Diana Dimitrova (ed.)


Diana Dimitrova’s edited book, The Other in South Asian Religion, Literature and Film: Perspectives on Others and Otherness, sets to map out and study the concepts of other, otherness and process of “othering” in South Asia and the South Asian diaspora through literature, films and in religion. Dimitrova argues that the concepts of other and “otherism” enable one to examine the processes of production and circulation of categories, the reconfiguration of identities and the marginalisation of certain communities, subjectivities and sexualities within colonial and post-colonial nation-state building and in the South Asian diaspora context. She argues that the process of production of any dominant discourse marginalises and disconnects from “other” religious, ethnic and sexual minorities within that particular culture. Such issues cannot be addressed with existing ideas of orientalism or colonialism, thus she claims that “‘Otherism’ is a term that [she] coined to denote the universal discourse of ‘otherness’ and ‘Othering’” (Dimitrova, 2014: 7). The collection of articles in the book tries to go beyond the binary concepts of West vs. East and orientalists vs. occultists by foregrounding the concept of “otherism”, and the ways in which such concepts and issues emerged within South Asia and beyond. Therefore, the project of the book is to try to unpack any dominant culture/force trying to marginalise subjectivities, communities, identities formations and languages, thus creating otherness within and outside. Most of the articles in the collection not only examine how certain languages, theatres and cinema issues produce and construct the otherness, but also trace the process through which such constructions have emerged.

The book has eight articles under three main sections: The first section titled “In ‘Other’ Lands: Diaspora, Religion and Literature” includes an article by Rashi Rohatgi about the Indian diaspora labour migration and their reconstruction of their own identity through the notion of “coolitude” (a term coined by Khal Torabully, a Mauritian poet and theorist) that creates a multiple identity and differentiates them from others both from the place of belonging and India. In the same section, Dimitrova traces South Asian Americans in relation to religious space—the Radhasoami movement—and how it is trans-configured in the new spaces. She analyses the complexity through which South Asian Americans keep links with their “homeland” and the role of the media in creating an identity in transnational places. Here, othering and otherness are important concepts that help to create identity through the religious space. This identity
formation is created not only in an opposite relation to the others from the new transnational places, but also in relation to the communities from their “homeland”. The second section titled “Creating Otherness: Language, Religion, Literature” has three contributions. Under this section, Tariq Rahman traces how Hindi and Urdu languages, that have a common language platform and more fluidity of usages in the past among many communities, become fixed on the communal binaries of Hindu and Muslim languages in the modern political identity formation. Here, othering is constructed through the process of language fixations. Anne Castaing focuses on Harivansh Rai Bacchan’s collection titled “Madhuśālā” and shows how the literature promotes multiculturalism even within a context of building the Indian nation, which is based on language nationalism and communalism, and thus is othering not only the outsiders, but also the fellow subjects. The last article in the section, written by Dimitrova, traces through the figure of the Urdu-Hindi playwright Upendranath Ashk and the nationalisation of Indian theatre where central figures in the theatre before partition become marginalised in the historical and political context of othering of Muslims in post-independence and post-partition era. The last section of the volume titled “Representing the ‘Other’: Otherness, Gender and Sexuality” has three chapters that look at how the cinema and media representations are producing otherness in relation to sexuality and gender. By mapping the figure of Razia Sultan, a powerful female Islamic ruler, Uri Mukhopadhyay claims that the image of the Razia could not fit within the “Islamic orientalist or nationalist frame” (Mukhopadhyay, 2014: 104) and points out the politics of representation and the process of ‘othering’ of minority women. Thomas Waugh looks at the queer and homosociality discourse in Bollywood. The author foregrounds the figure of the hijra and ambiguous male homosociality in Bollywood films and analyses the shifting and moving concepts of sexuality of otherness in Indian cinema’s industry. Finally, Sunny Singh traces the fluidity and inclusiveness of gender and sexual identities that do not fit into the existing nomadic-social and psychological categories. Therefore, she calls for explanations of gender and sexual identities that would be more culturally relevant and inclusive.

The book brings out yet another way of examining the notion of exclusion, marginalisation, reconfiguration of identities and subjectivities by foregrounding the process of “otherism” as an analytical lens. The editor claims that the newly proposed concept (otherism) has the potential to go beyond concepts of orientalism and colonialism and will lead to a more “universal” understanding of the emergence of hegemonic cultural politics and marginalisation of other cultures and subjectivities in the process. However, foregrounding a new universal category to understand the process may well lead to side-lining the fragments, fluidity, places of memory, blurring and border crossing processes