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Sara Upstone. *British Asian Fiction: Twenty-first Century Voices*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010. 240 p. ISBN (pb): 9780719078330. £ 15.99

- 1 Sara Upstone's *British Asian Fiction* proposes to examine the works of a series of British-born or British-raised authors on the basis of the contention that these writers signal the establishment of a "definitive genre of British Asian writing deserving recognition in its own right" (1). Aware of the pitfalls of labelling in a postcolonial context, Upstone proposes a rereading of Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul as "transitional figures in the development of British Asian literature" (17) in order to lay the foundations for a reading of more recent writers in the light of a positioning which is "post-ethnic," a term borrowed from Mark Stein. Reading Rushdie against the grain of much of the criticism which she quotes, the author detects a "discourse of stability" (21) in Rushdie which announces the strategies used by more recent writers to assert their confidence in new ways of being British that involve a transformation of Britishness itself. In the same way, she reads Naipaul more for his sense of the possibilities for renewal in a British context than for his acquiescent mimicry of Englishness. A second chapter devoted to Hanef Kureishi examines the posed-ethnic/post-ethnic opposition proposed by Stein as a continuum of possible positions which is also valid as a basis for examining the specific sensibilities of the writers studied in the following chapters. The remaining chapters are devoted to studies of Ravinder Randhawa, Atima Srivastava, Nadeem Aslam, Meera Syal, Hari Kunzru, Monica Ali and Suhayl Saadi. Each of the authors is treated in terms of a paradigm chosen as appropriate to his or her specificity, while the underlying thesis of the regenerative capacities of a British Asian perspective serves as a stabilising framework. Randhawa's treatment of the dilemma of gender and ethnicity is explored through Judith Butler's notion of the unintelligible;

Atima Srivastava's British Asian romances are treated in terms of Kevin Lynch's idea of the "legibility of urban space" (92). The perception of Meera Syal as the most comic British Asian voice is scrutinised through a re-examination of the notion of comedy in order to reveal the underlying sense of catastrophe veiled by a surface performance of "Asian cool." Monica Ali is read in terms of a form of protest that does not bear the stigma of alienation but that on the contrary reveals "a defiant spirit of national assertion" (173) which is rather the proof of a sense of entitlement and belonging. Upstone is clearly more at ease with female than male voices. She is troubled by Aslam's concern with the dangers of international terrorism in *Maps for Lost Lovers* and concludes that the public failed to get the point because the "magic realist quality of *Maps*' prose style obscures its intensely violent content" (110). Apart from the fact that magic realism is not just a prose style, this remark reveals the limits of an approach that is more concerned with the positioning of writers within a discourse of cultural and ethnic identity than with the complex interaction between narrative and social definitions of the self. In spite of her desire to avoid categorisation, Upstone ends up using the word "confidence" as a touchstone for diverse ways of rooting the self in a new context, and the word gradually refocuses the analysis on how these writers' characters see themselves rather than on the vision they offer of the world. Yet the analysis of Saadi in the final chapter offers insights into the potential of narrative technique. Saadi's use of language and music in *Psychoraag* does not simply root identity in a Scottish context but suggests also the ways in which language resituates all narrative by creating its own context.

- 2 This is a carefully documented and thoughtfully organised work which offers clear guidelines for examining writers who are trying to rethink cultural and ethnic positioning as both possibilities and limits for 21st-century writers. Upstone has her own positions and preferences, which is both natural and normal, but she situates her own readings within the context of the existing literature on the subject. The fact that she includes analysis of a writer like Amita Srivastava, with a more popular appeal, constitutes a welcome recognition of the need to view literature across a broad spectrum of registers. The book includes a twenty-page bibliography of fictional works, criticism and theory.

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Kathie BIRAT is Professor of American, African American and Afro-Caribbean literature at the University Paul Verlaine in Metz. She has published articles in all three areas with particular emphasis in her recent publications on writers from the Caribbean, namely Caryl Phillips, Fred d'Aguiar, Wilson Harris, Robert Antoni, Earl Lovelace and Sam Selvon. Her most recent publications in *English Text Construction* and *Transatlantica* also reflect an interest in questions of voice and orality.