

Report on the 9th Biennial Conference of the Comparative Literature Association of India

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### Recommended Citation

Saraf, Babli Moitra. "Report on the 9th Biennial Conference of the Comparative Literature Association of India." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.2 (2009): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1477>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1477)

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**Volume 11 Issue 2 (June 2009) Article 15**  
**Babli Moitra Saraf,**

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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss2/14>>

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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.2 (2009)**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss2/>>

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**Abstract:** In her article "Report on the 9th Biennial Conference of the Comparative Literature Association of India" Babli Moitra Saraf presents her perception of the intellectual trajectories of the conference and discusses a number of selected papers read. The conference in the main addressed two issues: the institutional status of Comparative Literature and Comparative Literature as an academic discipline. A close third was the agenda of Comparative Literature to construct a World Literature.

## **Babli Moitra SARAF**

### **Report on the 9th Biennial Conference of the Comparative Literature Association of India**

The 9th biennial conference of CLAI: Comparative Literature Association of India <<http://clai.in/>> was at the University of Hyderabad 28-32 January 2009 with the theme *Diverse Harmonies: Literary and Cultural Confluences*. It was organized by the University of Hyderabad Centre for Comparative Literature, the Hyderabad English and the Foreign Languages University (EFLU), and co-sponsored by the Sahitya Akademi, the Mysore Central Institute of Indian Languages, and the Hyderabad Goethe Zentrum. The conference also hosted the Third Sisir Kumar Das Memorial Lecture. The concept note of the conference stated that the "conference is planned as a fusion event to map and celebrate the meeting of literatures and cultures to foster better understanding of both the bonds that bind and the differences that must be respected." The political significance of this theme may not be underestimated in South Asia in 2009, particularly in India where social polity stands precariously on the edge of collapse due to divisive social formations, with differences and divergences becoming increasingly difficult to contain, including so politically.

If comparatists were looking for broad definitional categories traditionally and theoretically suited to their discipline, or enthusiasts of World Literature for common goals and methodologies, the CLAI Conference 2009 established that the divisive experience and discourses of colonialism are still dominant and relevant, issues of the nation-state are yet unresolved and are still being addressed, and in more region and culture specific ways than ever. Micro histories and ethnic identities within the Indian nation-state are emerging, encouraged and enabled by what is sometimes the new found literacy of first generation literates, from margins, gaps, interstices, and every imaginable crevice that this vast, varied, pluralistic, poor, and problematically democratic nation can pour out in an effort to be heard. This polyphony, or these "diverse harmonies" sent out a common refrain. The playing field is not even and, indeed, has become over recent times even more ridden with the pitfalls of inequality. Peoples are seeking spaces to articulate private oppression and community anguish and nations are still smarting under histories of exploitation from within and without and staring in the face of a present marked by both terrorism and fear, both understood not only as global phenomena (as in post 9/11), but also in the specific lived realities of individuals and communities in India and other parts of the globe. Also, that the discourse of centers and peripheries was still relevant, indeed urgent, and cultural articulation and intellectual life would have to engage with these. So while the 'center' debates about whether a World Literature is possible and if Comparative Literature is relevant and whether it can survive the onslaught of overlapping disciplines, the conference in the 'periphery' proved that India was unto itself the world, with its own centers and peripheries wherein texts would be and are being retrieved, created and compared and that this could continue eternally because of the seemingly inexhaustible nature of the unimaginably vast store of yet untapped sources and resources, both material and imaginative. Even the possibility of a "national literature" seemed like a vanishing prospect, constructed as the category is on notions of homogeneity to which the history and experience of this nation-state has given the lie.

Be that as it may, the conference statement opened up a vast area and had the potential of becoming all things to all people. There is really no "outsider" to comparative literature in India. For the conference demonstrated that India was the site of the comparative. Here single language literatures do not function in single language cultures and thus the comparative is axiomatic. Indeed, the study of foreign single literatures such as English is rendered still more problematic in the post-colonial situation as it can function only comparatively. I had, however, just recruited myself to a new discipline about which I often asked myself the naïve questions I was too hesitant to voice so as not to seem an ignoramus, questions of the kind "what is being compared with what here?" in the confrontation of texts across genres, a poem and a painting, a play and a novel, a book and its cinematic representation, apprehensive of the pitfalls of ignoring the separate tools of analysis that each genre possessed and had developed or how those analytical tools and methodologies of comparative literature differed from those of literary studies, literary theory or translation studies? I have since felt reassured having learnt that the "permanent crisis of Comparative Literature" -- as Margaret R. Higonnet reiterates

quoting Ulrich Weisstein -- is "asking again and again, 'What is to be compared with what, by whom, to what end and under what conditions?'" (1).

The conference theme opened up the field to a wide range of interpretation and was expectedly elaborated in diverse ways akin to what is suggested by Haun Saussy in his above mentioned ACLA: American Comparative Literature Association report -- following the 1995 Bernheimer report *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* -- on the situation of the discipline in the U.S.:

the notion of confluence hopes to complicate the workings of unilateral influence and power paradigms and engage with the study of relations, literary and cultural flows, and the exchange of ideas. The effort is not to forge any fictive unity among people, societies and nations, but to understand the thrilling harmony of diverse melodies that meeting of cultures can generate. The sub-themes include: 1. Forms, genres, themes; 2. Literary trends and movements; 3. Cultural interaction and exchange; 4. Migration and border-crossings; 5. Translation; 6. Travel writing; 7. Histories and genealogies; 8. Folklore; 9. Literatures of the marginalized; 10. Philosophy and religion. (6)

Comparative literature, in comprehending all of the above, presented itself as a domain undifferentiated from literature and literary studies, cultural studies, the social sciences, and all fields of the humanities included. Saussy had celebrated the extension of the comparative mode of analysis into the humanities and social sciences in general as a joyless triumph for the discipline of Comparative Literature (2). One begins to understand why. The panels in the parallel sessions were as diverse as the topics of the presentations. On day one, there were nine parallel sessions of six to nine papers each: Dalit and Adivasi Studies, Subaltern Politics, Translation and Language, Theatre Studies, Intertextuality, Writing Women, Women Writing, Other Margins, Popular Culture, Comparative Studies. On day two, eight sessions of six papers each, with Other Literatures, Travel, Literature and Culture, ( two parallel sessions), added to Dalit and Adivasi Studies, Women's Writing, Other Margins, and a dedicated session for papers presented by students of EFLU. On day three, the nine sessions of eight papers each, added Poetry (two parallel sessions), Popular Culture, Religion, and EFLU papers in Hindi. How does one choose from 191 papers to be presented over three days in a total time of seven and some hours, transition time included? There was so much wasted effort in evidence because of the inclusion of too many papers to be presented in too little time. This is the trend globally in large conferences which then become mere "events" rather than a space to listen and talk. There are innumerable parallel sessions to "accommodate" as many as possible, the maximum consumption in the minimum possible time. The justification is a self-referential, "it happens everywhere," boding despair in those writing for it and those wanting to listen. Inordinately skewed in favor of "names" and cronyism, these events are often littered with mediocre and lack-lustre talks during prime slots, while the flashes of brilliance of novel ideas and path-breaking research are snuffed out in the tedium of the wait for them.

The conference in the main addressed two issues: the institutional status of Comparative Literature and Comparative Literature as an academic discipline. A close third was the agenda of Comparative Literature to construct a World Literature. The Sisir Kumar Das Memorial lecture delivered by Amiya Dev brought all three strands together. Dev recalled nostalgically the time when Comparative Literature meant reading texts, in original and in translation, and savoring them to discover other worlds, rather than be bogged down by methodologies. He reminded us of Goethe and Tagore's exhortation to "read" other literatures as a fundamental position of Comparative Literature. In emphasizing the discipline implied the act of reading, along with the desirable language competencies with which a comparatist should be equipped, Dev lamented the lack of enough of it, for "contours should emerge only when there is a need." Touching on the life, thoughts, and works of self-effacing Das, he led the audience through the milestones of development of the theory and practice of Comparative Literature in Europe, from the scientism of a positivist persuasion of the early practitioners through the deterministic contours of the Europeans, through the "crisis" examined by the two Rene-s, and the widening of the scope of Comparative Literature by East Europe (affinity studies, literature and other arts), and the USA (topoi, culture specific studies), to the current state of Comparative Literature. He made an important distinction between translation and influence interrogating both categories, asking whether, translation was influence or imitation. He problematized the notion of the reception of a text by expanding its historical moment across centuries emphasizing the autonomy of texts and their abil-

ity to transcend their historical contexts, even though the act of reading involved not only texts but also contexts.

Dev's talk brought inadvertently to the forefront the comparatist's dilemma: the disciplinary compulsion to look for broad contours and the equally compelling necessity -- particularly in the post-colonial situation -- to regard the specifics. Having begun his talk with the reaffirmation of faith in and commitment to Comparative Literature, Dev did not quite confront the above contradiction in terms of the academic philosophy of the discipline or define its "tools of the trade" in a changed global academic workplace. Indeed, he settled the issue of nomenclature declaring that the use of "comparative" was justified because its domain involved more than one literature. He defined World Literature as the "sum total of texts available to me at this moment, translations included," adding that this definition would change according to subject position. World Literature is not one and the same everywhere: "If it were so, there would be no need of Comparative Literature." His argument seemed to fold back on itself begging the question, what IS, then, World Literature and what is Comparative Literature? Perhaps scholars in the discipline need to review how comparative literature may be realized, whether in the rigors of methodology and the use of analytical tools, or across the evolution of a comparative poetics. We recall the Bernheimer Report on Standards 1993 (Bernheimer, *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*). We are also reminded of Jonathan Culler's observations and reservations in this regard so significant for the definition and destiny of the discipline. He discussed the 2004 Report on Standards to say that since literary studies had expanded its domain to cover what was once traditionally Comparative Literature, the latter could and should shed that responsibility and devote itself to developing its Poetics, of course in the light of a changed global scenario (85-97). In my view, in spite of Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek's manifesto of Comparative Literature and its ten "General Principles," the issues remain unresolved (see *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application; "From Comparative Literature"*). Not surprisingly therefore, there was some anxiety among participants of the conference about the challenges to the discipline of Comparative Literature and consequently about securing its future at institutions of higher learning.

It was befitting, then, that the first keynote speaker, Tötösy de Zepetnek, referring -- among others -- to Chakravorty Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* and her views on and possibilities of the discipline, interrogated ways in which Comparative Literature could be resuscitated in the university as defined in his various publications, most recently in the collected volume *Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies* (I should like to note here that the second keynote speaker of the conference, David Damrosch -- one of the prominent English-language proponents of the concept of World Literature, see, e.g., his *What Is World Literature?* -- was not able to attend to the regret of the participants). Taking a pragmatic approach, Tötösy de Zepetnek emphasized that unless there were funds and positions in Comparative Literature and departments named "Comparative Literature," it would wither away as a discipline in academic institutions despite the euphoria expressed by, for example, Haun Saussy, because the designation "comparative literature" is symbolic capital and without institutional presence the discipline is compromised. In restating his understanding of the fundamentals of the discipline, Tötösy de Zepetnek reiterated the importance of the opening of the discipline to the challenges of a post-colonial world. Tötösy de Zepetnek made an important qualification about the crisis of Comparative literature as an academic discipline by suggesting that the discipline is clearly shrinking and constricting in the "centre" (Europe and the U.S.), while this is not the case on the "periphery" (i.e., Latin America, China, India, etc., but even within the European periphery such as Spain, Portugal, Greece, etc.) and thus we should consider to relocate the centre in the periphery, an inversion which becomes possible only when the hierarchical notions underlying the centre-periphery model are dismantled.

David Damrosch -- in the abstract of his keynote speech -- wrote that "there was a lot of Indian-literature-based comparative studies in India, surprisingly few American-lit-based ones in the USA" and that he would speak about the state of World Literature. In his plenary talk Harish Trivedi expressed his disappointment about the non-appearance of Damrosch because he had designed his talk as a riposte to Damrosch's claim that World Literature was "differently constructed in different locales." Trivedi challenged the assumption of egalitarianism in the construction of a World Literature through an examination of the concern in four recent books published in the USA. Pascale Casanova's

*The World Republic of Letters*, Emily S. Apter's *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature*, Wai Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents: American Literature through Deep Time*, and Karen Newman's *Culture Capitals: Early Modern London and Paris*. Reading and analyzing the said texts, Trivedi demonstrated how easily the "World" is rendered and constructed by local engagements and anxieties and mediated by urgent political polemics and polarization. Trivedi may be charged with a selection deliberately skewed in favor of his argument, but it was an important intervention recalling that canon formation is an ideologically charged activity in a hegemonical and non-equitable global dispensation. His selection also demonstrated that for many in the metropolitan centers the boundaries of the world stopped at their national frontiers and national concerns. The tendency within the U.S. academe, to regard 9/11 as a paradigm shift was an example. We observe that the continued preoccupation with the notion of a World Literature is predominantly a centrist concern. If the destination of Comparative Literature is the construction of a World Literature, it is not without its political implications in the interplay of power relations in a hopelessly unequal and divided world.

Next, I discuss selected papers from the conference. Christopher Larkosh interrogated the concept of "transculturation" understood as "flow of cultural materials in the original language and in translation" by suggesting that these not only "shape but also actually limit at times the way we organize our view of the world and its cultures." Juxtaposing the works of Amartya Sen and R.K. Narayan with that of recent writers -- the Pakistani Maniza Naqvi and the Nepali Samrat Upadhyaya -- Larkosh explored how they engage with the crisis of their own worlds, which in the globalized scenario of both economics and terror, touch all of us, putting "tomorrow" in doubt. Larkosh approached the notion of global connectedness going beyond literature, through contemporary politics and the global crisis of "relative security," a complacency that the North may perhaps be living with. Larkosh posits the imperative of understanding the South-South "translation" across a greater engagement with languages of minority groups within academic institutions by going beyond the politics of language education with its basis in numbers. Christine Everett's presentation reinforced Larkosh's concept of South-South communication demonstrating the many ways in which comparison may be problematized in translation across the politics of language. Examining the Hindi and English translations of Quratullain Hyder's short story in Urdu, translated by the author herself, Everett showed the problematic internal exchanges of the three languages which have charted the trajectory of at least three nations on the Indian subcontinent. The presentation was further layered by the fact that it was an "outsider" rendition admirably done, and spoke of the profundity of the "immersion" that Everett had undergone in the cultural nuances of not only the two North Indian languages, but also the ways in which English is "read," a rigor rare in the local academics in the regions speaking these languages, where so much of the context is taken for granted.

Between the opinions about the "death of the discipline" and the possibilities for its reinvention were located the diverse harmonies promised by the theme of the conference. There were some oft-repeated discussions on the purist notions of both literature and its evaluation so often patronized by Indologists of the Orientalist bent. There was irony in the fact that such positions be taken in Hyderabad, a state which in its political and social engineering has challenged the hegemony of dominant caste groups as a modern Indian democracy. Here, particularly, more than elsewhere, the Indian could not be defined as the upper caste Hindu and only the Sanskritic projected as "Indian." Indeed, nineteenth-century projects around the emergence of regional language and identity politics, literature and criticism were a constant refrain in the numerous presentations heard at the conference. For example, Sachidanandan Mohanty explored in his paper the case of Orissa through the writings of Radhanath Ray (1848-1908) and asserted that Comparative literature intervened to make "the regional imaginary in colonial India" through a series of "border crossing acts" such as translation and travel writing. This, he argued "disproves the cultural insularity [of Comparative Literature] and the myth that Comparative Literature is inimical to cultural particularism." Papers in the main clustered around the concepts of confluence and fusion and expanded to include a wide spectrum of issues. They ranged from micro studies such as the significance of Baladeva worship in Orissa to globally encompassing themes like "The Social Relevance of the Study of Culture and Literature: Intercultural Communication and Sustainable Humanities" referred to above as the first keynote talk. Probal Ray Choudhury presented a little known piece of significant historical movement, that of the Savarna fami-



ly into pre-modern Bengal and their contribution to the region's cultural evolution and literary development, research which would be a factor in future evaluations of medieval literary production in Bengal. Voices from the margins included the queer, the dalit, the tribal, and of course the issue of women, particularly of those doubly marginalized by their location within marginalized groups.

However, the real crisis of Comparative Literature seems to lie in the existence of the incomparable. D. Venkat Rao's presentation "Incomparable Iterabilities" was a thought provoking interrogation of the concept of comparativity as a "cultural universal." He argued that Eurocentric models of comparison cannot explain or accommodate the kind of texts produced by oralities or mnemonic cultures: "The recent metropolitan (ACLA/BCLA) debates about the 'birth,' 'death,' and 'rebirth' of Comparative Literature remain within the Anglo-American orbit" because they rely only on European "epistemic orientation" and "are yet to engage with the problematic of impossible epistemic comparativity." Post-colonial countries such as India are caught in the *aporia* of a conceptual heritage and a-conceptual cultures of memory. The challenge is to respond to this *aporia* and render responsibility to the cultures of memory from the "locations of our activity," identified by Rao as the university where one may unravel the discourse and the institution [humanities at the university], "where I cannot reduce my own complicity with this situation." Further, Rao examined the heterogeneous Sanskrit tradition and its "non-standardized" forms of reflection and noted the conspicuous absence of any comparative imperative. What one finds in the Indic context is the utterly radical divergence of formations/articulations of reflection/expression in diverse languages. One is confronted with this radical diversity of idiom and it is difficult to come across a single term that had gained a conceptual stability and cultural normativity in such diverse compositions. Rao's presentation brought together different strands of his on-going work such as classroom teaching and its pedagogical contexts in concept and method, questions of heritage, postcolonial predicament, and the poverty of approaches to the premodern. The fundamental question he raised for all academics was, "how do and how can we [i.e., trained as literary and culture scholars functioning in a political / philosophical organization called the university] begin to re-turn and re-examine cultural/reflective sources beyond their enframings in the last two centuries?" To pursue this, every semester a different course is designed and the problems are explored. Interestingly, his current classroom project, *Kalila*, aims to study the trajectory of the Panchatantra as it moves through history, geographies, cultures, and diverse articulations.

Pursuing the possibility of alternative paradigms, at least three papers in the conference revisited pre-modern India to examine the nature of "confluence." T.S. Satyanath, who teaches in the University of Delhi Department of Modern Indian Languages, has painstakingly put together a formidable database of medieval cultural texts, one which is growing as access by scholars is gained to the texts of the innumerable languages used in the regions in pre-modern India. He explored "the problematic of cultural confluence among divergent cultural traditions of India" through the "dynamics of pluralistic epistemologies" and suggests that the relationship between "canonical tradition (grammar), scripto-centric representations (writing culture), phono-centric representations (oral traditions) and body-centric representations (performing traditions)" share structural similarities and form part of a unifying discourse of literary culture through which communities sustain their own knowledge and are able to accommodate other diversities. In my own paper entitled "The Cultural Carnival of Medieval Bengal (1204-1757)" I discussed colonialism as another rupture in a series of ruptures which reconfigured the coordinates of cultural articulation and explored both the geographical site of confluence in the Bengal delta and the historical event of movements of populations that such a site permitted, including its occupation by the Turks and the prevalence of Persian as the court language for five hundred years. I concluded that performance was the site of the most significant confluence of memory, orality, genres, peoples, and cultural practice in the region, not only because it involved different castes/occupations and religious groups in its production, but also because it was the most significant mode of circulation and dissemination of texts in a pre-literacy culture. I argued for alternative approaches since critical evaluation of these products within nineteenth-century Eurocentric paradigms, which has been the dominant model of critical practice in India, would be unable to either retrieve or explain the mechanism or the dynamics of cultural production which depended on pluralities of social concerns and motives and gave the cultural production of the time its non sectarian, vernacular identity. Shagufta Shaheen discussed the encounter of Islam with pre-modern India to show how the unrestrained emer-

gence of a common language in West and North India, acceptable to all components of society, Hindavi which developed into Urdu, made the evolution of a shared cultural identity and synthesis possible. It was clear that the three papers revisiting history were trying to discover and understand the moment, mode and manner of the rupture that has polarized our society today.

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