

**Sandhya Rao Mehta, ed. *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015. 200 pp. ISBN 13: 978-1-4438-6877-8.**

Studying literature of the Indian Diaspora is an “in thing” in academia at the moment and every other day new books and critical studies are being published on it. As the list of authors grows so does critical works on their writing. The present volume under review comprises of eleven articles (here mentioned as chapters) penned by scholars from different parts of the world that attempt to bring together diverse ways of examining gender in Indian diasporic fiction. While gendered spaces within the diaspora have become central to the study of migration in transnational and globalised contexts, its literary manifestations, voicing various concerns, approaches and attitudes to the representation of this complex experience, are equally varied in treatment and range. Apart from the Introduction by Sandhya Rao Mehta, the editor, the volume brings together a variety of approaches with which to negotiate identities and create new selves in women of the Indian diaspora who are also linked to the perceived feminine task of collecting, remembering and documenting memory and images of the past.

Part I called “Reading Gender” comprises three articles which offer in-depth studies of four individual novels. In his protean novel *Midnight’s Children* Salman Rushdie tries to give us a socio-cultural history of the growing up of its protagonist Saleem Sinai and the simultaneous development of the nation state of India after its emergence as a new country in 1947. Focusing on two particular issues from the plethora of ideas that Rushdie deals with in the novel, in “Gender and the Indian Emergency: Representation of Women in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*” Gemma Scott examines how Rushdie’s gendered representation of the political Emergency and the imposer of it particularly by The Widow (referring to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi) is actually an alternative reading of history that is largely a result of the author’s self-avowed cultural displacement and is in fact a vital contribution to resistance. She insists that we should not “dismiss the characterization of The Widow and the treatment of Gandhi in the novel as authorial misogyny, or as a result of a paranoid narrator” (31). Also, we have to keep in mind that as opposed to the negative image of The Widow, Rushdie presents women characters like Padma elsewhere in the novel that are more explicitly positive.

In the next article Sanchari Sur explores a fictional account of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in India and its resonance among Sikhs in Canada in Anita Rau Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* She argues that a woman’s differential responses to trauma have to be understood in the context of her gendered upbringing and socio-historical circumstances that are temporal and contingent.

Through the character of Bibi-ji, this article shows the ways in which trauma crosses religious and national borders, and opens up possibilities for envisioning changing national and religious allegiances in the background of violence. Badami also complicates the notion of national belonging for women by moving her female protagonists from India to Canada. Bibi-ji's character demonstrates that it is possible to be both a Sikh and a Canadian.

The third article "Purdah and Zenana: Re-visioning Conventions" by Tulika Bahuguna begins by looking at how the Muslim covering called purdah has been traditionally, sociologically and anthropologically defined to unearth the negative connotations that come embedded within its definition and description. Trying to explain the formulaic binaries that define purdah as being "oppressive, restrictive and controlled as opposed to its presumably liberated, independent and self-dependent counterpart" (52), the scholar examines various social and political institutions such as family, haveli, educational institutions and necessities of purdah since the time before the partition, and the cross-currents between tradition and modernity through two novels, namely, Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and Nazir Ahmed's *The Bride's Mirror*. According to Bahuguna, given Hosain's diasporic standpoint, she is able to arrive at conventional systems of society with the experience of the outsider. In contrast Ahmad's contextualising of such Islamic conventions read into a wider way that tradition could be examined by being part of society itself.

The second part of the anthology entitled "Writing Gender" is the longest and contains five articles. While earlier studies attempted an essentialised study of gendered diaspora based on communities of shared experiences, subsequent works focused on the divergent ways in which travel and migration affected different communities in specific ways. An important question which arises in this context is whether diaspora provides agency to women who emerge from a nationalistic narrative into a transnational experience or whether women find themselves further marginalised in the new society owing to factors of race and ethnicity beyond the challenges of gender. The main thrust area of this section is to bring together multifarious ways in which women occupying marginal spaces within the diaspora transform, define and reflect themselves through the tropes of labour, cooking and clothing. Monbinder Kaur's essay "Blurring Borders/Blurring Bodies: Diaspora and Womanhood" explores the way in which hybridity allows for the female body to process the multiplicity of diasporic experience through a fragmented experience which allows for hybridity. Beginning with emerging issues in the diaspora and examining how they have been represented in different anthologies available in the market she shows us how with the passage of time, issues among the diaspora saw many changes as these groups began to assert themselves socially and culturally. Analysing the works of four diasporic writers, namely Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee, Kiran Desai and Bapsi Sidhwa, she attempts to

examine the shifting identities of women and the burdens created by these shifting roles of diaspora and how these writers are primarily concerned with the relationship between image, identity, culture, power, politics and representation.

Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* is a significant text as far as it delves into the process of attaining selfhood by the Bangladeshi diasporic protagonist of the novel. The next two essays use this text for comparative studies. In "Diasporic Mobility and Identity in Flux in V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Man* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*," the author argues that gendered mobility in both the novels comes at the expense of political participation, solidarity and action. While Naipaul's text is marked by a pervasive sense of paralysis, Ali's novel indicates that mobility – whether social, financial, or physical – is readily available to the hardworking South Asian immigrant. South Asian women migrating to the West sometimes carry with them – or are expected to carry with them – traditional gender ideologies where family and procreativity are valued over the individual self. In the other article entitled "Gendered Diasporic Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*," Elizabeth Jackson chose these two novels, both published in 2003, because the similarities and differences between the authors and their diasporic settings enable an interesting comparative analysis. In the two novels under discussion, the female protagonists, both from traditional South Asian families, struggle to reconstruct their identities in two different diasporic locations. Both encounter strong cultural pressures arising from their position as dependent women in the diaspora, and despite their internal conflicts and ambivalences, it is ultimately their individual choices which shape their identities and destinies.

Food and clothing have now become interesting facets in studying the diaspora. Several scholars have argued that food habits and food imagery act as identity markers for the women characters and shape their distinctiveness with special nuances that highlight their ethno-regional affiliations. "Food thus rises above its mundane function as a nutrient and becomes 'cultural sustenance' in diasporic situations" (120). It also enables the diaspora to draw on the coded language of culture and myth expressed through food to satiate its diverse cravings. In "Kitchen Politics and the Search for an Identity: *The Mango Season*" Shashikala Muthumal Assella shows how the Indian American novelist Amulya Malladi explores a new South Asianness and a new South Indian identity in her book *The Mango Season* (2003). Through abundant use of food imagery and culinary nostalgia, the scholar argues that Malladi uses food not only as a means of asserting a unique South Asianness, but also as a means of exploring women's space within the diaspora and India.

Like food, in much of the fiction of the Indian diaspora gender plays a significant role as being the site from where the dialogue between costume and cultural identity is primarily and most intensely conducted and contested. In the

next article entitled “Clothing, Gender, and Diaspora” Priyanka Sacheti discusses the novels and several short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni to bring out the tensions of cultural belonging and acceptance through recurring images of clothing, “particularly in the way that the sari is imagined and creatively used to indicate changing relationships with self and society” (135). She also rightfully assesses the difference between the first generation and the second generation of Indian women in America vis-à-vis the kind of attachment they profess for traditional clothes, especially the sari, and concludes her argument by stating that irrespective of generation, the sari ultimately becomes a manifestation of how the diasporic women perceive themselves in the arena of immigrant, gender and identity politics – and its influence in dictating the trajectories of their lives.

Part III of this anthology entitled “Performing Gender” comprises of three interesting articles. As the title of the first article suggests, “The Masculinisation of the Native Gentleman: A Close Reading of Neel Haldar in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*,” it explores the effects of diasporic displacement on Neel Haldar’s gender identity and argues that his very source of entrapment ironically empowers and masculinises him. Employing Judith Butler’s theory of “Gender as Performance” which states that gender should not be taken for granted, nor should be policed, and Sigmund Freud’s concept of the “Uncanny,” Uma Jayaraman reiterates how Haldar’s “very loss of identity paradoxically empowers him in his displaced state. The empowerment even in extreme instances of privation is made possible only because of his ability to passively resist oppression through a newfound fearlessness – of scatological pollution, of losing caste or face, of material loss of his possessions, wife and son” (160).

An important development within studies of feminism and sexuality has been the inclusion of queer studies within the diaspora. Modern Indian art genres are beginning to address the subject of LGBT relationships more directly than traditional literary sources. The last two articles focus on queer issues. In “Sexual Realisation in a Historical, Social and Cultural Context: Abha Dawesar’s *Babyji?*” Harshi Syal Gill discusses not only the sexual awareness and realisation of the protagonist Anamika but also places her within the context of a deeply ingrained cultural heritage, where she intrinsically recognises that her sexual transgression does not conform to accepted social norms. Also, she has to discard and escape from the cocoon of these norms to find acceptance of her deviation. Interestingly, Dawesar neither condones nor condemns Anamika’s sexuality, but recognises that diaspora is essential for ultimate self-discovery in the imagined freer world of the West.

As cultural texts, Indian films that deal with queerness among the diaspora have been extremely successful. Based on her reading of the films of Karan Johar, especially those that are set among the diaspora community in

America like *Dostana* and *Kal Ho Na Ho*, Margaret Redlich underlines the argument that the Indian diaspora is far advanced in comparison with the Indian population in terms of accepting and understanding of queer issues. Unlike serious art films or what is termed “parallel cinema” in India, what is unique about the Johar films is that by setting the films in the diaspora community, the issue of queerness is treated as a topic for humour while still positioning it within the narrative which legitimises it by making it a central concern of the plot. According to the author, apart from making the whole context acceptable and believable, both the films present the possibility of joy, hope and acceptance for an Indian gay man. Redlich also rightly points out that most queer films set in India on the other hand have very bleak endings where the society is still unable to accept it as part of reality. Citing Johar’s film *Bombay Talkies* as an example of a film with a gay storyline which is set in India and which deals with the same queer issues, she tells us how the reception at home is totally different and the film shows “only the possibility of a violent confrontation with society, represented by parents, followed by a life of loneliness, pain and lies, while the spirit of India looks on and sings songs of mourning for them” (193).

The contributors to this anthology are a mixed group of senior academics, emerging scholars as well as those outside academia and therefore the standard of all the articles are not consistent. As Adrian Roscoe mentions in the foreword to the volume, issues of identity, mobility, communal violence, masculinisation, kitchen politics, sexual realisation, and even clothing, all come under penetrating and revealing scrutiny. While some articles delve with these issues in general by mentioning several texts and performance pieces, there are a few which offer in depth study of one particular text. Of course allowing for new interpretations of established texts as well as introducing lesser known writers is the added advantage of this book. All said and done, apart from a few typos marring the good production (for example, page 161 where there are problems with upper and lower case of many words, and page 167 where *Kamasutra* is wrongly spelt), the editor should be congratulated for contextualising the issue of gendered spaces in the diaspora in a fresh light and bringing together a very lucid and readable anthology.

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