



A review of
**Bringing Light to
Twilight: Perspectives
on the Pop Culture
Phenomenon**

Malini Roy

I was in disbelief that I'd just explained my dreary life to this bizarre, beautiful boy who may or may not despise me.

Meyer, *Twilight*

A human girl having a vampire boyfriend feels 'bizarre' enough; placing the vampire on moral high ground, whence he might 'despise' the human, insane. Yet, the commonplace Bella's desire for the 'beautiful' vampire Edward has made for a bold fantasy come real, forming the absurd yet bestselling premise of *Twilight* – the well-known series of four novels for young adults by Stephenie Meyer, published 2005 onwards, and complemented by films and franchise to boot. This 'Pop Culture Phenomenon' is addressed comprehensively by *Bringing Light to Twilight*. Edited by Giselle Liza Anatol, this scholarly essay collection illumines and mobilises critical understanding of the *Twilight* phenomenon as a cardinal element and determinant of contemporary globalised American youth culture.

Bringing Light offers a valuable critical intervention in the burgeoning field of scholarly books and articles on *Twilight*, and benefits from a breadth of perspectives. The collection's sixteen essays cover a range and variety of schools of criticism, analysing the *Twilight* phenomenon through the lenses of folklore and fairy tale, gender and sexuality, queer theory, Gothic literature and subcultures, vampire literature, popular culture, translation, fan fiction, law, theology, Marxist theory, race and diaspora, and environmental studies.

One of the noteworthy features of this collection, to scholars and students of *Twilight*, is the *mélange* of competing perspectives on the source material emerging through the varied approaches of the essays, unpacking interpretative richness in a series often dismissed as 'insipid', 'vapid', 'shallow', and 'sexist' (4). This potpourri of perspectives is discernible, for

instance, in multiple and contested readings of Bella's voluntary identity change from human to Edward's vampirical state, a transformation that gains her the vampire's immortality and omnipotency, but loses her the human moral ace of possessing a soul. For Kristina Deffenbacher and Mikayla Zagoria-Moffet, who evaluate the intertextual links of *Twilight* with *Jane Eyre*, Bella's transformation is a celebratory act of sexual empowerment, winning for her 'the ability to throw off traditional, normative gender expectations and overcome repeated instances of women's victimization' (34). Meredith Wallis, whose essay identifies *Twilight* in terms of its legal forms and meaning, inflects the transformation into a zone of deep ambivalence: Edward perceives his own 'consensual transition to vampirism as one of damnation' – hence Bella's 'consenting' and 'overwhelming desire' for the transformation is doubly culpable (92). Tammy Dietz, writing in the academically unusual format of the personal memoir, offers a vigorous reading of Bella's transformation as a dangerous act of self-abdication that rings a death-knell for women's collective aspirations for 'their own personal development in life' (108).

Readers interested in Gothic and vampire literature generally will find the collection informative in assessing the position of *Twilight* in the history of vampire literature and in contemporary vampire culture, as expressed in cinema, tourism, and style and fashion. Anatol's introduction grounds the three recognisable – if discontinuous – waves of vampire literature, from late Romantic and Victorian instances through 20th- and 21st-century descendants, noting the surprising but decisive presence of the vampire in contemporary children's literature, including Neil Gaiman's recent Newbery-winning *The Graveyard Book*. Anatol's essay with Joo Ok Kim develops this genealogy, identifying Bella's subject position as human ethnographer of the non-normative vampires and werewolves in the series. Bella is considered as an inheritor of Jonathan Harker in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; Harker's Englishness places him at the centre of a cultural mindset that exoticises the blood-drinking Eastern European Count. Other essays in the collection consider the gender politics of *Twilight* in relation to celebrated representations of vampires in contemporary book and television series. Contrasting *Twilight* with *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Rhonda Nicol cleverly inverts common popular associations of Buffy as feminist icon of 'girl power' and Bella as the reactionary good girl, by revealing Buffy's alignment with the problematic aspects of Third-Wave feminism that privilege sexual liberation for women without the corresponding socio-economic empowerment.

The collection thus succeeds in creating a timely exposé of the 'ideological constructs underlying' the *Twilight* texts, an aim captured airily in the assonantal flourish of the collection's title – *Bringing Light to Twilight*. This commitment towards critical reading of the *Twilight* phenomenon underpins the editor's hope that the collection will be read not only in 'university settings' but also 'outside the academy' (2). This instrumental aim, laudable in terms of demystifying a series known to elicit a faddish following, provides a living instance

of the socially useful purpose that the humanities can serve, particularly in a post-recession era that has become particularly grudging towards the institutional study of literature and the arts. Unfortunately, this potential for reaching out to the wider public appears to be undone by the somewhat patronising note struck by the book's title, with its hint of a snarky desire to enlighten consumers of *Twilight* about a meretricious popular phenomenon. This attitude of superiority is perhaps understandable as a bid for leverage in an academic establishment that often positions popular culture studies as poor cousin. But in this case, ivory-tower snobbery may have had the counterproductive effect of foreclosing potentially interesting avenues of enquiry, such as the rhetorical or narrative strategies that make Meyer's prose enchanting for many. Kim Allen Glead's essay, for instance, which locates in Luc Rigoureux's French translation of *Twilight* a text more evocative than the original, also appears to indicate a more judicious choice of words and phrases by Meyer than is usually presumed. But the focus here on the reception of *Twilight* leaves the ur-text less than its due.

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