National Seminar on
Understanding Culture through Language, Literature and Cinema
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School of Languages
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Report of Session III: Understanding the Contemporary
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The Last Session of the National Seminar organised by the School of Languages on Understanding Culture through Language, Literature and Cinema held on November 25, 2011 at the Doon University received papers under the theme Understanding the Contemporary. The Session was chaired by the Faculty of Chinese and the Head of the School of Languages, Doon University Professor B R Deepak. Scholars from various prestigious institutions of India presented papers on the debatable issues of current times like Spanish immigration cinema, Decoding the culture of Indian urban youth through Cinema, Chinese Society through Reality Shows and Responding to the Globalization in the context of Latin America.

Ms Swagata Basu, Faculty of the School of Languages commenced the session with her paper on Attempts to Understand Islam through Intercultural Encounters in Spanish Immigration Cinema. She asserted through various data and figures that Immigration to Europe started with World War II and that it kept increasing with the arrival of guest workers in various European countries. She stated that doors of Immigration to Europe were open with the need to reconstruct their economies. Subsequently in the last decade of 20th century new tendencies emerged in Europe like the rise of the Right wing politics, concept of Fortress (closed) Europe, differential racism, tests of citizenship, questions on the native cultural concepts like emphasis on local languages, ban on the construction of mosques and minarets and on the use of veil. She later emphasized on the Immigration to Spain that it is comparatively a much recent phenomenon. Immigration to Spain is very heterogeneous in nature including people from Morocco, Romania, Latin America and also from Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, a majority of natives are against immigration mainly with the ‘Moros (Moors)’. Moors were the Muslims who came from Africa and ruled Spain for 700 years but
the present day Moors in Spain are not descendants of them. But in Spain they are presented to be so. Problems lead to the integration of these Moors in the Spanish society. She stated that there is a need to understand and deconstruct. She further opined that cinema acts as a tool to understand such social situations. For which she presented the case study of two films under the sub genre of Spanish Immigration Cinema: Tomandote and El Próximo Oriente. She said that in the first film Tomandote the approach to understand Islam is Eurocentric whereas in the other film El Próximo Oriente it shifts to a multiculturalist approach.

Dr Ruby Gupta, Associate Professor of English at the Dehradun Institute of Technology shared her thoughts on Decoding Contemporary Culture of the Urban Youth: A Perspective from the movie Delhi Belly. She focussed on how cinema is the reflection of the cultural ethos out of which it is born. It holds a mirror to contemporary society; whether it is societal norms, trends, preoccupations, values, ethics, relationships, struggles, and lifestyle. Over the decades, the evolution of Indian cinema stands testimony to this fact. She through the film Delhi Belly the latest youth-centric film, said that the film depicts the veritable churning of cultures among youth in the urban milieu. It humorously highlights the situation of urban youth, which is caught between the culture of their parents and the culture of contemporary urban society. This path-breaking film, which has almost achieved cult status, unabashedly and entertainingly regales audiences with the changing norms of language, lifestyle, morality and sexual mores of the urban youth. In this, Delhi Belly is the first film that unflinchingly provides a witty glimpse into the contemporary culture of the urban youth. This paper takes an in-depth look into the fast-changing cultural deviations from the traditional Indian culture as shown in the film; and attempts to analyze how closely the movie has depicted the reality of the urban youth.

Faculty of Chinese at Doon University Mr Madhurendra Kumar Jha presented his views on Reflection of Current Socio-political Culture of China through Reality TV. He said that Reality TV is an unconventional medium to understand culture. In China it is the biggest source of entertainment and is increasing day by day. He argued that it represents the current realities of the Chinese society through the case study of three TV shows: If you are the one being the first one where the male contestant had to impress a female contestant. This show created a lot of fury and wrath from the Government as one of the female contestants said, ‘Don’t talk to me unless you are rich’. This depicts the on-growing sense of materialism in the Chinese youth. He said that this show is not promoting anything but reflecting what is
happening. As materialism is increasing the number of divorce cases is also increasing in the society which shows that economic reforms cannot always have positive impact on the people. Mr Jha took the case of another reality show titled *Let’s go Oriental Angel* (2009) telecast on Dragon TV, a dance and singing show, drew attention when a female contestant became finalist who was born to a Chinese mother and an Afro-American father. She received many remarks due to her skin colour which showed the disrespect towards foreigners and showed the racial discrimination. It reminded of the 1988 riots in China when Africans were harassed by the police as they were dating Chinese girls. At that time too Government did not criticise this act. Mr Jha concluded that with ‘Inclusive Economic Growth’ it is also important to have ‘Inclusive Culture Growth’. The Third Reality show *Supergirl* became the most popular contemporary show. It was banned, telecast and rebanned as it was criticised by the Government for eroding the tradition and values of morality. This show also gave voting rights to its viewers which again the Government did not support that showed their stance against democracy. On concluding Mr Jha said that these problems are not only unique to the Chinese society but to other societies as well.

The last speaker of the session Mr P K Mangalam, Research Scholar from Centre of Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Latin American Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, spoke on *From ‘sameness’ to equality: responses to the ‘culture’ of globalization in the texts of Eduardo Galeano*. He said that Globalization, one of the most referred themes in contemporary discourses, is seen not only in its more visible economic aspect but apart from infiltrating territories for free flow of capital through ‘liberalism’, it has also led to a process of cultural standardization through selective prioritization of certain norms over others. Such cultural codes stamp certain sameness on all of us in simple everyday acts of eating, dressing and entertaining ourselves. This sameness takes its toll on diversity of cultural exchanges eclipsing differences of all sorts. He further argued that the response to this designed sameness lies in the appreciation of egalitarian values of local cultural traditions without exoticising them. He read in the texts of Contemporary Latin American writer Eduardo Galeano (Uruguay, 1940-) that Galeano talks about this simultaneous and intertwined spread of globalization and its accompanying cultural codes across the world. In *Patas Arriba: la Escuela Del Mundo al Revés* (in English *World Upside Down*), he documents and exposes the unfolding of globalization through both its more visible politico-economic and less visible but subtle cultural paradigms. He concluded his paper by emphasizing that it is also important to note that whereas these cultural codes transcend territories and languages to dominate
cultures of everywhere texts of Eduardo Galeano also transcend these barriers in order to explain the way these codes prevail over societies as part of the whole process of globalization. Anecdotes, popular beliefs along with poetic and visual languages inform these texts, exposing crude realities in ways that enable them to connect very effectively with readers. Mr Mangalam concluded his presentation and the last session by reading out excerpts of his own translation in Hindi of *Patas Arriba: la Escuela Del Mundo al Revés* by the Contemporary Latin American writer Eduardo Galeano.

After the presentations many questions were raised to the speakers and intense discussions were done which led to a very debatable atmosphere in the hall. The Seminar was concluded by a Vote of Thanks.