

sense 'in the context of the fluidity of the social world he inhabited, a world where most people were strangers' (p.55). Such characters abound in the scenarios of *Forgotten Armies*, where the minor and ghostly presence of the commoner reveals itself to be just as significant as that of a British official, where reversals of power are quite regular. The book's excellent organisation, including several maps, a list of key characters and an extensive index, help the reader sort through any difficulties in keeping track of them.

The book's unusual picture of the modern experience can be considered the result of its shifting the narrative of the second world war from the western to the eastern front and from the sphere of officialdom to the translocal worlds of the forgotten armies. Combinations of the most discrepant phenomena seem to have characterized the era, and in bringing them to light Bayly and Harper verge on the fantastic in their depictions. The non-western world of the mid-20th century is one of bizarre *bricolage*. We see animal-based armies alongside state-of-the-art war machines and we witness how the 'most advanced scientific techniques of killing were deployed alongside almost medieval patterns of bravery and brutality' (p.393). The notion of a 'triumph of the will' was strong among many fighting forces and Emperor Hirohito 'still believed that the Allies could be denied victory if his samurai were brave enough' (p.393). The most technologically advanced instruments of destruction were employed by the likes of kamikaze bombers who espoused quasi-ancient ideologies of sacrifice. The

techniques for expressing domination also seem to be of a strangely pre-modern sort. The Japanese probably incited the most hatred and spurred anti-imperial struggle with their notorious habit of face-slapping. The newly re-colonized subjects of Burma and Malay found this to be the most intolerable aspect of their subjection.

The fruit of long and arduous archival labour, *Forgotten Armies* is an achievement that helps one rethink broad subjects such as modernity and modern warfare. It is also a great example of the theory of nationalism and regionalism that Bayly has previously published. According to him, geo-political formations in modern times are born through the crucible of war. The vast transformation that was the second world war can be seen to have produced the region we understand today as Southeast Asia. The very term 'Southeast Asia' was coined only after 'the whole area from the borders of Bengal and Assam almost as far as the Australian Sea was united by the Allies for the first and only time in a single, interconnected administration' (p.xxxii). The seeds of a new order were being planted amidst the mayhem. Thus the vast cosmopolitan perspective that they bring to their narrative reveals 'the terrifying spectacle of change which destroys everything and creates it anew, and destroys again', which was central to Friedrich von Schiller's notion of the historical sublime.²

Destruction can thus be productive. The exceptional circumstances of modern warfare can potentially help bring into focus the seething struggles, unsettled

disputes and unresolved contests over power that endure quietly under normal conditions. The aftermath of explosions across a vast terrain leave the possibility for realignments of geo-political boundaries, the invention of nations and the formation of new regional blocs. Underneath the scorched remains, the ramshackle re-adjustment to normality and the refurbishing of historical trajectory lie the memories of vastly discrepant, yet interconnected, experiences. Such remains can be unearthed to reveal profound moments pregnant with possibility. Bayly and Harper are like archaeologists digging into the historical record to bring scraps back from oblivion and reassemble them in ways that may shed light on and enhance the meaning of our present. One issue that certainly comes to light is the potential discrepancy between the way the past is officially commemorated and the different ways it can be recollected in regions as diversely populated – in the past and in the present – in what we today call 'Southeast Asia'. ◀

Notes

1. White, Hayden. 1987. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
2. As quoted in 'The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation'. *Ibid.*, p.69.

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TO THE PROFESSIONAL ASSASSIN

*It is possible to throw down
A mountain, to erase a river
From its source; how many times
Have I whispered; real talent
Is needed for murder;
It is not easy at all
To commit a neat murder
The dead can jump out of graves
On rare mornings
Some light is needed;
As human sight is not powerful
Like the eyes of a cat.*

from Sarker Amin, *What my name is!*
Translated by Razia Khan and M. Harunir Rashid
Dhaka: DROUPODI, 2002

starts late at night and runs to early morning. Gulati's unique style of storytelling simultaneously uses and defies documentary conventions – the film incorporates 'traditional' style interviews but the camera keeps rolling even when a phone call interrupts the session and the interviewee lets us know that Gulati's next subject is waiting in the room next door.

The film paints a complex picture with snippets of history that date back to the first telephone call made via satellite, subtly hinting at the threat technological advancements make to all jobs, not just call center jobs. It serves as a gentle reminder to the changes we accept around us every day – from automatic toll collection machines on highways to self-check-in airline counters to self-check-out grocery cashier stations. It also reminds us that we are too quick to point fingers at cheaper labour in developing countries taking away American jobs. The film also poses more questions than it answers; half way through the film, Gulati asks a former call center employee: Who benefits? A question she says she learned to ask as a Critical Social Thought major, a question that highlights the politics behind the film and prods at the larger sociological issue of the distribution of power.

The theme of globalization is apparent in the film, but the subtlety with which Gulati approaches the issue of identity intrigues. At one point, she drops in at a call center job interview where the interviewee is asked to describe the last movie he saw. He begins to narrate the plot of a major Hollywood blockbuster titled *Face Off*. 'In that film, there are two main characters, Nicolas Cage and John Travolta...they change their faces and no one knows which is the real one.' The resonance of his response with the subject of identity (Indian call center employees posing as Americans) seems too uncanny.

Nalini by Day, Nancy by Night starts and ends with animation using a black and white palette that resonates with the archival footage in the film. It forms a nice balance between the humorous and satirical animation and serious and factual archival imagery. The film is a refreshing concoction of documentary and fiction that has 'text' starring as its own character. The 'fictitious' re-enacted phone calls from telemarketers in the opening animation might be scripted but is based on 'real life' accounts that the filmmaker has experienced.

Sonali Gulati continues to be interested in the subject of identity. Her first film *Sum Total* addresses gender and sexuality while *Barefeet* addresses diasporic and transnational identity. Before starting a film, Gulati always asks herself two questions: *Why this film?* And *why am I making it?* Clearly, the responses to these questions create close ties between the film and the filmmaker. For someone who believes that the personal is political, such critical introspection comes as no surprise.

Gulati's latest film *Nalini by Day, Nancy by Night* is a documentary worth watching. The film is witty and humorous with a serious heart on a subject of global importance that will keep you laughing all the way home and thinking thereafter. If you see this film, you'll know why Gulati is a filmmaker to watch out for. ◀

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