

## **Of Silk Saris and Mini-Skirts: South Asian Girls Walk the Tightrope of Culture**

*Amita Handa*

*Toronto: Women's Press, 2003. 211 pages.*

Using articles from Canadian mainstream media, discussions with Canada's South Asian community, and interviews with young second-generation South Asian women about their relationships with school and family during the early to mid-1990s, Handa sets out to contest the dominant culture clash model that has been used to explain how South Asian adolescents are "torn" or "caught" between the values of "traditional" (South Asian) and "modern" (Canadian) culture. Handa argues,

... that women and youth have become symbols of the sets of values that are seen to be in need of protection from the process of modern social progress ... certain notions of women and youth are mobilized in order to maintain and assert specific notions of identity and belonging. (p. 19)

Also, she points out that "South Asian cultural identities rely on particular definitions of womanhood in order to assert a distinct Eastern identity vis-à-vis the West" (p. 19).

The book is organized into seven chapters. The first chapter situates the central issues and questions she raises in her book amidst recollections of her past experiences in Canada and her reflections on present-day changes in Canada's South Asian community. The bulk of this chapter focuses on critiquing the dominant "culture clash" model in an effort to underscore its inadequacies. This critique hinges primarily on theoretical discussions of culture and identity, which become the theoretical framework for her work.

In the following five chapters, the author shares her findings, analyses, and arguments. Each chapter focuses on developing one particular aspect of her central argument, although many common subtexts and themes thread their way through them. Some of the main themes and subtexts are the invisibility of whiteness in relation to the ethnicity of brownness; the centrality of a white Canadian identity and the maintenance of white power and privilege; and the positioning of young South Asian women by discourses of East/West, modern/traditional, and brown/white, as well as their continuous negotiation of identities. In the last chapter, Handa plants the seeds of possibility for a collective political voice of opposition to racism built on black and South Asian diasporic voices.

Handa's experiences as a second-generation South Asian woman growing up in Canada during the 1970s are the major catalyst for this book. Many of her past experiences, which clearly are marked moments in her life, are scattered throughout the book, often juxtaposed against the women's narratives or used to set the context for the issues she raises. She skillfully writes herself into the work, leaving the reader with a clear sense of her multiple subject positions and locations and how they influence and speak to her analyses and arguments. It is obvious that this work is not just an academic endeavor for the author; it seems to be a cathartic undertaking as well.

The book's major strength is the vast diversity of literature that Handa draws on to develop and support her analyses and arguments. She weaves together complex historical and theoretical debates and arguments from an exhaustive array of literature, which includes colonialism, post-colonialism, diaspora, culture, identity, youth, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and nationalism. Handa applies this diverse literature in novel and insightful ways to her own work on the contemporary experiences of young second-generation South Asian women in Canada. Using the works of notable historians and scholars Pratha Chatterjee, Vinay Mani, Jenny Sharpe, and Laura Stoler, she rightly argues that:

... the positioning of South Asians vis-à-vis a dominant white/anglo population continues to be accomplished by drawing boundaries around notions of tradition, culture and women related to those that operated in colonial India. (p. 55)

A further strength is the book's validation of the emotional and psychological trauma experienced by diasporic peoples. By highlighting women's agency and resistance, Handa is careful not to portray them as victims. At the same time, she neither romanticizes their resistance nor disguises their complicity when it comes to naming racism as cultural difference or ignoring the privileges of whiteness. The author refrains from individualizing their actions; instead, she places them within the larger political and socio-historical context of Canadian immigration and multiculturalism, noting that "women are constantly positioned in relation to race and racial difference," and that the "difficulty for them becomes naming experiences of racism within a context that constantly tells them that race and racial difference do not matter" (p. 21).

The book's main shortcoming is its organization. While her arguments are clear, they lack a particular coherence and thus leave the reader contin-

ually revisiting many of the same themes and arguments throughout the book. Understandably, the complexity of her analyses and arguments, as well as the numerous subtexts and themes, make her work difficult to organize in a straightforward manner.

A large segment of the book is devoted to exploring the role that popular culture (e.g., dance, dress, and Bhangra music) plays in contesting, redefining, and often reinforcing static and essentialist notions of identity within the South Asian diaspora. However, a major oversight is her decision not to explore the impact of India's movie industry (Bollywood) on this group's identity formations. This is a glaring omission, for Bollywood has been, and continues to be, one of the most powerful forms of popular culture used to create and shape South Asian identities, particularly those of women. Bollywood's audience is no longer confined to the Subcontinent, but encompasses its extensive diasporas as well. Handa's book would have benefited from a consideration of how Bollywood reinforces, contests, and redefines the images and identities of South Asian women and the impact that this has had on the identity formations of diasporic South Asian female youths, who constitute a major consumer of this industry.

Handa touches on many of the markers of difference that have divided South Asians, including religion. She rightly notes that ongoing religious-based conflict in contemporary India continues to play out in the diaspora. Given that Muslim identity constitutes a major part of South Asian diasporic identity, the need for works that explore the interconnections of this identity with a variety of ethnic, cultural, and religious identities in the diaspora becomes more pressing.

In Canada, relatively little has been written on the South Asian diasporic community, particularly pertaining to women. Amita Handa attempts to fill this gap by bringing to life the realities of this all-but-forgotten segment of Canadian society. Her work, with its unique focus on this group and largely with respect to Canada's history of racism, immigration, and multiculturalism, is a valuable contribution to the existing literature and paves the way for future works on difference and diversity in diaspora.

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