

# **The Familiar and the Exotic in Language and Literature: The Politics of Perception and Representation**

Report on the 27<sup>th</sup> International Congress of FILLM,  
New Delhi, India 2017

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The 27<sup>th</sup> FILLM Congress was held in New Delhi, India from 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> March 2017. The picturesque setting of the India International Centre (IIC), the venue of the Congress in the heart of the city, provided the perfect ambience for an invigorating exchange amongst the participants. The thought-provoking theme “The Familiar and the Exotic in Language and Literature: The Politics of Perception and Representation” invited robust intellectual participation in a diversity of scholarly approaches as myriad as the twenty-odd countries from which the participants came. The call for critical engagement with discernment and representation, definitions and aesthetic perception, the political and cultural division between the familiar and the exotic was well-explored by 62 paper presenters and 11 plenary speakers in 23 sessions spread across the three-day event.

## **Day 1**

The Inaugural session was held at the CD Deshmukh Auditorium. The traditional invocation by Saraswati Vandana and FILLM President Dr Meenakshi Bharat’s speech opened the session where the keynote plenary address was delivered by Prof Elleke Boehmer (Oxford University). Prof Boehmer shared her interest in new moves in the postcolonial field to direct attention to the structural and technical ‘how’ (reading and reception) rather than the themed ‘what’ (objects of difference) of representation. She pointed to the paradox of theory being said to be over yet the need of the hour being these very verbal and structural dynamics through which issues concerning inequality and migration affect our world today.

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Prof Christel R. Devadawson (Head of the English Department, University of Delhi), Chair for the session, preceded Prof Boehmer's lecture with a presentation in which she brought forth theoretical concerns of the present time – who 'owns' a story and along what lines are reading, writing and illustrative practices gendered. The Inaugural session also saw Mizo students performing the breath-taking dance called Cheraw, which demanded rhythmic grace and agility to step in and out of long bamboo staves depicting the exotic yet familiar and characteristic elements of folk life in Mizoram in precolonial times.

Following the Inaugural session, the Congress had multiple parallel sessions for the rest of the day which ended in a sensorial experience through the visual paper presented by Sandhya Raman and Errol Pires in their exhibition entitled "The Enchanted Tree".

## **Day 2**

The second day of the Congress ensued with several parallel sessions on topics ranging from pedagogy to the representation of the exotic and the underlying politics; from the exotic in the Colony to contemporary cultural perception. The Honourable Swiss Ambassador to India and Bhutan graced the plenary session wherein Swiss-Italian creative writer Oliver Scharpf and his translator Dr Babli Moitra Saraf argued that exoticising of the west by the non-western world is very much a reality. The "fetishizing process" thus turns the West into "saleable, exotic objects" to suit a variegated milieu of consumers – cultural, commercial and political.

The evening saw the second instalment of the Congress' cultural component. A blend of the classical Indian dance forms of Kathak, Bharatnatyam and Odissi was presented in a choreography entitled "Vividha". A collaborative work of dancers Monisa Nayak, Sneha Chakradhar and Shalakra Rai, "Vividha" was an exploration of the shared and distinctive aspects of these three dance forms, brought together in obeisance to the five elements of nature.

Following the stellar dance performance was the grand Congress banquet in the Fountain Lawns of the IIC. The evening was hosted by the Swiss Embassy and Pro Helvetia, the Swiss Arts Council, New Delhi. It was in this cool and relaxing evening that a warm, heartfelt toast was made to the outgoing President of the FILLM, Dr Meenakshi Bharat by the new President Prof Margaret Higonet (University of Connecticut).

### Day 3

The concluding day of the Congress began with a final round of parallel sessions. The final cultural component of the Congress was delivered by noted danseuse Anita Ratnam. Entitled “A Million Sitas”, Dr Ratnam’s solo performance was based on her exhaustive research of not only meta-narratives of Sita, the wife of Rama in the epic *Ramayana* but also re-tellings in Kannada, Tamil, Telegu, Himachali, Oriya and even Thai and Indonesian traditions. Exotic characters who were either misunderstood, or who remained mere shadowy figures or were tarred with a patriarchal brush, were all excavated, interrogated and re-framed for this compelling ‘womanist’ narrative which aimed at bringing these narratives within the ambit of the familiar.

The final plenary talk was delivered by noted poet-critic, and an indispensable force in the Indian arts and literature scholar, Mr. Ashok Vajpeyi. He talked about the aesthetic celebration of Indian plurality in literature and the arts. This notion of plurality provides a paradigm of diversity, accommodation and understanding. Unfortunately, even in India there are forces, socio-cultural-political, which are undermining the Indian plurality and are being courageously opposed by arts and literature.

The plenary was followed by the Valedictory programme where outgoing President of FILLM Dr Meenakshi Bharat introduced the new President, Prof Margaret Higonnet in what was a markedly smooth transition of responsibility. Dr Bharat also profusely thanked the members of her core Organising Committee who left no stone unturned in making certain that the Congress was an outstanding success. The Local Organising Committee headed by Dr Bharat were advised and aided by an incredible panel of advisors and student volunteers.

Dr Vibha Chauhan (University of Delhi) was awarded the coveted first-ever winner of *The John Benjamins Prize for Linguistic and Literary Scholarship*. The prize was awarded to the best paper presented at the 2017 FILLM Congress by an up-and-coming scholar and Dr Chauhan received the award for her well-researched and equally well-argued paper “Challenging taxonomies of the ‘local’ and the ‘exotic’: The works of Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar”.

The Congress participants congratulated each other and bid adieu over a sumptuous lunch thereafter.