

Postcolonial Studies Across the Disciplines - Annual conference of ASNEL GNEL. Leibniz University of Hanover, Germany. 2- 4 June 2011.

I attend literary conferences primarily for three reasons - to get educated; to network with fellow scholars; and to enjoy a break from academic calendar activities. The GNEL conference at Hanover allowed me a sense of satisfaction in all three aspects. It was a wonderful opportunity to catch up with German colleagues working on New Literatures in English, and to partake in the new avenues being explored by research students, ranging from environmental injustice to exploring risk narratives.

From the perspective of scholarship, the three days of the conference Postcolonial Studies Across the Disciplines offered interesting insights as to how American, British and Transatlantic studies are being relocated within paradigms of postcolonial theorizing . While listening to several participants who discussed slave narratives, and offered re-readings of British and American narratives, I couldn't help but reflect upon (to cite the subtitle of one of the conference papers) the 'hijacking' of the postcolonial viz. the 'transnationalization of American Studies' (Claudia Perner Duisburg/Essen). The keynote addresses on the first (2nd June) and second day (3rd June) reinforced the conference's leaning towards an interdisciplinary study of the Atlantic world. Sabine Brook's "Gender and the Modern Abjection of Blackness" called for a theorizing of modernity from the point of view of enslavement. Tim Watson in "Inter disciplinary reflection on Slavery and Empire" attempted to contextualize the transatlantic movement of goods and bodies from a historical perspective. He reiterated that while ' Atlantic studies needs to be more literary', 'postcolonial studies on the other hand need to be more historical and transatlantic.'. Jessica Hennings' keynote on day three on " Postcolonial Textiles – Negotiating dialogue", on the other hand, was a unique inter-disciplinary approach to the production of crafts and its reflection in the narratives of everyday living.

The desire of the conference organizers to accommodate a wide range of interests ensured panels that ranged from sessions on ' Transcultural English studies in motion' to 'Dynamics in popular culture', and 'Reconceptualizing postcolonial theory' to 'Re-imagining slavery.' Methodological concerns incorporated historical, sociology, theology and cultural approaches. In terms of innovation, I found three papers particularly stimulating. Bill Bell (Gottingen) in "The Book, the Pilgrims and the Catechist" re-historicized the anecdote with which Homi Bhabha begins his by

now widely canonized essay “Signs taken for wonder.” As Bell pointed out, “ this is a text which has been recycled and repeatedly”. Using counter-histories to demonstrate how the anecdote is historically fraught, Bell threw up a set of questions that challenges the encounter as projected by Bhabha as “not all that it seems”. Emma Dawson (Keele) in “New India’: genres, characters and Englishes of India’s post-millennium fiction” analyzed the proliferation of genres like chick lit, crime fiction etc writing targeted towards a 21st century Indian middle class readership. Dawson stressed that it is time to challenge notions of postcolonial literary heritage and to evolve new theoretical terms of analysis. Dennis Mischke spoke of the combination of fictocriticism and performativity as a means of challenging western modes of objectivity. He competently dissected the borderline between scholarly writing and creative narration.

I also enjoyed the session ‘Under construction’ which allowed research students the opportunity to present their work ‘ in progress’. Equally engaging was the concept of the Teachers’ workshop, conducted on morning of 3rd June. A group of teachers communicated problematics of teaching the curriculum of new literatures at German schools. Reine Wandel (Magdeburg) who has worked extensively on pedagogical methods of teaching India, warned about the dangers of monolithic and simplistic cultural interpretations of Indian or any other culture for that matter.

One looks forward to literary conference as an opportunity to interact with writers whom we engage with critically. The creative presence at Hanover was however limited to Bernadine Evaristo, from Great Britian (yet again!). We had a pleasant lunch time reading by Libor Mikeska, whom we learnt was ‘an author ‘in making’. His manuscripts are still in search of a publisher.

Coming from a culture where undue stress is laid on formality and hospitality, it was a welcome experience to attend such a professionally organized conference, wherein time management was exemplary, and every session was conducted with legendary German efficiency.

(Mala Pandurang, Mumbai, India)