## Book Review

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Picturing South Asian Culture in English: Textual and Visual Representations, Edited by
Tasleem Shakur and Karen D'Souza, Liverpool: Open House Press, 2003, pp.199

South Asian Popular Culture, Edited by Rajinder Kumar Dudrah, K Moti
Gokulsing and Gita Rajan, Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge Journals, Volume 1, Number 1, April 2003, pp.88
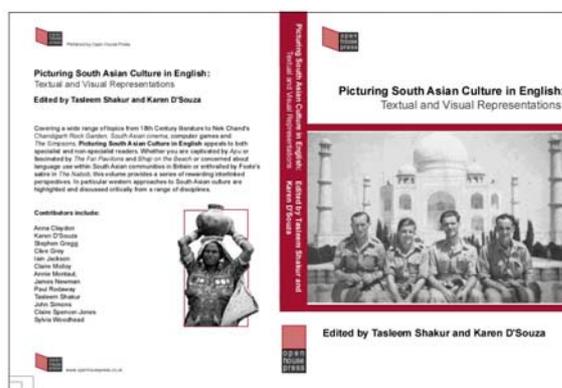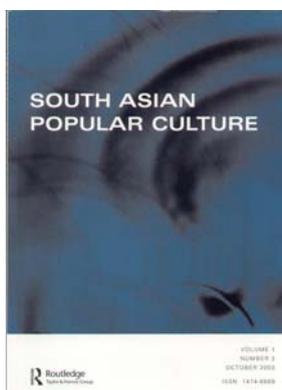
The notion of the sub-discipline of South Asian cultural studies is rapidly gaining force and establishing itself in areas such as literary and film studies, linguistics, history and geography. This review will consider a book and a journal that have been published within the context of, but not limited by, the development of South Asian cultural studies in the UK. South Asia is accepted by both texts as the geographical area encompassing the subcontinent (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka), which also extends the culture of the South Asian diaspora, particularly in Britain and America. In general however, the field hovers over urban centres in modern India or a non-regionally specific diaspora referred to as 'British-Asian' or 'Asian-American'. I believe this poses a problem for the field, that debates are positioned within the two 'homogenising' cultures of east and west. By this I mean the mainstream 'white British' culture or the 'Bollywood Indian' culture, whereas British-Asian culture has many more influences such as Black Afro-Carribean culture or regional culture.

Picturing South Asian Culture in English is a compilation of essays that grew out of a workshop at Edge Hill College, Lancashire, and the majority of the contributors are from there, albeit from a wide range of departments and disciplines. *South Asian Popular Culture* is the first issue of a new journal published by Routledge that attempts a longer term project to 'respond to the growing interest in South Asian

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popular culture within the different subject disciplines in the social sciences and humanities'. The journal is to be published biannually in April and October.

Several of the essays in *Picturing South Asian Culture in English* deal with literary (and theatrical) representations of South Asian culture. The first part ('Deconstructing History: Canonising Critical Constructions') begins with Stephen Gregg's essay, 'Representing the Nabob: India, Stereotypes and Eighteenth-century Theatre.' Gregg considers the play *The Nabob* by Samuel Foote (first performed in 1772) within the context of Georgian theatrical satire. A nabob was a governor in India under Mogul Empire, usually ending up extremely wealthy whatever their original background. The satire masks its real targets, suggesting the Nabob himself is the likely victim. Despite this, the play demonstrates an Orientalist view of India, one of an exotic 'other' corrupting otherwise consummate Englishmen. In an essay devoted to the novel *The Far Pavilions* (M.M. Kaye, 1979), Sylvia Woodhead uses a personal perspective on cultural geography to add to the debate on personal acquisition of knowledge. The articulation of theories of place attachment and the relationship between imagination and geography are convincing but one problem is Woodhead's personalised conclusion that appears as 'Orientalist' as the geography textbooks she seeks to discredit. The strongest literary criticism is 'From *Heat and Dust* to *East is East*: Journey from the Colonial to the Post-colonial South Asian Cultural Space' (Tasleem Shakur and Karen D'Souza), which in addition to the title book and play also considers the novel *In Custody* (Anita Desai, 1985). It's an ambitious journey and their choice of texts and character studies are appealing, concentrating in particular on issues of gender representation.

There are two essays that feel less appropriate to the volume, 'Finding Ceylon in 1603: Remembering Gamini Salgado' by John Simons and 'Confronting Attitudes towards English in Britain and South Asia: Language as an Expression of Identity in South Asian Contexts' by Clive Grey. The first is about Gamini Salgado, a Sri Lankan academic working in Britain who was the first Sri Lankan to become an English Professor. Despite John Simons' claims that this is a personal memoir and what follows is an interesting account, it fails to come to any useful conclusions with a juxtaposition of late 1930s Ceylon and Elizabethan England. Clive Grey opens the third part of the volume with linguistics, and the issue of the use of English language in India (with an aside to David Blunkett's infamous comments of 2001 relating to UK immigration). This essay is the only one not based on some kind of textual analysis and instead moves on to explore English as the language of education in India, which I believe belongs in another book altogether.

A particular highlight is the exploration of 'Politicised Territory: Nek Chand's Rock Garden in Chandigarh.' Nek Chand neglected his job as a city road inspector, and instead collected rubbish to idly build statues in a forgotten wasteland on the periphery of the city. Whilst Nek himself had no political or aesthetic agenda, Iain D Jackson argues that Nek Chand's Rock Garden offered the first successful denouncement of the Le Corbusier-influenced modernist city planning of Chandigarh.

The concluding part of the book aims to explore postmodernity and hybridity through three contemporary visual texts respectively, the film *Bhaji on the Beach, The Simpsons* and a computer game, *Diddy Kong Racing*. Anna Claydon analyses *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993, directed by Gurinder Chadha) in relation to masculinity and

fantasy with some interesting observations, including the discussion of the landscape of Blackpool as 'a mise-en-scene of post-colonial desire'. I disagree only with a concluding remark that 'British culture is no longer homogeneous,' as I dispute it ever was. Analysis of popular animated television series or computer games are an attractive choice for this volume, yet neither essays are significant contributions alone. Considering the character of Apu in *The Simpsons* turns the topic to Asian-American identity, an uneasy transition in a book otherwise concerned specifically with Britain, South Asia or both. Paul Rodaway's exploration of the critical performativity of Apu isn't particularly illuminating, perhaps a consideration of British Asian television programmes or characters would have complimented the volume better. Computer games are a fascinating area for analysis but this essay is more about racial stereotypes and images of elephants in general, than engaging with theories of new media.

Picturing South Asian Culture in English is primarily ambitious in its consideration of textual and visual representations from four centuries in a modest volume, resulting in a slightly disjointed read. Though its intent from the start is to be cross-disciplinary, an approach to one area such as visual culture would have provided a more consistent link through the wealth of material on offer. The idea of 'in English' could have been more narrowly defined, particularly as they originate from so many eras and countries. There was also a lack of engagement in the cultural theories of Said and Bhabha, who are often name checked but never explored. This volume is however important to open up further interdisciplinary debates on South Asian culture, and should also be followed by more focused studies of representations of specific texts.

South Asian Popular Culture contains a similar mixture of diverse texts and approaches, which suits the nature of a biannual journal more so than one book. The two articles that 'bookend' the journal are particularly insightful for the progression of South Asian cultural studies in an international context, 'South Asian Cultural Studies-Lessons from Back Home?' by Gargi Bhattacharyya and 'Notes Towards an Agenda for the Next Generation of Film Theorists in India' by Ashis Nandy. The former looks at diaspora writing in cultural studies, and outlines three prominent voices from Indian academia (Nandy, Chatterjee, and Bharucha) to warn against the dangers of separating cultures. The emphasizing of cultural boundaries often occurs through the diaspora's sense of pride and shame; Bhattacharyya imploring all 'to keep space for dialogue, change and uncertainty.' Nandy discusses a trend for Indian film academics that may well seep into UK study of Indian (particularly Hindi) popular cinema, especially now that the infatuation with everything Bollywood has subsided. Essentially he attacks the need to analysis popular Hindi cinema with the aim of producing 'lengthy, serious and sophisticated reasons for not liking them.' These essays are essential reading for all students of South Asian culture and also propose a challenge for future editions of the journal.

'Bombay Boys and Girls: The Gender and Sexual Politics of Transnationality in the New Indian Cinema in English' discusses several contemporary films which have purposely avoided identification with either Bollywood or parallel/art cinema to attempt to forge a new identity for themselves. Largely in English the films focus on the experience of NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) returning to India. Using textual analysis and considering the climate of the industry in which they were produced, Jigna Desai discovers a voice that is able to criticise both the diaspora and nation-

state. It is interesting to consider this alongside *Picturing South Asian Culture in English*, especially the essays that explore themes of travel and mythic India such as *Heat and Dust* where the protagonists look for enlightenment in the exotic East.

A less engaging article is 'Hybridised Identity as Counter-Discursive Strategy: A Genealogy of British Asian Culture and its Postcolonial Theatres' by Dimple Godiwala on British Asian theatre. I feel this article should have been brought as up to date as possible, maybe considering whether community theatre has been influenced by mainstream South Asian influenced theatre and musicals such as Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Bombay Dreams*. Again the need for more analysis of British-Asian television springs to mind, especially with the recent explosion of 'Asian' dramas (such as *Second Generation*, Channel 4, September 2003). Godiwala's conclusion that British-Asian theatre 'must seek to be challenging, hybrid, oppositional if need be,' could well be applied to any independent, regional or community theatre in the UK. Amit Rai's article 'Start Narrative Here: Excess and the Space of History in Asian Diasporic Films' is a formal analysis of films by Chinese-, Japanese-, and South Asian-American and Canadian filmmakers. His article includes an excellent analysis of formal space in Srinivas Krishnan's *Masala* (1991) utilising the theory of 'excess' to resist traditional viewing positions. Finally, 'Exhibiting Technology, Experiencing Culture: India through the Lens' by Gita Rajan is an absorbing discussion of an American photography exhibition, and the dichotomy between its conventional, traditional curation (emphasizing India as colonized nation) and the challenge to this by the medium of photography.

In conclusion, both book and journal are valid contributions to the field, and will hopefully be followed by further cross-discipline approaches. There is still much to debate, and these texts offer an important place for other academics to start from. Both texts are positively ambitious; the journal has the benefit of continuing its debate, whilst the book is more accessible to a general readership. Bhattacharyya, in the journal article discussed above, finishes with a quote from Rustom Bharucha that functions as a direction (and a reminder) for South Asian cultural studies, 'culture is not just what exists in me, or what exists in you, but what could exist between me and you.'