

Ethics of Representation, Forms of Resistance, and Narratives of Discomfort

23rd Annual South Asian Literary Association (SALA) Online Conference

Saturday-Sunday, 6-7 April 2024

(Executive Committee Meeting on Friday, 5 April)

On May 4, 2023, two women were paraded naked and allegedly gang raped by a mob of men amidst the ethnic violence that has gripped the state of Manipur, India, for more than two months. There were already reports of 150 dead, 5000 plus houses torched, 50,000 people displaced, and rumors of gang rapes, sexual violence, and executions, but it was only when the videos and images went viral on July 19, 2023, that the incident became ‘real’ and elicited responses from the public as well as the State. Social media has brought more visibility to the problems of representation. There has been a shift in the way images are circulated and incidents reported, which has exacerbated how we ‘consume’ traumatic events, violent outbursts, and/or resistance movements.

Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, observes, “Photographs had the advantage of uniting two contradictory features. Their credentials of objectivity were inbuilt. Yet they always had, necessarily, a point of view. They were a record of the real – incontrovertible, as no verbal account, however impartial, could be – since a machine was doing the recording. And they bore witness to the real-since a person had been there to take them” (26). The idea of contradictory features while witnessing the real, as highlighted by Sontag, raises questions about the ethics of representation. While these images become evidence of the violence perpetrated, they simultaneously have the effect of the trauma and violence recurring over and over again each time it is consumed. Furthermore, in *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, Judith Butler argues that “...the photograph is built into the notion of atrocity, and photographic evidence establishes the truth of the claim of atrocity in the sense that photographic evidence has become all but obligatory to demonstrate the fact of atrocity” (70-71). Whether it is photographs, images, or literary reimaginings of atrocity and trauma, the truth is always under scrutiny, but what remains constant is the bodies that bear witness to violence.

The outrage sparked by the incident in Manipur has become a focal point of reference because it calls attention to how women’s bodies become the site of contestation. Within this context, Angomcha Bimol Akoijam in “Manipur Women Caught in a Hobbesian World” writes, “These are the clear signs of turning women—their bodies and sexuality—into ‘battlefields’ and ‘weaponising’ (miseries of) sexual violence in the ongoing conflict.” This event is not a new phenomenon - whether it is the case of the Indian Partition, the violence against Dalit communities, or the most recent Bilkis Bano case. Such incidents highlight the sexualization of women and point toward a universal patriarchal ethos where women’s bodies are shown to be possessed or protected. South Asian feminist scholars Uma Chakravarty, Sharmila Rege, Urvashi Butalia, Ritu Menon, and Kamla Bhasin explore the vulnerability associated with women’s bodies. As Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin observe in *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition*, “Each one of the violent acts...has specific symbolic meaning and physical consequences, and all of them treat women’s bodies as territory to be conquered, claimed, or marked by the assailant” (43). At the same time, bodies, especially women’s, have also been the site of resistance reclaiming agency, as evident in various local and global movements such as #PinjraTod, #WhyLoiter, and #PinkChaddi campaigns. Such resistance movements have been central to countering the history of exploitation and the struggle to build an equitable society.

Violence and trauma have been central aspects of South Asian historical and political events like the Indian Partition, the Sri Lankan civil war, the 1971 Bangladesh War, the strife in Kashmir, the Rohingya crisis, and even the ongoing ethnic conflict in Manipur. These incidents draw attention to the politics of erasure and narratives that cause discomfort, such as graphic accounts of violence against women, queer bodies, and marginalized and subaltern identities. Whether it is the deliberate attempt to silence voices of dissent or privilege a particular ideology, such incidents often reject subaltern voices from speaking for themselves and relegate them further to the margins. While literary forms provide us with an insight into ordinary people's lived experiences, mental health, and traumatic experiences tend to be silenced within South Asia and the diaspora. The ethics of representation are fraught with complications, whether it is movements that seek to resist or the recollections of incidents that can be discomfoting.

This conference aims to explore narratives that destabilize, question, and re-script the normative mainstream representations of trauma, violence, and precarity. The scope of this conference encompasses the ethics of representation, forms of resistance, and interventions that have shaped the narratives of discomfort. It will examine responses to the rise of populism and sectarian violence against marginalized bodies marked by gender, caste, color, ethnicity, and religion, among others.

Panels/Individual Papers can address questions such as:

- In what ways does the ethics of representation shape narratives of dissent and discomfort?
- How have writers and artists navigated the narratives of discomfort to highlight the experiences of the marginalized, the minorities, and the underprivileged?
- What are the biopolitical and socio-political implications of these narratives?
- What new aesthetics and literary forms emerge in the process?
- What role do trauma and censorship play in this regard?
- How do individual subjectivities shape our understanding of discomfoting narratives or forms of resistance?
- How has the #MeToo movement addressed these issues both locally and globally?
- How is our understanding of LGBTQ+ and queer issues transformed/shaped by the ethics of representation, forms of resistance, and narrative of discomfort?
- How has children's literature addressed these questions?
- How has literature provided a platform to discuss complicated issues surrounding representation, resistance, and discomfort?

Please submit 250-300-word abstracts along with 150-word bio-note by the firm deadline of **January 1, 2024**, via the portal on the South Asian Literary Association's webpage:

[2024 SALA Annual Conference Paper and Panel Proposal Forms](#)

Conference co-chairs will notify of acceptance/rejection of abstracts via e-mail by **January 15, 2024**.

Please note that those who submit abstracts for consideration to the SALA conference must become members at the time of submission. For membership and other details, please visit the SALA website at <http://www.southasianliteraryassociation.org/>. Conference participants are

expected to register by **February 15, 2024** at the latest. Those who haven't registered for the conference will **not** be included in the final program.

If you have any questions, please email the conference co-chairs, **Dr. Ruma Sinha, Dr. Billie Guarino, and Dr. Nidhi Shrivastava**, at SALAvirtual2024@gmail.com.

Important Deadlines and Dates:

January 1, 2024: Submission deadline

January 15, 2024: Decision notification by Co-Chairs

February 15, 2024: Participants must be members of the South Asian Literary Association to remain on the program

March 30, 2024: Preregistration Discount ends

April 5, 2024: Executive Committee meeting

April 6-7, 2024: SALA Conference

April 6: Hamara Mushaira

April 6: Business Meeting

April 7: Recognition Ceremony (and Keynote)

Conference Organizers Bio-note

Dr. Ruma Sinha teaches at Rider University. She received her Ph.D. in English literature at Syracuse University. She is the recipient of MLA's Professional Development Grant for 2023-2024. Her book project uses an anti-caste feminist framework to foreground representations of Dalit women in literary works and argues that a focus on intersectional experiences and "caste consciousness" is vital to reimagining the collective solidarity of Dalits with other political movements locally and globally. Her articles have appeared in journals like *The Global South* and *South Asia Review*. She is currently co-editing a volume on Reimagining #MeToo and South Asia.

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Dr. Billie Guarino teaches at St. Anselm College. She has 15 years of teaching experience as an Assistant Professor at the Department of English, JMI, Delhi, and the University of Delhi. She was the 2022 COARC-INYA Scholar's Fellow. She worked on resistance movements in India and Myanmar for her doctoral thesis. She is currently co-editing *Literary Reimaginings of the #MeToo in South Asia and the Diaspora* (with Dr. Nidhi Srivastava and Dr. Ruma Sinha), which is under contract with Lexington Books. Her first book project is on insurgency, gendered violence, and social movements in northeastern India. Her research examines inclusive pedagogy

vis-à-vis minority literature(s), security studies, migration, conflict & insurgency in South & Southeast Asia.

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Dr. Nidhi Shrivastava works as a Lecturer of English in the Department of Languages and Literature at Sacred Heart University. She is a recipient of the 2022-2023 MLA's Professional Grant, the 2023-2024 URCG Research and Creative Grant, and The Presidential Grant from Sacred Heart University to pursue her monograph. She completed her Ph.D. in the English and Writing Studies department at the University of Western Ontario. She is currently working on her book project, which focuses on the #MeToo movement, Hindi film cinema, censorship, the figure of the abducted and raped women, Indian rape culture, and the 1947 partition, as well as co-editing a volume on Reimagining #MeToo and South Asia.

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