Alterior motives

Expert researcher of Anglophone literatures Professor Joel Kuortti discusses the dichotomy between the exotic and the familiar in postcolonial literature, and also touches on his personal interest in the works of Salman Rushdie.

Can you introduce yourself and the motivations that drive your academic work?

I am Professor of English with specialisation in literature, especially Indian literature in English. My interest is driven by a cultural studies approach: I want to find out what the conditions and forms of literary production are in a world where transcultural connections are increasingly relevant and influential.

What interests you most about Indian literature in English and cultural studies?

My interest dates back to the 1989 fatwa on Salman Rushdie's novel The Satanic Verses. This literary work, which caused political clashes, deadly violence and the proliferation of publications on a global scale, prompted me to begin looking into these conflictual topics. This continues to be an interest for me, although I focus more on other forms of transculturality and cultural contact now. As it happens, I am also President of the Rushdie International Society, which was founded in 2013.

Postcolonial world literature is another aspect that you focus on in your career. Why are you interested in this class of literature, and what have you learned from studying it?

When literature is interpreted within a national framework, it often seems to be reduced to a subservient role in nation-building. With postcolonial literature, there is also this kind of national interest in relation to anti-colonial struggle – and there's another side to it that incorporates elements from multiple cultural sources in an unpredictable manner, going beyond simplified identifications. This doesn't mean that there are only these binary extremes in literature. As with all literature, postcolonial and transcultural literature offer abundant ways to enlighten oneself on cultural, linguistic and all kinds of matters – and maybe even in ways that other kinds of literature don't.

What methods have you employed to examine the form, genre and paradigm of these texts?

Our main method is reading – understood widely as a way to approach different types of literary, media and audio-visual texts. There is no shortcut to analyse such textual materials – as we do not conduct corpus studies or statistical analyses – but they need to be encountered with an empathetic attitude in order to enable the perception of the easily overlooked everyday characteristics.

Although the 'Out of the Ordinary' project is in an early stage, could you provide an insight into the expected results and your thoughts at the current stage?

Defamiliarising the norm enables us to engage in an ethical encounter with alterity, or otherness, so that it is not constituted and defined by the stereotype of familiarity. Thus, our main hypothesis is that by defamiliarising the commonplace, we should be able to escape uniform knowledge of the commonplace, which also produces uniform knowledge of the other.

How do you hope the study benefits the field of literary and cultural studies at large?

Ultimately, we seek to find more ethical ways to engage with the other. If we eventually succeed in this in some meaningful way, I should imagine the application of the results would be advantageous in literary, cultural and even social studies.
One and other

In certain fields of criticism, such as postcolonial literary analysis, the salience of dichotomies between the exotic and the familiar is in danger of becoming lost – an issue that one group at the University of Turku in Finland is hoping to address through an innovative project.

THE WAY IN which people construct identities hinges, according to many theorists, on otherness. Individual’s experiences in a subjective universe is, in some sense, defined by their notion of the difference between ‘self’ and ‘other’, and it should therefore come as no surprise that when creating and imbuing art in all its forms, alterity is a crucial concept. Prominent 20th Century German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht, best known for his bitingly critical theatrical works created under Nazi rule, notably championed what he called the Verfrümmungseffekt or V-effekt; a process of defamiliarisation that he first identified in Chinese theatre. In plays like Fear and Misery of the Third Reich, Brecht estranges his audience from the characters on stage, forcing them to assess what they see on an ideological level.

Such tricks of alterity can be – and frequently are – employed and read in a fairly straightforward way in the context of European literature, to great effect. However, a problem arises when literatures in English, and especially postcolonial literature, are considered. These fields of literary study are concerned with artists from all over the world, including former colonies that have achieved independence – a historical circumstance that often results in common lines of thought among writers. In such a context, the problem of constructing coherent identities extends beyond the individual to the national level, and the notion of alterity manifests itself in the diametric opposition between the exotic and the familiar.

ENGAGING WITH ALTERITY

Focusing so closely on this opposition has led some theorists to argue that postcolonial literary criticism has become stuck in a rut. In their ardour to perceive and analyse the exotic and the extraordinary, the field has unintentionally fetishised the object of this attention, and arrived at a stereotyped concept of the familiar and commonplace that defines it by opposition; this trend leads to formulaic research on the topic. In this setting, a productive approach might be to look at the familiar in a new way – a change of direction that would, presumably, lead to a new insight into the exotic and the processes of normalising and ‘othering’, and a more ethical route towards engaging with alterity.

This is the objective of a new 48-month project initiated at the beginning of this year by four literary researchers at the University of Turku. Although Drs Joel Kuortti, Janne Korkka, Kaisa Ilmonen and Elina Valovirta are currently all members of the institute’s Department of English, their areas of expertise within Anglophone literatures are diverse, focusing on Indian, Canadian, Caribbean and ‘Chick’ literature respectively. Their project ‘Out of the Ordinary: Challenging Commonplace Concepts in Anglophone Literature’ has the potential to revolutionise the way such texts are read. As Kuortti explains: “If the ordinary – instead of being taken as something always already known – is given critical attention as a constructive limit of the ‘other’, it might eventually expose the polarity of exotic and familiar as unsustainable”.

EXOTIC FRUIT

The method employed by these researchers is simple: sensitive readings of a wide variety of texts, with particular attention to what is considered familiar. In the case of contemporary Indian diasporic writing, for example, recurring presentations of food and the kitchen as a space are devices that would often be interpreted as ‘exotic’ in comparison to a European reader’s cultural context. However, instead of reading the constituents of the text in this way, Kuortti and his colleagues interpret them as symbols of the familiar and commonplace. Doing so has a transformative impact, because it forces the critical reader to arrive at a new understanding of what is considered exotic.

Further objectives of Out of the Ordinary include the investigation of apparently uniform and hegemonic structures such as Europe and the coloniser, the pursuit of the commonplace in regards to literary forms and subject matter, and the critical assessment of traditional standpoints in postcolonial studies that may fall victim to stereotypes. The project is still in its early phases – but in time, the researchers hope it will provide an insight of unparalleled clarity into the workings of many contemporary texts.

A productive approach might be to look at the familiar in a new way – a change of direction that would, presumably, lead to a new insight into the exotic.