

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Northern Girls: Avant-
Garde Fiction in Reform
China*

REPORT

Speaker :

Snigdha Konar

3 Jan 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The seminar focused on *Northern Girls*, a critically acclaimed novel by Sheng Keyi, who, as pointed out by Dr. Konar, was one of the first writers in China to introduce women from the lower strata in popular fiction. The speaker pointed out that although this is a work of fiction, it is an extremely realistic portrayal of the actual situation.
- Dr. Konar highlighted how migrant workers form the most vulnerable section of society. Sheng Keyi draws from her own experiences as a migrant worker as well, thus adding a semi-autobiographical element to the book as well.
- The speaker also spoke about the structural violence the migrant workers, or the “floating population”, face after migrating from rural to urban China. She stated that migrant workers have become mere collateral damage in the process of globalisation and economic reforms.
- Dr. Konar noted that cities have become a paradox. On the one hand, they provide the opportunity for migrant workers to ascend the economic ladder, while on the other, they deprive them of even the basic standards of living.

NORTHERN GIRLS: AVANT-GARDE FICTION IN REFORM CHINA

REPORT

Speaker: Snigdha Konar, Research Associate, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Chair: Manju Rani Hara, Associate Professor, Centre for Chinese and South East Asian Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Date: 3 January 2024

Venue: Zoom Webinar

The seminar explored the novel titled, *Northern Girls* (2004) written by Sheng Keyi. The Chair introduced the audience to the genre of *avant-garde* fiction. According to Dr. Hara, Chinese *avant-garde* stands as a unique form of storytelling, often challenging long-held beliefs.

Dr. Snigdha Konar delved into the significance of the novel in the evolution of *avant-garde* fiction during the Chinese Reform Era. She highlighted that rural migrant workers, arguably the most vulnerable section of society, are a significant part of China's workforce, numbering over 300 million. In the novel *Northern Girls*, Sheng Keyi describes the plight of women migrant workers. This novel was initially rejected by Chinese mainstream literary critics as Sheng Keyi was as a migrant worker. Although the novel faced severe criticism in China, the work eventually gained attention and fame in the Western world.

Discussing the representation of women migrant workers in China, Dr. Konar noted that they are often portrayed as “fallen women”, despicable objects, and in some cases, as role models.

However, in the case of Sheng Keyi's work, the portrayal is significantly different. Taking up the case of migrant workers portrayed in the novel, the speaker pointed out that they face institutionalised cultural violence, eventually becoming victims of men, and the patriarchal state. They are often underpaid, and are victims of various forms of harassment, deceit, and are subjected to different forms of violence, including rape. Further, the household registration system, or the *hukou* system, has resulted in unequal life chances for migrant workers. As they migrate to cities in search of better avenues, they lose access to services such as education, gainful employment, and healthcare, among other social security benefits. Despite their pursuit for better opportunities, these migrant workers end up being deprived of essential services, making their living conditions even more challenging.

These circumstances, lead many women migrant workers to offer sexual services in exchange for temporary resident permits, which restricts their upward mobility. Dr. Konar posited that this should not be considered simply as an instance of personal violence, but a structural issue, where the denial of opportunities and the societal stigma against these workers lead to their exploitation. Migrant workers, who have been central to China's economic rise are often viewed as “anti-heroes” and “collateral damage” in the process of globalisation and economic reforms. Furthermore, they also face violence and discrimination in their personal lives. According to the speaker, the novel highlights the “paradoxical nature” of the city, which purportedly provides opportunities for social advancement but also comprises a dangerous interplay of structural violence and inhumane living conditions.

Dr. Konar noted that the narrative also reveals instances of structural violence, such as the *Hukou zhidu* and the implementation of China's one-child policy. Although the CPC claims that population control is an internal matter, the speaker argues that these policies infringe upon the human rights of the migrant workers.

Elucidating upon their significance, the speaker argued that Sheng Keyi's works are distinct from

the works of “pretty women” writers, who focus on lavish lifestyles. In contrast, Sheng Keyi’s characters toil in factories, and face the challenges of everyday violence and uncertainty. Furthermore, Sheng Keyi is also the first author to portray lower class women, often migrant workers, in Chinese literature. Most of her stories follow the migration model and represent the struggles and unusual events in the lives of these women and include semi-autobiographical elements. The text is primarily written in Mandarin, with occasional bursts of Hunanese and Cantonese dialects, which adds authenticity to her work as her characters represent fellow village-dwellers who have migrated to Shenzhen.

It was also noted that the publication of *Northern Girls* faced strict censorship in China, prompting the author to use asterisks to obscure explicit content. Despite this, Sheng Keyi’s novels, written with a significant element of realism, have unveiled various societal challenges, and have brought out the misogyny and violence experienced by women in China. Dr. Konar concluded her talk by stating that this novel acts as a critique of the China Dream, which talks of better education and social services. Upon reviewing the conditions of migrant workers, the speaker argued, that there is a great disparity between the “haves and the have-nots”.

This report was prepared by Muskan Punia, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

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