

A World of Difference: Multilingual Spaces in the Novel in English

Instructor: Prof. Ayelet Ben-Yishai

Guest instructors: Dr. Sutanuka Ghosh, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India
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Department of English Language and Literature, Fall 2024-25

Academic Content

While many of us inhabit a world in which life is lived in more than one language, our understanding of culture still seems predicated on a *monolingual* norm, the ostensible cultural backbone of the modern nation-state. Individuals are presumed to have a single core linguistic identity (their “native language” or “mother-tongue”), which – ideally – is also their “national language”. Deviation from this state of affairs is often regarded as an anomaly or an exception, and yet seems more and more to be the norm, especially in the post-colonial world.

This course will bring together faculty and students from three politically and linguistically complex locations – Haifa, Kolkata, and Singapore – to think about the ways that multilingualism shapes our world and culture today. Looking at the ways in which texts travel across and within languages and the way various languages work within a text, we will examine how intersecting contingencies of language, race, and ethnicity have been central to the cultural history of the past 150 hundred years and our conceptualization of modernity.

Studying a wide range of literary texts, we will ask what “the choice of a particular language and genre among a range of possibilities say about the political and socio-textual community that is being addressed, but also about the cultural and political imaginary that it conveys” (Orsini 2023, 198). Central to our discussion will be an examination of the historical role of English within multilingual cultures: from colonial rule, through the consolidation of the modern nation, to the growing pressures of globalization. We will ask how and why English has come to be the default language for global exchange, and how it inflects our world – and our locations – today. What are the stakes of categories such as “Anglophone,” “Postcolonial,” “World literature”? What methodologies and ideologies do each of these categories imply? Are the theoretical frameworks determined by us or demanded by the texts themselves? Are the ways in which we read mutually exclusive or can we come up with an eclectic methodology?

Core primary texts:

- Mulk Raj Anand, *Across Black Waters* (novel, 1940)
- Han Su Yin, *And the Rain my Drink* (novel, 1956)
- Souraya Antonious, *The Lord* (novel, 1986)
- Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay, *Byomkesh Bakshi* (short stories – TV series – film, 1920 onwards)
- Sonny Liew, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (graphic novel, 2015)
- Oz Shelah, *Picnic Grounds: A Novel in Fragments* (micro-fiction, 2003)

Logistics

Since our semesters and other administrative requirements do not overlap, and since we want to create a forum which will facilitate discussion rather than a very large (and alienating) zoom lecture course, the collaboration will have both common elements and separate ones:

Separate:

- Administration:
 - Each university will administer a separate course, with academic responsibility fully in the hands of the relevant instructor (Ben-Yishai @ Haifa, Ghosh @ Jadavpur, Roy @ NUS).
 - Each course will be taught in-person on the relevant campus, led by the relevant instructor. except for the guest modules (see below).
- Academic:

- The relevant instructor will also be responsible for adjusting the non-core aspects of the syllabus to fit local requirements.
- Grades will be assigned by the relevant instructor in accordance with local scales and standards.

Common:

- Guest teaching:
 - Each of the three lecturers will guest-teach 3 topics (equivalent of 1 week's teaching each) in the form of guest lectures in each of the three courses.
 - These 9 topics will form the common core-syllabus of all three courses.
 - Guest lectures not in one's home institution will be conducted by Zoom, or, budget permitting, by in-person visits of the lecturers to other campuses.
- Final student project:
 - Students will work collaboratively on a final project, bringing their own linguistic and cultural knowledge to bear on the material studied throughout the semester, providing a living laboratory for examining the questions at the heart of our inquiry.
 - The group work will be conducted via Zoom, under the supervision and guidance of one of the three lecturers.

Grading

1. Attendance, participation, and preparation: 20%.
2. 6 online responses to weekly readings: 20%
3. Research presentation: 20%
4. Final group research project: 40%

Rationale:

Our three Universities are each located in a unique linguistic, ethnic, and cultural eco-system, with complex colonial and post-colonial presents and pasts. These locales thus present a productive arena from which to explore what is increasingly called the "Global South" (and specifically India) via the plurality of its literatures. Our students *already* speak, read, and write 3-4 languages and move among them *as a matter of course*. However, this in-betweenness is often experienced as a liability. In our experience, reframing multilingualism as an accomplishment and as an asset increases student skills and capacity for high-level work in each of their languages and in their abilities to move between them.

While this course stands alone and can be repeated in following years we hope to build on it further in the following years to develop a fully international course where our students will travel for short periods to each others' locations to study together in-person. (Profs. Ben-Yishai and Ghosh have already collaborated on a similar course and workshop in 2019-20.) Moreover, we expect this course to be a lead-in for the English department's forthcoming International MA program in Literary Translation in a Multilingual Context, so be submitted this year and which has already been green-lighted by VATAT-MALAG.

Audience

The course will be taught in English and will offered as a BA elective to 3rd year students in the English Department, and from other departments at the University of Haifa. The course is open to any student who is will and able to take on a significant amount of reading in English.

To facilitate discussion and international collaborative group work, the course will be capped at 25 students (from the University of Haifa).

Lecturer Bios

Ayelet Ben-Yishai (Ph.D. UC Berkeley) is Associate Professor at the University of Haifa, where she specializes in postcolonial and Victorian literature and culture, and in the history and theory of the novel, with particular focus on questions of realism, genre, and literary epistemology. Her most recent work centers on Indian

writing in English, and especially the novel. A comparatist by training, my work informs and is informed by the intersections of law, politics, and literature and by postcolonial and narrative theory. She has been an Honorary Fellow at the IRH at UW-Madison, a Fellow at the Cornell Society of Fellows, a Visiting Scholar at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, and a recipient of two ISF grants for her research on the postcolonial novel in India. She teaches at all levels in the fields of postcolonial studies, literary theory, world literature, novel genres, and Victorian literature.

Sutanuka Ghosh (Ph.D. SOAS) is Assistant Professor at Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India. Her research interests include the long 19th century, Postcolonial Studies, Gender Studies, Trauma Studies, Memory Studies, Migration Studies, Literature and Ecology, and Life Writing. She was co-PI in a major research project on *Literary Ecology in Nineteenth Century Bengal* with funding approved under the RUSA 2.0 scheme of the Government of India. She has published on various aspects of women's writing in Bengal and other aspects of Bengali literature. She teaches various undergraduate and postgraduate courses in her research areas, among which are two courses she has designed for the Jadavpur University Department of English syllabus on the Indian Partition (MA programme: "Narratives of nation formation and rupture") and life writing (BA programme: "Life Histories"). I supervise MPhil and PhD students in these and other allied areas.

Tania Roy (Ph.D. Duke University) is Senior Lecturer at the National University in Singapore. Her research interests are at the intersection of postcolonial studies and critical theory; ecological aesthetics, and world literature. In *Adorno and the Architects of Late Style in India: Aesthetic Form after the Twentieth-century Novel* (New York & London: Routledge, 2020/), she constructs a speculative history of the twentieth-century novel in India through T.W. Adorno's category of late style. Additional research in the form of journals and book chapters discusses visual culture and art in India as responses to internecine violence and its historical memory, considered in the wake of market-liberalization at the turn of millennium. Her publications have appeared in *boundary 2*, *Theory Culture and Society*, *European Paradigms*, and *Migrating Minds: Journal of Cultural Cosmopolitanism*. She regularly teaches undergraduate seminars on postcolonial literature and theory, literature and psychoanalysis, and World Literature.