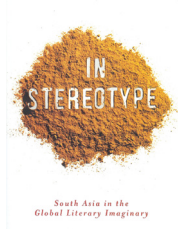


MRINALINI CHAKRAVORTY



Mrinalini Chakravorty, *In Stereotype: South Asia in the Global Literary Imaginary*

New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. xiv + 320 pages. 6 illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Hardcover, \$50.00; e-book, \$49.99. ISBN 9780231165969 (hardcover); 9780231537766 (e-book).

THIS IS A PONDEROUS TOME, neither an easy read nor an easily comprehensible anthropological and sociological investigation, but rather is in the genre of theory-laden postcolonial/postmodernist literary criticism. Beginning with the author's acknowledgment of debts to an unusually long list of scholars, associates, and relations who have cajoled, counseled, and prodded her to undertake and complete her enterprise, every chapter of this book is overflowing with innumerable quotations from other texts—ironically dealing with the problems of a notoriously overcrowded subcontinent. Yet this a stupendously scholarly product yelling for readers' attention and accolade. Quite expectedly, the book's jacket is emblazoned with powerfully crafted paean from her two distinguished acolytes.

This study wishes to evaluate the role of cultural stereotypes in some select Anglophone fictions by South Asian writers in producing the subcontinent's image on the world stage. As a scholar, Chakravorty judiciously distances herself from the camp of stereotype bashers who consider—that is, in her borrowed phraseology, through “ethical reading practice” (224)—and help situate “readers' interests (even in terms of their detachment or disinterest) in relation to worlds of difference” (223). Paraphrased in simple prose, the author maintains stereotypes do not uniformly or always imply disdain but, most of the time, difference, despite globalization. They help us realize that our world is inherently unequal (that is, not the same, though not in any hierarchical or moral sense). Indeed, such a view of a heterodox world has been the staple of postmodern *Weltanschauung* forms and this informs the ideological intellectual foundation of the book under review.

Chakravorty's select authors are Salman Rushdie, Arvind Adiga, Michael Ondaatje, Monica Ali, Mohsin Hamid, and Chetan Bhagat, Rushdie being the most controversial as well as the most feted of them all. She observes that “the multitude exists in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* “to reify stereotypical images of the subcontinent as teeming, chaotic, heteronormative, excessively consumptive, and fecund—a vision of a people aligned with the goals of a liberal state” (46). The stereotypes about hunger, poverty, and overcrowding in slums in Adiga's *The White Tiger* are discussed in tandem with Mike Davis's box-office blockbuster *Slumdog Millionaire* to highlight the myths about the informal economy of the “third economy” of the “Third World” as a cunning response of the criminal poor to the challenges of burgeoning modernity (47). In Ali's novel *Brick Lane*, Chakravorty considers what happens when the stereotype (“despitation, displacement, tenement housing, and crowds”) about a people follows them as they move from the colony to the metropole (48). Hamid's post-9/11 novel, *The*

Reluctant Fundamentalist, in Chakravorty's estimation, exposes "stereotypes about South Asia's place in the world," and forces his South Asian readers to "contemplate [their] involvement in how collectives elsewhere are mirrored in [their] ideas about the globe" (48). A brief concluding discussion of Bhagat's fiction, *One Night at the Call Center*, along with the film and television series, *Outsourced*, makes the point how the odyssey of both the terrorists and the overworked and tired corporate night shift workers affect assumptions "how coercion and free will are globally perceived" (49).

The above, indeed, constitutes a rich fare for commentaries and analyses and they are delivered sumptuously in steroidal muscular prose with copious quotations and footnotes. No wonder the work resembles an impressive dissertation demonstrating the depth and intensity of scholarly research—a magnificent literary overkill. A sober editorial intervention would have helped reduce its gratuitous bulk, the numerous asides in the text, and the long explanatory endnotes for the sake of greater precision and clarity as a monograph.

One should bear in mind that the stereotypes analyzed in the book are not to be understood as fictive or as products of prejudice. Stereotypes cannot arise *ex nihilo* but must refer to some actuality. As the British fantasy writer, poet, and political activist China Tom Miéville has it, "the stereotype exists because it is very often true." In the book under review there is, however, a puzzling elision of some typical cultural stereotypes not always connected to the subcontinent's colonial contact and impact. Although these are not to be found in works used by the author, the title *In Stereotype* does call for a discussion of the more comprehensive and deep-seated cultural and behavioral stereotypes but the author purveys only those that are the usual fare for either Western or based-in-the-West global authors and observers. For example, the stereotypes of social mannerisms such as eating and drinking habits and sense of hygiene and cleanliness of the South Asians in general. Oprah Winfrey's unabashed remark in a tone of muted surprise that "Indian people eat with their hands still" may have been uncalled for in respect of the American visitor's wealthy and educated host family (4) but it was right on the mark.

Thus, the Indian habit of eating with hands, so majestically claimed by a journalist remonstrating against Oprah's remark, cannot overlook or overwrite the brute fact how most Indian males (I speak from my experience in West Bengal, Bihar, and several areas of Uttar Pradesh), with the sole exception of a tiny fraction of the populace, not only use their hand to put food in the mouth but also masticate with their mouth open and "smack, smack, smack," nonchalantly—a grim spectacle that is provocation enough for any unsuspecting stranger amid them or sitting nearby to turn misophoniac. Then, at the end of the meal, they invariably lick all five fingers like a child sucking on licorice or an ice cream, until all the food particles are duly gulped. Thus, with his bellyful of succulent lunch or dinner, the happy Hindu Adam lets out a roaring burp signifying total satisfaction. Burping boasts a hallowed tradition that is sanctified in the *Mahabharata* story of Lord Krishna producing a cosmic burp on touching with his divine tongue a fragment of a cooked leaf (*śāk*) from Draupadi's hand as a sign of *tripti*.

Likewise, most women, *mutatis mutandis*, feed their toddlers and even older kids at home as well as in public little balls that are shaped by slowly and meticulously mashing the cooked stuff in their palms and stuffing the child's mouth adorably. Of course, Indian men, adolescent and adult alike, sip their tea or coffee with pronounced slurps—and the noisier the slurp, the more sapid the brew. There are other male habits like yelling over the phone, relieving themselves by the roadside, and expectorating oral and nasal

phlegm or bloody red betel juice everywhere on the street, and unabashed nose-picking in public. On the other hand, the Indians' hypersensitive purity fetish makes them use gallons of water to wash away trash, dust, and effluent matter, thus contaminating the entire home as well as the nearby households. There are scores of other stereotypical habits of Indians that exist outside of the frame of experience of the six literati and the author is concerned with the theoretics of the familiar stereotypes in the world.

Another stereotype of South Asia is visual and olfactory: raw sewage and the consequent malodorous air that Indians inhale but to which they are totally blind or anosmic. A blogpost from an Indian website describes the "obvious reality in India—a ghastly spectacle of rows of people defecating daily along any railway lines. Fifty-five percent of Indians defecate in the open every day. More than half the Indians cannot afford a toilet." However, the Indian (especially Bengal and Bihar) countryside stinks not only of human waste but also of cow dung used as cleanser, protective coating, and as holy shit, purifier of the walls and floors of the mud huts. The first prime minister of independent India, Pandit Nehru, proclaimed publicly: "The day every one of us gets a toilet to use, I shall know that our country has reached the pinnacle of progress." The distinguished diasporic literati Naipaul, on his first visit to India, was brutalized by the ubiquitous sight of people defecating everywhere and famously regarded the land of his ancestors as a part of the "turd world" rather than of the Third World.

An important point in respect of stereotypes of the Indians is that they are totally impervious to self-reflexivity about acknowledging their shortcomings which they regard as their sacrosanct cultural heritage and are ever ready to label any queries in this regards as inventions of the benighted outsiders at best or ignorant nitpicking by the arrogant and prejudiced foreigners at worst. Thus, Oprah's innocent but spontaneous remark was received with sneer and mockery by an educated journalist just to prove that the Indians' respect for time-honored practices are and must remain the hallmark of their culture and tradition apotheosized as *sanātana* (perennial), even in an ever-changing, heterogenous, globalized world.

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