

World Making Words: Connecting women's literary agency, activism and enterprise in

South Asia

Workshop 1: State, Society and Freedom of Expression

A Reflection

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Workshop 1 marked the beginning of the *World Making Words* project. This event brought together both online and in-person participants to engage with keynote speakers, panel discussions, and a reading group. Here, I will share some insights from participating and presenting in the event thanks to the bursary conferred upon me.

Neelam Hussain, the first speaker, from the Simorgh Women's Resource and Publication Centre in Lahore, Pakistan, presented an analysis of *Aangan* (1962) by Khadija Mastur and *Afshan* (1972) by A.R. Khatoon. Neelam's relevant exploration of the Progressive Writers' Movement highlighted issues of class and status within these novels, setting the tone for the forthcoming discussion. She emphasised the significance of women's networks, symbolised by the courtyard: whispers, gossip, and silence create a unique, women-exclusive language of power. Neelam's talk made us all think about the significance of women-only spaces and the crucial role of context when hearing what women have to say.

In 1942, when Ismat Chughtai published the short story, 'The Quilt' she was prosecuted for obscenity. Claire Chambers, Professor of Global Literature at the University of York, led a discussion on this relevant 'elephant in the room'. This saying aptly describes the way in which the story seems to depict a sexual relation between the narrator's aunt, Begum Jaan, and her servant Rabbu, both females. The secrecy of their intimate relation is open to

interpretation, especially because the narrator describes how they move under the quilt as an elephant that scares her at night. Together, in the reading group, we unpacked themes of secrecy surrounding women's desires, nationhood, and patriarchy. In this part of the workshop, Claire's questions around the story facilitated a collaborative dialogue about the Indian context at the time and the contrast with our more contemporary interpretations. Some of us were particularly interested to explore Ismat's critique of gender roles, voyeurism, incest, and consent. We also agreed that the story offers a subtle commentary on the pretence of innocence, which challenges the boundaries of homoeroticism. This is because the narrator is a little girl, and so her descriptions are often vague and ambiguous, creating a genuine narration but also disguising the more explicit sexual relation – probably a clever move by Ismat to avoid censorship and to keep the narrative open to interpretation.

The first panel in the workshop included Paminder Parbha, Head of International Programs at PEN International, and my own work as a PhD student in postcolonial literature at Northumbria University. Paminder introduced us to PEN International's activism. She outlined how the organisation promotes social cohesion and dismantles internal hierarchical practices. I am a PhD student who is thinking about the (non)boundaries of women's writings. In my case, I have examined how women articulate their experiences 'from below,' often speaking in ways deemed peripheral or insane, as Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa puts it. Paminder's presentation underscored the practicalities of defending freedom of expression in and beyond the literary market, particularly for marginalised writers facing persecution and exile. This panel was both theoretical and practical: we moved the discussion from fiction to political activism in the Global South. We also agreed that we should keep the conversation going without the intervention of colonial and Eurocentric enterprises.

Meena Pillai from the University of Kerala, the second keynote speaker, discussed women's online activism. She described how women perform complex negotiations to

become ‘assemblagers,’ and emphasised the role of affective feminism in fostering collective solidarity and emotional support. In the context of contemporary India, Meena illustrated how menstrual activism reclaims the ‘stain,’ intersecting with issues of caste pollution and shame. Meena’s talk offered a new insight for the workshop: the interconnections of women’s activism and solidarity occur online too. Up until now, delegates had not discussed how women’s freedom of expression or the state of states and societies is affected or prompted by digital interventions. Our discussion after Meena’s talk centred on the endless possibilities of online resistance, while also acknowledging that the digital world is a space mediated and controlled by market and political forces.

Panel 2 featured postdoctoral historian Aleena Din from the University of Bristol and Fulbright scholar Maham Khan from the University of Ohio. Aleena used oral histories to explore the multidimensional agency of British-Pakistani lives in Middlesbrough, presenting a ‘textured’ portrayal of their experiences. Maham discussed her co-creation of PAWPE (Pakistan Association for Women Publishers and Editors), which aims to provide a space for solidarity among women in independent literary spheres and is working on creating a digital archive. Both presentations highlighted the burden of representation on marginalised groups, while also showcasing the supportive networks that foster resistance, remembrance, and community. This panel showed that activism is about individual agency and about communities too. Although underpinned by academic contexts, both researchers showed that is possible to engage with external communities outside the university to facilitate women’s support in different areas. At the end, women’s writings are not only about publishing, but also about facilitating conversations at the local, national, and transnational levels.

This workshop provided a rich platform for engaging with diverse perspectives on women’s writing, activism, and the complexities of identity in South Asia and the Global South. The workshop was also an instance to talk through concerns without the labels of

academic hierarchies, as all exchanges occurred transversally among those with academic and activist backgrounds. In this vein, many questions remain unanswered in the quest to follow-up discussions in future events: How and when can women's writings become the mainstream? Do we want them to become mainstream? Can we use 'the master tools', as per Lorde, to dismantle patriarchy within women's writing? Can we stop women and their writing from becoming saleable commodity? Is it possible to create women's writing detached from a patriarchal discourse and society? Is it necessary to create a South-to-South dialogue around women's writing or is it an individual enterprise? I know I am not the only one looking forward to *making* many more challenging *words* with the participants' diverse and thought-provoking *worlds* in future events.