

Asian Women Writers

The Three Bears: Teaching Asian Women Authors Shailja Sharma De Paul University

I don't know how representative my experience is, but when I teach, I get two kinds of pressure from my students: one, that I teach a certain small "percentage" of women authors, perhaps in order to satisfy some inner affirmative action chart; and second, that these women authors be the course's spokeswomen for the inner domestic world of emotions, feelings, soul. If they don't cover those constituencies, they are not worthy. This is exacerbated in interesting ways when the authors are Asian or Asian-American. The easiest way to explain it is to say that within the context of Asian women authors, the ethnic imperative gets articulated as an assumption to reveal or expose a "problem," to which they, the audience, are the answer. The readers perform this function by 1) being the representative of a rational, advanced, society from which such problems are absent, and 2) applying the tools of reason and empathy, and thus taking care the Manichean rules of living.

A second reaction arises when the text resists efforts to be positioned as a victim, unwilling to be rescued. It is then often accused of being dense, hard or even uninteresting. This dichotomy points to an interesting problem: the attempt to teach narratives by Asian authors without making pity, or a simple First and Third world binarism, the precondition of reading them.

What we lose in such a reading is the ability to position them correctly, an ability to read them in **their** context, not just from within the space my students inhabit. In an uncharitable light, this can be read as patronizing, but in the context of problems in pedagogy, it highlights a need to reposition the texts we teach. It's not that there is an absolute divide between Asian audiences who may have been the texts' primary audience (which is not always the case) and the American audience which is reading it now, distanced both historically and certainly geographically from the primary space of reading. I think it is important to recognize that, given the way publishing markets are structured now, especially for authors who write in English, books address a variety of readers: Asian, English, American, European, African. This throws a wrench in any effort to read "purely."

Let me offer three examples of sources, one that offers itself easily to be positioned within historical North-South relations as "pathetic"; another which resists by self-reflexively examining the politics of reading, but then

reiterating not the pathos, but the lure of the exotic in reading about Asian women; and a third, the film *Fire*, which tries to avoid those pitfalls.

1. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is a popular undergraduate text. It occupies the genre of immigrant arrival; the protagonist arrives in the U.S. fleeing religious and gender prosecution and finds redemption here. Mukherjee falsifies history, and her protagonist keeps her distance from other Indian immigrants, seeing them as "ghettoized." Jasmine, the eponymous heroine, goes West in the traditional way, stopping for a while in Iowa where she is taken for Greek and an "Indian goddess." Sexual liberation follows like a chimera, but ultimately she sees it as a false lure and escapes out the window. The novel plays on the theme of the erotic exotic, the heroine's ability to find men who are willing to play the protector in return for sexual access is seen as liberation. Since its publication in 1987, this has quickly become a favorite text for undergraduate introductory courses.

So the question is: What does this text accomplish? I argue that it reflects a flattering portrait of the myth of America back to its readers, as a land of opportunity, freedom, sexual and financial liberation, and it taps into many easy myths that students can find and celebrate. But what is troubling about it is that in doing so, it reinforces many other stereotypes about Indian femininity. The typical Indian woman, according to this novel, is easily led, married at a young age to a man she hardly knows, and can passively attract men from a broad range of ethnicities. There is no attempt on Mukherjee's part to make class, caste or period distinctions. She ignores the virulent racism that Indians face in America, and through working the metaphor of "sati" and rebirth into her novel, she plays on the worst clichés about India.

2. Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Woman, Native, Other* is my next example. A non-fiction book, drawing partly on her travel and filmmaking in Vietnam, India and parts of West Africa, the text begins as a rigorous examination of the way in which readers triply marginalize postcolonial women authors. Then the text performs an interesting flip as Minh-ha begins to privilege aspects of women's narrative: she cites oral storytelling, female legacies of stories, and the role of narratives in healing and community which are passed down through generations in Africa. Suddenly the arbitrary divide between genders that audiences have been encouraged to oppose is being reinscribed, albeit as one that is POSITIVE and in danger of being lost in industrial society. The attempt by Minh-ha to recapture a pure or true woman's narrative by going back to pre-industrial society can easily slip back into a glorified third-worldism while ignoring the links between the viewer who seeks to preserve this vanishing society and the poor, underprivileged subjects who might not want to remain in their place.

As a teacher, what troubles me more is that such a move re-inscribes the distance between the worlds instead of showing complicity. Am I the only one who is afraid of this dichotomy? Why is it necessary to perform this nostalgic elegy for a vanishing world? Perhaps the answer is that it is

aesthetically more satisfying to depict a world captured at the moment of its passing. This is borne out by the photographs in the text which tend to fetishize the female figure in its rural, handicraft-bedecked surroundings. What happens to the urban hyperliterate Asian woman, is she not authentic enough? This again reinforces the idea that a proper mode of reading for these “backward” societies is along the continuum of modernism and industrialization, whether it is done positively or negatively. Frankly they are not that far distant from each other.

3. My last example is the film *Fire*, made by an Indo-Canadian director, Deepa Mehta. Broadly speaking, the film’s subject is patriarchy, and the burning of wives in India, in particular. However, when the film was released, it was hyped as a film about “Indian lesbians.” By all accounts then, it is a film that deals with some pretty controversial subjects. There are many available readings of the film. One was the popular “redneck” Indian conservative view: that the film sensationalizes something that just doesn’t exist in India, and in doing so, it insults Indian (read Hindu) culture. The second view, which was more widespread in reviews and responses in the U.S. was that Mehta is finally revealing a shameful secret that Indians don’t want to admit to: the existence of lesbianism in India. There is a third reading which doesn’t get much airtime: that Mehta presents a complex view of class and patriarchy. The wives of the two brothers, who eventually become lovers, do so because it is the only form of agency available to them. Desire functions as a form of agency and subjectivity. But this view doesn’t appeal since

it doesn’t tap into the narrative of oppression, freedom, sympathy, and complexity. The ambivalent reaction of the character played by Shabana Azmi (the elder daughter-in-law) to the love she feels for her friend and lover is glossed over. But the kind of reading I’m arguing for resists the simple impulse of pity and superiority on the part of the viewer. In doing so, it complicates the distance that “Orientalized” readings bring to Asian texts.

What can we as teachers do to allow texts to be read in complex ways? Certainly an easy answer is to include history, history and yet more history. But what I also find useful is a discussion of audiences, and a critical debate on the politics of publishing and film audiences, perhaps by having students read reviews from more than one country. This allows them to see that there can be more than one reading of a text, not just on the basis of individual interpretation, but in ways that have to do with political positions, gender, nationality, class and sexual orientation.

SOURCES

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Minh-ha, Trinh T. *Woman, Native, Other*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*, New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989.



Cloth of Gold
China, after A.D. 1220
Lampas weave, silk and gold thread
The Cleveland Museum of Art