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South Asian in the Mid-South: Migrations of Literacies

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South Asian in the Mid-South: Migrations of Literacies

Iswari P. Pandey

University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015. 264 pp.

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As community literacy organizations become increasingly concerned with providing a welcoming and culturally-relevant transition for incoming immigrants at a time when they face significant suspicion and hostility, Iswari P. Pandey's book *South Asian in the Mid-South: Migrations of Literacies* provides a timely understanding of immigrants as agents responding to misrepresentation post-9/11 and negotiating the liminal spaces of identity and culture through literacy practices. Pandey's study focuses on a South Asian immigrant population in a Mid-South city he calls Kingsville. The interviews that Pandey conducted with more than 70 participants make up a major portion of the evidence he uses in support of his main argument that literacy has a migratory nature of its own separate from the geographical movement of those using it. He examines how community members recreate and recirculate literacy in their processes of relocation, socialization, cultural preservation, and negotiation. Pandey refers to this labor—the act of building and rebuilding identity and culture—as “word work.” Pandey situates his argument within a body of scholarship that claims literacies are rooted in cultural and economic systems and that they move with users. His contributions lie in the distinction that literacies are nearly always in motion and transfer as “complex sets of practices and values open to multiple adaptations and negotiations” (10). The movements of literacies are multidirectional, the meanings and values of which are constantly in flux.

The structure of the book indicates that Pandey writes to a wider audience than merely scholars interested in literacy studies, cross-cultural communications, globalization, South Asian American studies, and transnational cultures. Each chapter begins with several quotations from the research participants primarily, and relevant scholars. In doing so, he incorporates the voices of whom he is speaking about, for, and to. His inclusion of statements from community members also helps readers cultivate a sense of familiarity with the people and the place that Pandey partially conceals by using pseudonyms, for both the name of the city and the names of participants, and by excluding physical descriptions and other significant markers of



identity from the scenes he recreates based on interviews or other interactions with community members. The quotations are also intended to alert readers to the main points of the chapter. This maneuver serves as an alternative to the topic sentence style of academic writing, making the content more accessible for a general audience. Pandey's structure and writing style further operate in the liminal space between the academy and the everyday. He mixes personal narrative, character sketches of community members, and descriptive scenes involving their interactions with critical self-reflection of his position as a researcher and immigrant as well as rigorous analysis of his subjects. He writes in a descriptive, clear, and straightforward manner and explains the academic terms and concepts he incorporates several times. Every scene or snapshot he details is followed by a discussion connecting it to his main argument. He makes short statements explaining his academic claims and ends with chapter summaries. The stylistic repetition Pandey relies upon lends itself well not only to general readers but those looking to gain a general sense of the book and its main arguments by focusing on just a couple of key chapters. For those readers, chapters one and six are recommended reading.

In chapter one "Departures and Returns: Literacy Practices across Borders," Pandey conducts a literature review of previous scholarly work to provide context for his research concerns and to build a credible foundation for his arguments. This introductory chapter contains an overview of his main points and how his research evolved since its development in 2004. He explains the unique literacy practices of his selected population as the migration of texts, people, and literacies that resulted in the relocation of religious and cultural traditions and the re-creation and re-circulation of related practices and values. Several terms used throughout the book are explained, such as "word work" and South Asian. Most of the participants of the study identify themselves as members of a certain ethnic, religious, or national community located in South Asia, or as coming from that region. South Asian immigrants use word work—shaped by nationality, gender, class, and religion—to negotiate power and identity through literacy practices performed in communities. Pandey emphasizes that the motion of literacies is reliant on community members to put in the effort needed to move and make them possible.

In chapter two "En Route: Reconsidering Sites and Subjects or Research in Motion," Pandey critiques the methodological approaches of qualitative studies similar to his own. He calls for the inclusion of historical and spatial perspectives in the understanding of location. Place should be viewed as a site of departures and arrivals that are interrelated and interdependent. The observations and interviews he includes from community members show how immigrants continually participate in acts of reinvention and move between communities and spaces. Pandey casts the narratives of Kingsville as one representative strand in a complex web of migration literacies. Pandey also reflects on how his positionality as an immigrant student from Nepal and a researcher at a Western university affects his study.

Chapter three "Genes and Jeans: Sanskrit South Asia in the US Mid-South, and Back Again" examines the word work involved with the process of using English to teach Sanskrit at a Kingsville Hindu school as a means of preserving South Asian cul-

ture among the immigrant population. The classical language associated with their communal identity embodies an ethnic history, especially a religious tradition. The migration of literacies occurs as the curriculum is circulated internally and externally from the community, and students form identities in relation to their heritage and in response to the dominant culture. Chapter four “Detours and Diversions: (Re)Writing Gender Roles” focuses on how South Asian female teachers in Kingsville participate in similar religious literacy practices to redefine their identity and culture in response to patriarchal values held by the community and gendered assumptions of the host society. Women challenge the male-dominated canon and form reading groups to discuss and reinterpret religious texts and traditional representations of women. Chapter five “Arrivals, Interrogations, Responses: ‘Islamic Ways of Life’ or the Literacy Practices of an ‘Other’ Nation” highlights the rhetorical practices of Muslim South Asian men in Kingsville. These men form reading and online discussion groups to actively define their identities and speak against media misrepresentation in a post-9/11 environment. Their writings and presentations address local concerns and a global audience through the continual reconfiguration of Islam.

The final chapter, “Between Departures and Returns: Literacies of Migrations, Migrations of Literacies,” summarizes the observations and arguments made throughout the book and discusses what the literacy practices of South Asian immigrants contribute to an academic and global understanding of the functions of literacies. Pandey’s reconceptualization of literacies as being in constant motion, inherently adaptable, and open to modification impacts approaches to research, pedagogy, and community literacy projects. Instructors and literacy volunteers are called to rethink what it means to prepare students to be empathetic, inclusive, and responsive global citizens. Pandey’s study shows how community members negotiate questions of identity, language, location, culture, and citizenship. For those working in classrooms and communities with immigrant and refugee populations, incorporating these negotiations into literacy practices and creating opportunities to enact them in public spaces can enable minority students to transform how they are misrepresented by the dominant community. This book is essential for community literacy sites invested in balancing instruction of the dominant literacies and culture with preservation of students’ home languages and traditions.

South Asian in the Mid-South was written, in part, in response to America’s hostile reaction toward South Asian immigrants and Muslims after 9/11. Pandey’s study becomes increasingly relevant as anti-immigration and anti-Muslim rhetoric poisons the current political scene in the U.S. and globally. The reluctance and refusal of several countries to take in Syrian refugees and the Trump Administration’s Executive Order 13769 “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry,” nicknamed the “Muslim Ban” by opponents, are two of the most recent examples. In a time of increasing globalization, Pandey’s research makes the significant suggestion that all issues and resources should be viewed in relation to one another and as simultaneously local, transnational, and in motion. The ability to navigate tensions between immigrant communities and the dominant culture is shaped by an understanding of power structures and how literacy practices can be used to transform these structures local-

ly and globally. In his observations and analyses of South Asian immigrants' literacy practices, Pandey challenges dominant conceptions of what it means to be an American. For these reasons, Pandey's book is highly recommended not only for scholars and teachers concerned with transnational relations and literacy practices, but also for general readers because we all have a stake in global citizenship.

Conscious practice of migrating literacies calls for constant examination of positions of authority. Pandey models critical self-reflection of his positionality as a researcher and how it impacts his process and final product. He recognizes that the lives of his subjects, like the migrant quality of literacies, are dynamic and fluid, which means they escape full and accurate representation in his book. He emphasizes this fact in the end of the preface when he refers to his research contributions as "nothing but word work" (xvi). The closing lines of the book echo this sense of perpetual work in motion by stating that he hopes his reflections on positionality and the movement of literacies and lives are a step in the right direction to communicating the potentiality of this understanding. In doing so, Pandey asks readers to consider his book as neither a point of arrival nor departure, but a word work that requires scholars, instructors, students, and global citizens to be continually transforming its arguments and concepts to make meaning and create change in their local and global communities. As a result, Pandey does not offer direct answers or practical examples for revising syllabi or designing community literacy projects. His word work becomes a draft for future research, and the word work represented in the narratives of community members can serve as starting points for classroom and community development in any location.