

Jasbir Jain, *The Diaspora Writes Home: Subcontinental Narratives*. Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2015. 268 pp. ISBN 978-81-316-0711-4.

The word “diaspora” forever seems to be expanding in its meaning and application and has also transcended geographical and cultural spaces of the nation-state. Though scholars have been engaging themselves in diaspora studies for quite some time now, it has gone through several phases over the last few decades. Beginning from the subtle analysis of reading post-postcolonial texts as moving from expatriate writing to that of diaspora and transnational studies, it also moved from the politics of exile to hyphenated identities and “translated” men. In trying to capture this long journey of diaspora studies, Jasbir Jain gives us eighteen illuminating essays (five of which had been published earlier) that raises many questions which cannot be answered by any generalisations on account of the multiple differences that crowd subcontinental diasporic writing. Beginning with the seminal question in the introduction as to “how many diasporas?” she makes it clear that the Indian one has acquired a multiplicity of approaches and each one works differently. Thus the difference between the indentured labourers, the voluntary migrants who went in search of trade or prosperity elsewhere, and the IT professionals who are now scattered around the world due to the effect of globalisation is so marked that they have to be forcibly brought under the large umbrella of subcontinental diasporic studies.

The Diaspora Writes Home: Subcontinental Narratives is a work of gathering multiple dispersions of the emigrants from South Asia across time and space to the various homelands they relate to now. In the essays in this collection, the homeland/homelands is/are placed at the centre and around it are assembled the various acts and modes of remembering the past across time and distance, moving from the immediate past to the distanced past and work with the various issues that the writers raise. The title “Writing Home” carries the meaning of representing as well as relating, hence memory and narrative are two factors that shape them. Memory is central to all kinds of writing but to the writing of the diaspora, it is much more central. Memory can be problematised in highly philosophical terms; it is never self-contained or isolated; it has a personal perception as the same event may be seen differently by different people and also by the same person in different contexts and times; it is likely to be embedded in a continuum of other events, people or environments; and most important of all, it inevitably gets intermixed with imagination. Therefore, in the very first essay Jain discusses narratives of four writers that bring together memories of the homeland with all their complexity of history, politics and exile and are predominantly narratives of “mourning.” The texts analysed in this

context are Sara Suleri's two memoirs, *Boys Will Be Boys* and *Meatless Days*, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters* and Sorayya Khan's *Noor*. These narratives, falling in different genres and spread over a writing period of nearly two decades (1989 to 2007) choose to work with memories of the past that refuse to be buried, memories that have a living presence and a foot in the future. Jain makes it clear that the diaspora "writes" home to fulfil its many psychological, emotional and historical needs; it also feels free to comment on the political or religious happenings that push the nation into orthodoxies, fundamentalism and closed spaces. Furthermore, it writes home to be visible in the host culture and to establish a two-way connectivity and constantly chisel at a past which it claims. Then they also write for the future.

In an essay called "The Burden of Culture" Jain discusses the trajectories of critics like Neil Bissoondath, Himani Banerjee, Arun Prabha Mukherjee and Uma Parameswaran along with the works of writers who are twice dislocated like Ramabai Espinet and M.G. Vassanji and contrast them with writers like Michael Ondaatje and Amitav Ghosh who instead of remaining confined to the homeland or east-west encounter, explore their difference amongst other pluralities. The next essay in this anthology also analyses the use of space in the writings of Ashis Gupta and Michael Ondaatje. Moving away from the diasporic writers who write only in English, Jain also explores the diasporic writing in Punjabi by analysing the works of writers like Harpreet Singh Sekha and Harbhajan Hans. Since their writing is in the mother tongue, they seek to reach a different category of readership, which perhaps occupies a different space, reality and history. The author comes to the conclusion that "the idea of the word 'homeland' is fascinating for it is the umbilical cord that cannot be shed" (62).

We are all aware that exile, émigré, refugee, expatriate – all these categories which signify different kinds of people are now clubbed under the general term diaspora and have erased all the nuances of difference. While the pre-independence Indian writer abroad worked through nostalgia, memory and a possible dependence on Indian philosophy, creating a mythical past from them or alternatively a return to India and a re-defining of the self within the trope of patriotism, the writer of the post-independence period works through other constructions which can be broadly categorised as exotica, history, fantasy, collision, and the use of a third space. The essay "The New Parochialism" discusses such issues in details and concludes with the following observation:

All reflections of the homeland cannot be considered equally valid or invalid. Very often literary evaluations may be different from cultural and

political ones, but this trend towards narrowing of spaces and the myopic vision needs to be watched with care. (86)

While some essays discuss the works of V.S. Naipaul, David Dabydeen, Neil Bissoondath, and other writers of the Indo-Caribbean diaspora, and those settled in Fiji, Mauritius, and Malaysia, who are all in a way children of the “Jahazi-Bhai,” one interesting essay entitled “A Bit of India: Under African Skies” discusses four writers – Ronnie Govender, Farida Karodia, M.G. Vassanji and Abraham Verghese who whether settled in parts of Africa or having moved away to any of the western countries, all are seriously engaged with the past. Each of these four writers relates differently to the land of origin and almost all of them admit the possibility of more homes than one. Thus “where does one belong?” is a query which needs to work with “how does one belong?” This difference of approach towards their homeland also comes out clearly in the essay which discusses the fiction of Tahmina Anam and Monica Ali.

The other interesting areas included in this volume are the different responses of the mid-air tragedy with the crash of *The Emperor Kanishka* through Bharati Mukherjee’s non-fictional work *The Sorrow and the Terror* and Anita Rau Badami’s fictional version in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*; the response of different writers like Shyam Selvadurai, Romesh Gunsekera and Naomi Munaweera on the civil war in Sri Lanka; the *muhajirs* who hold an outsider status and though an immigrant, does not belong to the place, as depicted in the fiction of Intizar Husain. In the essay titled “The Diaspora Zeroes in on the Borders,” Jain focuses on how increasingly writers from Pakistan are writing about the porous borders between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The border is both a haven of refuge and a place of violence and has come to play a significant role in politics and the writing about the war zone as can be seen in the writings of Kamila Shamsie, Raza Konrad Asraf, Fatima Bhutto, Nadeem Aslam and others.

For more than two decades, the cultural scene has been bristling with talk of crossover films, directed, at times also produced, and almost always written by Indians living abroad. These films form a broad category in themselves as they are engaged in an ongoing dialogue with their culture of origin. In “Cultural Interpretations/Representations in Film of the Indian Diaspora: Nostalgia, Memory or Spoofing?” Jain classifies diaspora films into three main categories, namely, i) the in-between films where a constant negotiation takes place between home and the outside, ii) the conflictual situation is a bizarre mix, full of stereotypes and caricatures and in general a fun atmosphere is created, and iii) diasporic films located wholly in India. All these films generate multiple interpretations of culture – one of the director, the other of the story writer, others still of non-culture readers/viewers, of cultural readers located abroad

and of cultural readers/viewers back home, especially if they are familiar with both the novel and the film.

This work, thus, explores the many ways the diaspora remembers and reflects upon the lost homeland and its own relationship with an ancestral past, its history, culture and the current political conflicts. Amongst the questions it asks is “how does the diaspora relate to us at home and what is our relationship to them as representatives of our present?” The last is problematic in itself for our present is not theirs and distance cannot equate the two. The transformations that new locations have brought about as they have travelled through time and interacted with the politics of their new homelands wherever they be – Africa, Fiji, the Caribbean Islands, UK, US and Canada, as well as the countries created out of India, such as Pakistan and Bangladesh –, have altered their affiliations and perspectives. The above issues together seek for new insights into the problematic of the diasporas’ lost homes. Also, several different narrative styles and modes are evident, varying from the *katha*, the *Tuti-Maina* stories, the *Thousand and One Nights* to modern and postmodern modes. Apart from the continuity of ideas and texts, the dominant concerns of poetics, aesthetics, memory and representation, form an underlying strand of continuity in these essays.

This volume is probably the first to deal with subcontinental diasporic writing in such a significant way. It serves as an ample testimony of the author’s erudition and expertise on the subject. But because writing changes, realities shift and perceptions differ, Jain is herself aware that no single volume can hope to cover the immensity of the philosophical and ontological issues. She therefore optimistically concludes with the remark: “And may they continue to do so, else a static world would be dead and boring” (9). Hence we can expect another such interesting volume in the near future.

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