

Report
on the UGC Sponsored Two-Day Seminar on “India in Contemporary Indian English Fiction” held on the 16th and 17th September, 2011
Organized by the Department of English
SIES College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Sion (W), Mumbai- 400 002

The English Department held a Two-Day UGC sponsored National Seminar on “India in Contemporary Indian English Fiction” on 16th and 17th Sept., 2011. The two-day seminar endeavoured to find answers to several questions on how India (where public amnesia and selective remembrance is part of its identity) is represented in its various writings. The seminar hoped to engage with the socio-economic-political ramifications of such a representation, to evaluate the emotional fallout (both for the writer and the reader) of such portrayals and to discover the essence of ‘India’ in Indian English fiction even as she stands claim to the test of terrorist attacks, insurgencies and communal flare-ups.

The first day of the seminar began at 9:00 a.m. with delegates registering for the seminar. The Inaugural Session began sharp at 10:00a.m. The Principal, Dr. Harsha Mehta welcomed all to the seminar and especially wished the out-station delegates with a memorable experience. She also talked about the accolades that the college has received and said that the seminar would be another feather in the cap. She said that seminars are opportunities for “intellectual sharing” and she wished the English Department to have a successful seminar. Prof. Lakshmi Muthukumar, convener of the seminar, in her Opening Remarks to the seminar stressed on the validity of having a seminar on such a topic in the current times and hoped that the seminar would help to “explore the contemporary angst”. The Chief Guest of the seminar was Dr. Chandra Krishnamurthy, Director, Academics and Administration, SIES (Ex Vice Chancellor, SNDT University). After an invocation sung by TYBA student, Radhika Chandrashekhar and the lighting of the auspicious lamp, Dr. Krishnamurthy addressed the delegates. She commended the Principal and the institution for its achievements. She appreciated the absolute variety of papers to be presented in the seminar and hoped that it would culminate in “mapping the progress” of literature. The Keynote Address was delivered by Dr. Avadhesh Kumar Singh, Director, School for Translation Studies, IGNOU, Delhi. He explained how seminars were not about finding answers but “about questions”. He stressed on the need to still “discover” India and that the real India is to be found in sociological discourse. He set the note to the seminar and hoped the seminar would discover the depth and scope of literature.

The first session (titled *Timelines and Territories- Mapping Contemporary Indian English Fiction*) of the seminar began at 11:30 a.m. The session was chaired by Resource Person, Dr. T. S. Chandra Mouli, Retd. Professor, Railway College, Hyderabad. He spoke on “Assimilation and Cultural Hybridization in Contemporary Indian English Fiction”. Dr. Chandra Mouli explained the need to be dynamic in the quest for identity and the flexibility of cultural spaces. He set the correct note to the session which also included four paper presentations by Dr. Lata Verghese (Catholicate College, Pathanamthitta, Kerala) “Caught between Two Worlds: Indian BPO’s – From Economic Boom to Cultural Doom?”, Ms. Saroja Ganapathy (Ramnarain Ruia College, Matunga) “Cultural Hybridisation in Amitav Ghosh’s Sea of Poppies and River of Smoke”, Ms. Mayurakshi Mitra (Maharashtra College, Byculla) “Assimilation and Cultural Hybridization in Music in Manhattan and The Namesake” and a joint paper presentation by Dr. Dinesh Nair (V G Vaze College, Mulund) and Dr. Raji Ramesh (S K Somaiya College) on “India(s) Imagined in

Soumya Bhattacharya's *If I Could Tell You*'. The first session was followed by lunch wherein the delegates enjoyed the hospitality of the Dept. of English, SIES College.

The post-lunch session, (titled *Matters of Location in Contemporary Indian English Fiction*) which began at 2:00p.m., was chaired by Dr. Mala Pandurang (Head, Dept. of English, BMN College, Matunga). She spoke on "Mapping Location and Emerging Subjectivities: Jhumpa Lahiri as a Case Study" and explored the diasporic angst of crossing borders. Prof. Usha Subramanian (Retd. Professor, Mithibai College, Vile Parle), the Resource Person took the topic further in her talk on "Blurring Boundaries-The Popular Versus the Literary". She questioned the "smug complacency" of popular writers who, merely on the basis of their bestseller status, claim superior and sole knowledge of what people want with their supercilious references to literary writers and how they pass on mediocre work to the unsuspecting reader as fun. The Paper Presenters in this session included Dr. Santosh Mishra (K V Pendharkar College, Dombivli) – "Contemporary Indian English Fiction as an Expatriate Representation of India", Ms. Hemlata Waghchaure (K V Pendharkar College, Dombivli) and Ms. Sujata Tiwale (Agrawal College, Kalyan) – "Horizon of Imagination: Stories of Displacement", Ms. Preeti Oza (St. Andrew's College, Bandra) – "Expatriates and One Dimensional India: A Perspective from Arvind Adiga's Fiction" and Ms. Sharmila Jajodia (Ramniranjan Jhunjhunwala College, Ghatkopar) – "India in Microcosm in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*".

The delegates broke for tea at 4:00p.m. and reconvened at 4:15p.m. for the third and final session (titled *Identity, Gender and Class Politics in Contemporary Indian English Fiction*) of the day. This session was chaired by Dr. Shireen Vakil (Retd. Professor, Sophia College, Mumbai). While speaking on "Real Writing: The Moral World of Shama Futehally's Novels and Short Stories" Dr. Vakil bemoaned the fact that Shama Futehally has not received the attention she deserved and emphasised on the need of a liberal outlook. The Paper Presentations in this session included those by Ms. Paromita Chakrabarti (H R College of Commerce and Economics) – "Consuming Cultures: Food and Gender in Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting*", Ms. Anita Padhye (K J Somaiya Institute of Engineering and IT) – "The Changing Ideological Configurations in Contemporary Indian Fiction: With special reference to Shobha De's *Socialite Evenings*", Ms. Rashmi Kulkarni (P D Lions College of Commerce and Economics) – "Images of Indian Woman in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence ---Stereotypes, Myths and Realities*" and Ms. Runa Shajeev (Dnyanasadhana College, Thane) – "Transcending Boundaries: A Comparative Study of Indian Women in Shoma A Chatterji's *The Baker's Dozen* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*".

The Second Day of the seminar began at 9:00a.m. The Fourth Session (titled *Taboo, Terror and Beyond*) of the seminar (and the first of the day) began promptly at 9:30a.m. and was chaired by Resource Person, Dr. Shoba Ghosh, Professor, Dept. of English, University of Mumbai. She spoke on "Taboo, Terror and Beyond: Some Conceptual Frameworks" and interpreted the 'Beyond' as 'transgression- a going across'. The Paper Presenters in this session included Dr. Jayashree Palit (M N W College, Vile Parle) & Dr. Mitalee Shome (M D Shah Mahila College, Malad) – "'The Migration of Dreams and Nightmares': Response to Globalization and Terrorism in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Kiran Nagarkar's *Gods' Little Soldier*", Pooja Sudhir (IBDP, D Y Patil Group's Sharad Pawar International School, Pune) – "Despiritualizing and Deriding Post-Independent India in Ravan & Eddie", Dr. Tamasha Acharya (Shri M.D. Shah Mahila College, Malad (W)) – "Redefining the Notion of the 'Other' Land" and Seema .C. (SIES College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Sion(W)) – "Heterogenizing Feminist Thought: Concerns of Indian Women as Reflected in Sara Aboobacker's *Breaking Ties*".

The Fifth Session (*Versions of India*) began at 11:30a.m. and was chaired by Resource Person, Dr. P. A. Attar, Head, Dept of English, Shivaji University, Kolhapur. Dr. Attar spoke on “British Literature and Indian English Fiction- A Comparative Study”. The Paper Presentations were made by Dr. A.P. Pandey (R J College, Ghatkopar) – “Contextualizing the Mahabharata in Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*”, Lakshmi Muthukumar (SIES College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Sion(W)) – “Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* – A Post Modern Comment on Twenty First Century India”, Mythili Mukund (M D College, Parel) – “A Quest for Self-Assertion in Raji Narasimhan’s Novel *Forever Free*” and Vijayalakshmi Nair (Burhani College of Commerce and Arts, Mazagaon) – “You Rendered Me Invisible: The Occlusion of Caste in Indian English Fiction”. The session was followed by lunch.

Post-lunch, at 2:30p.m., was the much-looked-forward-to Panel Discussion which included eminent poets and writers of repute like Dr. Gieve Patel, Anita Nair, Kavery Nambisan and Sampurna Chattarji. The panel discussion was on “Are there themes that are prototypically ‘Indian’ in Contemporary Indian English Fiction?” & “Is Contemporary Indian English Fiction Classist and Exclusionist?” The special invitees gave individual responses to the topics while substantiating their view-points from readings of their works. Dr. Patel stressed on the need to look at each writer individually, Dr. Nambisan on the need to being “tuned in” to the tensions of our country, Ms. Nair on the need of a writer’s forum in India and Ms. Chattarji on the need to give a burial to the concept of “authenticity”. The session as intended generated a lot of discussion apart from providing a wonderful interface between the writers and the readers.

All good things come to an end and so did the seminar. The Valedictory Function was presided over by the Principal, Dr. Harsha Mehta and the Guest of Honour, Dr. Gieve Patel. The compilation of the papers was released at the hands of Dr. Patel who also gave away certificates of participation, mementos and copies of compilation to the delegates. The delegates and the students gave their feedback on the seminar and thanked Prof. Muthukumar for providing everybody such a great opportunity. Prof. Muthukumar, the convener, the organizers, staff and student volunteers were appreciated for their efforts in putting the seminar together. Prof. Muthukumar in her “Thank You Note” thanked each individual who had supported the task of hosting the seminar and hoped that every delegate was going home with some answers and lots of wonderful memories.