

Keeping up with the Colonies

When talking of the colonies one might think of massacres, trading centres or overbearing Brits. But Dr Debjani Ganguly has deeper insights into the subject, gleaned from the literature that followed decolonisation.

Postcolonial literature manages to capture the excitement of the postcolonial era in the former colonies. It presents the optimism they felt for their future after they had cast off their oppressive foreign rulers. These themes of postcolonial literature intrigued Debjani and lured her in to take a deeper look.

But, alas, it is not all rejoicing and bright futures. Some of her later work focuses on the portrayal of historical atrocities within literature, in particular the literature (novels, movies, art) generated by the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. Debjani says that;

“The world we live in today is hyper-connected thanks to the internet. This hyper-connectivity allowed large quantities of literature to be produced and shared within the 10 years following the Rwandan Genocide. Sadly a lot of that turned out to be crass voyeurism and atrocity tourism. I look at the aesthetics and ethics of this and come up with some answers and even more questions about these depictions of extreme violence and extreme violation.”

Debjani addresses questions such as “what are the limit cases in literature? Is it genocide? Do these portrayals sensitise or desensitise us? Should artists limit their representation of atrocities?” As a discussion of some of these questions she refers to J.M Coetzee who claims that extreme violence is mostly portrayed figuratively or metaphorically: this establishes a translation to communicate with individuals far removed from the experience. He claims that there are no metaphors. Violence is singular and there are no comparisons to genocide. Only documentaries can portray such things.

Discussing unanswered questions is the main goal of Debjani’s research. She says that when commencing a new research project she will begin by surveying the field to see if the problem is worth following up. She checks for gaps in what has been covered by previous scholars on the topic. She says that the most important skill is refining and narrowing the argument such that you end up with quite a specific point to pursue and that you must continue to hone your argument throughout the process. The core materials that she uses to perform detailed analyses of her subject matter are mostly texts from the various archives which she has access to.

This is in quite stark contrast to the method of research undertaken by the vast majority of the scientific community. Debjani extracts and analyses information from previous scholars

and from history, whereas most scientists will use information extracted from experiments and from observation. It should be noted that there are similarities between their methods, both Debjani and scientists will read extensively on work written by other scholars in their field and both are aiming to address unanswered questions.

Debjani thinks that, no matter the discipline, to have successful research you need a research culture, good communication, academic freedom, contact between research staff and students, a research community and informal support networks. The ANU's marketing gimmick, "Excellence in research", describes the university well but she laments the amount of bureaucracy and deadlines imposed by the ANU which can affect the quality of the final product.

When the work is all done and her paper is published, Debjani hopes that her work contributes to the understanding of certain issues, by virtue of answering original questions with original content. In this way she is creating knowledge, addressing the questions that are up in the air and giving her answers a form of permanency through the act of publication.