Saborna Roychowdhury, *The Distance.* Calcutta: Mindscape, 2009. 236 pp. ISBN 10: 0578053632/13: 9780578053639.

Does distance always spawn myths? Do these myths merely feed on nostalgia? When I picked up Houston based Indian-American writer, Saborna Roychowdhury's debut novel, *The Distance*, I had a sense of *déjà vu* – it might turn out to be yet another story about immigrant nostalgia. To Roychowdhury's credit, her book refuses nostalgia a privileged place. The protagonist, Mini's sense of un-belonging does not remain confined at the level of a false sense of longing for the land she left behind. The paradoxical notion of distance – at once a desire to escape reality as well as the impossibility of escape – makes this novel distinct from many others in the genre of diasporic fiction.

A two-roomed tiny apartment in Gariahat, Calcutta; a grandmother fastidiously holding onto tradition; a mother grudgingly bearing the vestiges of that tradition; and a father outwardly content with his middle-class existence – the ordinariness of Mini's life is stark. So is the language which is bare and precise: "We lived in a crowded two-bedroom apartment overlooking the busy Gariahat corner where five road arteries intersected: my parents, grandmother, younger brother and me. Outside our old apartment building, long lines of vendors sold food, jewellery, underwear, and books on their pushcarts" (13). The crowd inside the house and outside on the street fails to mask estrangements between people, spaces, generations, ideologies and lives. Roychowdhury employs the trope of distance both in its material as well as symbolic dimensions.

In the beginning, distance is figurative. The routine spaces of the apartment and of the city are ominously distant. The people and the rhythm of their everyday life are devoid of any transformative possibilities. In the latter part of the novel, distance is literal as Mini leaves India for Vancouver, Canada, after her wedding to Neel, an engineering student. The distance is suffused with powers of freedom and independence: "My mother's life had been similar to my grandmother's and my grandmother's to her mother. But I was now breaking away from this cast" (114). She does break away but the relief is momentary. The newness of an occasional visit to a mall wears off soon. The harsh middle-class life in Calcutta is replaced with eternal boredom in Vancouver. Life comes full circle in a tiny apartment in the immigrant part of the city.

Roychowdhury's evocation of space is crafty. This book is as much about space as it is about distance. Mini's feeling of claustrophobia can affect the reader almost viscerally. The novelist's power of observation is acute and her description vivid. Take for example, the dinner at Mr and Mrs Mukherjee's house with fellow Bengali fortune hunters. Mini fails to inhabit the space of

immigrant nostalgia for a country that none of them would ever like to return to.

But haven't we already read novels with themes of immigrant disillusionment? What makes Roychowdhury's novel tick? As I mentioned earlier, it's the paradoxical use of distance that gives the novel an enduring appeal. Amitav, the college Marxist, who dreams of transforming the sedate Bengali society into a revolutionary one, embodies distance in the novel. Amitav is the spectre of distance that looms. Amitav is a possibility. An unwed Mini makes love to him. He is shallow. He is non-committal. But he is what is yet to come and what we can't yet fathom. Amitav is the eruption of the "unhomely" (*unheimlich* in Freud's expression) into the certainties of our stable life. Amitav makes us think of transformative political ideologies. If Mini returns to India, it is not for Amitav, the person but for Amitav, the idea. Mini's Amitav is at once the peg on which she could ground her longing for the ordinary and the spectre that will metamorphose this ordinary into a utopia.

The only jarring note I find in the novel is the deployment of a stereotype about social inequities in Bihar, a neighbouring state. Amitav travels to a Bihar village to take on the local landlord. Why would a revolutionary hoping to change Bengal travel to Bihar? The long communist regime in the state of Bengal had perfected the art of hyperopia, a farsightedness that didn't allow them to see the social ills that befell their own state. Perhaps, the novelist wanted to underscore the myopia in Bengali communists/revolutionaries.

In spite of this minor flaw, Saborna Roychowdhury deftly weaves generations, lives and spaces. The grim ordinariness of Mini's life might appear painful, depressing and frustrating to the reader. Yet Mini finds a new sense of purpose in her return. Outwardly calm, she has been touched by the unknown. Henceforth, she will be nowhere at home!

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