



HAL
open science

Photography in nineteenth-century India The Review | 15

Eve Tignol

► **To cite this version:**

| Eve Tignol. Photography in nineteenth-century India The Review | 15. 2015. halshs-01457535

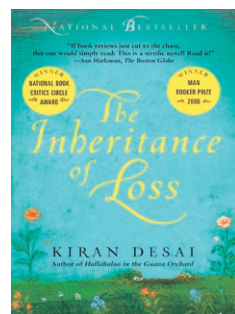
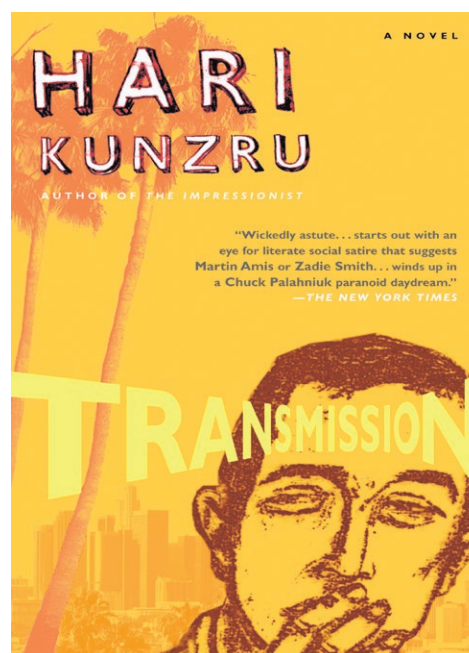
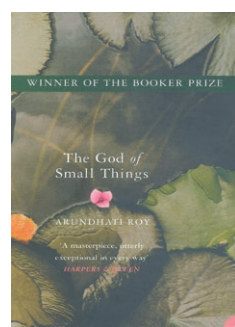
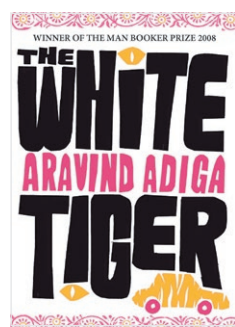
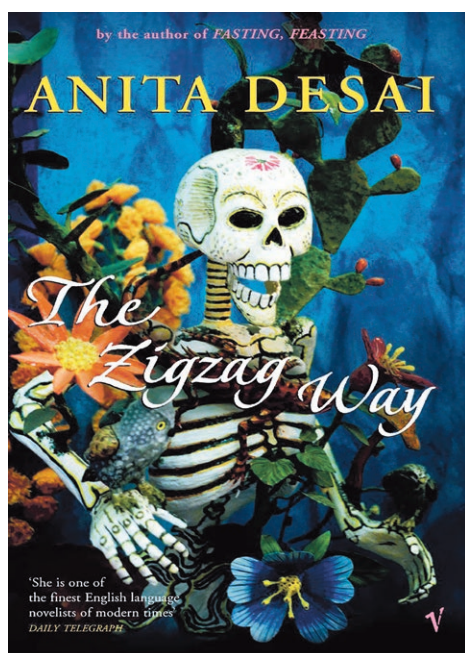
HAL Id: halshs-01457535

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01457535>

Submitted on 6 Feb 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



and perhaps is the most true to the book's overarching purpose of exposing the latest trends in IEF, since it includes scholarship on science fiction, graphic novels and the effects of globalisation. Himansu S. Mohapatra's critique of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is effective in debunking some of the claims of the novel and its supporters, while Nandana Dutta's essay is thought-provoking on the topic of the everyday in women's writing and the significance of small stories in the "post-postcolonial" novel (149). The four remaining chapters of the section are notable in their innovative approach to IEF. Subir Dhar's focus is on the inspirational writing – 'inspi-lit' – of bestseller Chetan Bhagat; Sreemati Mukherjee's subject is cyber-literature and the novel *Tokyo Cancelled* by Rana Dasgupta; Abhijit Gupta's piece offers an overview of the current state of Indian science fiction; and Rimi B. Chatterjee gives a comprehensive survey of comics and graphic novels and speaks to the potential for this genre in India. All of these essays are refreshing in their engagement with, what many readers will identify as, distinctly contemporary concerns and undoubtedly distinguishes them from the IEF of the 1980s for instance.

While the remaining sections of the book are less obviously connected to what the novelty of the decade 2000-2010 might be, Bill Ashcroft's opening essay is commendable. His reasoned piece on contemporary Indian English novels is most effective in its argument that, following the (seldom-observed) anti-nationalist utopianism of Tagore and Gandhi, prominent novels and novelists reveal a deep skepticism about the idea of the nation state in independent India. Taking Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as a starting point, Ashcroft discusses some "inheritors of Rushdie's prize-winning revolution" (29), that is, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Hari Kunzru's *Transmission*. He contends that three themes emerge in how these novels express their resistance to nationalism: class and socio-economic inequality, inherited colonial borders and boundaries, and mobility in the global era. The author concludes that the historical skepticism of nationalism evident in the writings of Tagore and Gandhi abounds in contemporary literature, while it simultaneously maintains an eye on the past and the future, the home and the world.

Another compelling chapter which delves into theories about the nation-state in India, national allegory and literature is Krishna Sen's discussion of Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* and M.G. Vassanji's *The Assassin's Song*. Her argument is that the concept of 'desh' – "the land or place of one's birth or familial origin, and therefore of one's ancestral heritage and spiritual and cultural belonging" (76) – is more relevant when reading IEF, such as the novels above, than Western models of the homogenous nation. The two essays in the section called 'Revisiting the Past' are also stimulating in their engagement with the historical. Paul Sharrad explains how some contemporary writers have tried (with little success) to rework classics like the Mahabharata for audiences today, while Rituparna Roy considers Mughal India and art in her reading of Kunal Basu's novel *The Miniaturist*. In the latter essay, Roy interestingly contends that a turn towards historical fiction is a "new trend of the decade 2000-2010" (112), as writers move past their preoccupation with the colonial in favour of the pre-colonial period. Unfortunately, there is little development of this claim which leaves the reader wishing for more, particularly because the edited collection as a whole often mentions potential trends in the recent canon of IEF without drawing any unified conclusions.

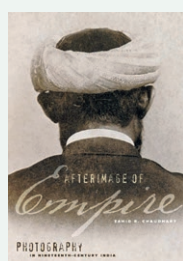
In the absence of editorial interludes at the beginning of each new section to create an argument for the book as a whole and to link the ideas within the diverse essays, it becomes somewhat unclear what the critical or theoretical trajectory of the collection is. It would have been useful to have some guidance on how these fourteen disparate essays address the editors' initial questions: what makes this decade special? What is new about their approach? Alternatively, a concluding chapter would have been most valuable in answering the above questions and in offering the reader a cohesive analysis of these contemporary essays on Indian English fiction in light of India's altered landscape in the first decade of the new millennium. As individual chapters, however, many of these essays will be of interest to general readers, as well as to students and scholars of the individual authors and texts. The list of references at the end of the book is also a useful resource on contemporary writing from India and literary theory.

Dr. Louise Harrington, Dept of English and Film Studies,
University of Alberta (louise.harrington@ualberta.ca)

Photography in nineteenth-century India

Afterimage of Empire is a rich and thought-provoking study of early colonial photography in the Indian subcontinent, drawing on extensive theoretical observations and interdisciplinary methods.

Eve Tignol



Reviewed title:
Chaudhary, Z.R. 2012.
Afterimage of Empire: Photography in Nineteenth-Century India,
Minneapolis: Minnesota Press,
ISBN 9780816677498

THE BOOK, BORN OUT of Chaudhary's doctoral dissertation at Cornell University, contributes to scholarship on Indian colonial photography notably developed in J. Gutman's, J. Falconer's and C. Pinney's works. Rather than proposing a descriptive historical account of photographic practice, this book explores the role of photography in the way people sensed (and made sense of) the world in history and inquires its social implications in the modern world. As the author explains in the introduction, the primary focus of the book is "what the colonial history of the medium [photography] may have to teach us about the making of modern perceptual apparatus, of the links between perception and meaning, and of the transformation of aesthetic experience itself". Interested in how this particular media is influenced by history and, in turn, influences history, Chaudhary starts his ambitious investigation with the arrival of photography in India (about the same time as it develops in Britain) and divides his argument into four thematic chapters, each relying on different material and exploring particular aspects of colonial photographic practices.

Chapters one and two are both devoted to the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 and its echoes in colonialist photography. In chapter one, "Death and the Rhetoric of Photography: X marks the spot", Chaudhary studies post-Rebellion

photographs by John Dannenberg and Harriet Tytler who memorialize British loss and death by reproducing in pictures the now empty spaces where tragic events had taken place, thus repeating patterns of traumatic shock. Chaudhary here addresses the "indexical" power of photography, which persuades us that the things photographed did really take place, in showing that photography is allegorical (and polysemic), and works along the same dynamics as those of rumour. Despite its assumed objectivity, the author argues that the photographic media is in fact a technology of propaganda which does not provide any narrative in itself but needs "captions"; here colonialist ones.

In chapter two, "Anaesthesia and Violence: a colonial History of shock", Chaudhary continues his analysis of post-Rebellion photography through the work of commercial photographer Felice Beato. In pictures of unearthed bones and hung rebels, Chaudhary sees what he calls, in Walter Benjamin's terms, a "phantasmagoric aesthetic". As the author argues, photography participates in the "dialectics of (in)visibility" which enable the viewers to experience the violence of their own destruction and transform it into a commodity. This process, which compensates the bodily shock of modernity and negotiates relations of domination by "managing" the colonized, is, for the author, symptomatic of a change in colonial ordering and "governmentality", to borrow Foucault's words. Here, Chaudhary argues that photographic practice has a crucial role in the production of colonial knowledge and is instrumental to colonial governmentality: it perceptually alienates the colonials and the colonized and justifies the ideology of the colonial state's civilizing mission.

Chapter three, "Armour and Aesthetics: The Picturesque in Difference", examines the picturesque aesthetic and the nostalgia for home that unfolds in Samuel Bourne's landscape photography in the 1860s. By converting the Indian landscape into the familiar through the resort to picturesque conventions, colonial photography reveals a perceptual change insofar as the world was increasingly appreciated as "picture-like". This chapter also investigates the works of Indian photographers Lala Deen Dayal, Darogha Abbas Ali and Ahmed Ali Khan and their adoption of the picturesque aesthetic. Instead of seeing traces of resistance in photographic practices, Chaudhary emphasizes the differences displayed in Indian photographs by reading them as attempts to mould themselves in the

terms of English picturesque conventions, while the continued invocation and re-adaptation of local artistic traditions are considered as examples of the evolution of Indian aesthetic expressions.

In chapter four, "Famine and the Reproduction of Affect: Pleas for Sympathy", Chaudhary explores the role of photography in stimulating emotions and sympathy especially through photographs taken by Captain Wallace Hooper during the Madras famine in the late 1870s. The author argues that such photographs enabled an identification with others that shaped English subjects through a sense of belonging to a "benevolent nation", and thus served social cohesion.

In *Afterimage of Empire*, Chaudhary impressively juggles both theoretical and historical material. Photographic evidence is also always echoed by other contemporary sources like travel writings, memoirs, or newspaper articles which render the narrative lively. The author's detailed studies are insightful; chapter three and the analysis of the work of Indian photographers – notably his investigation of albums containing blanked "photographs" of *pardanashin* women – are particularly captivating. Chaudhary's arguments, choice of examples and selection of photographs, compiled in a glossy edition, render the book an engaging read. The reader may find the author's theoretical explanations relying on specialized jargon hard to follow, and a proper conclusion, rather than a brief coda, would have helped bring together the different aspects addressed in the book. Moreover, while Chaudhary certainly emphasizes the importance of history and of historical determination in his study of the phenomenological impact of photography in the late nineteenth-century, there is relatively little detailed analysis of the photographs reproduced and of their historical context. More attention to the context in which those photographs circulated as well as to the intentions of the photographers, and to the reception and use of photography by various audiences would have further enhanced the study. Chaudhary's *Afterimage of Empire* is nonetheless an extensive study which undoubtedly opens up reflection not only on the role of photography in the Indian subcontinent but on the cultural and sensorial changes brought by modernity both in the Western and non-Western worlds.

Eve Tignol, Royal Holloway University of London
(eve.tignol.2012@rhul.ac.uk)