**Comparative Classics: Greece, Rome, and India**

**Mélissa Pires Da Silva:**

Welcome, everyone to the podcast series ‘Ancient World: New Voices’, where each episode discusses a university research on an exciting aspect of the ancient world. Brought to you by Mateen Arghandehpour, Giovanna Di Martino, Sofia Bongiovanni, and Mélissa Pires Da Silva. Today, I have the pleasure of introducing you to our guest Professor Phiroze Vasunia. Phiroze is currently Professor of Greek at the Department of Greek and Latin at UCL, and he is also Deputy Director of the Arts and Humanities at the Institute of Advanced Studies at UCL. His research interests include the study of cross cultural contact, colonialism, and empire. His interest in cross cultural research is reflected in his current project, which we shall discuss in our podcast today. The project is called Comparative Classics: Greece, Rome, and India, and Phiroze is its principal convener. Hi, Phiroze, how are you?

**Phiroze Vasunia**

Hi, thank you. It's good to be here.

**Mélissa**

Well, thank you for joining us. And we are very happy to have you. Let's start by explaining the project you are working on and you are the principal convener of. ‘Comparative Classics, Greece, Rome, and India’, who is involved in this research project?

**Phiroze**

The project involves four of us scholars. There's me in the first place, and then there's also Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad, who is a professor of Philosophy at Lancaster, there's Francesca Orsini, who is a professor of Hindi at SOAS, and has now just recently retired from SOAS. And there's Maddalena Italia, who is a Research Fellow at UCL. So it's the three of them. And then there's me.

**Mélissa**

Could you tell us what the main research goals or goal is of this project?

**Phiroze**

Yes, sure. But perhaps as I tell you about the goals, I could also tell you how the scholars that I have just named will be helping in the execution of the project. So, the idea of the project is to compare notions of the classical in Greece and Rome, and India. And we're interested in trying to understand how each culture conceptualizes its own sense of what it means to be classical. So there are people who have compared, for instance, Greek philosophy with Indian philosophy, or have compared various features of ancient Rome and ancient India, or ancient Greece and ancient India. But what we're interested in is not so much comparing the different cultures or civilizations directly, although there will be some element of that, but comparing what they mean by this concept of the classical. And so we're trying to understand through from this comparative perspective what it means to be classical, in Greece, in Rome, and India, as an ancient dimension. And then there's the modern dimension. So we're trying to look at what the ancient thinkers and writers themselves have to say about their own culture, and why, what aspects of it they regard very highly, what they are prone to rate as being hallmarks of the culture. And we're also looking at the same time at how modern scholars and thinkers have framed these ancient cultures and why and how they refer to these ancient cultures as classical. So part of the point is to broaden the notion of what it means to be classical. In English, generally, at least in university circles, when we say classics, we tend to mean Greece and Rome. And we tend not to think of other cultures as classical. So we'd like to sort of broaden out that idea of the classical to say that, to indicate that, it's more capacious than that narrow definition might indicate. And also, we want to sort of arrive admittedly at a wider non-Eurocentric conception of what it might mean to be classical. So that's partly also driving the agenda of the project. Looking at European and non-European ideas of the classical. If we had enough time, we would look at Chinese we'd look at Arabic, we’d look at Persian, we’d look at Hebrew, and all sorts of other languages and literatures and cultural traditions as well. But we wanted to be realistic, at least at this initial stage. And we've kept it to Greece and Rome, and India. And also there's an elitism to the idea of the classical. And we want to interrogate the elitism itself as well, and see whether different cultures construct the classic, in the same way, whether elitism is necessary to that idea of the classic and the classical: are there sort of more pluralistic, shall we say, less homogenous, less universalizing definitions of the classical that we might want to engage with? So, we think there are as you might imagine, and we think that, for complex reasons of the last 200 years in the way that cultures have evolved and a body for other factors, well, that there were ideas of the classical that were more flexible, perhaps more free, less totalizing than the ones that we seem to have inherited today. So these are some of the things that we're trying to look at, you know, in this project. And as I was saying, Ram-Prasad is a philosopher who mainly writes on Sanskrit traditions and Indian philosophy. And he'll be looking at the Indian material, and also Francesca Orsini is an expert on modern North Indian culture in the Urdu, Persian, she’ll looking at the sort of Indian receptions of some of the questions that we're talking about. And then Maddalena Italia is one of those fortunate people who is equally versed in Greek and Latin and Sanskrit, not to mention a bunch of other languages.

**Mélissa**

Great, yes, that's very interesting. Like you said, you are, on the one hand, looking at instances where the ancients self-reflected on their status as classics; but at the same time, on the other hand, you're also looking at later conceptions of what that classical status means. So why would you say that both these perspectives are so important to investigate?

**Phiroze**

Well, I think in a way, the idea of classics is inextricable from the reception of the classics. And really we couldn't carry out this project without looking at the modern end of things. It's true that in antiquity ideas of the classical are also being worked out. And we know for instance, that in Latin, our Aulus Gellius gives us one kind of definition of what it means to be classical. And initially, it's connected with economic factors, with status with class. But then his definition is developed and elaborated by other authors in antiquity, an much later, in the Renaissance, where, again, with the revival of interest in Greek and Latin, that classical comes to refer to Greek and Latin; there are various fluctuating approaches to what it means to be classical in the Renaissance. But basically, by around 1800 or so, thanks to Johann Joachim Winckelmann, thanks to Friedrich August Wolf, thanks to Johann Gottfried Herder and others, classics tends to mean really just Greek and Latin classics. And even within that sphere, it tends to refer to a narrow range of authors. And moreover, it tends to refer to non-Christian Greek and Latin writing. So even Greek and Latin that’s the creation of Christian writers is excluded, even if it might have come from the very same period as say Cicero, or Virgil, or Plutarch. So there's a very clear way in which the modern reception is shaping notions of what it means to be classical. There are interesting exclusions and inclusions in the canon of classics. And these gestures of inclusion and exclusion are taken over the course of the 19th century. There are further twists and turns to this narrative in the 20th century, in the early years of the 21st century, as well. So the kinds of texts that we read from antiquity, the kinds of questions we put to the test from antiquity, when we're asking the question of what is a classic, those answers shift over time. So that's why I say that the modern period is really important. It's an important part of this discussion. There’s also, as we're all too well aware today, [the fact that] Classics is elitist, and that the word classical has elitist connotations and that the idea of the classical can be seen as being something elitist. And we're trying to move away from that in our project as well. We're trying to interrogate that idea of why classics has come to be seen as elitist. And we think that if you look comparatively at the classics, the ideas of the classical, that we might find a sense of the classic, that is more pluralist, perhaps more open less universalizing, yes, less totalizing. And we think that over the last 200/300 years, partly because of how cultures have evolved in Europe, and in South Asia, and for a range of other reasons as well, there's come to be a kind of narrow definition of what it means to be classic and classical. This is reflected in, for example, in T. S. Eliot's famous essay ‘What is a classic?’ from the 1940s. And for him, of course, it's Virgil who offers us the definition of what it means to be a classic. But Eliot's conception of classic seems rather narrow to us today and I think that we can do a little bit better, even than T. S. Eliot; the essay is certainly remarkable and it's been influential and it's filled with many great ideas and many quotable passages, but I think it would do it no disservice to approach it again from a comparative perspective and think of how we might question this idea of classic that he offers us in that essay.

**Mélissa**

Are you looking at a specific timespan in this research? Because you really go from antiquity up to modernity.

**Phiroze**

Yes. So in the modern period, we're looking at roughly the last 250 to 300 years or so. We might go a little earlier. But we're interested to a significant extent in what modern European colonialism does to this discussion about the question of classics, especially in India, but also in western Europe. And we think that pressures from colonialism, from nationalism, both in Europe and in South Asia, are important shapers of this conversation. It's also interesting that the investment in antiquity in Western Europe is very different from what we find in modern India, for instance, and you would think that engineer would be very heavily studied by people in India. But it's surprising that, relatively speaking, ancient India, Sanskrit, other ancient Indian languages are not as well studied as Greek and Latin in western Europe or elsewhere, for that matter, and this is the case despite the fact that, at various moments in Indian history, there have been revivals of interest in Indian antiquity, there have been Hindu fundamentalists, political parties that have tried to claim for a particular reading of ancient India; the present government in India certainly belongs to that category. Despite its great efforts at championing a version of India that is grounded in a kind of Sanskritic-Hindu tradition, despite all that, the actual boost given to material resources for the study of ancient India is relatively limited. So if I may make a related point, the study of Greek and Latin receptions is very alive today and very quickly looked into, but on the Indian side, there's a lot of work to be done in terms of looking at the reception of ancient Indian in modern periods, but also just simply in terms of working on ancient Indian texts and producing editions of them and translations of them and commentaries on them and all the other kinds of analytical work that we're familiar with from Greek and Latin studies. I'm slightly exaggerating, there is a large degree of work that has been done. But it could be more.

**Mélissa**

That's very interesting to know, actually. I didn't know that. Something that really stands out in what you’ve just said is the importance of comparing India to Greece and Rome and the Indian tradition, the classical tradition to the traditions of Greece and Rome, and what stands out is the adjective comparative. Could you maybe explain why you are using this comparative methodology and how you are using it?

**Phiroze**

Yeah, we're interested in a comparative approach, because, as I was suggesting earlier, we think that bringing these different cultures into a conversation with each other will help us arrive at a more rigorous, more analytical understanding of what it means to be classical. So we'll be trying to see whether the picture changes our answers, changes when we, say, look at a particular culture from the vantage point of another culture, or even a particular genre from the vantage point of a genre from another culture. The comparative method is something of course that has been with us for generations, it evolved in many powerful ways in the 19th century, it’s connected with Max Müller, who was himself a distinguished Sanskrit scholar, and translator. But in the last sort of generation or so there's been a kind of renewed interest in comparativism, even among classical scholars, I would say, and this goes back to people like Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Detienne, who famously said: ‘compare the incomparable’. And then Geoffrey Lloyd has been encouraging classical scholars and others for three or four decades now to be comparative in their work. And he's written extensively about Greece and China from a comparative perspective, other scholars too have been advocating for a comparative approach. So we're drawing on some of the work of the scholars that I've just named, Geoffrey Lloyd, and then Marcel Detienne, Lévi-Strauss, to some extent, also, and others; but we’re also trying to see where we might be able to give something back to the comparative method as well from what it is that we're doing. I could give you an example, let's say of love poetry. For instance, if you look at the poetry of Sappho, or we look at the poetry of Catullus and think of this mainly in relation to other Greek and Latin love poetry, you arrive at one set of understandings of that particular Greek and Latin poetry, but if you bring it in relation to Sanskrit erotic poetry, you might come away with a different understanding of what Sappho was trying to do or what Catullus was trying to do. Similarly, if you bring it down into discussion with Urdu poetry, love poetry from the 19th and 20th century, you might again reconfigure what it means to read Sappho or Catullus or Ovid, or any of the other ancient poets who write about love. So there has been interesting comparative work between Sappho, say, and modern European poets, or Catullus and modern European poets, but I think you'll find fewer comparisons that look at Sappho in relation to poetry composed in South Asia. And in fact, one of the members of our group, Maddalena Italia has written on this very topic. She's looked at Sanskrit erotic poetry. And she's looked at discussions of this in the 19th century; and she has shown in her work that there's still a lot that can be done with our understanding of Sanskrit love poetry, because, in the 19th century, some of the scholars who were commenting on Sanskrit erotic poetry were actually coming to it from the perspective of Sappho. And so they were reading the Sanskrit in the light of Sappho. This is a fascinating phenomenon in many respects; you could say, why not?, let's read one poetic tradition in the light of another. But you might say perhaps also that there are some limitations. Why not read Sanskrit poetry in relation to other kinds of poetic traditions as well? So Maddalena has been trying to explore all this in her writings and in her work.

**Mélissa**

Very interesting, you are talking about reading one poetic tradition in light of the other. That reminded me of how interesting it is to see how these different cultures, because they are so different, build a relationship, a dialogue with one another, because that is also what you're trying to establish, to build a dialogue between traditions that are so different. Can you tell us a bit more about the type of relationship that you are finding between these diverse traditions?

**Phiroze**

Well, that's a very difficult and challenging question. And I would say that one factor that we might bear in mind is partly the historical context as well, and the historical frame. So in antiquity there was relatively little contact between the Mediterranean and India. Of course, there'll be scholars who will jump at my throat as soon as I've said that, because they'll say, well, there was lots of trade between Rome and India. And there was trade between Hellenistic Egypt and India. And there are similarities between Greek thought in Buddhism or Greek thought in Hinduism. And there are similarities in the kind of ideas of abstraction and materialism as well in these different cultures. But I think the points of contact that we do have are actually remarkable, because there was so little contact otherwise. And so the period of Gandharan art that we have, for instance, from the first couple of centuries CE, that show a fusion of Hellenic and Indic, and Saka influences. And again, the period of the Indo-Greek kingdoms from the death of Alexander to about 150 BCE, that's interesting, because it brings Greeks and Indians together, for what is to a significant extent the first time. And as I said, there's trade between the Roman Empire and India and large quantities of golden coins, other kinds of coins have been found in India, especially in southern India. So there are these instances of contact and trade and exchange. But I think that what's more interesting is trying to understand for instance, or to compare and contrast, if you will, ideas about ethics, ideas about the soul, ideas about literary genres, and, as I was suggesting, ideas about value, that is to say, what makes a certain thing valuable? What makes you give it the distinction of a classic? Why do you bestow that particular quality or character on a text or object or work of art? That's what we're trying to get at when we're looking at contacts and continuities and discontinuities between different cultures.

**Mélissa**

Amazing. Yes. Are there any specific case studies, because we were talking earlier about Sappho as an example, are there specific case studies that you will be focusing on in this research project to highlight those ideas?

**Phiroze**

There are certain texts that we think we'll be coming back to again and again; but we haven't, at the moment, said that we're only going to look at two or three case studies, although it’s possible that we might do so as the project evolves. We're interested, for example, in love poetry, as I've been saying to you earlier, so we'll be looking at conceptions of love poetry in Greece and Rome and India; why certain ones are privileged over others, why certain ones come to be written about, how they come to be written about and discussed and explored in antiquity, and in the modern period. So that will be one important set of examples that we're looking at. Another set of examples, also thinking in terms of genre is epic poetry. And we're trying to understand sort of comparatively about Homer and Virgil, on the one hand, and the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, on the other, and try to see whether we can understand the particular evolution of these epics, especially in the modern period when we approach them comparatively; the particular questions that are put to these epics, not just in terms of composition, but also in terms of the ideological reading of some of these poems. Why some readings get privileged over others. So why is the, for example, with the *Aeneid*, why is the Augustan reading, if you will, the one that claims that Virgil was sympathetic to Augustus, and that he largely supported the ambitions of the Augustine program, why has that become such an important reading strain, a very dominant strain in the history of Virgil scholarship? And I think if you look at that question, let's say from a South Asian perspective, you might say, well, it's connected with things that are going on in modern Europe in the 18th 19th and early 20th centuries, and that's partly, not exclusively, but partly connected to those sorts of things. So book 1, where Jupiter is talking to Venus, book 6, where Anchises is talking to Aeneas, book 8, the shield of Aeneas, book 12, at the end, when there's the statement about how the peoples are going to be reconciled. These are very important passages in the history of Virgilian scholarship for the last 200-300 years. But why have they become important? Who decided they were important? What are they important for? So we think looking at the epic traditions, and approaching them comparatively, will be important to this conversation: comparing the *Aeneid* with the *Ramayana*, I think, actually would be a very worthwhile exercise, or for that matter comparing the *Odyssey* with the *Ramayana* and comparing the *Iliad* with the *Mahabharata*. There are many similar themes in these epic poems, themes of abduction of an aristocratic woman, the search and the mission to rescue her, and bring her back home, the wandering hero, questions of exile and homeland, the threats, monsters, you have to overcome, etc. These are all central to the traditions in the Mediterranean as well as in South Asia. So we're hoping to explore this in a little more detail.

**Mélissa**

Thank you so much for these concrete examples. Talking about exploring these traditions, I just want to end with this last question: do you think that exploring the relationship between these traditions will help us understand the discipline of classics a bit better? Or even reimagine the future of classics as a discipline?

**Phiroze**

Of course, I'm tempted to say yes, I hope they will. I hope this will. But you know, that's very grandiose. And I'm flattered that you even think that this project could do that; but I hope that this will be a small contribution towards that in its own way. And as I was saying to you earlier, I hope that thinking about the Mediterranean world, thinking about Greece and Rome in a broader framework, so looking beyond the Mediterranean, looking at south Asia, looking at Asia, looking also, for that matter, further south, in Africa, and further north in Europe, I think all of that would be helpful for the study of what we call classics, and for the study of Greek and Latin. It's of course not a coincidence that there's been a surge in interest in global antiquities at the moment or world conceptions in world literature. And I wouldn't deny that this project sort of comes out of some of those interests and energies. But it's not that we're simply trying to be trendy, of course: we want to do something that is helpful and meaningful in a concrete way. I think decentering some of the ideas that we have, provincializing Europe, as one scholar put it, that is to say: placing it in a more global framework, might in fact, paradoxically, bring out new values and new resonances in these Greek and Latin texts that we may not have necessarily seen or appreciated before. And similarly, I hope that also, on the Indian side, we'll see things about Indian traditions in antiquity and in the modern period that we may not have noticed before, had we not been thinking comparatively, in the terms that this project is trying to do.

**Mélissa**

Thank you so much, Phiroze, for sharing this fascinating piece of research with us. It has been a real pleasure having you as our guest. And thank you also to our listeners for listening to this episode of ‘Ancient World: New voices’. You can drop your comments in the feedback form on the podcast webpage, and we look forward to welcoming you back for the next episode in a month's time. You can find more information about this podcast’s guest speakers, posts and materials on the UCL department of Greek and Latin website, which you can find in the description below.