

Literatures and Human Rights in Asia and Asian Diaspora Sessions

Session 1

Human Rights Discourses in Asia and Asian Diaspora: Histories and Counter-discourses

Presenters: Susan Henders (Department of Political Science, York University), Ted Goossen (Department of Humanities, York University)

Date: 19 May 2010

Session 2

Human Rights and Literature: Approaches and Issues | Presenter: Ted Goossen (Department of Humanities, York University)

Date: 16 June 2010

The discussion in the initial two sessions explored (1) historical, conceptual, and theoretical issues pertinent to human rights in Asia and Asian Diaspora contexts and (2) approaches to and issues related to the study of literature and human rights.

Session 3

Screening of the film "1999" (Lenin M. Sivam, 2010)

Date: 27 September 2010

This independent film by Canadian filmmaker Lenin M. Sivam looks at the effects of gang violence amongst Toronto's Tamil youth in the 1990s and its connections to the Sri Lankan civil war. A drama based on real-life events, the film was selected for the 10th ReelWorld Film Festival in Toronto in 2010.

Session 4

Dangers of Diaspora: Ethics and Aesthetics in Diasporic Sri Lankan Human Rights Texts

Presenter: Nedra Rodrigo (Doctoral Candidate, Department of Humanities, York University)

Date: 4 October 2010

The Human Rights text rarely serves a purely aesthetic function, but, because it addresses an injustice, serves an ethical function as well. Any critique of the creative Human Rights text must follow by examining both the aesthetic choices of the author (form) as well as the social function of the text (content and context). My presentation examined the treatment of the Sri Lankan civil conflict by three diasporic artists: poet/novelist Michael Ondaatje, filmmaker Lenin Sivam and musician M.I.A. (Mathangi Arulpragasam). I used both textual and extra textual information to determine the audiences interpolated by their works, and to study the effectiveness of employing chronoschisms and postmodern narrative styles in the articulation of human rights concerns.

Session 5

Duong Thu Huong's Novel without a Name

Presenter: Van Nguyen-Marshall (Department of History, Trent University)

Date: 25 October 2010

Examining Duong Thu Huong's anti-war novel, entitled *Novel without a Name*, this seminar explored human rights issues in wartime and raised questions regarding the limit of a state's demands on its people for sacrifice in a period of total war. This seminar also examined the dilemmas of dissident authors such as Duong Thu Huong, who questions state orthodoxy, as well as the relationship between fiction and politics.

Session 6

Noor, *by Sorraya Khan*

Presenter: Sorraya Khan

Date: 3 December 2010

A novelist of Pakistani and Dutch heritage, Ms. Khan spoke about Noor as an exploration of memory, silence, and atrocity in the aftermath of the Bangladesh-Pakistan war of 1971. She provided insight into the enduring intergenerational effects of human rights tragedies.

Session 7

Representing Minorities and their Rights in Law and Literature: The Macanese of Macau

Presenter: Susan Henders (Department of Political Science, York University)

Date: 15 December 2010

The seminar examined how minorities, their identities, belonging and rights, are represented in major international and Chinese legal texts as well as literary texts, given the tendency to emphasize the internal purity and coherence of such individuals and communities despite their lived experiences of interculturality. The session focused on the Macanese community, a Eurasian minority in Macau, now a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. The focus was on the extent to which law and literature allow for understandings of Macanese identity, belonging and rights that recognize their intercultural history and experiences. The presentation examined Deolinda da Conceição's short story "An Act of Charity" (1956), the novel of Henrique Senna Fernandes, entitled *The Bewitching Braid* (1992), and Liao Zixin's short story, "The Illusory World of Aoge" (1999).

Session 8

Kashmir/Cauchemar: The Queer Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali

Presenter: Anindo Hazra (Doctoral Candidate, Department of English, York University)

Date: 4 February 2011

My presentation focused on Agha Shahid Ali's collection of poetry, *The Country Without A Post-Office*. It sought to throw light on the queer impulse running through Ali's meditations in these poems on the state of Kashmir, poised precipitously vis-à-vis two large nations-as-claimants (India and Pakistan). Ali's queerness, most explicitly coded in the recurring gaze on Kashmiri male bodies, weaves through issues of sexuality to comment on the multifaceted hierarchies undergirding the nation-state. Ali's Kashmiri males embody sites of Indian national violence, literally bearing marks both psychological and physical. For Ali, these desirable young men are the rebellious children of the parent-nation, who must be broken if they are unwilling to reproduce, i.e., accede to, the Indian nation within the Kashmiri state. Yet, Ali's vision for a Kashmiri community does not pander to Manicheanistic separatism-as-solution: his poetry (re)inscribes a Kashmir where syncretic ties between Hindus and Muslims exceed, or make queer, the borders of the modern nation.

Session 9

Human Rights and Contemporary Tibetan-language Literature, Art and Music

Presenter: Françoise Robin (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, Paris, France)

Date: 18 February 2011

The speaker surveyed the diversity of contemporary Tibetan artists/writers (e.g. regional diversity, whether they communicate in Tibetan or Chinese, whether they live in or outside Tibet, and their patriotic, middle way, or passive stance vis-à-vis the Chinese state). She also explored the variety of

creative works being produced by these individuals, examining the often indirect and metaphorical ways they express human rights issues and how different forms of creative expression tend to reach different kinds of audiences. Robin noted the many paradoxes of the situation of Tibetan writers/artists in China. For instance, it is partly the Chinese state's multinational policies that have allowed these individuals public space to express themselves. Yet, the state also aggressively cracks down on writers/artists as soon as they are perceived as threatening to China's established political and economic order. The crackdowns have been particularly intense since the widespread protests by Tibetans across China in spring 2008.

To listen to this session, click [here](#).

Session 10

Quotidian Indignities: Life Lived as a Muslim in Contemporary India

Presenter: Arun Mukherjee (Department of English, York University)

Date: 14 April 2011

My presentation was focused on Indian writer Noor Zaheer's short story "A Life in Transit," and how it brings out the day to day othering of Muslim Indian subjects. The story poignantly underlines the invisible borderlines between Hindus and Muslims where neighbourhoods have been demarcated according to religion and a de facto segregation exists. Beyond that, the story underlines the deep reach of Hindutva ideology which constructs Muslim Indians as "invaders" and "foreigners" thereby endangering their lives and well being. The story successfully helps us grasp the emotional and psychological effects of being subjected to the onslaughts of this ideology and paints a dark future for the Indian democracy and its Muslim citizens.

Session 11

Cosmopolitanism and Democracy and Human Rights in the Contemporary Indonesia Theatre/Performance Work

Presenter: Michael Bodden (Pacific and Asian Studies, University of Victoria)

Date: 18 May 2011

This presentation examined two ways of being cosmopolitan in contemporary Indonesian performance. I used as my focusing examples Lena Simanjuntak and Arahmaiani. The former, born and raised in Indonesia, has lived in Germany since 1984/5 but travels yearly to Indonesia for two-month residencies during which she helps marginalized groups of (mostly) women construct theatre of empowerment pieces about their own lives. The latter lives in Yogyakarta, Central Java, but travels widely to places as diverse as China, Germany, Canada, Japan, Australia, Brazil, the Netherlands, and the USA to participate in exhibitions, festivals, biennales, and workshops for performance art. Her work often critiques capitalism, consumerism, and Northern imaging of Muslims, but when in Indonesia also tackles problems specific to Indonesia's internal socio-political-cultural-economic life as well. I want to investigate the following themes and questions: the divergent ways these two cultural workers cope with the tensions of being both global and locally-grounded citizens as they attempt to intervene in social discourses through their cultural creativity; how the forms within which they work modulate or shape their messages; how these forms also assume particular kinds of audiences and relationships between producers and between producers and audiences; and finally, how discourses (and practices?) of human rights can be seen as central to both of these remarkable cultural workers' productions.

Session 12

Gender, Ethnicity and the Politics of Pop Music for Uyghur and Mongol Communities in China

Presenter: Nimrod Baranovitch (East Asian Studies, University of Haifa, Israel)

Date: 19 September 2011

My talk explored the struggle of Tibetan, Mongolian, and Uyghur artists and writers to achieve a more independent public voice and more control over the representation of their minority identity in China's mainstream culture. We began our exploration with an analysis of Alai's novel, *Red Poppies*, in which the half-Tibetan writer struggles to undo the hellish image of "Old Tibet" that the Chinese regime constructed during the 1950s and 1960s and has perpetuated ever since. We then examined similar struggles of minority pop and rock musicians, among them Askar (Uyghur) and Teng Ge'er (Mongol), to express contesting narratives regarding their minority identity, history, and the living conditions of their fellow minority people in China. While in some of these literary and artistic expressions one can find strong political ethnic nationalism and at times even implicit calls for independence from China, the dominant motive in most of these expressions seems to be a strive both to expose injustices and human rights violations, and at the same time to claim and practice basic human rights, such as the right to speak out and express discontent, the right to maintain and assert one's different identity and history, and the right to equality and dignity.