

Guest Editor's Column

Bringing together these critical essays has been a great learning experience instrumental in providing fresh insights into the issues and problems of the diaspora. Several less visible writers and interpretative perspectives have come to the fore. Writers have been placed alternatively in global or national cultures, or in international politics. There is also a silent dialogue going on between writers and also writers and their own writings. Insiders or those familiar with native cultural situations tend to offer interpretations not easily accessible to the outsider. The location – both geographical and cultural – of the reader/critic is also of significance to the interpretative stance. In this issue there are a couple of essays on the same writer, with the idea of providing this comparison.

There are several absences: drama is not at all represented. Obviously this reflects on the difficult process of transplanting this genre in an alien linguistic medium or culture. It can only be generated by long residence or stronger cultural bonds. There is a fair amount of drama perhaps in other Indian languages, especially Punjabi – but in English Hanif Kureshi's name comes immediately to one's mind. His two plays – *My Beautiful Launderette* and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* were not only successful on stage but also as films. Again the critical attention seems to have a very contemporary span. It doesn't enter into any problematisation or differentiation between expatriate and diaspora.

But the focus on the last half-century has an advantage. Most of the essays negotiate new political problems – partitions, civil wars, peace and globalisation. They engage with victory and defeat, war and peace and terror, and they also move through love and hate. In addition, we also have an essay on poetry engaging with several locations, two interviews with writers from different locations and with different kinds of approach to diaspora literature, and above all a short story poignantly capturing the essence of homecoming.

During the course of these few months several other queries have come up in my mind which, perhaps, call for a critical reflection. First is the continuing issue of identity – how does the diaspora perceive its homeland with respect to other countries? Pakistan is more concerned with the situation in Afghanistan or its own Afghan borders, Bangladesh with its relationship with Pakistan despite cultural affiliations with India, and Sri Lanka with its Civil Wars and their aftermath. Other pasts are dismissed, other relationships pushed to the margins. Similarly, the twice-removed are further distanced. But one needs to stop short of generalisations. Vassanji calls back to India, while the Indo-Caribbean-Canadians do not necessarily move in the same direction.

The problematics of diasporic writing are many and they need to be viewed, reviewed and critiqued accordingly. I draw the reader's attention to two works – one a novel and the other an account, a semi-memoir, both published in 2016,

which throw a different light on the nature of the diaspora. The first is a novel by Aliyyah Eniath, *The Yard*, the second by Yvonne Vaz Ezdani, *New Songs of the Survivors*. Eniath is a Caribbean writer from Trinidad and of East Indian heritage of the indentured workers. It is about the gradual opening up of a community, living in close proximity, held close by kinship ties and religio-cultural restrictive practices. More than three generations live in close proximity, standing guard over each other but also sustaining relationships of support. But then outsiders marry into these families, migration to European countries begins to take place and older people – cherished and loved – die. The yard acquires a somewhat mixed population. A tender, yet thought provoking novel, centred around the idea of community, which is now a substitute for the homeland, while the outside in its allurements and entry becomes a disturbing factor – new, yet desired, and indispensable for a creative continuity. An idyll with its own crevices.

New Songs of the Survivors is about the exodus of Indians from Burma (Myanmar) during the Second World War, focusing primarily on the expatriated from Goa. It too is a community narrative, happily settled in its new community formation until the Axis bombardment disrupts their peace. I recall, as a child, seeing a scene in the Hindi movie, *Shabham* (1949), where the exodus from Burma was depicted. But it was a mixed population of Indians from different regions, and as sprawling and harassed as the 1947 exodus from the newly formed Pakistan. But Ezdani's concentration is on people from Goa – at that time in Portuguese possession, which presents a triangular problem of nationalities in political and geographical terms. The expatriates (not diaspora at that stage) from Goa, because of their fairly secure positions and despite hardships and losses, travelled to India in comparatively more comfort than the mainland Indian refugees. And after the war was over, many went back to Burma to make it their home until military rule once again forced them out. Curiously enough, the diasporic sensibility barely surfaces, perhaps because of the earlier British rule and then later the independence of India, or perhaps because Burma was a neighbour, or more likely because of the religion – Christianity – which facilitated anchoring oneself in a community. Both the books have a strong sense of community life, of neighbourliness and patriarchal hierarchy in addition to a cultural bonding nudging us to look at them through new perspectives – the meaning of community, belonging and home.

In a recent interview given to Tishani Doshi (*The Hindu Literary Review* February 19, 2017), Paul Beatty says, “And a thing that I’ve come to realise is that books that aren’t about Native Americans, are about them in absence.” Years before this Tony Morrison made a similar point in her work *Playing in the Dark*. Absence does not imply a non-presence. Whether about memory, identity or homeland, about struggle and discrimination, books are also about relationships, communities, belonging and not belonging. The reverse shadow of the ‘present’

is always there; the poetry in the romance, the drama in the conflict and the homeland in memory.

We express our sincere thanks to all those who have contributed to the making of this issue.

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