

## Using Novels to Teach the Cultural Geographies of South Asia

By Jean Lavigne

I have taught the geographies of Asia for ten years—first as a significant part of World Regional Geography and now, for the past four years, as a semester-long course on its own. While I have found traditional materials like textbooks and articles useful for introducing students to the physical environment, political systems, and economic realities of the region, teaching about cultures is often a more difficult proposition.

Cultures are complicated. Following the explosive growth of research in the field of Cultural Studies over the past two decades, we can no longer accept the idea that creating a list of differences in foods, clothing, and religious customs is sufficient for an introduction to another culture. All of those things are cultural artifacts, the products of culture, but they tell us very little about the way that culture (which is always and everywhere a process, not a thing) actually works. It is one thing to state that most marriages in India are still arranged by families, but quite another to help students understand how this cultural practice cements family cohesion, maintains social divides (especially through caste, long abolished but still influential), reinforces the subordinate role of women within families, and influences the pressures of sex selection in utero (through selective abortion). I also find myself deeply concerned with how to talk about something as complicated as culture in the context of a place like India without creating and reinforcing stereotypes. How, in the space of the few weeks of the semester that we have to focus on such a vast country, do I begin to show them the multiplicities of cultures? I am thinking here about differences between regions, between rural and urban areas, between linguistic and religious communities, and between the educated upper classes and the uneducated poor. Even if I devoted all of our South Asia classroom time to the realm of culture and society, I would barely scratch the surface.

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One way to address this problem is to assign novels as homework. Reading a contemporary novel from the region in question drops students into another world, offering them a nuanced portrait of a particular cultural space and time. Aspiring to relevance and realism, authors are often acute anthropological observers of culture and social behaviors; the same details that make a novel interesting to read provide an education for American students. Novels can paint a vivid portrait of daily life in another country while simultaneously teaching us about educational systems (when the characters go to school), rituals of courtship and marriage, gender roles within the family, family roles played by the older generation, class relationships in society, and so on. As the characters transgress their own cultural norms, which often creates dramatic tension in novels, students are effortlessly learning the nature of those cultural norms and expected behaviors. Moreover, because reading a novel is usually more enjoyable than reading a textbook, students are willing to spend more time outside of class learning about culture. Even more importantly, the medium of fiction allows students to at least partially identify with the characters, creating em-



pathy and understanding of another's point of view that can otherwise be very difficult to achieve through classroom learning.

In my current, semester-long Geography of Asia course, I use five novels, one for each sub-region of Asia. I also assign a feature film for each region, focusing on issues different from those treated by the novel. Like novels, film can present a cultural window into another society, though clearly not with the same level of depth and sophistication.<sup>1</sup> An annotated list of resources that I have successfully used for South Asia is included at the end of this essay, following the discussion below that focuses on

one example in greater depth.

Winner of the Man Booker Prize in 2008, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* was described in *The New York Times Book Review* as "a penetrating piece of social commentary, attuned to the inequalities that persist despite India's new prosperity."<sup>2</sup> Centered on the story of a rural, lower-caste boy who serves a wealthy family, the novel paints a vivid portrait of a modern India caught between tradition and modernity. Scenes of village life in the vast hinterland that Adiga poetically calls the Darkness are juxtaposed with the newly constructed apartment blocks and shopping malls of Delhi, as the protagonist follows the scion of the family and his American wife to the capital. As readers, we share Balram's embarrassment as his lack of schooling is contrasted to his master's American education, and we wince at his numerous missteps as

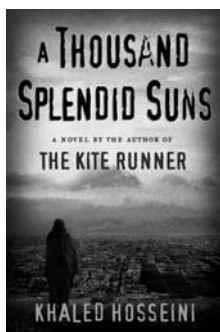
he adjusts to life in the big city. We share his seething frustration as he begins to comprehend the ways in which the inequalities he experiences—the bars of the cage in his metaphor—are structural, reinforced by caste, cultural traditions, and corruption. Corruption is everywhere in the novel, and both its ubiquity and the matter-of-fact way in which Adiga addresses it give American students a much better understanding of the everyday nature of this unfamiliar practice: "Every man in the village knew that he would have done the same in his position. Some were even proud of him, for

having gotten away with it so cleanly."<sup>3</sup> Elections are bought and sold, police are paid off, and Balram's master feels a small twinge of guilt as his car passes a statue of Gandhi moments after a successful meeting in which he bribed a government minister for a lucrative coal contract. Caste, too, pervades the novel, and the casual cruelty with which those of higher castes treat Balram makes a lasting impression, helping to convey the day-to-day discrimination that is entirely birth dependent.

Adiga helps us understand the burning motivation behind the massive migration from the villages to the cities, the chance to escape one's forever unchanging fate in the village, even if it means living in the meanest of accommodations, including the sidewalk. We come to understand the struggle for social mobility as a generational quest, the kind of dream that parents have realistically given up on for themselves, but hope to provide for their children. Even more importantly, reading an entire novel allows room for students to understand that a place like India is not monolithic, but fragmented and complicated. It is a country that is rapidly advancing in technology and business

outsourcing, a society that is out-competing the United States in crucial fields, but at the same time it is characterized by pervasive and longstanding traditions like caste and corruption that are extremely difficult to dislodge. After reading *The White Tiger*, my students have a more nuanced and detailed impression of India than I could give them through traditional assigned reading from a textbook—the best I can do without taking them to India to see it for themselves.

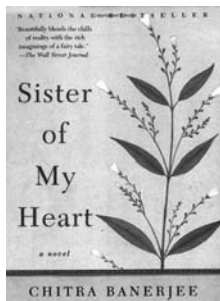
### Other Works I Have Used Successfully in Teaching the Geographies of South Asia



**Afghanistan:** Hosseini, Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (New York: Riverhead Trade/Penguin Press, 2008).

The novel provides a general sense of the regional geography of Afghanistan and is especially good for understanding the lives of women in that country under the rule of the Taliban, contrasting that period with the Soviet-dominated (and notably less patriarchal) period of the 1980s. This is a very popular choice with students, and many claim it as the best book they have ever read. It provides excellent material for class

discussions or short assigned papers on two topics. First, ask students to discuss how Hosseini treats gender-based discrimination as a cultural (not a religious) practice—one that is taught and reinforced by social institutions, rather than as a natural or endemic phenomenon. Second, students should pay attention to Hosseini's sources of hope for the future of Afghanistan; these are largely expressed in the novel through characters who value education, especially for girls.



**India:** Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *Sister of My Heart* (Rockland, MA: Anchor Press, 2000).

A moving and dramatic story about two young women coming of age in Calcutta, one marrying into a traditional upper-caste Indian family and the other wedding an expatriate and migrating to California. Both marriages are arranged, and the book is excellent for allowing students to learn about marriage customs (such as the bride-viewing ceremony) and family life. Ask students to compare a typical day in

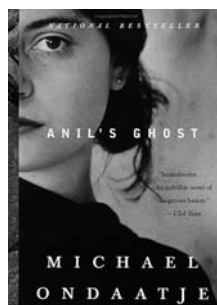
Sudha's life in India to a day in Anju's life in California, outlining the comforts, difficulties, and constraints of each situation. The novel also deals with the issue of sex-selective abortion and provides an opportunity for discussion about the social pressures that lead to a desire for sons.



**India:** Roy, Arundhati. *The God of Small Things* (New York: Random House, 2008).

Another winner of the Man Booker Prize, this lyrically written and ultimately tragic novel brings the reader into intimate familiarity with one family in one place (a small town in Kerala). In scale and scope, it is very different from the novels described above, but the themes explored (relationships of caste, class, and family) are similar. As an assignment for this novel, taking advantage of the level of detail provided

by Roy, students can be asked to create a visual representation of the setting, the characters, and the relationships between them. The product is similar to a concept map: the characters are linked together in a complex web of connections and social constraints, with elements of the lushly described setting illustrating the background.



**Sri Lanka:** Ondaatje, Michael. *Anil's Ghost: A Novel* (New York: Vintage Press, 2001)

This atmospheric novel evokes both the landscapes of Sri Lanka and the darkness of political murder in the context of that nation's long civil war. Students will require some brief background context on the history of the conflict, but they will find the mystery that propels the plot of the story compelling, and Ondaatje is a masterful writer. The work provides opportunities to discuss the insidious effects of a protracted and uncertain war on everyday lives. ■

### NOTES

1. There are also many excellent South Asia films that provide windows into cultural geographies, but *Monsoon Wedding* by Mira Nair (2002, Universal Studios, 114 minutes) is particularly good for its focus on the tensions between tradition (expressed through an arranged marriage) and modernity in a contemporary, upper class, globally connected Punjabi family. As with novels, I believe it is important for the instructor to choose films that are South Asian in origin, not merely in setting. This is one of several good reasons for not choosing *Slumdog Millionaire*, despite its popularity with students.
2. Akash Kapur, "The Secret of His Success," *The New York Times*, November 9, 2008, accessed December 7, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/09/books/review/Kapur-t.html>.
3. Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger: A Novel* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 28.

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