

Revisiting South Asian Diaspora Literature

It is a pleasure to bring this issue of *Asiatic*, being a rich offering on South Asian diaspora literature, to our readers. This is our second foray into South Asian diasporic writings. We brought out our first special issue on this subject in June 2012, and after five years we felt that it would be appropriate to revisit this exponentially growing field again. However, in spite of the broad thematic similarity, the two issues are substantially different. A cursory look will show that except for Monica Ali and Romesh Gunsekara, all the other writers explored in this issue are different from the ones dealt with in the previous issue. This is partly because our strategy this time was to bring the “less visible but qualitatively good writers... to our readers’ notice,” and we believe we have succeeded in this regard admirably. Many of the writers discussed in this issue – including Marina Budhos, Kazim Ali, Hari Kunzru, Kunzang Choden, Bhuchung D. Sonam, Manjushree Thapa, Sorayya Khan and Preeta Samarasan – have not received the kind of attention (that they obviously deserve) as writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh and Jhumpa Lahiri, all whom were discussed in the previous issue. In this sense, the two issues very much complement one another and contribute more fully to the creative and critical discourse on South Asian diaspora writing.

This issue was conceived in late 2015 while we were working on the June 2016 special issue on South Asian women’s writing. It was at this point that I was introduced to Professor Jasbir Jain, a well-known scholar in the field of diaspora writing, by my colleague and fellow *Asiatic* board member Professor Somdatta Mandal. This issue (particularly the section on South Asian diaspora literature) is the fruit of the concerted efforts of all three of us, as well as of the many scholars from different parts of the world who responded to our call to participate in the project.

An initial Call for Papers was sent out in August 2015, with deadlines for submission of abstracts by 15 January 2016, and full papers from those shortlisted by 30 August 2016. The response was overwhelming – a testimony to how the interest in South Asian diaspora literature is constantly growing (as also evidenced by the number of books and articles published globally on the topic of late). Of the many abstracts received, we selected fifteen after careful scrutiny, and invited these authors to send in their full papers on or before the deadline. After further rigorous vetting, we decided to publish ten articles and two interviews in this issue.

In our Call for Papers we specified two objectives in addition to the one mentioned above. These were to invite papers on diaspora literature from all the SAARC countries – Afghanistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – and in all literary genres: poetry, drama, fiction, nonfiction and theory. We have succeeded in the first to a significant degree as

we have papers on writers from almost all the SAARC countries, except Afghanistan and Maldives – a shortcoming we regret. As for the second objective, as always, it is fiction and especially the interrogation of diaspora novels that take up much of the space. However, we have one article on diaspora theory and one which investigates the poetry of three prominent diaspora poets: Agha Shahid Ali (1949-2001), Meena Alexander (1951-) and Imtiaz Dharker (1954-). The first article is by the guest editor of this issue, Professor Jasbir Jain, while the second is by Professor Santosh Gupta, also a veteran of postcolonial criticism. One interesting coincidence is that, as in the previous issue, we have two articles on Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* in this issue as well – one focusing on two other Bangladeshi younger writers, Zia Haider Rahman and Tahmima Anam, written by an expatriate Bangladeshi academic, Dr. Fayeza Hasanat, and the other written by Professor Susan Stanford Friedman, a distinguished scholar who has published widely on modernism, migration and feminist theory. We also have two very important interviews in this section, both conducted by the Book Reviews editor of *Asiatic*, Professor Somdatta Mandal – one with an oft-quoted theoretician on diaspora literature, Avtar Brah, and the other with prominent Bengali writer, sociologist and critic Himani Bannerji.

In addition to these articles and interviews on South Asian diaspora literature, we also have a general section comprising three articles and three interviews. The articles are respectively on Vietnam War poetry, native Christian auto/biographies in colonial India, and Asian American writers Maxine Hong Kingston and Fae Myenne Ng. The interviews are with three eminent and multi-award winning Asian poets: Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Dennis Haskell and Keki N. Daruwalla. Readers and scholars of Asian literature will find these articles and interviews highly rewarding.

There is also a section with nineteen book reviews. The books hail largely from two geographical regions – South and Southeast Asia – and comprise various genres, theory and criticism as well as creative writing, biography and translation. We have sequenced them regionally (South Asian books first, followed by the ones from Southeast Asia). There are reviews of books on/by classic Asian writers such as Tagore, Nazrul and Begum Rokeya, as well as young writers such as Jinat Rehana Begum, Philip Holden, Jon Gresham, Sreedhevi Iyer and Daryl Lim. There is also a review of a book on Bengali films, two books touching on Islam, a biography and a translated collection of poems composed by Bangladeshi migrant workers in Singapore. These reviews have been written by scholars and academics from Belgium, Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, Singapore, the UK and the USA – noticeably, four of them have been contributed by Dr. Angus Whitehead, currently based at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

This issue is particularly rich in poetry. There are poems by several distinguished poets, some who are highly revered in this part of the world and

who have received recognition and accolades from various quarters. Edwin Thumboo is, for example, often regarded as the father figure of Malaysian-Singaporean poetry in English and the de facto national poet of Singapore. Dennis Haskell is the recipient of the Western Australia Premier's Prize for poetry and a Member of the Order of Australia. Shirley Lim won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1980 for her first collection of poetry, *Crossing the Peninsula*, and has won the American Book Award twice, in 1990 and 1997. Muhammad Haji Salleh is a Malaysian National Laureate and winner of the SEA Write Award in 1997. Keki Daruwalla is also a highly decorated poet, having won the Commonwealth Prize for Poetry in 1987 and the Indian Sahitya Academy Award in 1984. Side by side with such world-class veterans, we also have two poems by a young, talented poet from Bangladesh, Reza Haq.

Lastly, we have a short story by Vijay Lakshmi, "Homecoming," and an essay by Muhammad Haji Salleh, "The Poet in the First Winter of Creation" – both which compellingly sum up the anxieties and struggles associated with immigration, expatriation and cultural deracination, which are at the heart of all diaspora writing.

I would like to thank the many writers and scholars featured in the issue, those who have helped to screen and evaluate the material to ensure the Journal's quality, and the editorial committee and advisory board members of *Asiatic* for their constant support. My special thanks are to Professor Jasbir Jain, Professor Somdatta Mandal, Dr. Susan Philip and Quratulain Shirazi for the generous help they have extended in putting together this issue.

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