

Special Feature: Comparative Cultures



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Review Article

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As the understanding of culture in terms of its vast range of plurality and dialogic formation necessitates a dismantling of all essentialist views about ‘reality’ and ‘truth; the articles in the Special Feature Section of this issue of the journal explore this plurality in terms of its potential to present multiple alternative perspectives and world-views.

One of the grand narratives constructing cultural identity is religion. An inclusive non-hierarchically pluralistic approach to mainstream religious discourses would seek to explore their zones of exclusion that nevertheless provide the framework of meanings determining the positivistic categories at their centre. Swastik Banerjee’s article titled ‘The Veiled Reality: the Role of Occult Practices in Understanding Reality’ studies magic and occult traditions as alternative knowledge systems beyond the margins of mainstream religions both in Eastern and Western traditions. Although superseded by dominant belief systems centred on the doctrine of ‘one truth’; occultism has been perpetually questioning this absolutist approach to reality and has been positing ontological models as more flexible, fluid and inclusive. Swastik Banerjee’s study re-evaluates magic as a knowledge system that covertly or overtly inscribes mainstream world-views from Vedic rituals to Renaissance Humanistic discourses. Although practice-oriented occultism has evolved across time and to a great extent has outgrown its demonized representation in the popular mind; it is yet to fully attain the academic attention it deserves. In the Indian context, ‘Tantra’ as an esoteric system legitimized through a process of Sanskritization is gradually finding acceptance as a subject of academic research. However, the

prototypical magic rituals constituting its pre-canonical content, demand a wider zone of contextualization under the umbrella of Culture Studies. Swastik Banerjee's effort in this respect seems promising enough.

Yogesh Prabhudesai's article 'Tracing the Śaivite Legacy of the Monolithic Temples at Palsambe' focuses on the archaeological features of these temples that stand as evidences to the predominance that Pāśupata Śaivism had gained in this region around 400 CE to 600 CE . Yogesh Prabhudesai's detailed archaeological study as well as his analysis of the historical context of their formation relates to how the geographical location of Gaganbadva on the threshold of the famous Karul and Bhuibavda passes made it into a significant site of cultural exchange. Since this area was used by traders to travel from Konkan to Kolhapur and vice-versa, it became a cradle for Śaivite culture as the majority of the Śilāhāras, from south as well as north Konkan were ardent Śaivas. The present article is a significant contribution to academic research activities on the evolution of Śaivism in south India.

Food discourses as a vital site of culture construction have been variously explored over three articles published in this section. Culinary practices as means of identity formation through the enactment of a homeland fantasy, have always involved a process of inclusion and exclusion, which nevertheless has always been a dynamic phenomenon. Focusing on *Kalapani Poetics*, Dr. Praveen Mirdha's article titled 'Writing the Polyphony of Sugar and Spices: Food Memories, Indian Culinary Legacy and Female Agency in *Kalapani* Crossing Narratives' examines how the preparation and consumption of food translates into a discursive process creating a space for women's subjectivity, giving inclusivity and visibility to women who are defined as 'other'. This article investigates how the constructions of Indian indentured migrant women's identities implicate food practices from the Indian subcontinent by involving assimilations and accumulations of food habits and ingredients in plantation colonies in the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean region across the black waters. This provides an alternative understanding of gender and culture from the female subject's perspective. Within a post-colonial framework, this article explores how food thereby operates as an articulation of subaltern voices by defying essentializing categorizations, as it plays upon placement and displacement (geographical/political/cultural) as a site of what Homi Bhabha calls hybridity. In *Kalapani Poetics*, Indian migrant women, specifically the 'coolie grandmothers' translate

cooking and food into an agency for self-assertion by reconnection with their ancestral food heritage and history. As this article observes, “it is significant to consider how coolie women, politicize their migration, by converting the confines of kitchen spaces into sites of creativity.” This however opens up questions concerning the gendering of national identity. Does this replicate what Partha Chatterjee observes as the essentialist narrative femininizing the Indian nation’s ‘inner’ cultural/spiritual space as opposed to the ‘outer’ modern active space defined by men? (*The Nation and Its Fragments*, Princeton Studies, 1993) Or should this construction of ‘imaginary homeland’ with women defining its ‘Indian’ core in a gesture of resistance be read in terms of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of ‘strategic essentialism’ (*Other Asias*, Blackwell, 2008) as a political tactics on the part of oppressed groups to represent themselves?

The other two articles on food discourses turn to the very question of ‘Indian’-ness that food represents in diasporic writings. Asmita Som’s “Cultural Translation and Representation of Food: Revisiting Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ and ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’” draw’s attention to this very assurance of ‘rootedness’, homogeneity and belongingness that food-metaphors seem to embody in post-colonial literature. As a process of cultural translation involving transaction, integration, assimilation, transformation and negotiation, diasporic writings replace the grand narrative of ‘roots’ with the heterogeneous idea of ‘route’; as they address the problematic ‘in-between two-nations’ identity. Food as a cultural trope of subconscious resistance to the threat of cultural annihilation, opens up a critical zone of representational politics. Applying Homi Bhabha’s theory of ‘hybridity’ and ‘third space’; Asmita Som explores the idea of ‘homeland’ as it informs Jhumpa Lahiri’s protagonists, Mrs. Sen’s sense of identity, nationhood and belonging-ness; and also enquires into the politics of food that serves as a microcosm of homeland, of family bond, community and culture for Lilia.

In a similar vein, the analysis of food as a representational trope is the subject of Pronita Roy’s article “Treatment of 'Food': Food imagery and Cultural identity in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*”. Rushdie’s deconstruction of the entire concept of India as a nation operates through the employment of food imagery that serves as a political tool to assert national identity. In terms of post-colonial semiotics, food acts as more than sustenance; it symbolizes cultural diversity and the collision of traditions. Pronita Roy’s article explores how nationhood is

constantly evoked through food metaphors like the protagonist Selim Sinai's jar of Chutney history for future generations. The trope of food embraces wider significations as to the transition of generations within a family as well as an expansion from the private to the public sphere, constructing newer structures of meaning-formation extending up to social hierarchies and power dynamics. The hegemonic potential implicit in food has been explored all throughout the novel.
