

Book review

Hybrid Heritage on Screen: The 'Raj Revival' in the Thatcher Era, Elena Oliete-Aldea (2015), Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 227 pages, ISBN 978-1-137-46396-8, hardback, 79,99 €.

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The early 1980s saw a British film and television phenomenon dubbed the 'Raj Revival' (by Salman Rushdie), as a cycle of films and television serials about British rule in India was released and broadcast. In her book *Hybrid Heritage on Screen: The 'Raj Revival' in the Thatcher Era* (2015), Elena Oliete-Aldea examines the five most popular screen fictions of this cycle: *Gandhi* (1982), *Heat and Dust* (1982), *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984), *A Passage to India* (1984) and *The Far Pavilions* (1984). The book is based on Oliete-Aldea's doctoral dissertation and follows its structure to a great extent. The main argument of the book seems to be that these screen fictions are ambivalent in their message, being both critical of Britain's imperial rule in India and, on the other hand, offering nostalgic glimpses of a time before Britain's multicultural 1980s. I use the word 'seems' as the book could have provided a clearer statement of its overall argument. In many ways, *Hybrid Heritage on Screen: The 'Raj Revival' in the Thatcher Era* reads like a dissertation and could have benefited from structural changes and a more thorough rewrite.

The author explains in the introduction that '[t]he filmic texts will be approached from a cultural perspective, paying special attention to the ideological implications of the texts in relation to their context' and that the films are examined 'against the sociocultural and political background of the time' (3). Therefore – and because Thatcher is mentioned already in the title of the book – one expects Oliete-Aldea to have taken her cue from Rushdie, who wrote of these screen fictions:

works of art, even works of entertainment, do not come into being in a social and political vacuum; [...] the way they operate in a society cannot be separated from politics, from history. For every text, a context; and the rise of Raj revisionism, exemplified by the huge success of these fictions, is the artistic counterpart of the rise of conservative ideologies in modern Britain. (Rushdie 1984)

However, Oliete-Aldea discusses the political context of the ‘Thatcher era’ and the rise of conservative ideologies in the early 1980s’ Britain, mainly in a short and very general background chapter that gives an overview of Britain’s political climate of the time. Some references are made to this chapter when Oliete-Aldea examines the Raj films in the later chapters but the actual discussion of the films is more text-based than contextually informed. This is a lost opportunity, for though numerous articles, chapters and critiques have been written on the Raj films and television serials of the 1980s, a book-length study on the cycle examined in their cultural and political context is a promising prospect. Unfortunately, Oliete-Aldea does not quite fulfil the expectation, as the contexts of the Raj screen fictions are discussed in three separate background chapters that are then infrequently referred to in the actual analysis of the Raj screen fictions.

Besides the political context of the 1980s, the other contexts included in the background chapters comprise a short history of race and racism from the fifteenth century to the present day, a discussion of migration, multicultural societies and globalization, as well as of theories of cultural identity, race and hybridity – with little reference to film or television – and in a chapter of its own, an examination of British heritage films of the 1980s, genre and earlier empire films. All of these contexts are relevant to the analysis of the Raj films, and yet discussing them in separate background chapters that constitute the first 85 pages of the 200-page book before the actual analysis of the films, and making the reader wait so long for what is supposed to be the topic of the book, is not the best possible solution. Examining the contexts together with the films – rather than making infrequent references

to them in the three chapters in which the films are discussed – would have allowed the contextual knowledge to inform the reading of the films more thoroughly and could have produced significant new insights. Oliete-Aldea brings up relevant theories and ideas by Lawrence Grossberg, Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall and Richard Dyer among others, when discussing cultural identity, race and hybridity in the background chapters, but she neither develops these further to propose an original theoretical framework, nor draws on them in the analysis of the films in a way that would have moved the existing literature forward.

A leading idea of the book is that the 1980s' Raj films and TV series feminized the Empire as the male imperialists and adventurers of earlier films gave way to more domestic and female-centred narratives – a trend already began by *Black Narcissus* in 1947. This argument in the last of the background chapters leads her to finally examine the actual films and TV series. Chapter 4 focuses on Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi*, which is the only biopic and historical film based on real-life characters. Chapter 5 examines the literary adaptations of *Heat and Dust* and *A Passage to India*, and the last chapter focuses on the television series *The Jewel in the Crown* and *The Far Pavilions*. Oliete-Aldea argues that in the 1980s this feminization led to Empire/Raj films that both systematically blamed 'women for the collapse of the imperial enterprise' and 'opened up new possibilities for the portrayal of intercultural relationships outside the rigid patriarchal colonial hierarchy' (79). She states that in the 1980s, 'colonial discourses were not only questioned but also rejected in favour of new possibilities of multicultural relationships' (79). Her analysis of the 1980s' Raj films focuses on the portrayal of these relationships.

Quite frequently her analysis of the films is a bit too dependent on previous studies and criticism. For example, one of Oliete-Aldea's main arguments about *Gandhi* is that he has been made a god, a Christ-like figure, in Attenborough's film, but this argument has already been made by Rushdie and others (as Oliete-Aldea duly notes) in the early 1980s. However, some interesting and valuable points are made especially about the gender relations and the role and agency of British women in India during the Raj in these films. The book is based on meticulous research, and though not particularly

innovative, the end result is a good and very readable overview of the British Raj screen fictions of the 1980s, mainly from the perspective of gender and ethnicity.

Reference

The Far Pavilions (1984, UK: Channel Four)

The Jewel in the Crown (1984, UK: ITV)

Rushdie, S. ([1984] 1991), 'Outside the whale', in S. Rushdie (ed.), *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–91*, London: Granta Books, pp. 87-101; here 92.