

Doná, G. (2017) The representational burden, book review of *The Good Immigrant* by Shukla, N. (ed) London: Unbound, 2016, *Soundings*, 104-106

**The Good Immigrant** by Shukla, Nikesh (ed) London: Unbound, 2016, pp. 1-254

The *Good Immigrant* is an edited collection of short stories, personal reflections and commentaries on identity and identity politics in the United Kingdom, bringing together the voices of black, Asian and minority authors. For these writers of colour who migrated or who are children of migrants, to reflect on migration means to think about two related types of histories, stories of personal migration but also the historic legacy of past migrations which still reverberates among those who are born in the United Kingdom. The authors use migration as an aesthetic lens through which they express their uneasiness about having to continue to justify their place in society and as a proxy for racial encounters that unfold in overt and subtle forms of racism and multiple belongings in racially mixed families and spaces that sit uneasily within the national imagination. These creative narratives give voice to what it feels to have been, to be and to continue to be the Other in its many variations.

Shukla's collection makes a claim for the inclusion of black, Asian and minority ethnic voices within the national imagination which is almost exclusively white, but it goes one step further to challenge the stereotypical assumption that the black, Asian and ethnic minority experience is homogenous. The book is indeed a statement against essentialism and homogeneity. While to be the ethnic immigrant can be a shared experience, not all experiences of ethnic otherness are the same. An appealing feature of this edited collection rests with its diversity, which can be seen in the multiplicity of the writers' experiences, the variety of narrative styles, and the wide array of topics covered in the twenty-one essays, which include class, popular culture, micro-aggressions, free movement, masculinity, death, and stake in society. Taken together, these aesthetically pleasing essays challenge essentialist stereotypes of the figure of the immigrant and the ethnic other. The authors do so by inviting readers into their creative space, which reverses conventional majority-minorities representations, and to experience racial encounters from the positionality of the Other, to feel what it feels to have otherness projected onto oneself, to be described through stereotypes, or to be the subject of racist remarks, which are even inaccurate.

The authors come from the performing and creative arts and most of them are familiar with the inherent politics of representations that exist in their professional worlds. They write about absences, partial presences, incorrect representations and stereotypical castings. Some also remember the huge impact that the presence of the rare ethnic role models seen on television while they were growing up had on their identity and aspirations. The book is a call to give black, Asian and ethnic minority characters the same kind of complexity that white characters enjoy, and to portray versions of blackness rather than a monolithic

blackness. Thus, the collection, which in itself represents a creative endeavor in the field of cultural representation, re-appropriates the representation of what it means to be an immigrant now for whom race is part of everything that she does.

After reading the collection, the title 'The Good Immigrant' is not what it first appeared to be, and takes on new meanings. The 'Good Immigrant' is not simply a collection of successful stories of good immigrants, as the title may at first imply, even though some stories do that too, but rather a critique of essentialistic constructions of the 'good' immigrant. The book problematizes societal representations through migrants are at first constructed as 'bad' immigrants - job stealers, benefit scrounges, girlfriend-thieves, refugees - until a crossover in consciousness, through popular culture, winning races, being role models occurs to transform them into good immigrants. The book offers not simply a critique of the burden of negative representations of the immigrant but it actually brings to the fore the burden of representation more generally, which can take many forms: the burden of invisibility, the reductionist burden to be put into the box of the model minority, the burden of the binary that essentialises the complexity of immigrants' lives. The authors creatively write about, reflect upon and problematise the burden of representation.

Britain has recently triggered Article 50. At this present Brexit conjuncture, we are reminded of the power of binary and affectively loaded representations of the bad and good immigrant, a focal discourse that was used to great effect to capture the national imagination, to displace more fundamental preoccupations about inequalities and to reconfigure new migrant hierarchies and claims to belong. The writers of the Good Immigrant voice the ongoing repercussions of those social formations that are racialised in the context of post-colonial migrations to Britain. Why do these binaries continue to reappear to play significant roles at this historic conjuncture that is characterized by global destabilization, political contradiction and ruptures? Similarly to the racialised subject in post-colonial Britain, the migrant becomes the object of state regulation, control, and jurisdiction. But it would appear that we have moved into a new kind of ethnicised politics of difference during which, as Stuart Hall wrote, political blackness is no longer the exclusive counter or resistant identity and black politics has taken a more individualistic cast partly in the conjuncture of the new entrepreneurial culture and economy. In the present configuration of unequal power relations and positions, why is it that we need the 'good' in the good immigrant?