

book review: postnational perceptions in contemporary art practice

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BOOK REVIEW: POSTNATIONAL PERCEPTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE

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Towards the end of this book, brought out by Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing in 2023, art historian Bindu Bhadana wonders what the significance of her titular analytic, the 'postnational', is in the wake of the resurgence of Indian nationalism in increasingly extreme incarnations in the last two decades. Nevertheless, the vantage point from which she reflects on the essaying of the body in early-21st-century art affords a clear view of what she argues is a passage through and 'post' the category of 'nation'.

Bhadana's analysis is tethered to a framework that interweaves reflections on contemporaneity, poststructuralist accounts of gender, queer interpretations of the nation, and postcolonial examinations of globalization to "focus on the complex ways in which contemporary Indian artists negotiate their identities through engaging with the concepts of nation and the 'postnation' using the queer performative body". The theoretical scaffolding is constructed using a range of ideas – for example, Judith Butler's concept of performativity; José Esteban Muñoz's notion of cruising; Donna Haraway's idea of the cyborg; Nivedita Menon and Gayatri Gopinath's reading of queer solidarities through diasporic transgression; and the work of scholars who look at the tensions between globality and nationhood across disciplines, like Monica Juneja, Parul Dave Mukherji, Homi Bhabha and Arjun Appadurai.

The three artists that Bhadana studies are Chitra Ganesh, Tejal Shah and Nikhil Chopra, all of whom, she contends, queer the so-called 'Indian' body across a range of mediums, and in ways that effect a dialectic with the constructs of nationhood and its excesses. Historicizing these shifts, Bhadana analyses Indian and Indian-origin artists' responses to them through close readings of artworks from the early 21st century. Her methodology is orientated towards the ideas that propelled these works into being: it is drawn from her interviews with their makers and research focused more on their sites of production than of reception. The straightforward structure of the book, from the central thesis to its unpacking through the description and exposition of specific pieces, makes it an accessible and fluent read.

In the years preceding the period under study, multiple interconnected phenomena occurred parallelly – the rise of religious

majoritarianism, the adoption of economic liberalization programmes, the emergence of new media technologies, and the development of a transnational contemporary art complex. Situating the practices of Ganesh, Shah and Chopra within a broader historical constellation illuminating the “contemporary” moment in Indian art history, Bhadana examines two sets of works by each artist. For each person and pair of examples, she traces an arc – from the deconstruction of the discourse and iconography of the nation in the 2000s to its transcendence in the 2010s. She contextualizes this queer deconstructive approach to the concept of the nation in the first decade of the 21st century in terms of formal and mediatic genealogical legacies: the comic book in the case of Ganesh, and video and performance art in the case of Shah and Chopra, respectively.

Bhadana’s selection of works reveals a transition from citing to surpassing the aesthetic forms by which the nation gets expressed. For example, Ganesh’s *Tales of Amnesia* (2003-2007) overwrites the patriarchal Hindu nationalism of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics via a reimagining of the ‘nation-as-goddess’ archetype. By the time of her *She the Question* (2012) panels a decade later, it is the projection of a desi futurist utopia that has replaced the remaking of the past. Similarly, where Shah’s video *Chingari Chumma/ Stinging Kiss* (2000) camps mainstream Hindi cinema’s gendered formulations of nationhood, 12 years hence, they have zoomed out to wider scapes, pointing out homologies between the patriarchy and the Anthropocene in a work like *Between the Waves* (2012). During this period, Chopra’s postcolonial masquerade as *Yog Raj Chitrakar* (2007-2011) is further complicated through a transracial performativity that probes otherness in histories where the artist himself is a visitor, such as in *La Perle Negra* (2015).

It is in the third chapter’s analysis of the movement ‘post’ and past the nation – once it has been experienced, critiqued and rejected – that the book fully fleshes out the premise promised in the title. Deploying queerness as a heuristic, Bhadana reads Ganesh, Shah and Chopra’s postnational works from the 2010s in light of a process, whereby they “deterritorialize and reconfigure familiar objects, reterritorializing them through their practice”. This journey takes place through affiliations with queer politics and aesthetics – a non-normative reimagination of the future (Ganesh), of nature (Shah), and of race (Chopra), articulated via the desiring, organic, gendered body confronting symbolic hegemonies. It also manifests through the artists’ engagements on social media, the virtual network veering them further away from the geographic constraints of the nation.

Even though the thesis is overall well-grounded, certain strands feel abbreviated within its larger scheme. For example, the last chapter begins to discuss affect in relation to queer theory in Bhadana’s commentary on Shah’s video *Between the Waves*, a tantalizingly

generative current that continues just beneath the surface of the chapter. However, the writer does not quite follow through, only reclaiming the potency of her argument in the concluding section: "It is within the forcefield of the affective domain that notions of the national are being broken down." Occasionally, there are missed opportunities to substantiate or extend certain points of discussion. One instance involves acknowledging how queer and national identities are appropriated and manipulated by markets and states, the latter phenomenon especially tying to the point about the return of the 'national' Bhadana detects in her epilogue.

As a focussed art historical account of a series of practices in contemporary art, *Postnational Perceptions in Contemporary Art Practice* fulfils its objective of addressing a gap in scholarship by "[c]onflating the relationship of the queer body with identity and belonging *vis-à-vis* the nation". On the other side of the research period the book covers, in a time of blinding hypernationalism, the idea of the 'postnational' might appear to be a vanishing point against a conceptual horizon. However, unlike the wrong end of the telescope that Bhadana resignedly invokes as a metaphor for observing the fluxes in Indian contemporary art, her book certainly offers a good view of its contours, marked by discursive and embodied transitions.

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