

SOUTH ASIAN IN THE MID-SOUTH: MIGRATIONS OF LITERACIES

An Interview with Iswari Pandey by Vani Kannan

A transcript of the full interview that accompanies Vani Kannan's *Enculturation* book review entitled "Dynamic Literacies and "Word Work": A Review of *South Asian in the Mid-South: Migrations of Literacies* by Iswari Pandey" (2018).

VK: Vani Kannan

IP: Iswari Pandey

[Music fades in]

VK: This is Vani Kannan, I am a fourth-year doctoral candidate in Composition and Cultural Rhetoric at Syracuse University.

IP: I'm Iswari Pandey. I'm an Associate Professor of English at California State University, Northridge.

[Music fades out]

VK: Thank you for taking the time to chat about your book. In reading it, I really appreciated the methodological reflections you offer, and how transparent you were with the reader about your research process. So now that the book is published, is there any advice you would offer to young scholars who are grappling with questions of methodology broadly, or even doing research on South Asian American literacy practices?

IP: I would say that—don't wait for a perfect method to emerge to guide you. In my own experience, I would start with a question. You know, of course I have some methodological kinds of models to follow—some case studies, some ethnographic studies that I was looking at at the time. But then as I started interviewing and observing different sites, talking with people, I began to realize that what I had in mind early on wasn't quite the thing. So I needed to constantly refine, constantly revise what I had gone through the field so to speak with. My advice again is just to stay open, and keep questioning and reflecting on your own methods. Because methods are tools, and they're great, but then methods are also more than tools, if we think of how knowledge gets made. My advice again is that we should keep reflecting on this interconnectedness between methods and knowledge, or findings, or whatever we call them, so we keep ourselves honest in the process and get a deeper understanding of whatever we are after.

[Music fades in]

VK: The second thing I'm thinking about is how, you know, your book focuses on the post-9/11 cultural, political, and economic landscape, and of course now we find ourselves in a landscape where once again there's heightened concerns about, you know, racially-motivated hate crimes,

Islamophobia, and there's been several attacks on South Asians in the post-Trump US And I don't say that to suggest that these things ever really ended after 9/11, but just that they're heightened in the public discourse right now. So this is making me think about your point that literacies aren't static—they're migratory, they're in a process of constant transformation. So I was wondering if you could reflect a little bit on the findings of your book in light of the context that we find ourselves in now.

[Music fades out]

IP: Absolutely. Yeah, literate acts are very dynamic, was one of the major findings or illustrations that I found in the course of my study. Dynamic in the sense that, you know, people—users who create and use the literacies and various kinds of "word work," let's say—reading, writing, speaking on behalf of oneself or a community, culture, nation, religion, people certainly marked group of people--so literacy in that broad sense is very dynamic acts.

And in the current moment, it seems like it's even more important to engage in using more of that "word work" to build alliances across communities and cultures, and also to bridge the divides that are sometimes artificially constructed using various means of identity markers used to keep people different from one another, not to get together to work together for their common cause. I think a lot of very positive things [are] also happening, from the Women's March, to the alliances that we see at work between various communities and the Dreamers, for example, or the LGBTQ community and other communities. So those alliances are really really important I think. And also to work across differences.

[Music fades in]

[Music fades out]

While my book focused primarily on South Asians and especially South Asian Muslims and Hindus in the mid-Southern city, the implications of their literacy practices I think are everywhere. We do have a tendency to talk sometimes in broad, kind of generalized terms, like you know “east” and “west,” or, you know, more recently “west” and “nonwest,” or other similar constructs. I think looking at any community, but in this case, in my case, South Asian community, deeply, kind of sheds light on the diversity within the community that’s considered a minoritized community, right? And so, that also brings to the fore the importance of paying attention to how these different kind of communities are made, unmade, remade, right, through different kinds of “word work,” or using words.

[Music fades in]

VK: Thank you so much. By way of wrapping up, where are you going next with your research? What questions linger for you after completing this project?

[Music fades out]

IP: Well, I am interested still in the questions of language, in identity as well as rhetoric, western broadly speaking and nonwestern, and what they mean for us and for the field. So, when I am

talking about language, I am primarily interested in the English language, sometimes, you know, these days called Global Englishes, and how it's taken up by different groups of people in different parts of the world and mobilized for a variety of purposes. And also rhetoric for advocacy, rhetoric of rights, of civil rights, of Dalit rights in South Asia for example. And closely tied to these issues, language and rights, is also the issue of identity and agency, especially of students in higher education, and how higher education and the public spaces, public writing, those issues are connected. So, these are some of the issues that I'm working on, and so my next set of works will address these questions.

[Music fades in]

VK: Well, we'll look forward to reading your next projects. And thank you so much for taking the time.

IP: My pleasure.

[Music fades out]

Works Cited

Habet, André, Vani Kannan, and Adam Patch. "Attic Jam" created 13 May 2018.