

Imagining Afghanistan

Over time and across different genres, Afghanistan has been presented to the world as potential ally, dangerous enemy, gendered space and mysterious locale. These powerful, if competing, visions seek to make sense of Afghanistan and to render it legible. In this innovative examination, Nivi Manchanda uncovers and critically explores Anglophone practices of knowledge cultivation and representational strategies and argues that Afghanistan occupies a distinctive place in the imperial imagination: over-determined and under-theorised, owing largely to the particular history of imperial intervention in the region. Focusing on representations of gender, state and tribes, Manchanda re-historicises and de-mythologises the study of Afghanistan through a sustained critique of colonial forms of knowing and demonstrates how the development of pervasive tropes in Western conceptions of Afghanistan have enabled Western intervention, invasion and bombing in the region from the nineteenth century to the present.

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The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge

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For nana, and in loving memory of nani

But last year stories began to reach us from the capital of unrest among the barbarians. Traders travelling safe routes had been attacked and plundered. Stock thefts had increased in scale and audacity. A party of census officials had disappeared and been found buried in shallow graves. Shots had been fired at a provincial governor during a tour of inspection. There had been clashes with border patrols. The barbarian tribes were arming, the rumour went; the Empire should take precautionary measures, for there would certainly be war.

Of this unrest I myself saw nothing. In private I observed that once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians. There is no woman living along the Frontier who has not dreamed of a dark barbarian hand coming from under the bed to grip her ankle, no man who has not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing in his home, breaking the plates, setting fire to the curtains, raping his daughters. These dreams are the consequence of too much ease. Show me a barbarian army and I will believe.

—‘The Magistrate’ in J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for Barbarians*, 1980

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Acknowledgements

In an interview Fred Moten once intimated that if we think something (a piece of music, a painting, a text) belongs to an individual, it is probably because we didn't look closely enough. One need not read between the lines to realise that this book too is a product of what academics increasingly label 'co-production'. It emerges out of an industry renowned for its practices of appropriation, expropriation, silencing and discrediting, and as such it is implicated in those invariably racialised, gendered and classed processes of knowledge production. But it is also a product of intellectual community, political solidarity and enduring friendships.

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