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Introduction to New Work in Comparative Indian Literatures and Cultures

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"Introduction to *New Work in Comparative Indian Literatures and Cultures*"
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Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.2 (2012)
Thematic Issue ***New Work in Comparative Indian Literatures and Cultures***
Ed. Mohan G. Ramanan and Tutun Mukherjee
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/>

Introduction to *New Work in Comparative Indian Literatures and Cultures*

Mohan G. RAMANAN and Tutun MUKERHJEE,

For the thematic issue *New Work in Comparative Indian Literatures and Cultures* 14.2 (2012) of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* — following a widely distributed call for papers — we selected new work about literatures in Indian languages by scholars in India, as well as worldwide. We paid close attention to work in the comparative and contextual perspective within the widest definition of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of comparative cultural studies as stated in the aims and objectives of the journal. The articles in the journal's thematic issue at hand contain a range of work with regard to genre and period. *New Work in Comparative Indian Literatures and Cultures* contains the following articles:

"Africa and India in the Novels of Dai and Emecheta" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/2> by Debarshi Prasad Nath and Juri Dutta. They discuss the work of two writers belonging to different continents, India and Nigeria. Interestingly, the novels of the two writers Dutta is analyzing — Lummer Dai and Buchi Emecheta —never heard of each other. Both novels are based on the custom of bride price, both writers speak out against the stifling rigidity of traditional customs, and uphold aspects of modernity in languages other than their native tongues. At the same time, both writers affirm the sanctity of the traditional institutions and customs. Emecheta relates her novel through the woman's voice and describes the limited choices available for her protagonist against the overarching presence of the traditional institutions. Dai's novel, on the other hand, presents a more optimistic picture regarding the possibility of change through his protagonist who successfully overcomes the immediate obstacles on her way to self-fulfillment.

"The Idea of England in Eighteenth-century Indian Travel Writing" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/3> by Amrita Satapathy who discusses how Dean Mahomed's 1794 *The Travels of Dean Mahomed* maps out territories of the mind of the colonizer and the colonized, how the narrative redefines contours of two diverse communities and cultures, and determines forms of cultural representations. Mahomed's *Travels* presented for the first time the idea of England from an Indian immigrant's point of view and altered the prejudiced outlook of early Western travel writings about the East. Mahomed's narrative opened an alternative vista for the wide-eyed Easterner of the world of the West and exposed a life less ordinary lived by inhabitants of Cork,

Brighton, and London. Satapathy argues that Mahomed's text is not a reductive account of England; rather, it reduces the colossal idea of England as imagined by Indian writers at the time.

"Shakespeare Reception in India and The Netherlands until the Early Twentieth Century" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/4> by Vikram Singh Thakur. Thakur locates Shakespeare in two different cultural contexts by looking at its reception in The Netherlands and India. His analysis is based on the fact that Shakespeare was a foreign playwright to both cultures yet both have gradually assimilated his works into their respective cultures and made him, probably, the most performed foreign playwright since the 1870s. Thakur aims at understanding how the reception of a work in different cultures is mediated by various social, cultural, historical, and ideological sieves through which the work gets filtered and reaches the target audience.

"Ancient Hindu Society and Eliot's Ideal Christian Society" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/5> by Anita Bhela. Bhela examines the influence of Hindu thought and Hindu philosophy on T.S. Eliot's critical writings. In *The Idea of a Christian Society* Eliot gives a hypothetical account of an ideal society that would contribute towards the well-being of all its members, while in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* he enumerates the essential conditions needed for the growth and survival of culture. Bhela argues that religion and culture were inseparably interrelated in Eliot's mind. She then traces similarities in the concepts of family, culture, and religion as expressed in Eliot's account of his hypothetical Christian society and ancient Hindu society to show that Eliot's concept of an ideal Christian society comes astonishingly close to the ideal of Hindu society as it existed in ancient times.

"Elements of Hinduism in Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/6> by Corinne M. Ehrfurth who explores how Hindu tenets in the *Bhagavad-gītā* continue to provide a didactic framework that inspires contemporary Indian literature. Ehrfurth highlights the similarities between characters, consumed with doubt and seeking understanding, in the ancient Indian text and Vikram Chandra's novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* where protagonists represent the diversity and complexity of Hinduism to a global audience. In examining how the novel's protagonists handle dilemmas, Ehrfurth presents Chandra's novel as illuminating how healthy and destructive actions affect one's ability of achieving the peaceful resolve found in the *Bhagavad-gītā*.

"History and Politics in Parthasarathy's Play *Aurangzeb*" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/7> by Shubh Brat Sarkar who analyzes the use of history in a dramatic text, the underlying politics and ideology of a literary product, and the modes by which the materials are shaped through dramaturgy. The name Aurangzeb, the title of the play, has a strong presence in history textbooks and has perhaps become an integral part of a grand historical, "Indian" nationalist discourse. In the play multiple contradictions co-exist and find new projections in translations and theater adaptations in different historical contexts. Indira Parthasarthy's 1974 play is based on events leading to the War of Succession among the heirs of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and it offers a critique of the one-nation, one-language, one-religion theory. Sarkar's analysis explores how the theme remained relevant in Parthasarthy's play.

"World Literature and the Case of Joyce, Rao, and Borges" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/8> by Bhavya Tiwari. Tiwari discusses the work of James Joyce and poses the question why Joyce is considered an important figure in Latin America and South Asia. Have Indian languages (e.g., Bengali and Hindi) responded differently to Joycean aesthetics? If yes, can there be political reasons behind this difference? Joyce's own position in Europe as a modernist aesthetician complicates his reception in the "periphery," India and Latin America. Hence, Tiwari queries as to what happens when Joyce's texts are received on two different continents. In this context, Tiwari discusses Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), and Jorge Luis Borges's texts with regard to their linguistic innovations and word play. Tiwari's comparative and contextual analysis is meant to illustrate the relevance of comparative cultural study.

"Duality of Illusion and Reality in Desai's *In Custody*" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/9> by Narinder K. Sharma who analyses Anita Desai's internal confrontation of choices. In the novel, Desai's narration offers various options at every step and the author suggests that it becomes difficult to decide what actually should be done. The attempt is to personalize impersonal time and space thereby brings it into the domain of conflicting choices signifying an existential desire to manifest freedom. Going a step further, it can be deciphered that the individual desires to make an ideal choice to experience "authenticity"; however, the desire of making an ideal choice results in the creation of psychic tension. Thus, for Desai, the subject often feels a psychic pull which signifies a "lack," a "void," or a possibility of something ideal left out or missed. In

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Sharma's analysis of *In Custody* the contradiction that splits an individual apart as subjective reflection takes place with relation to making an existential choice.

"Women's Worlds in the Novels of Kandukuri and Gilman" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/10> by Suneetha Rani who discusses Veeresalingam Kandukuri's *Satyaraja Poorvadesayatralu* (Satyaraja's Travel to the Distant Lands) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland.* While the novels were published in two different contexts — one in pre-independence India and the other in pre-World War I in the U.S., one in Telugu and the other in English, one by a man and the other by a woman — there is an interesting connecting thread that brings them together. Both were satires on the contemporary male chauvinistic world. While the Telugu novel pleads for a better treatment of upper-caste Indian women, the US-American novel looks hopefully towards an ideal world where men do not exist. Rani discusses the strengths and weaknesses of both novels while at the same time her analysis suggests the relevance of both authors' work today.

"The Indian Diaspora and Reading Desai, Mukherjee, Gupta, and Lahiri" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/11> by Amit Shankar Saha. Saha posits that displacement produces a point of encounter between the alien and authority. Saha analyses aspects of (im)migration in texts about the Indian diaspora: if the host society is intolerant then it is through reactionary self-fashioning that the (im)migrant asserts his/her ethnicity as a defensive mechanism to rescue self-respect. However, while the host society is welcoming, it does not guarantee ready assimilation because there is always the question of severing the (im)migrants ties with his/her home land. (Im)migrants start living in two worlds simultaneously by making adjustments. They become transnationals who attempt to define their identities in terms of their point of origin and their destination followed by a second phase where ethnicity is reasserted, although this time not as a reaction against a hostile society but as displeasure against themselves. Ultimately, in the third phase, there is an understanding of how cultures enrich and an acceptance of hybrid existence becomes possible.

"Redefinitions of India and Individuality in Adiga's *The White Tiger*" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/12> by Kathleen Waller who discusses Indian individualism as being supported by a democratic and secular society, but also stymied by traditions and socioeconomic realities which keep most of its people living in poverty. In *The White Tiger*, Adiga challenges Indian culture to create a society in which individuals are truly free. Waller argues that the relevance of Adiga's novel is that it is social structure and practices of hierarchy keep many people in the lower classes of Indian society and that this state of affairs is counter productive. Instead, Adiga's novel suggests that the situation of India's social structure and its entrenched hierarchy would have to be looked at and that through the erasure of constraint by society's class hierarchy Indian society could transform itself.

And "Gender Anxiety and Contemporary Indian Popular Fiction" <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/13> by Elen Turner who discusses two examples of Indian "popular literature" which reflect contemporary Indian middle-class anxieties surrounding globalization and social change. The recent proliferation of foreign business process outsourcing companies in India has changed the financial and lifestyle opportunities available to young, urban Indians. While sociological and ethnographic studies have found that workers embrace what they perceive to be westernized lifestyles, the novels under discussion present a more nuanced picture. Chetan Bhagat's *One Night at the Call Centre* (2005) and Shruti Saxena's *Stilettos in the Boardroom* (2010) demonstrate that young workers embrace and enjoy the freedom accorded them by working in outsourced companies. The texts also show that a tension exists between individualism and traditional social and familial practices.

We hope scholars working in whatever discipline or field will read and utilize thought expressed in the articles. We thank the editor of the journal, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, for his interest expressed in our endeavor, as well as the anonymous reviewers of the articles for their comments to improve the articles.

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