

**Katarzyna Ancuta and Deimantas Valančiūnas (eds). *South Asian Gothic: Haunted Cultures, Histories, and Media*. University of Wales Press, 2021. Pp. 284. UK £70 (hardcover or ebook). ISBN: 9781786838001.**

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In *South Asian Gothic: Haunted Cultures, Histories, and Media*, editors Katarzyna Ancuta and Deimantas Valančiūnas, alongside thirteen fellow “expert scholars of film, literature, and cultural studies of South Asia,” strive to create what should be recognized as the most successful attempt to introduce the academic world to the Gothic films and folklore of South Asia and the political unrest that has formed its foundation (7). From the opening chapter on the “gothic poetics of state terror” in Dhruvajyoti Bora’s *Kalantor* Trilogy (17-18), to the final chapter, which addresses Bangladesh’s beloved ‘Bhoot FM’ (259), *South Asian Gothic* provides substantial evidence that the Gothic serves an integral role in far more than just the books and movies at the epicenter of South Asia’s popular culture. This collection analyzes the Gothic’s presence as a framework by which some of South Asia’s most creative minds can ponder the complexities of their own unique experiences and fears—especially as such accounts may relate to a “common cultural landscape” of South Asia that remains largely unexplored by academia (7). Scholars of popular romance studies will be specifically drawn to the words of Shweta Sachdeva Jha and Sarah A. Joshi, authors of *South Asian Gothic*’s fifth and tenth chapters, respectively.

After a list of illustrations (ix), the contributing scholars’ biographical information (xi), and an introduction explaining the thoughts and theories responsible for the book’s creation (1), the fifteen chapters of *South Asian Gothic* are separated into four parts: “History, Politics, and Trauma,” “Colonialism, Postcolonialism, and Diaspora,” “Spirits, Rituals, and Folklore,” and “Gothic Media.” While the titles of all four sections focus on specific components of the Gothic within South Asian culture, media, and mythology, it is important to note that nearly all of the fifteen chapters within *South Asian Gothic* share one key element—the Gothic’s vital malleability as a reliable tool for the exploration of political unease within South Asia.

In their introduction, Ancuta and Valančiūnas state that in the years prior to collaborating on *South Asian Gothic*, they noticed “a more systematic investigation of the horror genre in India” (7). This, coupled with a shared desire to “dispel the notion of the culturally monolithic India that some academics appear to cling to” and a profound interest in highlighting “texts that may be less known outside their local cultures, but are nevertheless representative of the ways these cultures engage with the Gothic in their cultural production,” has resulted in one of academia’s finest collections of scholarly research into South Asia’s fascination with, and dedication to, the Gothic and its many monsters and mysteries (7).

Within the opening lines of the collection’s first chapter, “Places Stained by Time: The Gothic Poetics of State Terror in Dhrubajyoti Bora’s *Kalantor* Trilogy,” Amit R. Baishya establishes a connection between the “Gothic” and “state terror,” two concepts whose relationship within South Asian media serves as the scaffolding by which much of the research within *South Asian Gothic* has been constructed (17). This chapter addresses “the connection between state terror and the Gothic” (17), how “a particular place is stained by time” and the horrors of its history (20). The chapter also addresses the overall sense of “otherness” associated with temporality and the Gothic’s meticulous application of time not merely as a method of measurement, but as a tool crafted to enrich and enhance the narrative (26). In the chapter’s parting words, Baishya hauntingly suggests to the audience that “a decentralized Gothic poetics of state terror has global resonances” (29).

In “The Past and the Present: A Reading of *Bhooter Bhabishyat*,” Nishi Pulugurtha echoes the sentiments of Baishya, writing that the “Gothic represents the state of fragmentation that is so characteristic of the modern world” (52). Rather than being exclusive to Pulugurtha’s chapter, the “fragmentation” of modern society is a concept that permeates much of the scholarship within *South Asian Gothic* (52). For example, in “Search and Subterfuge: The Haunting of the Bengali *Bhadralok* in Tagore’s *The Hungry Stones*,” Prasanta Bhattacharyya comments on the “fractured and fragmented Indian identity,” and its struggles “to cope with the social and cultural pressures generated through the forces of history” (71).

Scholars of South Asian culture and popular romance studies alike will undoubtedly find themselves enthralled by “Tracing Terror and the Uncanny in the Gothic Urdu Fiction of Hijab Imtiaz Ali,” the collection’s fifth chapter. The difficulties of living in a “fractured” society are the focal point once more when Shweta Sachdeva Jha writes of how “Gothic fiction in Urdu” became “a means for *ashraf* women to cope with the fractured modernity of the *ashraf* class and their homes in late colonial India” (82). Later, Jha further illuminates how Ali’s fiction includes elements of the Gothic as a well-veiled vessel for providing commentary on the fears and struggles of “*ashraf* women” (93). The final pages of Jha’s chapter specifically highlight how Ali’s “narratives offer women readers a possibility of imagining the world where the protagonist can travel and defy social conventions of decorum and desire” (92) and the conclusion that Ali’s immaculate deployment of the Gothic “style offered her a means to explore feminine desire, love and anxieties felt by *ashraf* women” (93). Such statements serve as irrefutable evidence that studies of romance and the Gothic are inseparable partners in an oft-celebrated marriage of theories, depictions, and academic analyses.

Near the conclusion of this chapter, Jha addresses one of *South Asian Gothic*’s most important components—the Gothic’s unrivaled employability as an easily molded medium for exploring “everyday fear and terror” (91). Several of the chapters that follow provide

valuable commentary on “the socio-political climate” (98), the “perpetual state of fear” cultivated by “colonial oppression” (126-127), and the inescapable connection between the Gothic and the political that Baishya highlights in the first chapter of *South Asian Gothic* (17).

“Spirits, Rituals, and Folklore,” the third part of *South Asian Gothic*, masterfully delves into what Runa Chakraborty Paunksnis refers to as the “eerie world of spirits” (134). Throughout much of this section, “the enigma of Gothic eeriness” and “the inscrutable world of the supernatural” (145) take center stage, shifting the focus from the political phantoms that haunted previous chapters to the more incorporeal and inexplicable entities whose mere existence “invites us to be a part of” the “everlasting mystery” of the Gothic (145).

Readers that find themselves intrigued by investigations into reinterpretations and reinventions of European werewolf mythology should focus on Sarah A. Joshi’s “Monsters of Every Stripe: Navigating the Werebeasts of Indian Horror Cinema.” This chapter, which is the tenth of *South Asian Gothic*, primarily explores depictions of the werewolf, “one of the most ubiquitous liminal human-monster creatures” (167), and what similarities exist between the “classic Gothic werewolf” and the “weretiger or werecat” of Indian cinema (168). Joshi suggests that several “features and ideological tropes” are shared between the European werewolf and the weretigers and werebeasts of Indian cinema, including “shape-shifting, contagion, and violent sexual desire” (169). In the closing lines of this chapter, Joshi addresses a component of these stories which lies at the heart of the centuries-old “fascination with shape-shifting that exists across cultures” (171): the ability to probe “the darker side of man and nature” through the Gothic’s common utilization of “these tormented liminal beings” (181).

In “Gothic Media,” the collection’s fourth section, the remaining chapters examine the Gothic’s presence in Hindi comics (207), Hindi horror movies (223), South Asian television programs (243) and ‘Bhoot FM,’ the “pioneering programme” that ushered in widespread interest in “the concept of live radio ghost storytelling” and fueled the “budding supernatural Gothic tradition in Bangladeshi radio” (259). These final chapters, when put in conversation with one another, stand as a lasting testament to the assorted applications of the Gothic within not only works of literature and cinema, but the entire spectrum of South Asian popular culture.

From the first page to the last, *South Asian Gothic: Haunted Cultures, Histories, and Media* strives to bring the cultural, political, social, and paranormal components of South Asia’s enduring fascination with the Gothic to the forefront of modern academia. Despite the plethora of Gothic imagery and influence that permeates South Asian popular culture, such a proactive attempt to investigate and catalog these components has until now never before been undertaken by a member of the academic community. Furthermore, the collection’s fifth and tenth chapters masterfully merge studies of romance and the Gothic with a flawlessness that ensures such connections will be a focal point of future academic inquiries.

With the publication of this collection, editors Katarzyna Ancuta and Deimantas Valančiūnas at last rectify a great oversight and critically consider South Asia’s use of the Gothic as a framework by which some of the most haunting specters, both political and phantasmic, can be exhumed from their respective crypts and catacombs and properly scrutinized under the analytical eyes of modern academics and consumers alike.