

Migration and Cultural Identity: An Introduction

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The present volume was conceptualised at the conference organised in January 2020 titled “Contextualising Migration: Perspectives from Literature, Culture and Translation” on the occasion of the annual conference of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at GITAM, Hyderabad. The conference was set to address and bring together the fresh interventions and nuances that were emerging in India as well as worldwide centring on the plight of human as well as citizens’ rights in the wake of the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar (Azeem 2016; Imtiaz 2009) and citizenship debate and institutionalising of Citizenship Amendment Act in India (Bushan 2021; Subramanian 2021). Translation became a point of entry into this debate as the issue of migration and identity escalated into a pertinent matter within the national borders as it used to be of the international borders. Rising demands for a singularity of cultural identity started challenging the multicultural, multi-ethnic democracies like India whose cultural fabric is mosaicked with numerous languages and ways of life. A long history of close contact and frequent exchanges among vernaculars found themselves under particular attention. Such attention to cultural life, such creation and extensions of cultural borders into a political one were not too unfamiliar in the Indian subcontinent. National prerogatives as started getting defined by the rising demand for the cultural singularity following the majoritarian standard also appeared as a direct deduction from colonial epistemology or even that of European modernity (Deshpande 2011; Venkatesh 2018). Histories of colonial institutionalising of religion into communities and its terrible outcomes in the form ‘Partition’ seemed repeating themselves once again though in a different

form. Terms such as outsider, illegal refugee started making an appearance once again in everyday discourse.

Conceptualised at such a historical juncture, the aim of this volume is to contextualise these emergent tendencies within the long histories of migration motivated by a renewed understanding of translated ideas and identities in the present order of world affairs. The volume also aims to trace the literary metamorphosis under the influence of the emerging transnational, transmedial world of literary exchange that has documented the complex negotiation of loss and recovery and methods of searching for one's identity on one hand and on the other, made literature increasingly difficult to be tied down to one nation, one language. Consequently, the volume is divided into three interconnected sections. The first two sections are dedicated to account the challenges thrown by the latest discourse and dynamics of migration and to document the theoretical as well as literary responses provided to such developments. These sections also attempt to bring out the significant role of translation in the life of immigrant communities. The final section is designed to substantiate the understanding of the emerging fictional and non-fictional worlds further by looking comparatively into the recent literary output coming from the diaspora and discussing its shifts and extensions with respect to the early writings.

Wars, calamities, weather, partition, employment and eviction – there are many reasons for migration and it has been studied from such points of view. While these factors force people to migrate leaving their homes behind, there is hardly any respite from the trauma of departure, of rootlessness (Ragnoli 2019). It becomes part of peoples' memory, part of their corporeality and part of their survival and resistance which eventually gets registered in folk tales, performances and different literary forms. This translation of experience into tangible forms,

stories and songs, is a complex one as this apparent literary process is often closely dictated by the socio-political contours of migration. Migration, by bringing people in contact with a new culture, language and community, creates a volatile contact zone between the migrating and the host community. The host community often gets gripped by the fear of adulteration of their culture and compromise in their employment. The present world order provides us with many examples to inspect such fears closely and examine their validity and origin.

The inflow of migrants from the ‘middle-eastern’ countries to different parts of Europe has given birth to similar fears and anxieties among the European communities. When French President Emmanuel Macron, speaking to Europe 1 during the United Nations annual general meet in 2019, stated that “France cannot host everyone if it wants to host people well”, he was voicing this same anxiety. France is not alone in bringing the discourse of being selective in the context of migration. We have heard similar concerns and slogans during Brexit campaigns. Interestingly, such discourses are not too uncommon in the Indian subcontinent as well. The brutal attacks on workers belonging to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in 2008 in Maharashtra are not a distant memory. Similar incidents of attacks on migrant workers and vitriolic references often find their ways into electoral campaigns in India.

It has been noted on many occasions by experts of the global economy as well as multinational organisations such as the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund that the increase of national or provincial workforce due to migration plays a crucial role in strengthening the respective economy which contradicts all election or other politically motivated claims regarding migration. Besides, migration has also helped in addressing and resolving global labour market imbalances

resulting in the revision of migration policy in European countries and the US. May 2014 edition of Migration Policy Debates suggests that due to such policy changes Europe and US have received a 70% and 47% boost respectively to their workforce between 2004 and 2014. The scope of this volume allows us to closely investigate the other claims against migration that is cultural adulteration.

The domain of customs revolving around culinary habits, literary practices and religious festivities dominating ways of life and giving it a particular distinguishable identity has been broadly referred to as culture or national culture. However, such a domain, historically speaking, has perennially remained in a state of making, of becoming. Histories of colonisation, state annexation and reformation can account for such a transient state of becoming a culture for most modern nation-states. For which languages such as English, French and Spanish could become an integral part of Asian, African or South American cultures; for which it is not only the native American or indigenous Australian or Maori traditions that define the respective cultural identity of US, Australia or New Zealand respectively. Therefore, to assume cultural identity is a rigid one-dimensional entity and gets adulterated with the inflow of new elements is to create an ahistorical myth and to push under the carpet the question of power. This volume identifies the significance of this cultural impediment in global migration and attempts to understand the construction of a discourse of cultural adulteration through migrant culture from the vantage point of power and cultural status quo. It aims to bring to attention the need for a novel understanding of cultural identity in the present global order of things. By showing that, the present order has made it possible for an Indian immigrant to settle in the US or ‘middle-east’, write about the host nation and aspire to be accepted within the fold of literature, this volume points out demands for new

categories of literature beyond diaspora literature and charts out the need for reexamination of existing notions of culture-specific to nation-states. The world, in this volume, therefore, appears to be a contact zone of diverse languages and customs and this global order demands reception and acknowledgement of ideas such as mobile texts and transnational writers. This volume aspires to suggest not only possible new categories in literature and cultural identity but also a reexamination of mechanisms through which ideas such as national culture and national identity proliferate homogeneous equations of citizenship involving one land, one language and one identity.

Essays in section one of this volume attempt to address this specific need and theoretical possibilities in pursuit of an interdisciplinary understanding of the phenomenon of migration. Professor E. V. Ramakrishnan, by tracing looming influences of colonial epistemology in our treatment of migration, shows how the negotiation between the self and the society becomes a multidimensional platform where impulses to surrender to the nostalgia for home, adapting to the new surroundings and political ambience play their part with allusions to nation, nationality, globalisation and memory. By drawing readers' attention to the 'inner exile' of the migrated self, Prof. Ramakrishnan suggests the need to take stock of migration as an everyday process that renders the self unsettled forever and thereby questions the validity of political categories of the nation.

Prof. Maya Pandit's paper extends this argument on the lucidity of identity further by drawing examples of the lives of Mumbai dance bar girls. The ability which enables these women to translate between their village specific lifestyle and the profession demanded routines, prompts Professor Pandit to invite our readers for a relook at the ideas of memory, nostalgia and the local-global dichotomy commonly associated

with migration. Professor Shivarama Padikkal and Professor V B Tharekeswar's papers add to this discussion by pointing out how the act of translation itself is a migratory phenomenon and is getting shaped by the changing contours of people's mobility. By showing the interconnectedness of translation and Migration, and how these fields have been influencing each other in recent times, these papers offer theoretical roots that perhaps can enable one to trace the process of loss and recovery involved invariably with migration and translations.

In the first section of essays of this volume, migration, therefore, is deliberated as a phenomenon as well as a struggle playing out across the borders of language and socio-political landscape. The following section aims to build on that deliberation by tracing how migration and its expressions and documentations play out across the borders of readership, style and genres. A number of media are referred to in this section as songs, poetry as well as social practices which bear witness to this struggle and preserve the imprints of diverse factors such as multiplicity of linguistic and socio-political culture.

Essays on the Chinese and the Bhojpuri immigrants in Bengal look into the bureaucratic as well as emotional histories of the process as reflected in songs, folklores, census reports and emerging practices within the migrant communities. Tracing individual and political anxieties of the migrants, both these papers attempt to translate designs of negotiations by migrant communities which so far mostly remained confined within the bounds of vernacular literatures. Simultaneously, they bring out significant case studies which may familiarise the readers with the everyday struggle of language as well cultural politics that immigrants are subjected to. The paper on Miyah poetry amplifies the migrant community's voice which finds itself judged, stereotyped and accused of exercising, carrying forth its cultural heritage in a land inhabited for almost half a

century by them and traces how the morass of postcolonial political strategies is locked into a symbiotic relationship with such tendencies.

The final section attempts to capture the emergence of newer literary expressions and styles and codes of language as symptomatic of literary preservation of diversity experienced at the contact zones between the host and migrant community. Papers in this section, focus on the recent fictional writings and point out the emerging ideas, trends and concerns in diaspora literature and aim to substantiate the theoretical concerns outlined in the first section of this volume. For example, the fluidity of the idea of the nation finds its echo in the discussion of the emergent 'petrofiction'. Fictions such as Benjamin's *Jasmine Days* and *Goat Days* written in Malayalam, depicting the stories of protagonists caught up in Arab spring and lost in the Gulf respectively which became popular through their English translation remind us of the complex flux from which such literary texts evolved. These literatures compel us to contemplate - Where does this kind of writing belong to - are they native to Kerala or the Middle East?

Human mobility, in these examples, plays upon borders of nation, language and identity and keeps turning them porous. Deconstructing the structures at play that stigmatise and often marginalise migrants, these papers draw readers' attention to the power dynamics between the host and migrant community which controls and enacts the episodes of hopes, of integration and negation. Concerns emerging with long-settled migrants, issues evolving with the second and third-generation migrant population such as growing up as children in diaspora, succumbing to family expectations as well as the fate of women under anxious and cautious patriarchal customs are also taken up by these papers to show the evolving nature of migrants' concern and ambitions in the host land. Drawing our

attention to these aspects, these papers aim to push the boundaries of discourse on migration and literature beyond the themes of acculturation and assimilation and also attempt to suggest with analysis new ways of deliberation and investigation.

As we witness a global increase in migration, as more and more nation-states in Asia, America and Europe reel with the influx of migrants, we also notice the scope of new debates on migration, on possibilities and challenges for inclusive growth and development. These debates though will remain centred around local resistance against migrants finding a refuge, around the processes of dehumanisation migrants undergo as well as the cultural differences but are also bound to concentrate on the new nuances such processes of resistance and dehumanisation involve. This volume has sought to delve into the emerging global reaction to migration and ask - why exactly migrant culture and literature can be portrayed as threatening to the host culture? Does it challenge the given canon and if so, in what ways? What constitutes the fear of the migrants? How do migrants respond to such marginalisation? What role does translation play in accommodating migration?

Papers in this volume have attempted to address these questions, engage with them and find probable answers and directions which need further research and attention. The significance of understanding internal migration and provincial rivalries in analysing issues related to recent global migration; retracing the histories of cross-cultural exchanges and taking into account the emerging transnational and transmedial genres of literature are some of these core areas and directions. This endeavour will be satisfactory if such directions are found to be worthy of pursuit in further investigations and the aims of this volume manage to find their echoes in future scholarship on this field by the readers, and researchers.

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