

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

AMITA HANDA, *Of Silk, Saris and Mini-Skirts: South Asian Girls Walk the Tightrope of Culture*. Toronto: Women's Press, 2003, x + 221 p.

Amita Handa's doctoral research on young Canadian girls who are second-generation South Asian offers a detailed and illuminating picture of the complex socio-cultural factors that influence their sense of individuality and selfhood. By using qualitative interviews interwoven with her own personal narrative as a second-generation South Asian woman in Canada, Handa offers a fascinating and honest look at how these young women negotiate their personal identities and their communities on the basis of their race and gender. Throughout the text, the social world as it is encountered by these young women is detailed and analyzed, where their experiences with family, school, work, sexuality, gender, marriage, cultures, social events, and racism result in heavily contested self identification.

In order to locate the personal experiences of young second-generation South Asian women within the larger socio-political Canadian context, Handa draws upon Canadian media news coverage of South Asians, and interviews with different South Asian community leaders and members from across Canada. She also outlines the historical events that have informed and resulted in the contemporary Canadian discourses of race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism. Handa examines changes in the government policies surrounding the three waves of immigration and settlement of South Asians in Canada, and situates them within the larger context of the British colonization of India.

A dominant theme that underlies Handa's book is that the struggles and conflicts experienced by these young South Asian women occur as a result of the discourses of binarism that underlies contemporary societies. Their sense of selves was negated by the framework that locates as opposites East/West, Brown/White, South Asian/Canadian, traditional/modern, backward/advanced. As Handa illustrates throughout the book, for all of Canada's policies and claims to the value of multiculturalism, the binary divide existent in Canada validates and privileges modern, white, Western culture.

As Handa argues, young South Asian women in Canada experience conflict in their identities and within their communities by not conforming to the norms of either community, which are polarized and viewed as

oppositional and mutually exclusive. Their lived identities are negotiated and fluid, resulting in an ever-changing series of roles dependant upon social context. But across all aspects of their lives, these women experienced a high degree of isolation, a lack of freedom, and lack of choices over their lives as a result of the competing pressures by each community to conform to their assumed cultural norms. Behaviors of white Canadian youths, such as rebellion against parental authority, are experienced differently for the young women in Handa's book as a result of the interlinking of their femininity with their Indian identity. These women are pressured, on one hand, to be the preservers and preservatives of traditional Indian culture; while on the other hand, they are living in a westernized culture that values individual freedom and autonomy. Negotiating their sense of inclusion and exclusion from South Asian and Canadian communities resulted in a high degree of stress as articulated by these women, manifested through depression, eating disorders, and running away from the family. However, Handa does not construct their conflicted experiences in terms of victimization; rather, she explores how these women are voicing multi-faceted and intricate identities that actively resist this dominant dualist paradigm and are more honestly representative of their complex realities. Handa discusses how her own internalized acceptance of the categories of modern and traditional was challenged by the complexity of how these women articulate their identities outside the dominant framework.

This book would be of interest to academics, undergraduate and graduate students in the areas of Women's Studies, Canadian Studies, Multi/Cultural Studies, Sociology, English, History, and Anthropology. It would be an interesting choice for an undergraduate or graduate text, since it effectively uses the personal narrative interwoven with interdisciplinary critical theories as the overarching framework. Handa's book is lively and engaging in articulating how competing cultural beliefs surrounding race and gender in Canada and in South Asian communities result in pressures and tensions for young second-generation South Asian women. One main downfall of this book is that the arguments and analysis become slightly repetitious. Later chapters reintroduce and reinforce the central themes while simply presenting new examples of socio-cultural contexts in which these tensions occur for young South Asian women.

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