

Jazbat: The Birth of the Modern Subject

An extension lecture on “Jazbat: The Birth of the Modern Subject” was organised by the Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia on 10th October 2019. The lecture was given by Professor Margaret Pernau, Senior Researcher at the Centre for the History of Emotions at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. The lecture was preceded by a welcome address by Professor Nishat Zaidi, Head, Department of English. Drawing on her latest publication, *Emotions and Modernity in Colonial India* (2019), Professor Pernau’s lecture mapped the history of emotions as well as their interpretations and practices as contextualised within major political events in colonial India, particularly the struggle for freedom. Professor Pernau began by drawing attention to a well-known apprehension within academia which is that of emotion history becoming a niche subject, which she believes is perhaps because people claim to know everything about emotions and render the study of emotions as less challenging than, say, political movements or economic history.

Professor Pernau interpreted emotion history as not a counter project to political history but as a different way of looking at political history which is powerful enough to challenge the master narratives of modernity which has always been read as a movement towards more discipline or the controlling of emotions. She further drew on theorists such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault and their concepts of modernity and bureaucracy in terms of factory workers or courts to establish the fact that the more modern a particular society becomes, the more discipline it needs. A point towards which Professor Pernau drew the audience’s attention was that there is no set category which would translate into what we call emotions, for instance, ideas such as friendship, honour and justice can come under the rubric of emotions. So, it is not only that different words are used for emotions but it also points towards the delimitation of which phenomena belong to the category like emotions and works in a different way than what one would imagine.

Professor Pernau further delved into the history of the word ‘Jazbat’, claiming that the word does not come up before the 1870s which tells a lot about the change happening during that time which was so strong that people could not grasp it any longer with the vocabulary they had on hand and they had to use new words. ‘Jazbat’, she said, comes from the concept of ‘Jazb’ in Sufism, referring to the way Sufi disciples travel towards god when He attracts him so ‘Jazbat’ always has this underlying implication of being drawn by some entity in a certain direction, not out of one’s own will in most cases. Furthermore, she established a link between emotions and nationalism, citing the Aligarh Movement as a viable instance. Nationalism, she said, is something which comes about in the modern age and is something which we cannot understand if we don’t look at emotions.

Professor Pernau cited the journal, *Tehzeeb-ul-Akhlaq* by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan which was published between 1871 and 1897 to state that most of the articles in it urged for the need for strong emotions, particularly from young men. This was required so that the community could survive and have a dignified future. The future required the readiness to feel strongly for one’s religion, community and nation. So, it was not just the need for strong emotions, but also that these strong emotions became a social ideal so that the ideal is no longer balanced; the ideal, in fact becomes ‘Josh’ which has become a new catch word since

the 1890s. Professor Pernau's lecture was thus about moving beyond the dominant narrative of colonial modernity and its fixation with discipline and restraint and traced the contemporary transformation from a balance in emotions to the resurgence of fervor. This was a novel way to understand the degree to which emotions play a part in the formation of social groups, communities and movements. Professor Pernau's lecture was thus an engaging thought about how emotions shape both private and public lives and are themselves shaped by culture.

The lecture was attended by faculty, researchers and students from both the Department of English and History. It was followed by a long discussion and question session and came to an end with a vote of thanks by Dr. Shuby Abidi, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jamia Millia Islamia.

