

# Preface

*Transcultural Negotiations of Gender: Studies in (Be)longing* comprises revised versions of 20 selected peer-reviewed papers from scholars from India and abroad—both well-established academics and researchers from premier institutes—presented at an international conference on “Gender Studies: Expanding Horizons of Trans/Inter-Culturality”, coordinated by the two editors of this volume (i.e. the two of us, both from the School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi), in collaboration with the Indian Council for Social Science Research, held on 7 and 8 March 2013.

When we decided to organize the conference, we were not very sure where we were headed, or what the ultimate shape of the output of the conference would be like. Committed as we both were to issues of gender and sexuality, and convinced as we both were that gender relations are indeed getting continuously re-negotiated, and corollarily the field of gender studies is itself continuously expanding, in this increasingly trans/inter-cultural world of ours, we thought of simply opening the canvas globally to scholars of literary and cultural studies, to let them etch their own views on the issue, and wait and watch for what shape the final picture was to take. The call for papers (cfp) for the conference stated somewhat tentatively, “The conference intends to bring together scholars, researchers, and students from various disciplines of Comparative “Literature”, Translation Studies and Cultural Studies to share their experiences and research covering a wide range of issues related to “women” and sexual minorities as activists, artists, authors, critics and inter-cultural workers. It seeks to dwell on the interstitial spaces of gendered metaphors of inter-culturality as it aims to reiterate and reinterpret the provisional nature of all borders to unfold how the experiences of “women”/gendered identities have resisted normative discourses of representations, reprisals and control”.

The response that we received, however, was overwhelming, and though proposals came predictably only from academics of certain fields—English and Hispanic literatures (understandably, given the affiliations of the two of us), Comparative Literature, Media and Culture Studies, and a few other language-specific literatures like French, German and Bengali—we knew that we were probably

on to something more coherent. The sheer diversity of the geographical locations and profile of the participants—their relative uniformity in terms of their areas of affiliation (literature and culture studies) notwithstanding—was very encouraging. There were paper presenters from all the four quadrants of India—North, South, East and West—in almost equal numbers, and also from diverse other countries—Brazil, Ireland, Scotland, Serbia and USA. And, they were of diverse statures too—ranging from senior professors to mid-level academics to young research scholars. It is this diversity that convinced us that we could, after all, have a systematized volume come out of it, which could look more specifically at certain patterns emerging out of the papers presented within the general scope of the conference.

There were three salient features to this emergent “systematization”, out of which the third may need a greater elaboration. First, we realized that all the papers (for certain, the ones selected for publication after peer review) dealt with—not just the expanding state of gender studies in the context of trans/inter-culturality, as the conference had originally, and somewhat vaguely, proposed—but how gender actually gets *negotiated* in the concreteness of *transcultural* matrices, leading to our first key phrase, which eventually came to the very title of the current volume: “Transcultural Negotiations of Gender”. Secondly, we found that such transcultural negotiations of gender happened on the dual axes of *belonging* and *longing*—the twin desires of being located within a cultural milieu, “belonging” to it as it were, while simultaneously yearning for either what has passed by or what is yet to come, a “longing” for change presumably—leading us to formulate our second key phrase, the parenthetical “(be)longing” which brought out this tension, and came to constitute the subtitle of the volume to come: “Studies in (Be)longing”.

Thirdly, we discovered that the transcultural negotiation of gender on grounds of (be)longing that the contributions were talking about could be framed around four interlinked but discrete registers. Usually, when one thinks of transculturality, one automatically presumes interaction amongst cultures from different *spaces*, say between Indian and European cultures. The contributions for this volume revealed, however, that one could (be)long transculturally over *time* too, and even within the same geographical space, say India, one has continuous transcultural negotiations between precepts of the past and the present, between beliefs of different times. This possibility of temporal transculturality led one to a third register too, a specific one at that, that of *modernity/technology*, whose advent seemed to particularly unsettle one’s sense of (be)longing to a tradition, leading one on specific modes of transcultural negotiations. And, finally, especially since all this was being conceived in the context of gender, which itself is performative, a fourth specific register that emerged was that of *performance*, or that the transcultural negotiations of gender on grounds of (be)longing often had performativity at their prime means. This third discovery, coupled with the former two, thus gave a structure to this current volume and its primary postulation, as enshrined in its key words/phrases—that *transcultural negotiations of gender* happen through exercising forms of *(be)longing over time*, across *space*, deploying modes of *performance* and engaging with *modernity/technology*.

To sum up, the volume that has emerged thus probes into how gender gets negotiated in cultural praxes along the two axes of “belonging” and “longing” [as captured in the cusped keyword “(be)longing”] as one moves transculturally across time, space and changing performative modes, in light of the impact of modernity/technology. Further, it also ends up probing into the category of “transculturality” itself, by examining how not only does the word pertain to the coming together of, or interactions amongst, cultures from diverse *spatial* locations, but how shifts over *time* and with changing *performative modes* and *technological means* of articulation within what may be presumed to be the same culture—inhabit, as it may, a single space—also amount to the “transcultural”. Accordingly, while this volume does present accounts of how gender gets negotiated in transcultural articulations across different parts of the world—India, Europe, Latin America, Japan, Mauritius, etc.—it also shows how even within the same space, reappropriations of myths, rituals, religious customs and traditional forms across time, and articulations of gender across different technological means of representation, perform similar transcultural negotiations of gender. The volume thus comprises four parts, devoted respectively to the four coordinates named above—time, space, performativity and modernity/technology—around which transcultural negotiations of gender take place on grounds of belonging and longing, the sections comprising five articles each, to sum up to the 20 articles that the volume is made of.

The articles in the first part “(Be)longing in Time” primarily examine how gender gets negotiated in the temporally transcultural act of myths, rituals and religious practices getting revised and revisited over time. The section begins with an article by Brigitte Le Juez, which probes how legends get reinterpreted over time, especially from a gendered perspective, with the appropriation of Charles Perrault’s fairy-tale “Bluebeard” in modern representations of marital abuse as an example. The tone for how gender gets negotiated through transcultural rewritings of myths and legends over time being thus set, the second article, by Metka Zupančič, carries the same forward in a comparatist study of how ancient myths get retold by contemporary women writers across cultures through some instances of such later rendition of legends, primarily of Eurydice, Draupadi and Mahadevi in the works of two female writers of Indian origin from Mauritius and USA—Ananda Devi and Chitra Banrjee Divakaruni—respectively. The third article in this section, by Satish Poduval, similarly takes up three instances of re-reading of the legend of Sita from the *Ramayana* and some related religious practices from a gendered perspective, across three diverse times, but also diverse spaces and media of articulation—a 1919 poem by the Malayalam poet Kumaran Asan, polemical works by the Dravidian leader Periyar from the 1950s to the 1970s, and a 2008 animation film by the American artist Nina Palay—to show how they lead to diverse modes of reinterpretation of the religious in the public domain in negotiating gender. Carrying the argument further, in the fourth article of the section, Abin Chakraborty shows how the noted playwright Girish Karnad reworks classical myths and folktales to subvert stereotypes of the passive woman, and instead creates alternate spaces for gender negotiation. As a cautionary closure to the section, lest it be believed that all reworkings of myths and legends and religious beliefs lead necessarily to enablement of the

woman, the final article by Ratul Ghosh examines how not just traditional religions, but even alternate, hybrid, and reinterpretative—and thus possibly “transcultural”—religious practices like tantric and sufi cults also often retain patriarchal frameworks, requiring a further “de-masculinizing” of their mythologies and religio-sexual rites.

The articles in the second part “(Be)longing in Space” study how transcultural negotiations of gender take place when people from different spaces interact, as also when public spaces and domains themselves become sites of such negotiations. The section begins with Laura P. Izarra’s examination of such trans-spatial negotiations in the writings of Irish migrant women in South America, where in an articulation of (be)longing, one sees attempts at re-imagining a “new Irishness” in the diasporic situation. This is followed by Biljana Djorić Francuski and Ljiljana Marković’s co-authored article, which examines the representation of gender issues in two diverse cultures—India and Japan, so different and yet so same—through the works of two twentieth-century authors, who themselves are exemplars of such a transcultural negotiation—Ruth Praver Jhabvala, a European who, having married an Indian, spent more than two decades in India, and Natsume Sōseki, a Japanese whose two-year visit to London proved most influential to his subsequent life and writing. The third article in the section, by Vijaya Venkataraman, specifically picks up for study crime fiction by women writers from India and Latin America to establish a comparatist take on transcultural negotiations of both gender and genre across space. The fourth article in the section, by Ira Vangipurapu, concretizes this negotiation of gender in relation to space to the particular case of the state-scape of Cuba after the 1959 socialist revolution and the physical space of the cinema hall, and in its analysis of the 1983 film *Up to a Certain Point* by Tomás Guitérrez Alea, shows how gender relations got questioned and re-negotiated in the spectatorial space of the cinema in the socialist nation-space of Cuba. Moving to a more literal dealing with “space” and how it becomes a factor in negotiating gender and sexuality, the final article of the section, by Pranta Pratik Patnaik, analyses a particular park in New Delhi, which is a well-known haunt of gays in the city, to show how its demarcated space becomes a veritable site for negotiating one’s sexual and gendered identity.

The articles in the third part “Performing (Be)longing” locate such transcultural negotiations of gender in the context of changing modes of performance, considering particularly that gender itself is performative. The section begins not with performance per se, but with Paromita Bose’s article on the debates raised by an eighteenth-century text that rewrites the mythical story of Radha from the perspective of female sexual agency, but the fact that its author Muddupalani was a performing courtesan, and that the debates about the text arose in the context of the Devadasi reform in 1911, when another dancer, Nagarathnamma, tried to re-publish the text, makes it an important connection between mythology and performance as registers of transcultural negotiations of gender. This issue of transformation and reformation of performance traditions and resultant redesigning of gender is explored further in the next article, where Kavya Krishna K.R. studies the “re-invention” of the Mohiniyattam dance form in the 1930s, with its own gender, class and nationalistic coordinates of delineation. Taking the analysis of the negotiation of gender through transformative appropriations of female performative

traditions across the transcultural cusp of tradition and modernity further, the third article of the section, by Madhumeeta Sinha, studies two twenty-first-century documentary films by Saba Dewan that attempt a feminist historical recovery of two performative phenomena—the early twentieth-century courtesan culture embodied by *thumri*, and the early twenty-first-century controversy concerning bar dancers in Mumbai—caught amidst debates concerning prostitution, the notion of the “public woman”, and a bid for “social reform”. The fourth article by Piyush Roy moves directly to the gendered codes that performance bears, and in its analysis of the 1957 Telugu film *Mayabazar*, where the protagonist performs an on-screen gender switch, shows how gender roles are negotiated in it by transiting through a choice of *bhava*-s, or performative codes of human emotions. The final article in the section, in adding a truly transcultural twist to the issue, shifts to Latin America, and picks up the curious cultural institution of “Narco Corrido”, or performative ballad-singing dealing with the drug trade, as also the “Narco Novel” literary form that emerges from the same, to show how gender is negotiated through performances in another cultural situation, and in the context of violence and substance-abuse.

The articles in the final part “Modernity, Technology and (Be)longing” further trace how gender gets negotiated in transcultural ways, in a context like India, with the advent of modernity and its companion technology, in extending the issue that was already raised in the previous section, through questions of social reform concerning performative traditions at the turn of the twentieth century. The first article in this section, by Sanghita Sen, specifically focuses on how Tagore’s female characters, through their “radical worldview and actions”, usher in the “new Indian woman”, showing a specific instance of negotiation of gender around the protracted event of passing over from tradition to modernity. Taking this study of the connection between literary modernism and the conception of the “new” inspirational woman further, in the next article, Soumi Chatterjee explores the evolution of the “Muse” in modern Bengali poetry—from Tagore to Sunil Gangopadhyay—as one travels down twentieth-century Bengali modernity, tracing how the role of the woman in poetry changes with modernization from that of an inspiring goddess-like figure in the classical mode to real life-like women, in correlation with changing social situations brought about by events in modern history. The question of technology, that companion of modernity, and how it plays a role in this “trans”-negotiation of gender is discussed in the third article in the section, where Rajan Joseph Barrett, in his discussion of a particular Kannada short story “Gulabi Talkies”, shows how technology has changed the woman’s life in India, and—in analysing the story of Gulabi, who now has a cinema named after her, and Lillibai, who has become the gatekeeper of that cinema, having shifted from her original occupation of a traditional midwife—shows how women from different strata of society negotiate technology differently, and how technology impacts gender roles. Taking the issue of the role of technology, modernity, liberalization, etc., in the negotiation of gender identity further, the fourth article in the section, by Parnal Chirmuley, studies three popular Indian women’s magazines in English—*Femina*, *Marie Claire*, and *Good Housekeeping*—to see the modes of gendering of the “new woman”, as India straddles transculturally between tradition

and a post-liberal consumerist modernity. The final article in the section, as also in the volume, by Debra A. Castillo looks at the cultural representation—in cinema, in the literature and on websites—of the role of technology vis-à-vis gender and sexuality, through the increasing global institutionalization of outsourced and assisted reproduction and surrogacy, especially with India and Latin America emerging as sites for the same, the section (and the volume itself) again ending on a cautionary note concerning the fault lines in such attempts at transculturally negotiating gender through technology and modernity.

The articles that comprise this volume thus try to examine how gender gets represented at cusps of transculturation—across time, space, performative modes and technology—through a negotiation between one's desire to "belong" to the cultural mode that one is safely ensconced in, and one's "longing" for the change that gets occasioned through one's coming face to face with the other that such transcultural moments constantly bring one in contact with. The parts, in their organization, also try to cyclically talk to each other, since negotiations of gender, as one moves transculturally across traditions and spaces and times, cannot but entail the realization of the same through the performative and the technological. Further, the parts, in trying to present a good balance to both the sides that such negotiations may entail, showcase both affirmative and subversive, as well as critical and cautionary instances of such transcultural negotiations of gender.

What is also to be noted is that the book studies the interface between gender and culture from both global and local perspectives, bringing together within the same volume analyses that take into consideration diverse cultural locales like Latin America, Japan, Mauritius, France, Ireland, etc., and which yet spirally converge upon India, where the bulk of the studies are based on, thus providing a unique gyrating sweep on the issue, rather than being either narrowly region-specific, or uniformly inter-regional. Moreover, as has already been mentioned, the contributors to this book are also varied. Not only do they come from diverse countries, and from diverse disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, but they are of diverse statuses too, and the resultant coexistence of very diverse views is something that we believe adds a freshness to this volume. Most importantly, and to sum up its objective once again, theoretically, this volume tries to make an important intervention in two ways: first, by locating the interaction of gender and culture on the twin axes of "belonging" and "longing", and using the cusped word "(be)longing" to represent the same (rather than the dyad "longing and belonging" which has already been used in diaspora and transnational studies); and secondly, by broadening of the scope of the "transcultural" beyond a mere spatial understanding of the same, and instead articulating the "trans" in changes in modes of articulation of culture over time and technology and media too. It is on the basis of these humble yet significant theorizations and supplementations that, in the final analysis, we believe this collection of essays will prove to be interesting read, and we present it before the reader for approval.

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