

## Guest Editor's Column

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It was perhaps Emmanuel Nelson who first drew critical attention to a phenomenon that was growing to an extent that it was transforming writing in English significantly all over the world by the nineteen-nineties. In two collections of essays published in quick succession, *Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (Greenwood Press, 1992) and *Writers of the Indian Diaspora: A Bio-bibliographical Sourcebook* (Greenwood Press, 1993), Nelson showcased the many talented writers and the varieties of works that had been spawned by migration from the Indian subcontinent over the decades. In the Appendix that he composed for the latter book on "Domicile and the Diasporic Writers," he listed almost sixty authors who had been affected by geographic dispersals that took them from the region and across continents in the course of time. Many of the diasporic writers he had included in his books had ancestors who had moved from the part of the world that we now know as South Asia to countries in Africa, the Caribbean Islands, mainland South America and the south Pacific in the colonial era and Great Britain, Australia and North America in the twentieth century. Theirs were tales of forced or voluntary migration, of expatriation and of travel and settlement in remote lands but also of return to the homeland after a period spent abroad or reflections on the countries they had left behind – home thoughts from abroad, so to speak!

I contributed two essays to *Writers on the Indian Diaspora* on Nirad Chaudhuri and Amitav Ghosh. The latter had by then published his second novel *The Shadow Lines* (1989) and had just printed an extract from his soon-to-be published work, *In an Antique Land* in *Granta*. A few years later I published a book on Bharati Mukherjee in "Twayne's Contemporary United States Authors Series" in which I delved deeper into the theme of what she had called in an essay "the aloofness of expatriation" and "the exuberance of immigration." My interest in the phenomenon of diasporic writing emanating from the subcontinent developed further when I compiled the collection of essays called *South Asian Writers in English* in the Thomson-Gale series, "Dictionary of Literary Biography" (2006) that featured writers such as Monica Ali, Anita Desai, G.V. Desani, Adib Khan, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kamala Markandaya, Ved Mehta, Michael Ondaatjee, Shyam Selvaduri and Bapsi Sidhwa as well as Chaudhuri, Ghosh and Mukherjee. And then for a while I moved on to other areas of research interests and writings, feeling that I had had enough of diasporic South Asian writers for the time being.

However, in 2011, when I was invited to become a judge in the DSC South Asian Literature Prize for 2010, I was immediately struck as I read the books that had been entered for the competition by the way diasporic South Asian writing had mutated in the hands of some fresh and bright young writers. It seemed to me now that a new phase of South Asian fiction in English had emerged, for this new generation of writers appeared to be fascinated not only by the earlier themes of uprooting and re-rooting but also by the mythos of return or near-epic tales of outward flows. Priya Basil's *The Obscure Logic of the Heart*, Tishani Doshi's *The Pleasure Seekers*, Shilpi Somaya Gowda's *Secret Daughter* and Roma Tearne's *The Swimmer*, all published in 2010 and thus considered eligible for the prize, have a few things in common: they are novels by writers of South Asian origin who have settled overseas or moved to the West in their childhood or are descendants of Indian families who have become immigrants for some time now; they are all novels written from a desire to overcome feelings of aloofness and loss incurred by diasporas and by a longing for reconciliation with what was left behind; they all straddle cultures and attempt to unite families and people across space, time and political and racial borders. Meanwhile, Tabish Khair's *The Thing About Thugs*, shortlisted for the DSC Prize, seemed to follow Amitav Ghosh's opening novel of his projected Ibis trilogy on colonial diasporic Indians, *Sea of Poppies* (2008), for both Ghosh and Khair are fictionalising in their works the extraordinary lives of some ordinary South Asians who had migrated to other lands in the nineteenth century for one reason or the other.

The reading that I had been doing in 2011 and my renewed interest in the new and exciting variations on diasporic South Asian themes in recent novels being produced by writers who originated from the subcontinent though domiciled elsewhere led me to come up with the topic of "Expatriation, Migration and Return" as my preferred subject for the special issue of *Asiatic* that Professor M.A. Quayum invited me to guest-edit at the end of 2011 for the July 2012 issue of his periodical. And so it was that I gave a "Call for Papers" inviting submissions on what I chose to call, "The Mythos of Return" in contemporary South Asian writing as well as themes such as fictions of transnational migration, aloofness and expatriation, and historical novels about the outward flow of South Asians since the colonial era.

The response to the "Call for Papers" announced by Professor Quayum was to me most gratifying. In all, I came across at least forty essays that dealt with fictions focused on most of the topics that I had listed in my write-up. In the end, I chose twelve essays that discussed novels of the South Asian diaspora from distinctive angles. Not surprisingly, two of the essays are on Amitav Ghosh's works since he has persisted with the theme ingeniously from his first book, *The Circle of Reason* (1986) to his most recent one, *River of Smoke* (2011). Two of the essays selected are on Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction, and Bangladeshi-born

British writer Monica Ali is the subject of at least two more papers. But the essays included range from the novel of an established writer such as Bharati Mukherjee to novels of upcoming writers such as Tishani Doshi and Shilpi Somaya Gowda. The diasporas treated are diverse in nature – encompassing not only the migration of Indians, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans, but in one case the Indian-born Chinese writer of short stories, Kwai-Yun Li’s tale of an Indian Chinese’s migration to the United States.

It is to be hoped that readers of this special issue of the *Asiatic* will find the varied angles from which the themes of emigration, expatriation and return are treated in the essays fascinating and rewarding. In her paper Sushmita Banerjee certainly treats Bharati Mukerjee’s *Jasmine* provocatively in dealing with the novel’s depiction of “the ambivalence of identity” and in discussing how “the notion of agency” is subverted in the novelist’s “diasporic” work. Charu Mathur examines perceptively two of Romesh Gunesekeera’s novels to explore questions of diasporic identity formation. Anjali Gera Roy explores with impressive subtlety Amitav Ghosh’s tale of what she terms “subaltern cosmopolitanism” in *Sea of Poppies*. In contrast, Omendra Kumar Singh approaches Ghosh’s novel thoughtfully to trace the way notions of caste are “reinvented” in it. Nishi Pulugurtha looks at “themes of the twice-migrant Sino-South Asian diaspora” that make Kwai-Yun Li’s fiction quite remarkable. Shweta Garg and Rajyashree Khushu Lahiri are quite ingenious in probing Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Namesake* to find in the novel the different ways in which “food acts as an identity marker” for her characters. Venkattesh Puttiah discusses the same novel but his interest is in highlighting Lahiri’s adroit depiction of the shifts that take place in attitudes of different generations of South Asian immigrants. Maswood Akhter critiques what he calls “the politics of the right to write” in Monica Ali’s fiction, contrasting the very different reactions her novels have received depending on their locations. Sagarika Chattopadhyay and Jaya Shrivastava juxtapose Ali’s *Brick Lane* and Doshi’s *The Pleasure Seekers* to detect “a move away from essentialist conceptualisations of the nation and culture to a more discursive discourse in contextualising the complex process of home-making” but Sajalkuar Bhattacharya juxtaposes Doshi’s novel and Gowda’s *Secret Daughter* much more critically, and even polemically, bringing up the question of “the right to write” in a very different way. Premila Paul’s discussion of Jean Arasanayagam’s fictionalising of Sri Lankan domestic workers in the Middle East reminds us of the contemporary subalterns of the diasporas whose narratives must be considered essential to any representative work on the South Asian diaspora. Finally, and hopefully fittingly, this collection of essays concludes with Seemin Hasan’s assessment of what she phrases as “the dynamics of repatriation” in Gowda’s *Secret Daughter*.

Professor Quayum readily and generously agreed to print all these twelve essays that I chose for this special issue of *Asiatic*. However, some sort of

selection was inevitable and I must thank all those who responded to my call for papers. I would also like to thank Professor Quayum for his patience and for doing some of my work since because of reasons out of my control I could not devote as much time to it as I was supposed to. But it was a privilege to guest-edit this issue and find out in the process how the themes of expatriation, immigration and return have taken on new dimensions and are attracting very good writing and critical thinking years after Nelson's pioneering volumes, testifying to the endless narratives being spawned by the South Asian diaspora and the infinite possibilities of critical reflection on the subject.