

**European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies 2010**  
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**Panel 16 : "Dissent, opposition and minority in contemporary literature and film from South Asia and/or the South Asian Diaspora"**

Conveners :

Alessandra Consolaro, University of Turin, Italy

Thomas de Bruijn, Independent scholar, Leiden

SESSION 1:

**Questioning the Literary: *Dalit* versus *Lalit* writing.**

Joya John

A significant body of writing has emerged in India under the rubric of dalit literature. The nomenclature 'dalit' seeks to create a political category for several low caste/ex untouchable communities in India. Often used to reverse the stigma associated with caste specific names it also represents a militant rejection of both Gandhian terms like 'Harijan', as well as more statist vocabulary like 'Scheduled Caste'.

Caste has been the object of study for various disciplines that have brought their distinctive discursive practices to define it. It needs to be asked what can the discipline of literary studies bring to this rich diversity of knowledge? More directly how can 'literary' disciplinary tools help us to analyse caste? The question of the literary poses a particular problem when assessing dalit writing. Literature is often described, by dalit writers, as an ideological category that masks the social 'reality' of caste. This critique can be summed up as the absence of the dalit writer, the dalit protagonist or dalit consciousness in 'savarna' literature but is further complicated by a fundamental suspicion of the literary itself. Dalit writers critique the non political nature of the literary by insisting on the political import of their writing. The problem of the literary is often resolved by defining dalit writing as sociological rather than literary. What are the limitations of this kind of approach to the question of the literary?

In recent years many dalit writers have produced literary histories of dalit writing. Like in the case of an earlier form of feminist literary theory, this exercise involves tracing radical literary traditions/authors in which it becomes incumbent on the literary historian to only trace 'dalit' writers. Such traditions have more importantly to be bearers of dalit consciousness, a category that often leads to the rejection of writers as quietist. Is it possible to look at dalit writing outside simplistic binaries of the individual and the community, dalit consciousness and an ahistoric notion of dalit oppression? Through my paper I wish to study how Hindi dalit writing addresses literary institutions, canons and traditions as well as mediates ideas of the nation and citizenship. I wish to extend some of the issues raised by seminal writing on the Hindi public sphere by Francesca Orsini. While Orsini discusses how language, literature and nationalism coalesced around issues of gender and the peasant question, the question of how caste became an object of reform within the literary remains muted. I will examine the processes set to work in the making of the Hindi public sphere which have repercussions on how dalit writers have responded to issues of canon formation, systems of literary evaluation and how caste was

represented in nationalist and progressive Marxist literature.

### **Rebellious natures in Hindi writing**

Thomas de Bruijn

The esthetics of the literary representation of individuals that are in some way or other disconnected from the mainstream of society has received much attention in studies on modernist writing, especially the stories from the post-Independence *Nayi Kahani* movement. It has often been noticed that there is a link in this representation between the cultural and religious complex of renunciation and asceticism and the depiction of alienated individuals who struggle to find a way in modern society. The dominant position of *Nayi Kahani* in Hindi writing has led to a strong imprint of this esthetic and thematic program on more recent literature.

The rise of Dalit writers has added a new semantic strain to the representation of individuals. In this writing, alienation is not the main emotional tone, but rather the account of sharp exclusion and struggle for survival and dignity in a harsh and forbidding society. Rebellion and inner conviction are the main characteristics of the individuals in Dalit writing.

The present paper will explore the contrast between the two semantic and esthetic programs for the representation of the rebellion of a protagonist. It will try to demonstrate how *Nayi Kahani* and Dalit writing, coming from opposite directions, meet in using references the discourse of renunciation to depict the individualisation of their protagonists. The cultural and thematic coordinates of their references to this shared cultural paradigm are completely different. With reference to Dalit stories collected in the volume *Carcit Dalita Kahaniyam*, edited by Dr. Kusum 'Viyogi' (Delhi: Lalit Prakshan, 1997) it will attempt to position this representation of rebellion on the map of Hindi writing.

### **Unknowable or Comprehensible -Two Attitudes to Life and Death In Modern Hindi prose**

Guzel Strelkova

The paper is mainly based on the novels by Ajneya "Apne –apne ajnAbi" (To each his stranger), 1961, and Krishna Sobti " Ai, LaRki" (Hey, Girl!), 1991.

From the very beginning of his literary career the main hero of Ajneya's prose was a person going on the path of "Resistance and rebellion" and experiencing a feeling of exclusion from the common world. Let it be his early stories (like "VipathagA" or "Vivek se baRhkar) or Shekhar – the hero of his first novel "Shekhar: ek jIvanI", or heroes of his later creations. Some of Krishna Sobti's heroines also could be considered and understood as marginal (Mitro Marjani of the same name novel, Ratti of "SURajmukhI andhere ke" or Mahak Banu of "Dilo-Danish"), but they try to overcome this marginality and sometimes reach their aim by rebel, at least a clear, open protest. Heroes of the both writers express their rebellious or marginal nature in different ways, reasons for their rebelliousness and marginality are also different.

One of the aims of my paper is to present this rebellious nature of the heroes and how it changes or not under the force of circumstances and opposition to the society.

In my paper I proceed from the assumption that creations of the both writers combine a western and Indian approach to understanding and representing the world. The novels look very close in composition, choosing the main heroes and highlighting key points. In my paper I try to show that Ajneya and Krishna Sobti in these novels reached practically opposite results presenting their heroes on the margin between Life and Death, the heroes

in search of God and attempt to understand the meaning of their existence. For one of Ajneya's heroines, Yoke, rebellion to the world and God is practically the only way in her search of Truth and she fulfills her "existential choice". At the same time the writer shows as an alternative another heroine, Selma.

I suppose, that the novel by Krishna Sobti, written about 30 years later than Ajneya's, might be viewed as "a stylistically alternative model" that tends to subvert an offered by Ajneya pattern. Interplay between the two texts is also very important for understanding the attitude of the both writers

to "ideology and cultural aesthetics" which changed with the passage of time. Assumption of the both writers of rebel, revolution and opposition to the world could be also understood while comparing these two novels.

### **Parody and irony in contemporary Hindi theater as a constructive device**

Annie Montaut

Although parody is acknowledged in Western literature as a relevant form in artistic creation (Cervantes's *Don Quijote* being the most famous example), and has been strongly theorized, from Bakhtine to Jameson and Hutcheon, it does not seem to enjoy a similar status in Indian modern art.

For instance, one of the most explicitly parodist Hindi writer, Krishna Baldev Vaid, has often been equated to a mere aping of Western avant-guards (particularly of Beckett whom he translated into Hindi), with no authenticity and no 'indian-ness', as well as stigmatized as decadent and nihilist (Jaysingh). A textual analysis of his play *Parivar Akhara* (2002), read against the background of his novella *Dusra na koi* (title itself a parody by truncation of a line from Mira Bai) makes it clear that the parodized and parodying texts are two authentic voices engaged in an argument about the place of mystics and metaphysics in contemporary India. Along with the strong use of autoparody, Vaid's use of classical or medieval formulas fits the definition of parody as the inscription of the past in the present, bringing to life historical tensions.

My second case study will be *Agra Bazar*, an early play from Habib Tanvir (1954) and the treatment of Nazir's ghazals. These ghazals are themselves parodies of the ghazal culture (the one about the cucumber being particularly famous) which tell us about a de-constructive interpretation of the mughal culture in the late eighteenth-nineteenth century. Their use in *Agra Bazar* in a quotative way reshapes them into a parody in the second degree in order to voice both a Brechtian view of social struggle and the predicament of the late mughal culture in the early 1800ies (Fort William College years), a time where historical tensions radicalized with the beginnings of colonization.

### **Educating the young against discrimination. An analysis of the Hindi textbooks of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)**

Mariola Offredi

The paper takes into consideration the Hindi textbooks of the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, set-up in 1961 and fully funded by the Central Government) for sixth to tenth grade students (11/12 to 15/16 years of age) published in 2000s. In accordance with the NCERT's aim of qualitative improvement of school education, these new generation textbooks are framed so as to bridge the gap between education and life. The literary texts of the collections – prose works, poetry, drama, songs, all introduced by a critical note – differ as to the matter. Some of them are clearly intended to fight discrimination of every kind, be it against low caste people, women, or

minorities, while others deal with the problem of discrimination in indirect, and even subliminal ways. In both cases, however, the critical introduction to each text and the exercises at its end are meant to serve as a stimulus for reflection and discussion.

## SESSION 2

### **“The Second Voice” Questioning woman’s agency in Partition narratives**

Anne Castaing

Many recent studies (Urvashi Butalia, Kamla Bhasin & Ritu Menon, Partha Chatterjee) claim they wish to restore women’s agency at the centre of the History of the Indian nation, thus responding to several decades during which the crucial role they played was implicitly denied. The question of abducted women during Partition, which was dealt with legally just after Independence but was for a long period of time deprived of its reality by a vast nationalist metaphorization evoking the truncation of the nourishing mother, has recently given way to an ideological reversal which aims at promoting “raw” life narratives through women’s points of view, evacuating all “allegories” of the violence and recalling the victims’ individuality. This question thus takes over a novel like Amrita Pritam’s *Pinjar*, which enables the expression of the woman’s voice, raised against a deprivation of its own agency and history.

However, beyond all debates concerning the narratives “gender”, the exception that *Pinjar* represents questions the relationship between literature and historical mythicization or repression. Concerning woman’s agency during Partition, literature seems indeed quite reluctant to extricate itself from the fetters of the grand narratives of womanliness. One wonders, as a consequence, if a second voice of Partition is possible. Is woman’s discourse possible beyond discourses *on* woman? Examining Hindi (Krishna Sobti, Krishna Baldev Vaid, Agyeya) and Urdu (Rajinder Singh Bedi, Saadat Hasan Manto) partition narratives, this paper aims at questioning the ability of literature, as well as the strategies implemented, to allow the expression of woman’s voice, confined in a social, domestic and symbolic position of essentialized womanliness pre-established by a patriarchal imagination.

### **Resistance in today’s Hindi world: *Mohandas* by Uday Prakash.**

Alessandra Consolaro

This paper will study Uday Prakash’s *Mohandas* as a multi-layered story of resistance. From the thematic point of view it is a story of marginality, featuring a young *dalit* resisting against the oppression of the hegemonic society. It is also a story of multiple identities - or of a total loss of identity. The text resists gender categorization (short novel or long story?). There is a continuous meta-textual play: *Mohandas* reminds us of Gandhi not only in his name, but also in his ideas and actions (persisting in his search for truth, never resorting to violence). Other characters too (Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh, Shamsher Bahadur Singh) obviously refer to the Hindi literary field. As *Mohandas* was first published in *Hans* in the Premchand anniversary issue (August 2005), and Uday Prakash often refers to Hindi authors of the past in his works, it is possible to analyze the text as calling for an alternative canon in Hindi literature, resisting the mainstream. *Mohandas* can be seen as an example of postmodern Hindi literature, where the focus,

though, is not on the urban middle class, but on the rural and subaltern India. This is part of the globalized world even if it seems to be totally aloof: the narrator's interventions emphasize the contemporaneity of events that seem to happen in parallel world, creating a stylistic rupture. Finally, the story has already had multiple *avatars*, with inter-media translations in the form of theatrical adaptations and a cinematic version.

**Sheila Rohekar's "Taaviiz": On hybrid identity, transcending religious communities, and violence**

Heinz Werner Wessler

The plot of Sheila Rohekar's novel "Taaviiz" is based on a love and marriage between a Hindu woman (Reva) and a Muslim man (Anvar) and its consequences. After Anvar is killed during communal riots, Reva marries again after some years. Her son Annu, being made aware sometimes directly, sometimes in a more or less subtle way, of his "mixed blood" origin, finds acceptance and consolation in a radical Hindu activist group as a college student and turns into a radical Hindu himself. He breaks with his father-in-law and his own mother, but is however killed in Ayodhya in 1990 during the Ramjanmabhoomi agitation by a police bullet. While being prepared for cremation, his friends find out that Annu is circumcised, which finally leads the radicals to killing his surviving mother to avoid complications.

The narration goes back and forth in narrative time, changing between auktorial narration, reportage and forms of non-linear story telling, including references back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A crucial element is the time reference the diary of her grandfather, a freedom fighter. A visit at Sabarmati Ashram illustrates the sharp contrast between the hopes of the those days for communal harmony and the the present.

While Reva's love relationship and marriage with Anvar is a symbolic act of communal reconciliation transcending the borders of religious communities, the brutal murder of her husband, her son and herself contradicts the ideals of a harmonic society, unraveling the inherent violence society is based upon. Annu is the symbol of the failure of identity constructions beyond traditional social boundaries in modern India.

Sheela Rohekar (born 1942) has a Bene Israel Jewish background. She has been living in Lucknow for decades and is one of the few Jewish Hindi authors of our times.

**"Event, Memory and Identity in *Rang de Basanti*, *Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi*, and *Mumbai Meri Jaan*"**

Nandini Bhattacharya

Three recent Indian films -- *Hazaaron Khwaishein Aisi* (2003), *Rang de Basanti* (2006), and *Mumbai Meri Jaan* (2009) -- illustrate the late windings of a turn toward a singular postmodernity incipient in Indian cinema since its early days. This singular postmodernity differs from the European idea of postmodernity in that it is concerned with the human in an older political sense: it uncovers processes of identity-formation and marginalization that assert the meaningfulness of the term "identity." This political concern is expressed in this cinema by representing liminal identities as fully embodied political subjects. They also, however, indicate a nascent postmodern formation of identities in contemporary Indian cinema as identities are interpellated by the violent event as portrayed in "historical" cinema. I use the aforementioned three films --to explicate a theory of history and of the historical event, especially the violent event, that grounds this cinema's postmodern aesthetic. The aesthetic form that postmodernity takes here is a play with

uses of history: how different emphases on historical structure or event, or a radical questioning of their significance, alter the status of the human subject and foreground the liminality of identity. While in *Hazaarón Khwaishein Aisi* and *Rang De Basanti* the status of the “event” is differentially weighed as a contestation of powerful nationalist and statist discourses on history, more recently *Mumbai Meri Jaan* has displaced the nation-state, structure-event binary altogether to privilege the lowest common denominator of the polity and to foreground bare life.

### **The literary re-appropriation of buddhism: countering majoritarian and nationalist narratives of belonging**

Laetitia Zecchini

This paper endeavors to explore the literary re-appropriation of Buddhism in contemporary Indian literature. Buddhism emerges as an alternative tradition, both dissident and indigenous, to what is often seen as a monolithic, homogeneous and majoritarian national culture. Buddhism is both reclaimed and reinvented by dalit literature but also by many poets and writers in English and in Hindi (Kedarnath Singh, Keki Daruwalla, Pankaj Mishra, Arundhati Subramaniam, etc). This reclaiming of Buddhism problematizes the relationship to the nation-state, especially in the case of Dalits who reinterpret it as a strictly heterodox and “world-transforming” counter-tradition to Brahmanical India. It also signals a reinvention of the self from the marginal or the minority perspective, the reconstruction and recovery of a polyphonic history, a new way of belonging to India and to modernity – a “re-Enlightenment” that can combine the non-secular and equality.

Contemporary Indian literature also counters the sanitizing political recuperation of Buddhism to expose and foreground its radicalism and humanism. To both dalit and non-dalit writers, what also seems particularly significant in the Buddhist tradition is its spirit of quest and restless personal experimentalism, its resistance to an un-equal, ritualized and hierarchical system of values, its ethics of compassion and inclusion, but also its expression of sorrow, the multivocal diversity and singularity of human suffering.

### **Reading of a sample from her work by writer Sunny Singh, followed by discussion**

Sunny Singh is an Indian writer, currently based in London where she teaches creative writing at London Metropolitan University. The reading will center around the theme of the panel and be followed by discussion with all panelists.

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