeates relentlessly through her oeuvre of eleven novels and novellas, nine short stories and one play. Her lifelong commitment to freedom in all contexts- personal, sexual, economical and intellectual, her involvement with the Progressive Writers’ Movement and the rebellion against its perceived orthodoxy and rigidity, her fearless and outspoken projection of experiences hitherto unheard of in the world of Urdu letters – are stuff that legends are made of. With an abiding belief in *mazhab-e-insaniyat*, Chughtai carves a niche for herself among her illustrious contemporaries – Rajinder Singh Bedi, Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishan Chander.

In the year of Ismat Chughtai’s birth centenary, we would like to revisit the ‘Indian’ author whose view of life, sense of history and progress, ideas on social justice, religious tolerance, paradigms of human relationship and power structures have undergone continuous transformations since the twentieth century till the present day. Focusing on the pan-Indian literary dialogue initiated by the Progressive Writers’ Association, the conference would encourage discussions on the alternative sensibilities of ‘national’ belonging which emerged from the experimental and

iconic works of the PWA. What happens to the spatial, temporal, affective embodied, performative and literary imagination and memory every time one reads, teaches, performs, sees, feels and thinks of the Chughtai's oeuvre? How altered realities have baffled human convictions and have transformed into objects of struggle, transgression and anxiety?

The 'author' finds herself caught between political tensions, social upheavals, engaging debates between literary styles and diction, possibilities of new forms of expressions, narrative structures, diverse registers of different language systems, dramatic modes and performative gestures. How have the works of Chughtai adhered to or resisted systems belonging to spatially, historically or culturally defined categories and have consequently led to the transmutation of 'traditional' approaches and formation of stylistic invocations? What has been the potential of the imaginative, the ironic and the performative for radical litterateurs? The conference would further explore how have dynamic and radical aesthetic innovations constituted revolutionary feelings and ruptures within literary modes? The conference therefore invites submissions which explore the 'modern' 'Indian' author within the scope of the critical spaces offered but not restricted by the following:

- Fundamentalism and Censorship in literary transactions
- Canon and the popular in literature
- Linguistic tensions and ambivalence
- Political movements and literary transactions
- Myths and Modern Indian Literature
- Literary history and generic configurations
- 'Tradition' and radical change
- Transgressive desires and essentialized gender norms
- 'Deviant' sexual practices and identities; heteronormative and compulsory heterosexual frameworks

**Conference Coordinators:**

- Ms. Epsita Halder, Assistant Professor, Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata (epsita.halder@gmail.com)
- Dr. Debashree Dattaray, Assistant Professor, Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, Kolkata (debashreedattaray@gmail.com)

Abstracts of about 500 words, with a 50-word note on the speaker, must be

emailed to the Conference Coordinators before 31 July 2015. Acceptance mails will be sent by 7 August, 2015.

**The 17th Triennial ACLALS Conference, Stellenbosch, South Africa**  
**July 11 –15, 2016**

*“stories that float from afar”: the idea of postcolonial culture: inclusions and exclusions*

In a piece recorded in 1873, only fifty kilometres from the ACLALS 2016 conference venue, /Xam storyteller //Kabbo argues his case for returning to his home in the northern Cape from Cape Town where he had been first a prisoner in the Breakwater prison and then a language and cultural informant for the linguist, Wilhelm Bleek. The home to which he refers is one that is already literary rather than tangible, for //Kabbo and his community have been displaced by settler invasions and their pursuit of a livelihood criminalised. //Kabbo can never really return home because home, in Homi Bhabha’s unforgettable formulation, has been rendered unhomely, invaded by history, the oppressive force that “captures dreams and redreams them,” to borrow a phrase from *The God of Small Things*. A reading of //Kabbo’s piece today exhibits the thrilling power of world literature in English to rescue from the abyss of natural and human history, aesthetically ordered feelings and ideas, and enable their uncanny enunciation in the space of the present, in our minds, writing and seminar rooms. At the same time, the text signals the limits and dangers of the idea of world literature in English. The phrase, ‘stories that float from afar’, has come to signify the ability of stories to transcend temporality and place, to speak to us of inaccessible experiences from a time that has gone, along with the quagga, a species of zebra, which, not coincidentally, disappeared in the wild in the 1870s, the same decade as //Kabbo’s enforced sojourn in Cape Town. //Kabbo, though, is not celebrating the ability of stories to cross cultures and time but mourning their inability to exist apart from a community of meaning, of telling and, crucially, of interpretation. The phrase comes from the sentence: “For I am here; I do not obtain stories because I do not visit so that I might hear stories that float from afar.”

Today we are confronted with the irony that the literatures in English from around the world that we teach and study often come from countries whose scholars and writers cannot easily travel to conferences or access journals or books or are forced

to live outside the countries of their birth. Many of their compatriots are excluded by language, class and education from reading their books. This does not mean, of course, that these are people without literature, culture or learning. Written literature in English in Africa, we should remember, is only the tip of the iceberg. Most literature is not written and is not in English. An over-reliance on writing and English brings its own sort of exclusions with it.

This conference represents an opportunity to explore the dangers of ahistorical relativism, cultural appropriation and neo-colonial forms of exclusion and inclusion as well as the paradoxes inherent in notions of postcolonial and world culture. It is an invitation to consider ways of approaching literature and other cultural forms in a spirit of greater hermeneutic receptivity and with increased theoretical rigour. How can we build on the sorts of critical self-reflexivity that is already embedded in feminist, queer, postcolonial, ecocritical and transnational approaches to literature and culture? How can we interrogate the power structures that authorise particular people to speak and to produce knowledge about literature and, simultaneously, ask which kinds of interpretations, discourses and modalities of knowing are screened out in the process? How, in a gendered, class-ridden, multilingual, fluid and ideologically plural, often violent, environment, can different voices become audible? How do we respond to the power of those nodes of financial hegemony that try to decide for us what counts? And how do we guard against the triumphalism of English?

This is the first ACLALS conference to be held on African soil since the 1970s and the first ever to be held in the western Cape. For centuries the Cape has been the crossroads of the world. It looks east across the warm Indian ocean and beyond to the Pacific, west across the Atlantic and beyond to the Pacific, south to the Antarctic, from where the whales and penguins come, and north into the African interior. The western Cape is a melting pot of peoples, languages and cultures, home to people with roots in every quarter of the globe, not least in southern Africa itself, a part of the world which has always been part of human history. The engraved ochre found in Blombos Cave, 300 kilometres east of Cape Town, represents the earliest known evidence of human aesthetic activity, dating back some 100 000 years. Today the region is a vibrant cultural hub. It is multilingual, multicultural and multi-religious; it is hybrid; it is queer; more than any other major city of the world, Cape Town is home to diverse species of plants and animals as much as it is home to people. At the same time old exclusions persist. The scars of slavery, colonialism, genocide and apartheid are still raw. Forms of exclusion, related to class, race, education, place of

originand language, co-exist alongside new forms of inclusivity, accommodation and hybridity. The Cape is riven by identity politics and nationalisms of various kinds and its extraordinary biodiversity is threatened by climate change. It is a region as violent as it is beautiful. In short, the contradictions of the contemporary world are brought into sharp focus in the western Cape and, with it, the urgencies and the contradictions inherent in the practice of cultural studies today. The 17th Triennial ACLALS Conference invites scholars working in a variety of media (literature, linguistics, film, the visual and musical arts and popular culture) to present papers in the area of the conference theme -the idea of postcolonial culture today: its inclusions and exclusions.

The following are among the questions and topics the conference hopes to explore:

The idea of world literature in an unequal world  
The relationship between regional literatures and world literature  
The exclusions and inclusions of Commonwealth and postcolonial literature  
Literary value, production and circuits in a neoliberal world  
What is lost and gained by various forms of periodisation and classification  
Excluded genres and modalities of knowing  
Orality and writing  
Gendered inclusions and exclusions  
Transnational eyes: the ocean as conceptual tool  
Writing lives: memoir, autobiography, biography in postcolonial contexts  
Questions of reception: travelling texts  
Hidden communities of cultural production and interpretation  
Education, technology and power  
Multiculturalism and indigeneity  
The possibilities and limitations of a world language  
Languages and localities  
Proliferation and postcolonial culture  
Addressing conflict, violence, trauma  
Tradition and modernity  
Rethinking hybridity  
African literary visions of the world  
Migration and Diasporas: gender, sexualities, class, race  
Desire: its freedoms and its tyrannies  
Representations of religion and spirituality  
Ecologies: natural and imagined

Film: postcolonial inclusions and exclusions  
Climate change and the practice of cultural studies  
Migrations: forced and desired  
Performance and public art  
Literature, culture, art and social justice

On writers, artists and public figures who have passed on in the last few years:

Chinua Achebe, Stuart Hall, Nadine Gordimer, MbuleloMzamane, Gabriel GarcíaMárquez, Doris Lessing, Nelson Mandela, Kofi Awoonor, Doris Lessing, Seamus Heaney, Ruth PraverJhabvala, Maya Angelou, Khuswant Singh, MafikaGwala, Andre Brink, Chris van Wykand Mavis Gallant. We hope to attract a large and committed group of scholars to this gathering, which can make an important contribution to expanding and diversifying the archive of our knowledge of literatures, languages and cultures. The South African /Xam storyteller //Kabbo in the 19th century bewailed his inability to visit his home where he might “obtain” the many “stories that float from afar”. We invite scholars from the many sharers in the storehouses of narratives in their multiple forms to bring and to share these stories in Stellenbosch in 2016.

The conference is being organised by the English Department at Stellenbosch University, in association with the English Departments at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Western Cape, the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, the Stellenbosch Literary Project (SLIP) and the District Six Museum. The conference dates are July 11 to July 15 2016 and abstracts should be sent to

**Professor Shaun Viljoen (e-mail: scv@sun.ac.za) by the 10 January 2016.**

## BOOK REVIEW

***The Lives of Others* by Neel Mukherjee, Random House India 2014, pp. 514, price Rs. 599.**

Apart from certain cinematic explorations, the non-Bengali reader has had little access to literary narratives of the Naxal movement and its coming to strength and impact on Bengali culture and politics. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* which uses the Naxal movement as a kind of a framing device, inspired mixed reviews and some degree of bashing from ideological quarters when it was published a year or so ago. Neel Mukherjee's *The Lives of Others* mirrors the politics of the Bengal region during this particularly tumultuous and violent period of its history, in the lives of the members of an extended family and presents to us a finely detailed and frequently harrowing picture of the times, interweaving a web of connections that network event and people, and bind the individual and personal within the political. It is quite remarkable how much ground Mukherjee covers in this gripping novel depicting an intergenerational Bengali family in the Calcutta of 1960s. Through two sets of interconnected narratives, set apart from each other through means of differing font and voice, Mukherjee is able to weave the two major worlds of his novel: the subaltern and the decadent, the rural and the urban, each of which is presented through and located in variegated circumstances and characters. Mukherjee uses a third person narrative to etch the fortunes of the affluent middle class Ghosh family and their squabbling domesticity seen through the everyday lives of its members in their four-storey home in urban Calcutta amidst the collapse of their once substantial paper business now caught in a rapid freefall. This narrative moves fluidly through the different floors of the Ghosh home reflecting the hierarchical positions of its inmates, even as it shifts shape to inhabit each individual consciousness of a large cast of characters as widely varying as the seven year old Arunima in her convent school hankering for an imported flash pencil box, the unlovely malcontent Chaya doomed to cross-eyed blackness and spinsterhood, the devoted family servant Madanda, the 11 year old mathematical prodigy Sona or his hapless widowed mother Purba. It is a rich mosaic of beautifully captured middle class life, its aspirations and its skullduggery in a language that is bold and old-fashioned at the same time, enabling the echoes and lilt of a spoken Bangla (cadence is the only familiarity this non-Bengali speaker presumes). This is not an omniscient narrative; it is rather a luminous third person narrative that is capacious and accommodative: making room for descriptions of food, fabric and jewellery amongst

other things; the abstruse world of numbers and figures; together with scenes of sadism, coprophilia, incest, rape, alcoholism, and of course the mandatory Durga Puja; the sounds of the street adding to the clamour of a large household as well as thick descriptions of the dinginess and grime of the urban work-a-day world where the poor attempt to scrape a living.

The novel begins with a prologue narrating a horrific act of violence. A starving peasant Nitai Das slaughters his wife and three small children, the youngest an infant, before swallowing insecticide in famine struck Medinipur in 1966. The second epistolary narrative of the novel connects to this event in a direct fashion. It is narrated in the form of a long letter by Supratik, an unlikely scion of the decadent self-absorbed Ghosh family, who leaves the luxuries of his childhood home to throw in his lot with landless peasants and displaced adivasis and joins the cause of the Naxals in rural Bengal. Supratik's narrative is self-introspective and reflective. It is also a first person account of rural impoverishment and the embedded nature of his party work in building the violent Naxal resistance.

Supratik is the connecting link between the novel's two main worlds revealing the nexus between the state and the parasitic affluence of the powerful resting upon and sucking the life-blood of those who labour whether peasant or factory worker. In this it both complements and extends the middle class habitation of the realistic novel, without however succumbing to an easy representation of it as a Manichean divide between good and evil. Mukherjee is not squeamish in writing about violence and the absence of a palpable authorial voice rules out a standpoint position. However his searing and savage description of brutality on both sides points to the trauma of violence if not its futility and pointlessness. The structural violence of the social order reflects in the exploitation of the peasant and worker; the brutality of Naxal resistance is matched by police brutality torturing Supratik to death: the flaying of the skin of his inner thigh in the pattern of a hammer and sickle can only be termed telling. There is a juncture in Supratik's account when he realizes that the peasants they have succeeded in revolutionizing are now completely defenceless and at the mercy of the State's counter attack. He also realizes towards the end that he has very conveniently implicated Madanda in his own theft of gold from the Ghosh household in order to finance the making of bombs and other arsenal. Supratik's betrayal of the old servant cannot but reveal the unshakable tenaciousness of class affiliations, even in a revolutionary fired by the zeal of bringing about a classless society.

Like the prologue, the second of the novel's two epilogues also connects to Supratik. A group of young dispossessed adivasis, male and female, move towards the railway tracks in the stealth of the night in the year 2012 and disconnect the fishplates hours before the arrival of an express train. Sabita, their chief, remembers Maoist lore about a comrade called Pratikda who had imparted this technology to the rank and file of Naxal cadres. The legacy of violence continues as does the story of dispossession: even as the narrative completes a circle, it unspools to create a fresh arc, a new trajectory.

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## BOOKS PUBLISHED BY MEMBERS

Somdatta Mandal (ed), *A Bengali Lady in England* by Krishnabhabini Das (1885)  
Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015

Uma, Alladi, M. Sridhar and K. Suneetha Rani, eds. *Vibhinna: Voices from Contemporary Telugu writing*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2015, pp.406.  
Paperback, Rs.200/-.

Laksmisree Banerjee, *Peahen Passions - A Collection of Poems*, Authorpress, 2013

*Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* , A translation of the Manohar Mouli Biswas' autobiography *Amar Bhubane Ami Beche Thaki* (2013) translated by Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi, Stree-Samya, Kolkata, 2015, Rs.350/

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