

INDIANS ON INDIAN LANDS: INTERSECTIONS OF RACE, CASTE, AND INDIGENEITY.
By Nishant Upadhyay. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2024. 256 pp.

Nishant Upadhyay in the book *Indians on Indian Lands* offers learned meditations and provocations to readers interested in the doubleness of the term “Indian” in North America. The designation, which could refer to Native American people and the Indian diaspora at once in the aforesaid context, allows Upadhyay to bring together scholarship on race, caste, coloniality and indigeneity generatively. In this regard, they accomplish a number of well-timed tasks. First of all, Upadhyay provides a lexicon to probe the nebulous phenomenon of Indian cultural ascendancy in North America, demystifying the caste-based politics that undergirds it. Secondly, they bring to light anew, the transnational circulation of capital. Thirdly, they problematize the assumed minoritized and consequently, vulnerable position of the Indian diaspora in the First World. Finally, they ruminate the possibilities of solidarities while acknowledging their limits between the two Indian communities they study.

By foregrounding caste, Upadhyay rejects the homogenization of the Indian (and the South Asian) diaspora, linking it to the settler colonialist practices of dominant caste Indians in Canada. These practices, carried out in concert with the putatively multicultural Canadian State reveal the enduring legacy of coloniality in governance and the mobilization of one racialized minority against another. Yet, Upadhyay’s scholarship is polyvalent. The book begins with a recounting of the *Komagata Maru* incident, where 376 South Asian men, aboard the ship, *Komagata Maru* were denied entry by Canada. In response, the Musqueam leaders said that if they had control over their lands, they would not have turned the migrants away. After this hopeful premise of solidarity, Upadhyay, deftly switches to the *Komagata Maru* centenary event, where the only Native presence was the photographer, the Native staff serving South Asian food and Musqueam singers in their traditional wear performing in front of the guests. This juxtaposition reveals a concerning phenomenon— where dominant caste Indians who have settled on Native lands dominate the memorialization of a noteworthy Indian-Indian interaction in the past, positioning themselves in the mainstream and joining the Canadian state in marginalizing the Natives. This catalyzes a chain reaction in the book, as Upadhyay wades through the intricacies of exchanges between these communities, and the persistent realities of settler colonialism, ethnonationalist purism, anti-blackness, heteropatriarchy and violence in the Canadian nation-state.

In the first chapter, “Unsettling Brahminism”, Upadhyay draws attention to “caste-maneuvers” of upper-caste Indian diasporic scholars, or the obscuring of caste in their academic presence and self-fashioning. This leads them to speak of how Indian-centric postcolonial theory, while adequately critiquing European colonialism, fails to reckon with and decenter brahminism, constructing homogenous colonized and postcolonial subjects. Caste obfuscation in the academic world takes place through the cosmopolitanization of postcolonial analytics. This is also tied to an aspiration to whiteness, Upadhyay argues, tracing the predominance of dependence on white theorists in the citational practices of savarna scholars, with a convenient exclusion of non-Savarana philosophers such as Ambedkar, Phule and Periyar. Simultaneously, Upadhyay draws attention to the engagements between Black and Dalit writers, as a counterweight to the hegemonic model of Indian-centred postcoloniality. The latter, as they adequately explain, relies on the homogeneity of the Indian postcolonial subject, read from discursive apparatus inaugurated in the work of Black scholars, and causes the misconstruing of the Black colonized subject as a model to think of the universal brown subject.

Racialized immigrants traverse the regimes of citizenship asymmetrically, even as Canada’s extractive economy welcomes immigrant labour. An aspiration to citizenship turns racialized immigrants, who could be possible allies with indigenous people, into accomplices of the settler state. In the second chapter of the book, “Steady Workers”, Upadhyay deals with the making of the “model minority” Asian and the “unmodel” Native myths. Beginning with an anecdote about a Sikh man

calling another Sikh man a native American as a derogatory term, with negative stereotypes attached to it, the chapter documents many pertinent case studies that illustrate the complicity of Asian labour in an ethnic othering. Interestingly, the chapter extends beyond the declared project of the book to describe the model Asian immigrant stigmatizing “unmodel” Black communities in Canada. At the same time, it details solidarity, despite othering, between Sikh and indigenous women workers to invoke concerns of gender. This chapter is a magnificent achievement in locating multifaceted relationalities. It reveals to the reader, particularly because it is followed by a relatively cynical first chapter, the balance Upadhyay endeavours to strike between hope and despair in thinking about differences, while rigorously pursuing exemplary research in the Social Sciences.

Chapter three begins with an anecdote again, illustrating how the author’s surname opens up a world of access and intimacy within the domestic space of a successful conservative Indian diasporic family. The logic of purity that structures caste-d behaviour is shown at play in the North American continent. This chapter, fittingly titled “Other Indians” employs an anti-caste analytic to show how the indigenous other, i.e., the native gets conflated with the Indian other, i.e., the non-Savarna. These practices are chronicled, keeping in sight, the large-scale Hindutva movement gaining traction in the continent, which is premised on a singular, uni-cultural imagination of Indianness, and the academic project of Indic Studies, establishing a model of decolonization based on the aforesaid homogeneity.

The pre-conclusion, fourth chapter delves into the domain of intimacy. “Colonial Intimacies” opens with a dialogue between an Indian Muslim man and an indigenous woman where the latter is subjected to denigrating stereotypes at a date. Arguing via Nayan Shah, Upadhyay deploys “stranger intimacy”, as encounters that either fortified or destabilized social hierarchies through relationalities to examine what they call *colonial* instead of interracial relations. Without denying the space for agency and creative fashionings of relationships, Upadhyay looks at how “the trajectories of these intimacies are scripted through settler-colonial logic” (118). This is also a significant chapter for literary scholars, as it bases its theorization upon short stories by the Cree writer Tomson Highway and Punjabi writer Sadhu Binning. The relationships depicted in these stories are marked by hauntings of the violent past and the pursuing of intimacies in this context, makes them both haunting and haunted, which Upadhyay uses to construct a larger argument about the same, demonstrating it through a fastidious reading of literature, history and field-notes.

Finally, the book culminates on a note of optimism, despite the author’s declared academic pessimism at multiple points. Through recorded statements, the author muses about the younger generations being invested in *Indian-Indian* solidarities, as unlike the older generations, they may not experience a struggle to claim belonging to the settler state despite racial violence and can bring about “decolonial alliances” (151) in the face of impossible relationalities. This is the larger tone of Upadhyay’s work, with the notion that, “complicity and solidarity are not binaries” (15). While implicating savarna scholars and outlining colonial incommensurabilities, Upadhyay, steers clear of projects of shaming and does not make the case for summarily rejecting Indian-centric postcolonial/transnational scholarship. This makes their work a peri-optimistic, or a somewhat hopeful attempt to imagine the future with new/better ethics.

The significance of this book for literary studies can be gleaned from a comparison with what the inaugural manoeuvres of postcolonial theory did to the canon. After the rise of colonial discourse analysis, it became fairly common to read *Mansfield Park* differently, with special attention to how Sir Thomas Bertram’s wealth in the text is derived from his colonial possessions, including a sugar plantation in Antigua run by slave labour. After *Indians on Indian Lands*, celebrated works such as *The Namesake* might be read differently as well. In general, this book is a necessary introduction to critically think about Indian (and South Asian) presence in literature, film and the other arts in a globalizing world.

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