

How to Be an Alien in British Cultural Studies

A conference for MA students, PhD candidates and young researchers

organized by

**The Centre of Excellence for the Study of Cultural Identity (CESIC),
The British Cultural Studies Centre (BCSC) of the University of Bucharest
and New Europe College (NEC)**

**New Europe College
(21 Plantelor St., Bucharest)
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Book of abstracts:

1. Sidonia Ariton (PhD candidate, University of Bucharest) – “Shakespeare in India: Who’s the Alien?”

It is widely known that theatre has always played a major role in Hindu culture. Therefore it is no wonder that the Indian people have shown such a great interest in one of the greatest playwrights of the world, William Shakespeare, and his creation. My presentation aims at exploring the interest toward Great Will in India and the attention given in Indian culture to some of Shakespeare's most influential plays and best-known Shakespearean themes. I will aim to prove that some of Shakespeare’s plays (with particular reference to *Hamlet*) voice concerns that are very similar to some of the traditional Indian epics.

2. Alessandra Ciufu (PhD candidate, University of Bucharest) – “Alternative Identities in the British Raj. Gender Non-Normativity as Menacing Deviance in Khushwant Singh’s *Delhi: A Novel*”

The *Criminal Tribes Act* of 1871 was an attempt by British officials to control India’s broad spectre of gender fluid identities, by homogenizing gender diversity into the umbrella term ‘eunuch’. Nevertheless, it was also a means to reinforce the image of the British as the colonial authority whose purpose is to rectify the indigenous conceptualization of gender, masculinity, and alternative identities. This paper looks at representations of *hijras* in recent Indian fiction in English, to understand the impact of the British legal and cultural rearticulation of such identities. I will explore the manner in which *hijras*, as one of the numerous gender-fluid Indian communities, challenged the Western canon of gender normativity to the extent that they were regarded a social danger. I consider the Western imprint of notions of civilization, sanitation, and sexuality to disclose the destabilizing potential of such non-binary gender identities, in relation to the colonial authority which sought their erasure. Khushwant Singh’s *Delhi: A Novel* provides an account of the social, cultural, and economic decay of non-normative gender identities. I argue that the representations of the gender fluid characters in Singh’s historiographic metafiction give voice to the cultural and social anxieties of colonial India, with their reverberations in the context of globalization.

3. Teodora Driscu (PhD candidate, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași) – “A British Pilgrim Outside the UK: C.S. Lewis’s *The Pilgrim’s Regress*”

C.S. Lewis was a prolific British writer with an international reputation, reaching the United States, the rest of Europe and even the Far East. His first prose fiction, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, published in 1933, presents in an allegorical form the quest of the protagonist, John, for the mysterious Island of his longings. The inner battle portrayed in the story is a deeply universal one: the character searches for truth and the meaning of existence, wandering through the different ideologies of the North and South until he gets to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. This paper will analyse how C.S. Lewis's allegory *The Pilgrim's Regress* speaks not only to the British public, but also to the whole world, as it explores themes and motifs of universal value with an impressive power of persuasion. It delves into the reason for the paradoxical findings of the main character: instead of life, he finds death and instead of pride, he gets humility. It will use comparative methods and literary criticism to discuss the different aspects of the main character's quest, attempting to highlight what makes John, the British pilgrim, a universal Everyman.

4. Teodora Leon (American Studies MA student, University of Bucharest) – “(De)Constructing the Self in Sabba Khan's *The Roles We Play*”

Tales of immigration automatically imply a sense of displacement or of being caught between different worldviews and value systems. Clashes may arise not only between native residents and foreigners, but also among the members of an immigrant family, wherein everyone reveals a particular mentality. While older people may seek solace in deeply ingrained traditions from their country of origin, younger immigrants may find it more challenging to balance their mix of cultures. This element additionally suggests that the search for individuality is more likely to take longer, given the collision with collectively inherited traits or traumas. The paper seeks to look at two correlating aspects, namely the gradual process of identifying one's roles in a society and the way in which stories of integration do not just reveal customs belonging to the native country but may actually get to highlight the shortcomings of the host culture. The analysis will be based on Sabba Khan's graphic memoir called *The Roles We Play* (2021), which follows the author's identity crisis while growing up as a British Muslim in East London. Within a conglomeration of issues connected to racism, misogyny or religious intolerance, Khan aims at pinpointing the importance of acknowledging one's own ability (and need) to take control of their life, in order to enhance critical thinking, call out personal or communal injustices, and renounce the kind of social performativity that ultimately leads to (self-)alienation.

5. Honya Majeed (PhD candidate, University of Bucharest) – “Traditional and Transnational Identities in Multicultural London: Elif Shafak's *Honour*”

This presentation will focus on the refashioning of global identities in displacement from indigenous culture to a different culture, where rules and traditions are different, yet certain original beliefs travel with the people who move to a different country. The dislocated person fights many obstacles to adapt to a new culture, with different ideologies, beliefs and views, and sometimes patterns of thinking from their country of origin seem to provide the feeling of a certain stability. A diasporic place is affected by various cultures and traditions, yet certain mentalities are carried over borders and reinvented in relocation, even though they correspond to different times and mentalities. Patriarchal constraints continue to impact women, whose choices are limited by their expected duty to family values. I will investigate Shafak's representation of multicultural London as a site of transnational relocation and argue that the central concept of honour stands for those conservative beliefs that survive migration, being transplanted onto new territories despite people's desire to escape them.

6. Nicolae-Cristian Molea (MA student, University of Bucharest) – “Luddites, Neo-Luddites and the Inability of Science Fiction to Think Beyond Autonomous Technology”

The goal of this paper is to analyse and explain the fears of autonomous technology encountered in science fiction movies such as *The Matrix*, *War of the Worlds*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Artificial Intelligence*, *Chappie*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Elysium*, and *I, Robot*. To do so, I will analyse the relationship between Luddites and Neo-Luddites and the kind of relationship each has with technology in their particular time period. I will also have a look at what the Luddites, dating back to the Industrial Revolution, stood for, how they acted in order to protect their rights and way of life, and how the phenomenon translated into the epistemological or intellectual Neo-Luddism that is going on in the 21st century, which operates with different means and has different reasons. I will argue that science fiction is the perfect genre where this analysis and comparison can occur as it more often than not portrays forms of Luddism and Neo-Luddism and dystopic realities in which people resist autonomous modern technologies. The Luddites were a group of people, allegedly acting under the command of Ned Ludd, who resisted and fought back against the changes that the Industrial Revolution brought about by destroying new technologies, as the people of the time were being replaced in factories by cost-effective machines. Neo-Luddism is a philosophy, or way of life, encountered in the 20th and 21st centuries, which opposes the use of many harmful modern technologies and promotes a simpler way of life, though in doing so it resorts to intellectual work and movements rather than destroying new technologies.

7. Daria Nedelea (MA student, University of Bucharest) – “The Pursuit of Perfection: Queer Womanhood in British Films”

Movies are important mirrors of culture, as they show society’s common, main perception on different matters. They carry codified meanings and can maintain or deconstruct biases through their representation of certain characters. The issue of women’s representation in film is engrained in the beliefs of patriarchal societies that have shaped culture. In order to understand it one must analyze what the ideal woman is: how does she act and look? Judith Butler considered this to be the pressure of performing femininity, as in following a pre-set system of rules on what womanhood should be; in my analysis I wish to prove how performativity infiltrates female characters’ narratives in film and beyond, in the substrate of culture. When it comes to women being portrayed in movies, there has been a huge shift taking place over the past decades: from damsels in distress to powerful, independent heroines – but this is not the general rule. Queer women have often been misrepresented through tropes that villainized and reduced their identities. I wish to delve deeper into the ways female perfection is presented in two British movies, “*Cracks*” (2009) and “*Carol*” (2015), which show two opposing expressions and manifestations of it – from obsession and mental illness to falling in love and claiming one’s freedom, the characters still manage to captivate the viewers with their glamour and relatability, proving that their identities are deeply nuanced and complicated.

8. Daniela Sora (PhD candidate, “Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu) – “Three Faces of Britain’s National Identity”

We can talk about three facets of knowledge/power, which are mathematical and physical sciences, science, and philosophical reflection (Foucault, 1966, p 375). We may think that “Anthropologization is the great internal threat to knowledge in our day. We are inclined to believe that man has emancipated himself from himself since his discovery that he is not at the centre of creation, nor in the middle of space, nor even, perhaps, the summit and culmination of life” (Foucault, 1966, p 380); namely “new ways of thinking about knowledge” Foucauldian’s discourse as we should have a sense of belonging, we ought to be “Something”, not “Nothing”, we must be ethnic; we can’t have more than one ID are the arguments of native British people. According to them, people in the UK may feel English, British, something else or a mixture. Moreover, if British people want halal food, they must take that multiculturalism as the

coloration of their skin as that's an ID as well, said BBC, but more than 90% of Muslims strongly sense being genuine British. To this characteristic, I have brought Britain's" three political faces "and a minority of different religions the Muslims studied from French perspectives. The information to be analysed may be discovered in open sources.

9. Tamara Stermin (MA student, University of Bucharest) – “Further Questions for Cultural Studies: Multiplying Multidisciplinarity with the Help of Historicity”

This presentation proposes a less explored avenue of research for Cultural Studies, namely the study of intellectual virtues as cultural products, which presupposes the analysis of their development and of their frequent assimilation as cultural values. Its object of study is open-mindedness as a recognized intellectual virtue in our contemporary Western world, one usually assumed to be a universal, objective value. The question is: *Can* open-mindedness be considered a universal cultural value? Answers to this question can be sought with the help of insights from researchers from various fields, such as intellectual and cultural history, the history of science and epistemology. The hypothesis I put forward is the following: thinking could be considered of universal significance, but open-mindedness only surfaces as an intellectual virtue in contexts where freedom of thought is under threat (one recent example being totalitarian regimes). This hypothesis, however, does not solve the problem of universality, inviting new questions: Why is freedom of thought a value? And does the resurfacing of open-mindedness under the right circumstances indicate a universal value? In order to investigate these questions, I use a comparative approach and discuss theories of open-mindedness (or related concepts) from British and American mid-20th century culture, but also from cultural spaces that could be considered 'alien' to British Cultural Studies, such as intellectual discourse in communist and post-communist Romania. The potential ramifications of the initial question of universality show how the proposed approach can help multiply perspectives in the multidisciplinary dialogue characteristic to Cultural Studies.

10. Irina Vasile (MA student, University of Bucharest) – “Staging the Experience of the Outsider through Humour and Rage in Michaela Coel's Solo Performance *Chewing Gum Dreams*”

The position of the outsider in society is never an easy one to imagine oneself in and it is just as difficult to contain one's emotions and remain composed when facing an unsupportive, defensive system. Considering the diverse cultural identity in the UK, individuals became more and more aware of the way they are represented in visual culture, this becoming a key factor in constructing their self-image. The effects of these representations can be detrimental, since they have the power of constructing reality and establishing what the norm is. While some categories will integrate into this constructed normality, one might wonder what happens to the categories that do not feel represented and fall outside the norm. This paper will analyse how the experience of racial and gender discrimination is depicted through humour and rage in Michaela Coel's solo performance *Chewing Gum Dreams*. Making use of the critical works of Judith Butler, Rebecca Traister and Audrey Lorde, the main attempt of this paper is to showcase the complexity and potential of combining powerful emotions in order to raise awareness of the difficulties encountered by a young black woman throughout her journey of self-discovery.