

Report on One-Day Symposium 'Comparative Literature in the 21st Century'

The symposium titled 'Comparative Literature in the 21st Century: Theory and Praxis' which was scheduled on 22 September 2017 served as a precursor to varieties of engagements with comparative literature programs, to be organized under the aegis of Jain University mediated by Dr. Mythili P Rao, Director, School of Humanities and Social Sciences and Dean of Languages, Jain University. Professor E V Ramakrishnan Member of the Executive Council of International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) and Vice President of Comparative Literature Association of India (CLAI) opened the symposium with the keynote address followed by Professor Chandra Mohan, Professor Ipshitha Chanda, and Dr.Sushumna Kannan

The theme of the symposium was set to:

Compare worldviews through literature/ literature(s)/ writings (derivative formulations to be critiqued) that are in circulation across the world that mediate rethinking the world hitherto held 'one and equal'. Is World Literature an 'entrepreneurial, bulimic drive to anthologize and curricularize the world's cultural resources?' Do such exercises hierarchize Anglo/American master-languages, narratives? Do attempts to mediate cultural differences through translation, papering over differences, privilege dominant languages, literature, and cultures making it palatable to the Anglo-American tradition, with its emphasis on common sense and 'ordinary language'? Does globalization in the 21st century more than ever before invest responsibilities on preserving the specificity of untranslatable words/worlds, drawing one's attention to the (in)visibility of translation, transduction, the politics of what is (un)translatable and so on? Is the practice of comparative reading in the 21st century analogous to treading between translatability and untranslatability, universality and particularity, cosmopolitanism and localism?

The symposium opened with the welcome address delivered by the Pro Vice Chancellor of the University Prof. Sandeep Shastri that set the tone of the symposium through his reflections on 'texts', 'contexts', 'writing' and the 'world'.

Prof. EV Ramakrishnan through the course of the keynote address began conversations around practices and engagement with comparing writings/literature in the Indian context, comparing worldviews, knowledge production viz-a-viz the act of writing in regional contexts with the advent of modernity. He analyzed literary experiences across regions as a trope to build on comparative experiences of literature in the regional context, through intervening Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit and varieties of cultural influences that molded modern regional varieties of languages. It is simplistic therefore he noted to assume that homogenized, monolithic experiences are at work while comparing texts in regional contexts. Drawing on the advent of reading in the Malayalam context, focusing attention on books in print, looking into questions of accessibility, to knowledge produced in the printed form in the Malayalam context, drawing extensively on writing in the regional context he revisits the advent of 'print', as fashioning knowledge production that determined multiple subjectivities across regions through varied experiences. He enquired into how science and technology (with the invention as he notes of the compass, print, and gun) alerted the nature of knowledge production in the west. This revolutionary, monolithic nature of knowledge production has inevitably resulted in cultural marginalization even erasure of, to draw on examples, Arabic, Persian and to a large extent Sanskrit that had contributed towards formulating modern standardized language varieties in the regional context. The past in which case is being reconstructed through various fragments of the present, multiple pasts vying with each other for legitimacy. Drawing references to the role of colonial administration in the production of India as an object of knowledge in the 18th century evolution of modernity he reflects on how Persian and Arabic before Sanskrit gets replaced by English are participant in molding Indian cultural histories.

Enquiring into the marginalised identities of Persian and Arabic in the Modern Indian context at present, its contributions towards the formulation of Modern Indian languages being erased, he emphasised on how enlightenment treatises came to India through Persian, not English, therefore the significance of these languages of late being consciously marginalised because of its 'allegedly repugnant Muslim' associations. Such exclusions according to the speaker stand testimony to cultural histories being silenced through Eurocentric knowledge production. To understand how Modernity enters Malayalam, Tamil or Gujarathi, uniform or normative constructs of regional experiences as pan Indian needs to be unpacked to facilitate comparison.

Prof EV Ramakrishnan formulated his arguments around translation as a significant comparative strategy drawing on the translation of a Dutch novel called *Akbar* into Malayalam, the translation is one of the focal points around which comparisons begin. With suggestions that comparative literature in India needed to inquire into the emergence of modern regional language varieties, he held that the trajectories of Modern Indian Literature have been different with inevitable common elements or phases like the postcolonial.

Prof Chandra Mohan through his talk titled *Comparative Literature: Multiple Rhythms* outlined how the trajectory of world literature crosses paths with Comparative Literature, enlarging the scope of Comparative Literature. Through drawing on Mathew Arnold he illustrates what it is like to compare, comparative Literature being the kernel of literary studies. Defining comparative literature as Henry Demak formulates it, he drew on theories of interdisciplinarity namely 'centripetal' and the 'centrifugal' spirit that opens up interdisciplinary practices. Under the aegis of Comparative Literature, the study of writings become progressively interdisciplinary and inter-literary. Literature moves in this attempt beyond its immediate boundaries, its myopic specifications beyond paralytic isolation. His concluding remarks drew on how one was indebted to the west for the proliferation of interdisciplinary scholarship. He illustrated how literature integrates other disciplines into its ambit of inquiry.

Drawing on Vishnu Nagar's *Ishwar ki kahaniyan* Prof Ipshitha Chanda reflected on the plurality of human existence. Through her paper titled *Comparative Literature and the ethics of Plurality*, she illustrated the usefulness of plurality, the basis on which the discipline of Comparative Literature stands and the ethics that derives from it, the plurality being the focus of self-reflexivity. She proposed that according to the doctrine of अनेकान्तवाद, no reality, metaphysical or philosophical position can be true if asserted without conditions. For a metaphysical proposition to be true it must be subject to one or more conditions. Every standpoint in which case can only claim partial understanding of reality nevertheless reinforcing possibilities of dialogue with the 'other'. She draws on the construct of truth as uniquely experienced though its structure is universal. According to her arguments the truth of our world is a common, co-constituted shared truth, unique and universal, relational and situational. The idea of the world is one of being with, सहित from which the word साहित्य is derived. Language is a way of being with, a relation through language with the world that literature fetches us. Language is the medium of inter-subjectivity, one's relational being in the world. Difference is the object of the study of comparative literature, which brings forth questions of ethics, forging the possibility of a relationship with the world. She further enunciated that if one had a relation with the world, the basis of that relationship is what defines questions of ethics. Her proposal at that point in time was to evaluate the renewal of the fundamental commitment of comparative literature to difference, without which the act of comparison did not make sense. According to her, in the world view that made the discipline of comparative literature possible, was the acceptance of relational existence. She endorses that a relation of perception, of encounter, of imagination with the 'other' be established. She reinforced the notion that it is this acceptance of relational existence, living, not being shut off within one's own mind or body, but among and with the minds and bodies, selves and egos of others that

comparison becomes possible, the philosophy of अनेकान्तवाद provides the foundation for this relational world view by proposing an ethics that fosters and encourages plurality.

The symposium concluded with a session on Digital Humanities by Dr. Sushumna Kannan

This session explored the politics of virtual society that claims to make the world's information "universally accessible and useful". While critical skills of intervening into writings are replaced by new skills required at the time of data, the session focused on debates around how literature becomes data, approaches and research acumen exclusively digital to writings. If 'Digital Humanities' is 'the next big thing in a long time', what are the implications of digitization in the 21st century? What are the ramifications in its attempt to rephrase questions of social, cultural and political import, making them more and more about infrastructure, of turning information into data? Is it merely a complex way of storing and accessing knowledge? Does the act of archiving pose ethical problems? Does it suggest violence of epistemology?

The session on digital humanities attempted to evaluate these questions.

The symposium closed with its attempt to conjecture questions of 'Linearity', 'Simultaneity', the west in the world, questions of marginality and translation in the global times.