



## Drama in Diaspora: South Asian American Theater and Performance

Dr. Shilarna Stokes (she/her)  
[shilarna.stokes@yale.edu](mailto:shilarna.stokes@yale.edu)

### Course Description

South Asian Americans have appeared on U.S. stages since the late nineteenth century, yet performances created by South Asian American artists have only just begun, in the last thirty years, to successfully dismantle dominant representations of South Asian and South Asian American communities and to imagine new ways of belonging. This seminar introduces you to contemporary works of performance (plays, stand-up sets, multimedia events) written and created by U.S.-based artists of South Asian descent as well as artists of the South Asian diaspora whose works have had an impact on U.S. audiences. With awareness that the South Asian American diaspora comprises multiple, contested, and contingent identities, we investigate how artists have worked to manifest complex representations of South Asian Americans onstage, challenge institutional and professional norms, and navigate the perils and pleasures of becoming visible. No prior experience with or study of theater/performance required.

### Learning Objectives

1. Students analyze performance-based artworks (plays, films, videos, performance art) created by artists of the South Asian diaspora, particularly works that engage US histories, identities, and topics.

2. Students develop a foundational understanding of the theoretical aspects of concepts such as *diaspora, performance, racialization, representation, authenticity, abjectness, orientalism, pluralism, double-consciousness, thrown-togetherness, and otherwiseness.*

3. Students develop an awareness of ways that people and communities perform in order to restore, maintain, change, or resist colonizing authorities/practices as well as to make new homes in new nations.

4. Students use their understanding of the integral connections between South Asian diasporic communities, US history, and performance to analyze contemporary social, cultural, and political phenomena.

## Course Format

Seminar. This is a reading/discussion course conducted via Zoom. All sessions will be recorded. There will be breaks. We will discuss standards for visibility, comportment, etc. in our first meeting.

## Required Course Materials

See course schedule below. All readings and videos will be posted on Canvas or will be accessible via the Yale Library system. No course materials must be purchased.

## Course Schedule

### **July 2: "Orient"-ation and Racialization / How to Read Plays, Films, and Cultural Performances**

- REFERENCE: SAADA (South Asian American Digital Archive), "An Introduction to South Asian American History" (2 pp)
- SHORT ESSAY: Kibria, "Not Asian, Black or White: Reflections on South Asian American Racial Identity" (8 pp)
- SHORT ESSAY: Fuchs, "Visit to a Small Planet: How to Read a Play" (5 pp)
- BOOK INTRODUCTION: Dave, Introduction to *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* (18 pp)

### **July 4: South Asia on the American Stage in the early Twentieth Century**

- BOOK CHAPTERS: Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (pp. 1-45)
- ESSAY: Bald, "The Travels and Transformations of Amir Haider Khan" (23 pp)
- ESSAY EXCERPT: Srinivasan, "Archival Her-Stories: St. Denis and the Nachwalis of Coney Island" (19 pp)

[Assignment Due: Response #1 \(300-450 words\)\\*](#)

### **July 9: Brownface, Orientalism, Interculturalism and Appropriation**

- ESSAY Chatterjee, "Un-Re-Painting the Town Brown" (9 pp)
- SHORT ESSAY: Dasgupta, "*Mahabharata*: Peter Brook's Orientalism" (8 pp)
- SHORT ESSAY: Bharucha, "Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* - a view from India" (6 pp)
- VIDEO: excerpts from Peter Brooks' *Mahabharata* (90 mins.)

Assignment Due: Zoom Presentation #1 (5-8 mins)\*

### **July 11: For Your Convenience / For Your Enlightenment**

- PLAY: Mandvi, *Sakina's Restaurant* (80 pp. script)
- PLAY: Guha, *The Yoga Play* (85 pp script)
- BOOK CHAPTER EXCERPT: Dave, "South Asians and the Hollywood Party" (10 pp)
- BOOK CHAPTER EXCERPT: Dave, "Indian Gurus in the American Marketplace" (12 pp)

Assignment Due: Response #2 (300-450 words)\*

### **July 16: Actors and Activism in South Asian American/Diasporic Communities**

- VIDEO: Kondabolu, *The Problem with Apu* (80 mins.)
- REPORT: AAPAC (Asian American Performers' Action Coalition) Visibility Report (20 pp.)
- PLAY: Sharma, *The Jazmines* (65 pp)
- VIDEO: excerpted examples of "brownvoice" performances from 1968-present

Assignment Due: Response #3 (300-450 words)\*

### **July 18: Fitting In & Standing Out: Adolescence, Sexuality, and the Model-Minority Myth**

- PLAY: Joseph, *Huck and Holden* (67 pp script)
- PLAY: Ahmed, *Raisins not Virgins* (60 pp. script)
- ESSAY: Dave, "Animating Gandhi: Historical Figures, Asian American Masculinity, and Model-Minority Accents" (25 pp)
- VIDEO: excerpts from *Harold and Kumar go to White Castle*, *Never Have I Ever*, *The Namesake*, and *The Magicians* (60 mins.)

Assignment Due: Zoom Presentation #2 (5-8 mins.)\*

### **July 23: Muslim Self-Representation in the Wake of 9/11**

- PLAY: Malik, *Unveiled* (40 pp. script)
- PLAY: Akhtar, *Disgraced* (83 pp. script)
- VIDEO: excerpts from The Arab American Comedy Festival (30 mins)

Assignment Due: Response #4 (300-450 words)\*

## July 25: Stand-Up / Ask the Doctor

- VIDEO: excerpts of Stand-up Sets by Dean Obeidallah, Mindy Kaling, Aziz Ansari, Hassan Minhaj, Lilly Singh, JusReign, and Abby Govindan
- PLAY: Pal, *Chaos Theory* (70 pp. script)
- PLAY: Shekar, *Queen* (64 pp. script)
- VIDEO: excerpts of Sanjay Gupta interviews (15 mins.)

Assignment Due: Response #5 (300-450 words)\*

## July 30: Queer Identities and Transnationalisms

- PLAY: Madhuri Shekar, *A Nice Indian Boy* (55 pp. script)
- PLAY: Shayok Misha Chowdhury, *Public Obscenities*
- VIDEO: Pratik Motwani, #<EMBEDDED># (72 mins.)

## Aug 1: Final Scenes and Discussion

Final Assignment Due:

- Scene Analysis, Cultural Performance Analysis, & Critical Reflection (12-15 pp)\*
- Scene Presentations/Reading (ungraded)\*

\*Detailed descriptions of all assignments can be found on Canvas and will be discussed in class. All assignments (including Zoom presentation recordings) must be submitted via Canvas.

## Assessments and Grading

NOTE: Every day an assignment is late results in a grade reduction of one-third step e.g, B to B-).

Assignment	Percentage	Weeks Due (dates below)
5 Reading Responses (300-450 words)	30/6 each	Classes 2, 4, 5, 7 and 8
2 Zoom Presentations (5-8 mins. each)	20/10 each	Classes 3 and 6
Final Project: Scene Analysis (4-5 pp.), Cultural Performance Analysis (4-5 pp), and Critical Reflection (4-5 pp.)	30/10 each	Class 10
Participation	20	throughout

## Attendance Policy

- Attendance at all class sessions is mandatory. Excused absences must be cleared in writing, in advance.
- Latenesses, early departures, and overlong breaks, impede the progress of the class as a whole. They should, therefore, be kept to the barest minimum. Requests for these must also be cleared in writing. Absences due to extra-curricular projects, work, or other classes will not be deemed excused absences.
- Grade penalties for absences apply as follows:
  - 1 unexcused absence—final grade is reduced by one-third of a letter (e.g., B to B-).
  - 2 unexcused absences—final grade is reduced by two-thirds of a letter (e.g. B to C+).
  - 3 unexcused absences—final grade is reduced by a full letter grade (e.g. B to C), and the student may be unable to pass the course.
  - 4 unexcused absences—the student will likely be asked to withdraw as there will be insufficient basis for evaluation.
  - NOTE: Roughly 1 hour of unexcused absence at any point during a scheduled class counts as 1/3 of an unexcused absence.

## Academic Integrity

The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Plagiarism is the use of someone else's work, words, or ideas as if they were your own. Here are three reasons not to do it:

- By far the deepest consequence to plagiarizing is the detriment to your intellectual and moral development: you won't learn anything, and your ethics will be corrupted.
- Giving credit where it's due but adding your own reflection will get you higher grades than putting your name on someone else's work. In an academic context, it counts more to show your ideas in conversation than to try to present them as solely the product of your own thinking.
- Finally, academic dishonesty always catches up with you. The most common penalty is suspension, but students caught plagiarizing are also subject to lowered or failing grades.

## Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, & Belonging

Taking our cue from the work of Vijay Prashad, we begin the course with an investigation of what it means to craft solidarities, to develop antiracist analyses, and to center questions of antiblack racism in a course concerning the experiences of South Asian Americans.

I intend to provide an equitable, inclusive, and welcoming learning environment for *all* students. Please let me know of any concerns or questions you may have about any aspect of the course. As well, please let me know of any ideas you have for improving the accessibility of the course for yourself or other groups of students. Although I may not be able to grant every request, I promise to think through each one.

We will start the course by taking some time to develop guidelines for discussion and collaboration that I hope will allow everyone to feel empowered to speak, supported by the group, and enabled to contribute their unique talents and perspectives.