

MUSINGS

[The DS Literature page team invited Professor Firdous Azim, Chairperson of BRAC University's Department of English and Humanities, to muse and then write on the very successful international conference she and her colleagues had organized on 18-19 May. What follows is her reflection on it.]

Redrawing Gender Boundaries in Literary Terrains

18th and 19th May 2017.

FIRDOUS AZIM

The connections between gender and literature have a long history. Looking only at English literature, we can trace them back to Mary Wollstonecraft's 1794 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Written in the aftermath of the French Revolution, that tome brought out the ideological underpinnings of literary representations. By the time we come to the early twentieth century, we see a host of writers and critics commenting on women writing and women as they were written about. Between Wollstonecraft's 18th century *Vindication* and Virginia Woolf's 1924 *A Room of One's Own*, English writing had spawned numerous women authors – poets and novelists – allowing for examinations of issues of love and romance, of sexuality, of the domestic sphere – of the 'woman question' in short.

As women were being drawn into the literary realm as a separate category in the west, questions of gender were also being put through critical lenses. Questions of class and race entered the discourse, complicating the gender terrain. Also, notions of the fluidity of gender and of identity further muddied waters, questioning the sex-gender divide, and viewing all identities as constructed and therefore subject to change. In the South Asian context, the notion of freedom and nationality was absolutely connected with the question of identity, and women's roles and the way the woman question was addressed in nationalist discourse formed the dominant concerns of feminist scholars. Such concerns had the effect of changing the way they were approaching literary texts. But as they began redrawing these two concepts – gender and literature – feminist scholars everywhere started looking at disciplinary boundaries, trying to bring the humanities and the social sciences closer, re-examining the methodologies that defined them, and working towards devising new methodologies, or cross-fertilizing old ones.

In the conference organized by the Department of English and Humanities at BRAC University or ENH at BRACU, my colleagues and I and participating scholars were interested in crossing other divides. While English departments have concentrated on the study

of literatures in English, the organizers of the conference tried to make it a bilingual one, with not only writings in Bengali being discussed, but having panels in both languages. Indeed, linguistic issues were part and parcel of the conference; for example, one of the plenary papers looked at the status of minority languages in India.

As the concept of literature is now going beyond the written to the spoken word, to performance, media of all kinds and to filmic representation, some of the scholars participating brought in issues relating to other mediums, especially film. In fact, one of the moderators commented on this tendency, and said that the organizers should have termed the conference 'cultural terrains'.

Amongst all these changes, there is a final change I would like to draw attention to. We organizers had designed the panels to combine young emerging scholars as well as older established ones. We were astounded at the number of abstracts we received from them. It was obvious to us that we now have a large number of young people entering the literary field. This can only be a good thing, as many minds set to work, and we work towards creating a rich and varied field for the cultivation of literary studies in the country.

But as organizers we were encouraged also by its regional and international dimensions. Our opening keynote speeches, for instance, were wonderful we thought, as they brought in contemporary concerns and merged them with established literary ones. The Chaucer scholar Professor Ruth Evans, of the University of St. Louis, concentrated on the concept of 'relatability' in the first of the key-note speeches. She began by talking about the prevalence of sexual assaults on women in campuses around the US. It is within these contexts such as Chaucer's has to be brought alive now. Peppering her talk with quotes from Chaucer, she showed that the point is to make the text speak, and to entuse students with the ways in which literature brings alive social issues.

Professor Niaz Zaman recounted her own story as a writer and Professor of English at the University of Dhaka.

Weaving together the personal and the professional, and her growth as a writer, Niaz Zaman showed how women have to traverse different spheres in order to establish themselves as well as to engender their disciplines. She also highlighted the issue of rape and assault on women, and commented on how important it is that the gender scholars/writers reflect these concerns in their teaching and writing. Her deliberations were especially interesting to the audience, as many of us had been part of the curriculum changes in English departments, either as students as our syllabi underwent immense changes in 90's, or as professors and academics involved in refashioning the way in which the discipline of literature was emerging out of its Leavisite stranglehold into a broader and more inclusive field then.

We were especially very happy to have Susie Tharu, from the University of Hyderabad, India, who is being featured separately on this page. I would like to say a few words about why we thought it was important that she ends the conference. She is somewhat of a pioneer in the field of women's studies in the region, as the very influential *Women Writing in India 600 BC to the Present* bears out. The two volumes came out in the 90's, marking a watershed in Indian and, in fact in South Asian, literary studies. Perhaps as interesting as the works collected in the two volumes, are the introductions to the researched sphere. The introductions piece out the thorny questions that have beset the sphere of feminist literary criticism, including the question of whether women write differently. There is no direct answer to this question. The stress now is on why women have been occluded from literary history, and on tracing the history of a particular manuscript to show how issues of sexual respectability pertain to how women are included into the "literary". As literature delves into spheres that are not commonly talked about – exploring unconscious desires, or protesting injustices—it is the literary space that gives women the opportunity to explore these spheres. And yet all the while, the spectre of women voicing

their dreams and aspirations is seen as subversive of dominant norms and ideologies. These submerged voices need to be re-excavated, as including these writings does indeed redraw the literary map, showing up the gaps in established literary spheres.

Listening to Professor Tharu I felt that all the old concerns of what happens to the literary space when we engender it is still relevant today, but has taken on such varied dimensions. Her own work has led her to excavating Dalit writing, and it reminded me of Shaheen Akhtar's anthology of women's writing in Bengal, - *Sati o Satantara* – during the compilation of which she felt inspired to add a third volume, concentrating solely on oral expression. The many forms of literary expression, the connections between orality and the written word – these are only some of the issues that emerged as we examined literary and gender connections.

I have tried to use this write-up to reflect on why we organizers had thought this to be a timely intervention in our field. The decision to intervene was based on a review of changes that had occurred in the 80's and 90's, and looking back at the last 25 years to understand where literary studies stands today. At that juncture, the stress had been on drawing bridges between the social, the cultural and the literary. We are perhaps at another critical juncture as the concept of gender keeps undergoing many reviews and changes, and while changes in technology and modes of expression open up newer avenues to explore. The oral, the pictorial and the written seem to be juxtaposed in new ways these days; exploring this brave new world is now the task of the literary scholar. And if the scholar is a woman, or if it's the question of gender that is being explored (whether by a woman or not!) – we need to be there with sharpened and exciting new critical and creative tools.

I do think it was an exciting conference, and a good time was had by all!

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POETRY



Places

BATOOL SARWAR

The intimate impersonality of my hotel room
Spurs my memory—
Hairbrushes, creams, lotions and books
Spread out in a place
Where tomorrow a stranger will sleep;
Will my imprint still linger in ghost-like reality
Within the four walls of this rented room?
As I ponder, there
Flares a fluid flame-like dance of images
Flickering flashbacks across time and space.

As neurons scramble to reassemble
Other rooms and houses and gardens
Now long gone to make room
For sterile skyscrapers blotting out the light,
I wonder
Does a young girl
Somewhere in a long forgotten over-grown garden,
Still smile with innocent rapture,
Her face turned upwards to drink in
The soul haunting beauty of sun drenched flowers?
Does a young woman somewhere still soar in ecstasy
At blue sky and green grass days
When love seemed eternal?
Does a young wife somewhere still plod
Across snow covered pavements in cheap ill fitting boots
Struggling to make sense of infidelity and motherhood and poverty?
Does a separated single woman somewhere still
Weep blood red ruby tears
Staring into the eyes of a confused child
Unable to understand
Why things fall apart?
Suspended in a strange limbo
Between past, present and future
A mature woman
Gazes with bittersweet detachment
At the scrolling tapestries of memory,
And carefully folds them in cedar-scented
Chests as trousseau for the girl
Born from the flesh of her flesh,
Before starting to contemplate
In some trepidation and a dawning wonder
What rooms she will inhabit,
In what worlds she will wander
In the last and final silent sleep.

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Thinking Beyond Boundaries: An Interview with Susie Tharu

SOHANA MANZOOR

Susie Tharu and K. Lalita are well-known in India and beyond for their path breaking publication *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*. Published by Feminist Press in 1990, the two-volume collection is a comprehensive representation of 2600 years of women's writing in India. Seemingly unattainable, Tharu and Lalita's project unearthed women writers from various parts of India, examining local and oral traditions, and recovering a magnificent array of writers and poets from forgotten pasts. This significant contribution to the history of women's writings reminiscent, in scope and achievement, of Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, works that recovered women writers from the Western tradition.

Susie Tharu visited Dhaka this past May as one of the keynote speakers at *Redrawing Gender Boundaries in Literary Terrains*, an international conference arranged by the Department of English and Humanities at BRAC University. In her keynote speech, she spoke of the various challenges and achievements of women writers and activists, but her focus is on the larger perspective: she wants women to make connections with the world and not deal only with the domestic sphere.

Tharu's more recent achievements include *Towards a Critical Medical Practice: Dilemmas of Medical Culture Today* (with Anand Zacariah and R. Srivatsan), 2009, and *No Alphabet in Sight*, 2011, a dossier of new dalit writing from Kerala and Tamil Nadu (with K. Satyanarayana). *The Exercise of Freedom: An Introduction to Dalit Writing* (with K. Satyanarayana) is another example of Tharu's groundbreaking efforts. The works in the later collection not only showcase the literature of a suppressed group of Indians, but also suggest how literary work can turn into social movements.

When I met her during the BRAC University conference, Susie Tharu's first



Susie Tharu

PHOTO: SOHANA MANZOOR

observation on Dhaka was the cleanliness of the public toilet she had seen while walking from BRAC Centre to BRAC University. She said, "Now I know that it is possible to keep them clean, but I rarely see any in India." The comment reflects her keen observation and interest in human behaviour; she certainly is not just a theorist or artist observing things from her ivory tower. No wonder she noticed the cleanliness of public toilets in Mohakhali and the fact that it was possible to keep them clean without making other humans carry excreta on their heads.

When I asked about her accomplishments as a teacher, writer, editor and activist, she smiled as she said, "All teachers write at some point of their lives. I do, too. As for the projects you mention of unearthing the women writers—well, there were also some others who wanted to do it. We just got together, and then other women and even some men joined in. It was a delightful project with some very dedicated people in it." She made it sound so simple; and yet the faraway look in her eyes was a tell-tale sign

perhaps of the constraints her team had to overcome, or some experiences that still strike a chord when she reminisces about the project.

"I wanted to be connected with a variety of things in my own world," she said with reference to dalit literature and how it came to acquire an identity of its own. As late as in 1979, dalits were refused a panel in a conference arranged by Kannada Sahitya Parishad. She condemned the caste system in India saying, "I am glad to see that it is not such a huge problem in Bangladesh." When told there is no caste system in Bangladesh, she shook her head, "That I don't believe. It is everywhere in some form or other." Suddenly, the image of a dehumanizing man-hole cleaner emerging from open sewer in a busy road near New Market loomed before my eyes and I became silent.

The other point of interest she referred to is the political culture of medical equipment. "Medicine has become politics, you know," she said with a wry smile. *Critical Medical Practice* opened an untrodden path for her

and many others. "It was an entire year of preparation. You surely cannot be unaware of the gigantic business enterprise the medical industry has become," she said. Then her expression turned grim as she went on to explain how doctors and medical students are part of a huge conspiracy. For many of them working through this project was an "aha moment," as they experienced flashes of an existential crisis. The original goal of this project was to look into the educational cost of a medical education. But instead, the study turned to examining the medical infrastructure providing the best for the rich, and a minimal service to the poor.

Our conversation turned finally to women's writing and sexuality in ancient and modern India. "Look at Khajuraho. Isn't it difficult to believe, or even conceive, some of the art forms depicted there? When right wing Hindu activists attack art scholars, we refer to those ancient examples. We have such a rich tradition. But then, we cannot go back; we have to live within today." She paused and added, "Repression and suppression are two different things. We have to learn to differentiate between them." As for feminism, she refuses to take the term as something static. "Feminism grows," she said, "from carefully thought-through and grounded 'feminist' interventions in specific contexts and in relation to specific issues." For Tharu, feminism is an unfinished project which developed in response to the challenges it had to confront. At this point, she turned to Bangalore Nagarathnama, the famed artist and courtesan of South India, and a figure given prominence in *Women's Writing in India*. She alluded to the patriarchal culture that incriminates such women for profanity and immorality because of their profession. Yet when it comes to art and literature, these same women often prove the pioneers, philosophers, and writers.

At one point Tharu said, "A text is so much more than just words on pages." She talked

about the miracle of meaning and how translation has become important in today's world. She calls it a "transaction" between different cultures. That is also when she said wistfully, "You know what you should do? You should write a history of the Indian subcontinent from the perspective of Bangladesh." I could tell that she was glimpsing an undiscovered terrain and wondering at hidden treasures lying underneath. But it is a legacy to be explored by us Bangladeshis. As an onlooker, Susie Tharu could only advise and suggest directions for scholarly work.

But even before embarking on such a project, we need to write a literary history of women in Bangladesh, I thought. Some of this important work has already been taken up by scholars like Firdous Azim and Perween Hasan, but there is much more that needs to be done to uncover long forgotten Bangladeshi women writers from the rubble of oblivion. There must have been women writers who are now lost to us merely because of lack of documentation. The story of the eighteenth-century Telegu poet Muddupalani and her work *Radhika Swantanam* that Tharu's uncovered is inspiring, as are the efforts of Bangalore Nagarathnama to revive that classical tale. Even though the latter lost a legal battle against the British Raj who accused her of spreading immoral tales, her book continued to be sold and read in secret.

When it was time to leave, I took in her white hair, bright eyes and warm, engaging smile. She turned to thank the student volunteers for bringing us tea. As she held out her hands to say goodbye I knew that it was not just Tharu's scholarly work, nor her fascinating projects as an activist, but her personality itself that has helped her shape contemporary South Asian feminist discourse.

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