

Fall 2011

Review of Suvir Kaul's Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Postcolonial Studies. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009. 240 pages. (\$36.00). ISBN-13: 978-0748634552

Journal of South Texas English Studies

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/jostes>

Recommended Citation

(2011). Review of Suvir Kaul's Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Postcolonial Studies. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009. 240 pages. (\$36.00). ISBN-13: 978-0748634552. Jostes: The Journal of South Texas English Studies, 3(1).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of South Texas English Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UTRGV. For more information, please contact justin.white@utrgv.edu, william.flores01@utrgv.edu.

Book Review

Suvir Kaul's *Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Postcolonial Studies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009. 240 pages. (\$36.00). ISBN-13: 978-0748634552

In his latest contribution to the fields of eighteenth century literature and culture, Suvir Kaul examines the creative potency and political urgency of what he terms “the literary artifact” and its dense role in the contemporary work of empire and aggressive nationalisms which mark the era. In particular, Kaul’s book exemplifies the myriad contradictions, inconsistencies and overlooked dynamics that account for the mounting cultural anxieties which were the chief response to what was fast becoming a disorienting and an unrecognizable world. The book is impressive in depth and range, covering, drama, novels, and periodical literature. Each chapter contextualizes the works in their rich historical, geopolitical moment while never losing sight of the framework of the colonial imperatives which drive the volume forward.

In his erudite introduction “Towards a Postcolonial History of Eighteenth-Century English Literature”, Kaul firmly establishes his motives for revising the period’s literature through a postcolonial lens by revisiting the issue of empire and its multiple ideological quandaries and paradigms. A careful reassessment of eighteenth century literature against the larger questions of empire which besieged the era in question, is a crucial step in understanding the currents of globalization today. England’s understanding of itself and its institutions, from coffee houses to play houses, is due to the country’s local articulation of ideas of domestic class, gender and racial difference, specifically and problematically from accounts of other worlds being brought into its orbit by exploration, trade, and colonization. Chapter one, “Theaters of Empire,” highlights the tensions between playwrights and their audiences, as they sought to negotiate the complexities of empire. Writers absorb the historical moment of the age by challenging their protagonists to overcome obstacles while simultaneously encountering unknown peoples and societies, in unforeseen localities which stretch the full breadth of the known world.

Chapter Two, “The Expanding Frontiers of Prose,” continues to ponder the juxtaposition of the domestic with foreign spaces and subjectivities by exploring how novels become a central literary medium for modeling such complex relations of power and personhood. Especially noteworthy is his reading of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, in which Kaul cogently argues that Crusoe’s ambition “oscillates between the twin poles of colonial expropriation...and the hope of conveying those overseas properties in the propriety of a manorial estate in England.” Chapter three, “Imaginative Writing, Intellectual History, and the Horizons of British Literary Culture,” examines how periodicals also came to establish themselves as privileged textual space for the elaboration of nationalist sentiments, among other colonial issues. He also gestures to the weighty subject of Enlightenment philosophies accounting for colonial upheavals and reappropriation. Chapter four, “Perspectives from Elsewhere” focuses on following a trail of “disparate” writers, from Lady Mary Wortley Montague to Phyllis Wheatley, in order to put into relief the subject making devices of British culture and self-conception. The book concludes with a refreshing reading of John Keats, and critically asks to what extent was the literature of the age aesthetically and subjectively removed from its own imperial legacies, to what extent was the literature immersed in it, and what role, ultimately did writing play in crafting of the repository of England’s imperial identity.

Kaul argues that the literary constellation of the late seventeenth century and long eighteenth century constitute a “wonderful archive for analysis between the idea of a national literature, nation formation, and the making of British empire.” This book is a valuable addition indeed to the burgeoning subfields of transatlantic studies, settler studies, and postcolonial studies of the era.