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(editors)

*South Asian Filmscapes:
Transregional Encounters*

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reviewed by [Manal](#)

The book *South Asian Filmscapes*, edited by Elora Halim Chowdhury and Esha Niyogi De, is the first publication of the South Asian Regional Media Scholars Network (SARMSNeT). It empowers a collaborative cross-regional discourse on film and media. The book shapes the field of South Asian Studies, its histories, and their mutual cultural influences through a transregional approach. There are several shared concerns and expectations of various scholars about the investigation and availability of the films across South Asia.

The first part of the book is about 'Nations and Regional Margins' that focus on the films under discussion, navigating borders and differences between Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. In the very first chapter 'National Identity and Cinematic Representation,' Fahimdul Haq investigates filmmakers from Bangladesh. Three identities are dominant in Bengali history. Bengaliness is the ethnolinguistic identity of the nation, Muslimness represents the religious identity and popular religion stands for all liberal streams of significant religions. The Bengali films favour Bengaliness. The movies, *A Tree without Roots* and *Agami*, portray Islam as a monolithic force. In the solution of these two opposing ideas (Bengaliness and Islam), later movies propose popular religion as the solution to this conflict. A recent film *The Clay Bird* is about the practice of popular religion, spiritual, religious, and philosophical thoughts. Films about the Chittagong Hill Tracts are uncommon. A film by the indigenous people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, telling their own stories, is unique.^[1] In the chapter 'Silencing Films from the Chittagong Hill Tracts,' the cultural homogeneity of Bangladesh has been discussed by Glen Hill and Kabita Chakma. In at least three ways, the cinema can be categorised in relation to indigenous people. First, are the scenographic films, where indigenous people provide little or no insight into issues. Second, exogenous films are made by non-indigenous people. And the third category includes endogenous films—that is films made from the perspective of indigenous people by themselves. Cinema has been used as a mirror to represent Bangladesh's identity.

Likewise, there are many efforts in the first two decades of Pakistan's existence to create cultural politics dependent on the teachings of Islamic standards. Hence the chapter 'Female Friendship and Forbidden Desire' enables us to think through different genres. Kamran Asdar Ali discussed two films from Pakistan, *Sehali* (1961) and *Neela Parbat* (1969). The film *Sehali* is analysed against the grain from the points of view of queer theory and homosexuality. In the second movie, *Neela Parbat's* explicit argument is around the issue of sexual desire in old age. The critical

analysis of these films takes a small step in discussing such themes that remain silent in the national histories of Pakistan. And the essay 'Pakistan, History and Sleep' is about the early life and career of film director Hassan Tariq. The film locates him simultaneously in old colonial and new national fields of practice (113). This essay written by Nasreen Rehman, speaks to the question of modernity and difference in the national film tradition. *Neend* provides understanding into the gendered Pakistani subjects bound by family, society, and state, just as with the development of religion and honour. The film separates unavoidable thoughts of class, sex, religion and patriotism, yet it reasserts imposing male-centric masculinities. Nevertheless, the woman remains a sexual object and her only role is to give birth to a son.

The development of a single national identity in Hindi cinema has been discussed by Amit Ranjan in the chapter 'Bringing Back Sikhs After The 1984 Pogrom.' This chapter explains how the community finds itself at the margin after the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguard. After 1990, the reconciliation process was begun by the state and Hindi cinema took an active part in it. Two leading films *Border* and *Gadar* demonstrate the idea that the Sikh characters present themselves as part of the Hindu community. This was against the demands of the largest Sikh community who want to recognise Sikhism as a different religion. The two movies *Border* and *Gadar* reconstruct the identity of Sikhs as brave warriors. Significant research on these cases has been generated,^[2] and despite many efforts to change the memory of savagery faced by the Sikhs they hate the Indian state and still live with grief. The Sikhs categorically said, 'Na bhulay hain na mauf kiya hain unko' (We have not forgotten nor forgiven them) (73).

Part Two of the book is focused on transregional crossings in which the subcontinent was seen and was attempting to be seen as a homogenous whole. Madhuja Mukherjee's chapter 'The Public in the Cities' particularly talks about cross border mobility and the border itself. She argues that the history of the movie theatre enables us to understand the political, cultural histories of countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. It allows us to understand the growing political, cultural field in these places and also in big cities such as Bombay, Lahore and Calcutta. There are multiple ideas and trends about modernity, altering modernity, and about the complex circumstances of social life across the subcontinent (134). Throughout the existence of post-independence cinema, it is feasible to check the peak of realism in the so-called parallel cinematic movement. In the essay 'Realism and Region in South Indian Cinema, 1947-1977,' Hariprasad Athanickal speaks about popular and new-wave cinema. It has been observed that new-wave cinema builds on the realistic aesthetics that is already developing in mainstream cinema. Another aspect of the growth of realistic elements in mainstream cinema is reflected in the song picturisation in which the cinema moves outside the studio for the first time. There are many moments in mainstream cinema that have a direct or indirect connection with Indian political history. Tamil cinema also presents the root of realism in proper cinemas. And to make films in the region, it can be said that the reflective, self-conscious political kind of realism is developed with the new wave of cinema.

The chapter 'Cross Wing Filmmaking' by Lotte Hoek explores the relationship between East and West Pakistan in the history of Bangladesh cinema. Both cinemas told different stories because of national narratives. In particular, the chapter explores in more detail the film *Son of Pakistan*. This is an old film, and the details are not clear. But the irony is that the film is neither in Bengali nor in the Urdu language, but the film was made in English. The historical records and clarity about the films of Bangladesh are uneven. The film *Jaltey Suraj ki Neeche* was the last Urdu film that was released across East and West Pakistan in 1970. The implication for the aesthetic politics of hybrid peoples and location are a fact of cinematic life in the industries. Esha Niyogi De in the chapter 'Action Heroines and Regional Gifts' uncovers the fact that transnational cinematic economics can vary in scale and leadership. The creativity in the Shamim Ara screen was

recovering female bodies from looming phallic brutality and restoring women-centred practices of religious coexistence. *Miss Hong Kong* and *Miss Colombo* present the development of paradoxical aesthetics. These films present the freedom of women under metropolitan change and combative gender action as well.

In the chapter 'This is London not Pakistan,' Gwendolyn S. Kirk analysed two films *Pehlwanji in London* and *Jatt in London* in a way that incorporates and subverts popular understandings of diasporic identities and experiences (221). This chapter is about the shifting concepts of Punjabi, and the ethnic and regional identity of Pakistani portrayed through a western setting. This essay examines the behavior of Punjabi identity and its markers in cinema. *Maula Jutt* was released in Zia's brutal military regime. The film completely ignores the questions of women and their identity. The theme of subversion of the state and masculine honour became the dominant themes of the cinema at this time. The growth of new Pakistani cinema presents a unique case study because of various issues that the culture of the small cinema might confront. Zebunnisa Hamid tries to investigate the development of new Pakistani cinema in her essay 'The Birth of a Cinema in Post-9\11 Pakistan.' After 9\11, Pakistan endured enormous pain for fighting a number of literal and figurative conflicts. The rise in debt, poor economic and literacy rates resulted in Islamic extremists in Pakistan.^[3] However, different economic and political steps by the government prompted a time of development and improvement. And liberalisation of media was an important change that had a great impact on the film industry. Stories of migration, masculinity and violence can be seen in Pakistani new cinema. In 2007, Pakistani director Shoab Mansoor released *Khude Kay liye*. The film is an analysis of fundamentalism and revolutionary Islam in Pakistan, while at the same time condemning the racial profiling and outrageous interrogation of Muslims in the US.

'Fractured Geographies, South Connectivities' is the last part of the book which focuses on border, wars and trauma films. Zahir Raihan's documentary *Stop Genocide* (1971) provides an ethical appeal for humanity and justice. The documentary does not only present evidence of genocide that took place in Bangladesh but also, to some extent, it criticises the US for indirectly transferring the atrocities of war through its support to Pakistan. It reveals the violation of human rights in Bangladesh and Vietnam, the contradictory values and the promises to eliminate world atrocities as it does here, and the V-effects or alienation effects. On the national level *Stop Genocide* explains the struggle of the colonial state and at the international level, it raises a voice against the attitudes and actions of the US and the UN. The main purpose of the film is to bring about a new society that is free from all suppression. Alka Kurian's essay 'Gender, War and Resistance' are about women's narratives that go unreported, and only their exploitation is presented. Many women who use art as a device to oppose this narrative have no support and undergo systems of oppression. The perspective of female films is quite different from films made by men. Multilayered oppression is the lot of women who traditionally follow the silence which enhances their victimisation. The filmic narratives guarantee the recognition of hurt and suggest that those who were hurt deserve justice.

Naadir Junaid in his essay 'Cinema that Raises a Critical Consciousness' analysed the movies and documentaries of the filmmakers of East Pakistan. The cinema shows the political subjugation faced by the Bengalis during Pakistani rule in the 1960s. Zahir Raihan's film *Jibon the key Maya* was the first attempt to deal with political problems. Alamgir Kabir's documentary *Liberation Fighters* and his film *Dheeray bah Meghna* provide proof that the filmmakers of East Pakistan were not in the favour of conventional entertainment-based cinema. For Kabir a true artist has to be politically conscious (269). His second movie *Surjokannya* unveils the state of women in a patriarchal society. Through his films he incites the viewers to contemplate freedom of expression, democracy, political consciousness, and protest in the contemporary society of

Bangladesh. Bangladeshi films about the liberation war have a significant place within national cinema. Elora Halim Chowdhury's essay 'Ethical Encounters' is about the healing and friendship of the liberation war in the contemporary films of Bangladesh. Three contemporary movies *Shongram*, *Itihaash Konna*, and *Meherjaan* draw complex narratives of the birth of a nation, identity, war, gender, nation and sexuality, and women's experiences during the liberation war. The films, *Orunodoyer Ognishakkhi* and *Megher Onek Rong*, take up the issue of war children. A recent film, *Guerilla*, presented a woman as a freedom fighter for the very first time. Prior to this event literature that was produced in Bangladesh always presented a narrative about male valour and the victimisation of women. The guidelines provided by black feminism, that sees identity-based oppression operating in crosshatching ways^[4] and *birangonas* (war heroine) have provided a public site of struggle (298).

Overall, the book interconnects approaches, to study the geography and associated political elements through cinematic imagination. Individual chapters delve into specific archives. The book seeks a comparative space of encounters between a multiplicity of historical perspectives and methodological choices. On the one hand, the book pictures the effects of the massive geopolitical rift in South Asia, and on the other it interrogates how films intersect with discourses around nationalism, sexuality, religion and language. This book contributes to multiple academic fields including discourse analysis, nationalism, sexuality, religion, language and especially in the field of screen literature and theatre. This book will help future researchers who want to explore nationalism, politics and religions in emerging film cultures. This book will be helpful for all those who explore cinema and film culture in all regions because it emphasises the transregional connectivity between cinema and society.

Notes

[1] Naeem Mohaiemen (ed.), *Between Ashes and Hope: Chittagong Hill Tracts in the Blind Spot of Bangladesh Nationalism*, Bangladesh: Drishtipat Writers' Collective, 2010, URL:

[Between_ashes_and_hope_Chittagong_hill_tracts_in_the_blind_spot_of_Bangladesh_nationalism](#)

[2] Thomas Obel Hansen, 'The time and space of transitional justice,' *Transitional Justice Institute*, Research Paper No. 16–11, 28 June 2016, doi: [10.2139/ssrn.2801546](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2801546); see also Dustin N. Sharp, 'Emancipating Transitional Justice from the Bonds of the Paradigmatic Transition,' *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 9(1) (2016): 150–69. doi: [10.1093/ijtj/iju021](https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/iju021).

[3] Stephen Philip Cohen, 'America and Pakistan: Is the worst case avoidable?' *Current History* 104(680) March (2005): 131–36, p. 132, doi: [10.1525/curh.2005.104.680.131](https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2005.104.680.131).

[4] Nathan Heller, 'The Big Uneasy: What's roiling the liberal-arts campus?' *New Yorker*, 30 May 2016, URL: www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/30/the-new-activism-of-liberal-arts-colleges.

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