

Reports

Indian Popular Fiction: Redefining the Canon – National Conference at Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi

A report by Indrani DasGupta

The Department of English, Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi, in collaboration with FORTELL, organized its 4th Interdisciplinary National Conference titled “Indian Popular Fiction: Redefining the Canon” on 16 and 17 January 2019. The highlights of the conference included the presence of luminaries from the world of Hindi and English popular fiction such as Vishwajyoti Ghosh, Advaita Kala and Devapriya Roy. The keynote address was delivered by the doyen of Hindi crime fiction, Sri Surendra Mohan Pathak.

The Principal, Dr. Sunil Sondhi, in his welcome address, opened up the debate surrounding the notion of “popular” with the question, “Is Popular always good?” Dr. Gitanjali Chawla, the convenor of the Conference, highlighted the controversial status of Indian popular fiction. While academicians have for long scoffed at this genre calling it vulgar and devoid of aesthetic value, its avid consumption by the masses merits rethinking as the “popularity” of these literatures challenges the idea of literary merit itself. The co-convenor of the conference, Dr. Prem Kumari Srivastava stated that earlier these works of fiction were found only at places such as bookstands at railway stations and pavement bazaars. However, now, they were also being promoted at places such as the Oxford Bookstore. This underscored a need to focus on the transition, shifting paradigms and perspectives surrounding the terrain of Indian popular fiction.

Delivering the keynote address, Sri Surendra Mohan Pathak shared his observations and experiences from his own journey of six decades as a writer of crime fiction. Contesting the validity of the literary canon in terms of the wide readership of pulp fiction as against the confinement of canonical work only within the academia, he argued that the commitment of the “pulp” writer

and content of these popular works were not a matter of debate. The best-selling author, columnist, screenplay writer and the guest of honour at the conference, Advaita Kala, questioned the veracity of classifying writers under labels such as “chick-lit”. Kala bolstered her argument with her personal experiences by stating that these generic categorizations served to restrict writing, while also denying legitimate attention from literary pundits. Kala stated that if publishing a book was an insular process, working as a screenplay writer was quite different as many factors such as “age” served to weigh down one’s writing within the world of cinema.

In the first plenary session titled “Experimenting with form”, the relationship of textual strategies with content was foregrounded. In this session, Devapriya Roy, the author of the critically acclaimed novel, *Heat and Dust Project*, underlined that Indian popular fiction was not merely a commercial venture, but a form of writing that encapsulated a personal touch borne from one’s subjective experiences. She posited that the style and content of this subjective writing was often experimental in nature and demanded more than instant gratification from readers. In the same session, Deepa Agarwal, the well-known children’s fiction writer, argued that the idea of children’s literature being a didactic piece directed at instilling moral values in children was completely unacceptable. She posited that children’s literature involved resisting stereotypes and exploring one’s quotidian existence; at times through the lens of fantastical and folkloric themes.

The second plenary session titled “Who is writing?”, held on the second day of the conference focused on the relationship between an author’s work and his art and the importance of influence in the development of a particular style. Vishwajyoti Ghosh, one of the most notable speakers in this session, discussed his growth as a graphic novelist tracing his journey from being an avid comic book reader to being influenced by calendar art iconography and the urban milieu of Delhi. Ghosh argued that pictures are not supplementary to the content of the text, rather pictures are the “text”, suggesting that style and content are inextricably interwoven. During the same session, Dr. Anuradha Marwah, the well-known writer and academician, stated that her novels were different from the so-called chick-lit novels. She added that a writer discovers one’s true calling in the process of writing and any text is located within oneself.

In the third plenary session titled “The art of writing”, the process and strategy of writing was documented. This session featured Niraj Srivastava, debut writer of the historical novel, *Daggers of Treason: The Curse of the Mughals Series - Vol. I*. Niraj Srivastava explained that historical fiction entailed writing in the fashion of the fictional characters and positioning oneself in the same milieu. To bring

history alive, he stated that the writer must share the perspective of the characters. The second author of this session was Karan Verma, who is well known for his novel *Jack and Master: A Tale of Friendship*. Verma stated that his art was an ode to his choice of unconventional careers. His writing mirrored his struggles as well as his learning from his experiences in working in different professional fields.

Several papers were also presented by delegates in thematically varied sessions over the two-day conference, offering wide-ranging critical insights into the various debates surrounding the literariness and legitimacy of this terrain taking into account the proliferation of various genres such as detective, crime, suspense, erotic fiction and the reinterpretation of mythic narratives and folktales restated in contemporary idiom. These papers sought to explore the intricate network of relationships between political beliefs and this literature of the masses as also the role of technology and digitization in concomitantly reformulating the idea of the literary canon itself.

The valedictory session was chaired by Prof. Raj Kumar, Head, Department of English, University of Delhi and the panel included Prof. Simi Malhotra from Jamia Millia Islamia along with notable decision makers from the publishing field—Ms. Aditi Maheshwari-Goyal, Director-Copyrights & Translation, Vani Prakashan; Ms. Karthika V. K., Managing Editor, Westland Publications; Ms. Mansi Subramaniam, Senior Commissioning Editor, Penguin Random House. The panel debunked the idea of literature being outside the purview of market forces and restated the dominance of canon as being shaped not by literary concerns but by the symbiotic relationship between readers, authors, the publishing industry and political ideologies.

The valedictory session, was followed by a cultural event in association with SPIC MACAY, with a Kathak dance performance by the noted danseuse, Ms. Rani Khanum.. A book exhibition was held on both days of the Conference, highlighting the interface of popular literature and other popular cultural art forms with commerce. The conference ended with an interrogation on genres and parochial classifications with a view to position popular fiction as dynamic and interdisciplinary. The conference widened our understanding of the various debates surrounding Indian popular fiction.

Indrani Das Gupta is a Doctoral Fellow from the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. She is currently working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest include popular culture, Victorian, modern British and post-modern literature, science fiction and detective fiction.

ranid66@ymail.com