

Boehmer, Elleke: *Indian Arrivals, 1870-1915. Networks of British Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015. ISBN: 978-0-19-874418-4.

Rezensioniert von: Amelia Bonea, The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, University of Oxford

Some weeks ago, researchers from London's Natural History Museum and University College London announced that Cheddar Man, the oldest complete human skeleton discovered in Britain and believed to have lived almost 10,000 years ago, was likely to have had blue eyes and 'brown to dark skin', according to DNA tests conducted on a fragment of his skull. The news attracted considerable attention on social media, with discussions branching into a number of prominent, if predictable, topics, including racism, immigration, Brexit, British identity, religion and climate change. The fact that so many commentators were ready to dismiss the story as yet another example of 'PC propaganda' and 'PC madness' was a chilling reminder—if, indeed, one was needed—of how widespread the notion that pre-WWII Britain was a 'white' country still is. The very idea of studying something that many commentators regard as a non-topic raises suspicions, as some of the scholars who have ventured into the territory of non-white British history also testify. Gretchen Gerzina, for example, recounts how in the course of research for her book *Black London: Life before Emancipation*, a saleswoman in one of the capital's major bookshops emphatically told her that 'there were no black people in England before 1945'.¹ Sukhdev Sandhu documents similar attitudes in his book-length 'love letter' to the city, which explores London through the literary lenses of its black and Asian writers. His quote from a reader's letter to *The Independent* in 1995 perfectly captures such perceptions: '[...] it is wrong for 20th-century multi-culturalists to invent a spurious history for black settlement in Britain before the Fifties and Sixties'.²

It is in this context that books like Elleke Boehmer's *Indian Arrivals, 1870-1915: Networks of British Empire*, become particularly relevant, as they attempt to challenge some of

these widespread assumptions about the history of non-whites in Britain and the manner in which they shaped British society. A well-known postcolonial scholar and novelist, Boehmer approaches her topic from a literary and historicist perspective, in an attempt to demonstrate that 'late Victorian or imperial cosmopolitanism' was 'more dialectical' than previously envisaged (p. 3). Unlike Sandhu's study mentioned above, which discusses both black and Asian writers, Boehmer's book deals only with Indian writing and is also narrower in its temporal focus. In this respect, as well as in its literary approach, the book also differs from Michael Fisher's earlier study of Indian 'counterflows' to British colonial movement into South Asia, which covers the period from 1600 to the Mutiny of 1857.³

Given the book's emphasis on textuality, the focus is necessarily on elite Indians, who moved about the literary and intellectual spaces of London and Oxford—as opposed to the scores of lascars, ayahs and soldiers who represented the less privileged segment of an estimated population of about 10,000 Indians in Britain at the turn of the century (p. 9). The range of texts examined is impressive, and includes not only literary works, but also correspondence, journals and memoirs. Boehmer conceptualizes literary texts both 'as actual records of travel and cultural transaction' and 'as imaginative structures' that shaped social interactions and were, in turn, shaped by them (p. 12). She pays special attention to the lyric poem, which she regards as a 'particularly suggestive and mobile medium for forging connections across cultures' (p. 13).

Each of the book's four main chapters explores a particular historical and literary moment in the development of India-in-Britain. Chapter 1, 'Passages to England', focuses on what Boehmer fittingly calls the 'Suez discourse', that is, travel writing in the form of memoirs, correspondence and even poetry—such as that of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu—that is recognizable on account of cer-

¹ Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London. Life before Emancipation*, New Brunswick 1995, p. 3.

² Sukhdev Sandhu, *London Calling. How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City*, London 2003, p. 1.

³ Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism. Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857*, New Delhi 2004.

tain interrelated motifs. Prominent among these was the notion of the Suez Canal as a 'gateway' between India and Britain, a marvel of modern engineering that contrasted sharply with the alleged backwardness of its physical and human surroundings and enabled Indians to imagine themselves both as 'modern traveller[s]' and as 'civilized' citizens of the British Empire (p. 63).

Chapter 2 engages with novels, especially gothic novels like Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* and Charles Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, as well as poetry published predominantly in the 1880s. This was a time when cultural cross-pollination between India and Britain was encouraged, amongst others, by the establishment of the Indian Institute at Oxford (1884) and the well-known Victorian fascination with 'alternative forms of religious belief' like theosophy and unitarianism (p. 103). Here, Boehmer uses Yeats' poetry, with its 'zigzagging between different cultural and mythic resources (Irish and Indian, especially)', to argue for the existence of a 'poetics of intercultural crossing', a notion she develops in the rest of the book (pp. 109, 115).

In Chapter 3, the gaze turns to the Decadent decade of the 1890s, in particular the poetry of 'lotus artists' like Sarojini Naidu and Manmohan Ghose, and the Oxfordian Cornelia Sorabji's memoirs. Boehmer illuminates how these writers carefully cultivated and performed their 'Indianness', in the process forging an image of India that did not simply mimic the British orientalist stereotype, but 'endow[ed] [it] with inner cultural strengths' and with 'the more positive inflection that the Aesthetic and Decadent movements in the arts afforded' (pp. 179-80).

Finally, Chapter 4 focuses on 'diasporic India-in-Britain' during the first years of the twentieth century, identifying two main forms of perception and representation: a nationalist, alien India that harboured the potential for extremism and violence—as demonstrated by the 1909 assassination of Lord Curzon Wyllie by Madan Lal Dhingra—and an esoteric/authentic India, visible especially during Tagore's 1912 visit to Britain, which Boehmer regards as marking a fundamental change in the 'understanding of the mod-

ern as something pertaining exclusively to the west' (p. 193).

The book closes with a 'Coda', which revisits Indian involvement in WWI and summarizes the main literary and cultural imprints that India left on Britain, namely 'the colonial travelogue, perceptions of the imperial city, the orientalist inflection of late-century Decadence, the sinuous shape and sound of Edwardian poetry, and, throughout, concepts of the modern and mobile western self—movements, ideas, styles, and identities which across most of the twentieth century were rarely seen as shaped by Indian hands' (p. 250).

This last observation, together with the narrow social and geographical focus, which privileges London and Oxford at the expense of other potentially relevant cities like Edinburgh, brings us to one of the few shortcomings of an otherwise carefully researched and beautifully written book: namely, how and why did the intercultural exchanges documented here come to be erased from British cultural and political memory? How, indeed, did we reach a point where it is possible to argue that speaking about non-white presences in Britain prior to WWII, let alone about their influence on British society and intellectual life, is an example of political correctness 'gone mad'? It would be interesting, for instance, to learn more about the afterlives of the literary works discussed here, about the manner in which they have (or not) been incorporated into processes of education in the metropole, but also to understand, as far as possible, what the audiences of this literature, largely absent from Boehmer's book, actually made of it. In a study which sensitively and empathetically explores the multi-layered meanings of 'arrival', this would, perhaps, provide us with a better understanding of why, in certain respects at least, India has still not arrived in Britain.

Amelia Bonea über Boehmer, Elleke: *Indian Arrivals, 1870-1915. Networks of British Empire*. Oxford 2015, in: H-Soz-Kult 18.05.2018.