

**Elora Halim Chowdhury and Esha Niyogi De, eds.**

***South Asian Filmscapes: Transregional Encounters***

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South Asian films and cultural scenes are not homogenous. Instead, South Asian nation-states are divided by national boundaries, ethnicity, language, politics, economy, and cultural and religious differences. There are historical connections and contentions between and among the various regions and subregions of South Asian countries. Against this context, *South Asian Filmscapes: Transregional Encounters* explores how film archives in South Asia provide a “multisensory” historical lens into the connected histories of the region, featuring a wide range of essays and analyses from leading scholars and filmmakers covering various topics related to South Asian cinema. In this insightful book, many chapters delineate the cross-border mobility of film arts, and practitioners have dislocated the fixed notion of national identity. In contrast, other chapters question the

cinematic representations that converge on nationalistic, sexual, gender, religious, and linguistic discourses. The authors argue that despite the tendency for infrastructures of production and exhibition to be restricted by national and global regimes of finance and knowledge, the cinema is also open to competing social and political claims made by its filmmakers, financiers, and target audiences. The form can exceed or transcend divisions and hierarchies and critique cognitive categories such as regional, statist, or global.

The book is divided into three sections, each focusing on a different aspect of films in South Asia. Part 1, “Nations and Regional Margins,” examines films that navigate borders and differences internal to Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. Here, the politics of nationalism, identity, and representation are at play. In this section, among five chapters, two concern Bangladeshi films, two Pakistani films, and one Indian film. All the chapters revolve around the idea that the oppressed do not take oppression for granted. Instead, they oppose or negotiate with the oppressors and their oppressions. In chapter 1, Fahmidul Haq elucidates how Bangladeshi independent cinema often presents a specific understanding of national identities based on “Bengaliness,” “Muslimness,” or both. This chapter argues that independent films in Bangladesh often engage in alterity to “Muslimness.” The author calls for a syncretic narrative of popular religion to reduce conflict. Similarly, Glen Hill and Kabita Chakma in chapter 4 illustrate the marginality of Chakma cinema within the dominance of Bengali-Muslim cinema. They argue that despite having broader appeal across the globe, the indigenous Chakma films are being marginalized by the hegemonic representational politics of contemporary Bengali-Muslim films, which show Bangladesh’s identity as homogenous, disregarding the non-Muslims and non-Bengalis such as hill tribes living in Bangladesh.

Kamran Asdar Ali in chapter 2 and Nasreen Rehman in chapter 5 discuss films from 1950s and 1960s Pakistan that challenged the moral and ethical boundaries of Pakistani nationalist narratives. Ali analyzes two films from the 1960s, *Saheli* (1961) and *Neela Parbat* (1969), and Rehman analyzes *Neend* (1959) to foreground differences rather than cultural unity in the prescribed social order. These films challenge ideas of class, gender, religion, nationalism, sexuality, and a “perverse” desire to disrupt entrenched moral arguments in narratives. However, these films buck the trend in asserting agentic power or the ability to act for oneself, which dislocates various structural boundaries but simultaneously reinforces other boundaries, such as patriarchy and masculinity, as demonstrated in *Neend*. In chapter 3, Amit Ranjan has explicated the politics of representation of the Sikh community in India. Analyzing films such as *Border* (1997) and *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001), Ranjan explains that these films tried to romanticize the contribution of the Sikh community when it comes to Hindu nationalism and attempt to erase the memory of violence to the Sikh community, especially the 1984 massacre. However, many Sikhs still carry the legacy of Sikh rebels and feel the injustice done to them.

Part 2, “Transregional Crossings,” looks at film histories of porosity and cross-fertilization on the subcontinent and beyond. This part contains six chapters, of which three are from Pakistan, two are from India, and one is from Bangladesh. All the films discussed in this part connect the hyphenated history of the Indian subcontinent during the pre-partition and post-partition eras. With the neoliberalization in the 1990s and onward, films have gone global, drawing on the diasporic lifestyles in the movies that connected the local with the transnational spaces. In chapter 6, for example, Madhuja Mukherjee argues that these cities in the Indian subcontinent during the 1920s and 1930s became sights/sites of vibrant cosmopolitanism through active film cultures. The author

explores the links between Bombay, Calcutta, and undivided Punjab, showing how the traffic of films, personnel, and capital between these places was fervent, and that these connections eventually produced particular types of popular cinema. In chapter 7, Lotte Hoek discusses the film *Son of Pakistan* (1966) and its relevance in understanding contemporary Pakistani and Bangladeshi cinema. The author mentions that the details of the film are unclear and not well recorded but suggests that looking through the Bangladesh Film Archive can present alternate perspectives on established historical narratives of the nation-state.

In chapter 8, Esha Niyogi De argues that transnational exchanges in the film industry often inscribe “categories of difference” into systems of cross-cultural contact, but the small-scale Urdu film industry in Pakistan, with its focus on economic collaboration and commodity material across national borders, spawned a border-crossing aesthetic that was inspired by multiple regional influences. In chapter 9, Hariprasad Athanickal analyzes films from different South Indian languages to understand the literary aesthetics of realism and its relation to the production of realism in South Indian cinema. The concept of *ur* (Tamil), or identification with place, contributes to the complexity of understanding realism in South Indian cinema.

In chapter 10, Gwendolyn S. Kirk examines how two films, *Pehlwan Ji in London* (1971) and *Jatt in London* (1981), depict and challenge popular ideas about diasporic identities and experiences. The chapter notes that Punjabi cinema in India and Pakistan often reinforces regional culture and tradition within the diaspora. The recent resurgence of Pakistani cinema has primarily excluded Punjabi and Pashto cinema, and the effects of these changes on the representation of transnationalism and diasporic identities are yet to be seen. In chapter 11, Zebunnisa Hamid argues that the development of New Pakistani Cinema serves as a case study for the factors that led to its emergence and the issues that small cinema cultures may face. The growth of Pakistani cinema has been affected by changing global politics and the desire for counternarratives. The new cinema audience shares viewing practices and preferences with transregional and international audiences.

Part 3, “Fractured Geographies, South Connectivities,” focuses on border war and trauma and how these issues are represented in films. This part comprises four chapters from two countries—three from Bangladesh and one from India. In chapter 12, Fahmida Akhter discusses the 1971 documentary “Stop Genocide,” directed by Zahir Rihan during the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The film is seen as an ethical cinematic appeal for humanity and justice and creates a dialectical cinematic language opposing dominant cinema practices and following the aesthetics of Third Cinema. However, the author argues that the representation of women in the film has been criticized for linking their image to victimization and spectacle. At the same time, men are often glorified as heroes in the war. Despite the impulses of a Third Cinema structure, the film has been seen to reconstruct gender stereotypes within the nationalist struggle.

In contrast to the Bangladeshi women, Alka Kurian, in chapter 13, examines documentaries to understand how Muslim Kashmiri women, despite experiencing severe human rights violations, have gone beyond their cultural symbolism as widows, half-widows, or grieving mothers. The author explores how their resistant narratives not only subvert the traditional role of women within the militarization process but also play a significant role in the struggle for independence from the Indian state.

To understand the role of cinema in raising consciousness over commercial gain, in chapter 14 Naadir Junaid highlights the work of two prominent Bangladeshi filmmakers,

Alamgir Kabir and Zahir Raihan, who made important politically oriented films before their untimely deaths. The author suggests that there needs to be more experimentation and critical commentary on political issues in Bangladeshi cinema. Elora Halim Chowdhury, in chapter 15, studies modern war movies. She finds that unlike older films that showed men as honorable and women as shameful, new films give different views on gender from the 1971 archive. These films also show chances for healing and understanding in close relationships, similar to Akhter's views. However, despite this focus on women's narratives, the films still leave the reintegration and location of women within the nation ambiguous. The chapter also touches on the concept of "controlling images" and how they justify the state's disciplining certain bodies and groups, in this case, the *birangonas* (brave women). The author suggests that instead of accepting these controlling images, feminist scholars should ask how objectification is mobilized in specific historical contexts and what alternative reading practices could create a representational space for women as sexual subjects and citizens.

Overall, the book provides a comprehensive examination of how films in South Asia reflect and shape the social and political realities of the region. The authors delve into selected archives of cinema in South Asia, uncovering complex spatio-temporalities and shedding light on how films can reinforce and subvert dominant ideologies. The book accommodates write-ups from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh but not from other countries such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, or even Afghanistan. Furthermore, the volume is about encounters, but it does not deal with contemporary hegemonic and counterhegemonic relations among the nation-states and their culture industry. In addition, the book mainly talks about film archives and texts instead of larger contexts of film production, circulation, and viewership. Despite the limitations, this book adds value to the literature on South Asian film and cultural history. No doubt, students, faculty, and researchers in South Asian movies, media, and cultural studies will benefit from this book.

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