Multilingual Locals & Significant Geographies

MULOSIGE Modules:
The Poetics of the Orphan in Postcolonial Writing

Reading List Description

Abdelkébir Khatibi (1938-2009), the Moroccan intellectual and French-language writer, developed in the 1970s an implicit poetics of the orphan. This poetics was a postcolonial theory of identity, both at the level of the individual, society, and their interaction. In an era of decolonization in North Africa, Khatibi theorized through his creative-critical output a way of reconceiving of the self in the encounter of difference, eschewing colonial paradigms for a vision of the identity that could adopt into itself all sorts of difference through meeting with cultural others. The orphan, as a poetics, then, exceeds a colonizer/colonized paradigm. His poetics of the orphan also rejects the basic modernist, Bildungsroman template in capitalism tears apart families to create the stark figure of the individual as a bare capitalist unit of work value.

Taking the insight gleaned from my reading of Khatibi’s poetics of the orphan, I approach another postcolonial setting, that of South Asia. There, I read the Urdu short story writer Naiyer Masud (1936-2017) as initializing his own poetics of the orphan. Masud turns his back on the dominant modern Urdu topos of nostalgia for a premodern “India” in which social, linguistic, and political divisions had not yet sundered communities in two. Instead, Masud uses the central postcolonial problem of cultural continuity to imagine how cultures or communities are turned into orphans—orphaned, in effect—not by political processes but by modern forms of knowledge, specifically history and anthropology. Masud’s poetics of the orphan also includes a readerly effect, namely, the feeling of being cast adrift in a world without anchor.

In this comparative approach, I use the word “poetics” to indicate a constitutive, individual rubric for literary creation, something that motivates the author’s selection of tropes and that guides the creative spirit through to the end of attempting to illustrate a particular worldview and aesthetic and moral inclination. Moreover, this approach of reading one author from the postcolonial Global South alongside another allows the comparison of similar literary strategies that while attendant upon common postcolonial circumstances and problems nevertheless resolve in their local cultural, social, literary, and intellectual circumstances in specific ways.

This reading list developed out of a talk given at SOAS “The Poetics of the Orphan in Postcolonial Writing” (SOAS, 5 March 2019) organised by Professor Francesca Orsini.

Reading List contributor:

Matt Reeck has a PhD from the Comparative Literature Department at UCLA. His articles on French, Hindi, and Urdu literature have appeared in various journals and edited volumes. His translations have won him National Endowment for the Arts and PEN-Heim translation grants. His forthcoming translations include French Guiana — Memory Traces of the Penal Colony from the French of Patrick Chamoiseau (Wesleyan UP), and The Chronicle from the Urdu of Intizar Husain (Penguin India).
Week 1 - Khatibi

Readings


Week 2 - Khatibi Scholarship

Readings


Week 3 - Other Relevant Scholarship

Readings
Harrison, Olivia C. “Cross-Colonial Poetics: Souffles-Anfas and the Figure of Palestine,” PMLA 128.2 (2013): 353-369.

Week 4 - Masud

Readings


Week - Masud Scholarship

Readings


Week 6 - Week 1 - Histories of gender I: Gender in multilingual literary histories

Readings


*MULOSIGE Modules seeks to foster research and pedagogy that highlights comparison across and between languages and that is attentive to the 'significant geographies' of each context. Readers can create and submit syllabi based on their own collaborations with other scholars at http://mulosige.soas.ac.uk/contribute-collaborative-courses/*