

Utopian Identities, Real Selves

Whereas most of the voluminous critical discussion of 'postcolonialism' and literature has concentrated on issues of 'writing back' in colonial situations and in European languages to empires past and present, the focus of the IIAS workshop 'Chewing the West' was on indigenous literatures and the broader issue of the multiple ways in which not only Western literary genres, but also non-Western modern identities have been configured in literature outside the West.*

Report >
General

5-7 December 2002
Leiden,
the Netherlands

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The workshop's very conceptualization promised a shift from a narrow concern with the legacies of colonialism, which, as many commentators have observed, has tended to reinforce the very dominance of European languages and literatures that indigenous authors and post-colonial scholars are contesting. If the presenters effectively 'provincialized' and localized the dominant West, they also indicated that much remains to be done, through the study of literary forms themselves, before we understand how the worldwide processes of literary creation occur and lead to the emergence of 'world literature'. Particularly fascinating were the hints of a tension between utopian possibilities for identity conveyed through literary forms, whether 'Western' or 'indigenous', and the 'real' selves, whether in the guise of characters or authorial personae, conveyed by the literary text. The tension between idealized past or future identities and real selfhood in the present has less to do with the formation of the nation state than with the creation of literary selves. Readers around the world can recognize the latter in their own actual everyday, modern contexts (for several stimulating definitions of realism and the self in literature, see Karatani 1993, Makdisi 2000 and Zhao 1995).

Thus, according to Daniela Merolla (Leiden University), a real self emerges in modern Berber Kabyle literature that is distinct from those portrayed in either French ethnographic, Berber folkloric, or official (classical) Arabic linguistic terms. According to Thomas de Bruijn (Leiden University), Premchand's Hindi short story, *Kafan*, effectively presents India's economic and social realities in the 1930s not through Western techniques of narrative and psychological realism,

but by using older, indigenous rhetorical forms. Madhava and Ghisu acquire a selfhood which late-colonial Hindi readers could recognize as similar to their own through forms of characterization that derive from traditional ideas about possibilities for individuality and freedom. One such possibility occurs in the last stage of human existence, the 'sphere of renunciation', which is governed by the dominant emotional state (*rasa*) of 'the gruesome'. Another is embodied in the archetype of the saintly drunk. The self thus brought to life in the story is poised between the utopian promise of social customs and beliefs that offer an all-encompassing meaning to and release from life's suffering, and the paradoxical realization that, as Ghisu observes, 'someone who did not get a rag to cover her body when she was alive, needs a new shroud when she dies'. The story argues against any realistic hope of either a utopian modern future or a return to an idealized traditional past by means of a rhetoric saturated with Hindu religious idealism.

Merolla and De Bruijn, as well Kwadwo Osei-Nyame, Jr (University of London), Evan Mwangi (University of Nairobi), and Said A.M. Khamis (University of Bayreuth) in their essays on African literatures, do not present national identities as unitary but, rather, as multiple, layered, and gendered. The complex reality of war in Vietnam as portrayed in Duong Thu Huong's *Novel Without a Name* (1991) cannot be reduced to the heroic, ideal male stereotypes of Communist Party slogans, as Ursula Lies (University of Potsdam) demonstrates in her analysis. Yet that novel also conjures up a timeless, utopian kind of national identity that transcends the limits imposed by national boundaries, state doctrines, or gender differences. The role of the Sherlock Holmes-like detectives in the 1930s Sumatran novels discussed by Doris Jedamski (workshop convenor) is similarly utopian, not only as an idealized 'manifestation of modern rationality and subjectivity', as she puts it, or as a representation of the quintessential Javanese nobleman brought back to life in the late colonial Dutch East Indies, but also as an endorsement of a desired, future state of absolute law and order. As represented in the

Indonesian detective figure, the 'real' self is concealed behind the mysterious masks of a paternalistic superman who only ambiguously represents either the independent modern self or the national citizen. This is reminiscent of Franco Moretti's and Umberto Eco's claims that the detective fiction genre in the West negates individualism and freedom in the interest of promoting a paternalistic kind of social order (Moretti 1983; Eco 1979). As Moretti notes, detective fiction invokes science for defensive rather than developmental purposes, for it reinstates 'an idea of *status society* that is externalized, traditionalist, and easily controllable' (Moretti 1983: 145, italics in the original). The fetishist preoccupation with outward appearances and the hyperphysical details of the modernized colonial world, as noted by both Matthew Cohen (University of Glasgow) and Keith Foulcher (University of Sydney) in their papers on theatre and the novel in early twentieth-century Java respectively, may also convey a similarly ambiguous message: the tension between a 'real' national or modern self in the colonial present and a protean world of hypothetical, utopian identities without limit or possibility of attainment. <

References

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* Foulcher and Day, *Clearing a Space: Postcolonial Readings of Modern Indonesian Literature*, Leiden: KITLV Press (2002), p. 2, n.1