

Book Review: *The Alchemy of Empire: Abject Materials and the Technologies of Colonialism*

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Rajani Sudan, *The Alchemy of Empire: Abject Materials and the Technologies of Colonialism*. Orient BlackSwan, 2016. Pp. 223. ISBN 978-81-250-6290-5.

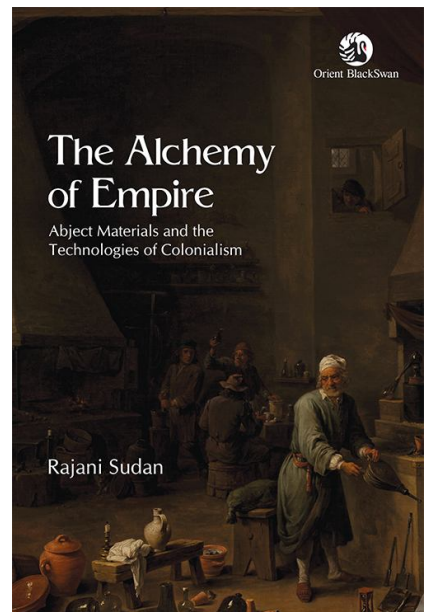
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The transnational turn to English history has resulted in sustained attention to the non-European factors that shaped British identity from the 17th century. Rajani Sudan's work is situated within this turn, so to speak.

Sudan's interest lies in material culture and commodities, from muds to nutmegs and inoculation, and their role in imperial discourses, the fashioning of English identity and as instruments of interracial relations. She reads travel narratives, letters from and to the East India Company offices, commentaries and tracts, alongside literary texts to demonstrate how 'India's technology scientific practice, and epistemology informed European Enlightenment values and socio-political norms' (1). It is her contention that 'some of the "classical" Enlightenment scientific knowledge is not European in origin but emerges from a far wider circulation' (5). Initial encounters with Indian techne and commodities produced anxieties, which then the British transmuted into 'knowledge' that then became Western/European science.

Thus, Sudan demonstrates how Indian mortar becomes a means of building British buildings in Madras' Fort St George. Mortar is appropriated within discourses of science as well as in actual construction of walls and houses that then enable the English to separate White Town from Black Town, and to transform the city into an icon of British imperialism. Mortar was the key to establishing Englishness, in other words. Sudan also notes how the commonplace nutmeg, once the key to Linnaean taxonomy, and a key commodity of England's global spice trade get relegated to the back shelf. It was appropriated into scientific discourse and became an 'abstraction' (64), as a result.

In the case of ice, Sudan argues via Orwell's *Burmese Days* and select non-fictional texts, the substance marked the difference between the tropics and Europe, but also between different locations within the tropics. Ice, she writes, 'has a metonymic relation to the metropole, functioning as the material that divides the "jungle life" of teak extraction from the urban pleasures of Rangoon' (77). Robert Barker discovering ice-making in Allahabad, attributed the



technology, notes Sudan, to witchery (83). Then, embarking on greater research he discovers the modes by which temperature control was achieved by Indian ice-makers. This radically altered the English experience of India itself for, as Sudan writes, it seemed possible to ‘us[e] the inventions and techne of Indian science [to] circumvent the actual situation of these East India Company officers, stuck in an inhospitable landscape, and lured with the promise of fabulous profit’ (90).

Turning to inoculation, Sudan traces the discourse and practice that is documented in Mary Montagu’s Turkish letters and the discovery, in India, of a native system of healing that is then merged with the European system. JZ Holwell and others documented a native medical practice that predated Turkish and European innovations and inventions. Using foreign bodies, long deemed inferior, into English bodies was unacceptable, given fears of contamination. British scientific epistemology may have been informed by xenophobia and hence these sources of possible prophylactics for smallpox were ignored. India, defined in imperial discourse as primitive, could not be offering a solution, argues Sudan. Necessity, however, altered epistemology and ‘methods of inoculation forced Britons to suspend, however theoretically, the xenophobia that structured cultural, metropolitan, and civic British identity’ (113). Sudan shifts attention to literary texts such as *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* and *Dracula* to demonstrate the widespread fears over contamination and foreign bodies that she had tracked in the scientific and medical discourse from the 18th century.

In her chapter on plasters and paper, Sudan explores the European discovery of Indian paper-making processes. Via Jane Austen’s *Emma*, Sudan looks at the mix or alchemic transformation of commercial materials into discourse and abstractions, including social values such as the woman’s reading habits or intellectual labour. ‘The labor entrenched in correspondence from rope to paper, from hand to pen, from letter to recipient’ for Sudan is an allegory of such an alchemic transformation. Sudan also notes how ‘Indian physical and intellectual labor that extracts, refines, and disseminates the properties of the substances ... the technique and techne that constituted the Indian intellectual property’ was part of the ‘traffic’ by the British in India and later by scientific societies responsible for the circulation of those ideas (147). This traffic is, Sudan demonstrates, is one through which the appropriation of Indian techne into European Enlightenment occurs.

The Alchemy of Empire, which partially recalled for me Kavita Philip’s *Civilizing Natures*, is characterized by intellectual rigour and breadth of coverage, of discourses, texts and geographies. While in some cases the connections Sudan forges emerges from imaginative leaps not easy to decipher (for instance between Robert Barker in Calcutta/India, and Benigne Poissenot’s in France/Europe), they provide a way into both material culture and intellectual history of the Empire, European Enlightenment and English identity. An excellent instance of the transnational turn in studies of imperial histories, as stated at the outset of this review (and part of a pantheon major works as *The Postcolonial Enlightenment*, *The Global Renaissance*, *Global Romanticism*, among others), Sudan demonstrates how English and European identity and the grand European Enlightenment could not have emerged, or perhaps even thought of, without the inputs, legitimately or illegitimately ‘borrowed’, from Indian science and techne. We sail perilously close, of course, to the nativist stance (‘we always had these well before the Europeans’) when we seek native roots and antecedents to everything European, but Sudan makes sure this does not happen by emphasizing cultural transactions (albeit underwritten by imperial ideologies and race) rather than cultural isolates. Work like Sudan’s also recalls Seema Alavi’s *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire*, Ulrike Starke’s *The Empire of Books* and others with their analysis of mutually

supportive local (as in native, colonized) networks, scientific, political and theological discourse that competed, contested and sometimes collaborated with European knowledge-making practices and engaged in debates with the latter. *The Alchemy of Empire* is a useful work to consult for imperial discourse studies, European intellectual history and colonial politics.