

Pradipta Mukherjee and Sajalkumar Bhattacharya, eds. *The Diasporic Dilemma: Exile, Alienation and Belonging*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2014. 352 pp. ISBN 978-81-8043-111-1.

The present millennium is by all odds the era of migration where new topographies of identity and memory, enabled by technology and media, continue to evolve. As a result, “home” has become a term under erasure – it has transcended the arboreal sense of rootedness in a specific national soil. To situate itself in the contemporary cosmopolitan critical culture, a volume on postmodern diasporic literature and performance has to confront the basic modern sociological premise that societies are discrete cultures and are nationally structured, hermetically sealed by their respective borders. The narcissistic discourse of national cultures has blinded people’s eyes to the past millennia of intercontinental cultural exchange and syncretism. However, we live in an era where people are increasingly becoming gypsies – living, learning, loving and working internationally – and yet migrants are being demonised, just like gypsies. Evidently, a cosmopolitan living does not rule out the desire to keep out strangers: surprisingly, one can be a frequent flier to major cities of Europe and the United States and yet vote for Trump in support of the wall. Many supporters of Brexit realised that their vote went against national interest, though, when the European Union vowed to adopt strict visa and business policies towards Britain. However, the Syrian refugee crisis has resulted in an unprecedented opposition between cosmopolitanism/multicultural strategies and neo-nationalist attitudes. In fact, the fear of immigrants was one of the clinching factors of the United States Presidential election of 2016.

The Diasporic Dilemma: Exile, Alienation and Belonging by Pradipta Mukherjee and Sajalkumar Bhattacharya is a sincere effort to find what can be the meaning of *home* to a migrant, and to explore the processes of acculturation and assimilation that migrants go through, leading to contradictory feelings of emancipation and heartbreak. In the volume, the editors have put together twenty-one essays organised in eight sections followed by an interview of Lakshmi Persaud. The Introduction by Pradipta Mukherjee does a very good job of setting the stage for the discussion, situating diaspora studies with key facts and figures. Sajalkumar Bhattacharya’s article on Sri Lankan diasporic fiction begins by reminding that diasporic identity is not monolithic: like colourful potsherds, it can and should be broken into myriad fragments uniquely marked by location, colour, gender, class, religion, age and so on. Another article by Ananya Chatterjee, which comes near the end of the volume, has introductory material on globalisation and cultural transformation in the Indian diaspora. The articles stand on the contemporary theoretical ground, and often present flickering moments of illumination.

In the post-Brexit world, disrupted by the Syrian refugee crisis and the neo-nationalist ferment of the US presidential election, the popular demand for borders, walls and restrictive immigration policies are on the rise. For many, “Cosmopolitan” is a curse-word for a US presidential candidate who supported the asylum of Syrian refugees. This is a result of thinking in nationalist either/or binaries that define a “native” identity against whatever is foreign to it. Economic globalisation does not guarantee a change of this exclusivism of the nationalist outlook. Contrariwise, Anthropology has shifted base from the study of exclusive cultures to borderlands; and literature, too, can create a space in the Derridean *l'avenir* where the walls of nationalist prison houses can be pulled down, and the inside/outside boundary transcended. Two articles by Syeda Ayesha Ali and Samik Dasgupta study the outlines of such a transnational migrational politics in Amitav Ghosh’s works. Ali and Dasgupta show how Ghosh weaves complex stories of perpetual travellers crossing borders – transcending physical and conceptual boundaries that seek to exclude other people and knowledge. They explore how Ghosh’s unique characters have intimate cultural memories of distant locations – a responsiveness that problematises their notion of home. This straddling across places and practices counters the classifying bias of colonial ethnography and the narrative of modernity and progress. Dasgupta discusses Ghosh’s critique of modernity in *The Glass Palace*, articulated through a heated exchange between the district collector Beni Prasad, the representative of British ethos, and Queen Supalayat. When Prasad accuses the princess of debauchery, the queen angrily replies that it is not only the British who know what is ethical, and a colonial power has no right to lecture others about liberty.

Arnab Kumar Sinha’s article explores the representation of rising Islamophobia in Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Sinha applies Pei-Chan Liao’s Derridean notion of “uncanny terror” to discuss how America’s war on terrorism resulted in the “symbolic suicide” on the part of the Other who relinquishes liberal values and becomes a supporter of counter-terrorism. Lack of acceptance in the host country lands the immigrant in a deep psychological crisis: it compels him to change his position from “I love the US” to “I love USAMA” – the very regressive politics which the mainstream accused him of professing. There has evidently been a clash of cultures in Europe as a result of 9/11, and the recent influx of Syrian refugees. Islamophobia and hate crimes are on the rise, threatening perfectly peaceable refugee families that are already at their wit’s end trying to make a living in a foreign land. The Levinasian/Derridean vision of justice and hospitality seems to have receded to a very distant future-to-come, and we have to wait to see if a fascist neo-nationalism can win the day.

Three articles in the volume explore gender and diasporic experience. The first of these by Nilanjana Deb explores the representation of the lives of indentured Indian labourers who made their journeys from Eastern India to the Caribbean. Deb takes up Ramabai Espinet’s novel *The Swinging Bridge* which draws

extensively on the author's own experiences as an Indo-Trinidadian woman living in Canada. The extensively researched paper informs how the women of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and the Eastern Uttar Pradesh, were transported across the "black waters" to sugarcane plantations, and the *jahaji* relationships that began on the ship. Their "doleful songs" and scattered letters inscribed their trauma of displacement – cultural memories that were ignored or silenced by the patriarchal framework of the community. The third-generation woman novelist performs the role of an archivist, reconstructing a gendered version of the cultural past using oral and written sources. There is an urgent need to counterpoint the selective memories used by the Indo-Trinidadian diaspora: the narrative of large and righteous Indian families surviving their journey across *kala pani* – which erase the history of widow remarriages on the ship and wife-beatings. Mona, the diasporic woman-novelist of the next generation attempts to explore the underside of the nationalist history by recording and reconstructing the stories and *Ramayan Kathas* of Chandroutie and Baboonie, two women survivors of the indenture era.

The Caribbean diaspora is also represented in an interview of Lakshmi Persaud appended to the volume. In the interview, she recounts how her family migrated from India when there was a labour crisis in the Caribbean sugarcane plantations following the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. Her mother's family came as indentured labourers on a 5-year agricultural contract while her father's side came as economic migrants, paying for their own passage. From farm-hands, they rapidly became the owners of successful businesses, and later moved into more respectable professions. This scheme is common to many migrant families in Trinidad, Fiji, Guyana and Mauritius. She narrates how the splendour of the nearby savannah and the East coast of Trinidad shaped the mind of an author with roots in India's Gangetic plains and its mythologies.

Mahitosh Mandal's article on the exiled author Taslima Nasrin raises the controversial issue of Muslim women's rights. Mandal rightly brings up a key point that Nasrin raises repeatedly – that patriarchal interpretation of religious norms privilege men and deny basic human rights to women. The article extensively discusses Nasrin's life and works, and her exilic journey across about a dozen European cities, and her helpless yearning for her homeland. However, the article suffers from what could be called a passive voice issue: Nasrin is exiled, the narrative voice tells us, giving minute details of her traumatised literary expressions; but does not mention who deported her and under what circumstances. Apropos of the appeal for the revocation of triple *talaq*, readers would have liked a closer examination of the machinations of the two postcolonial nations, Bangladesh and India – a Muslim majority country with Islam as the state religion and a professedly secular nation, respectively – which have equally failed the Muslim women.

Suryendu Chakraborty's article discusses the contribution of *Xicanisma* or Chicana feminism to understand the uniquely incapacitated position of Latin American women at the US-Mexican borderlands. Falling back on Gloria Anzaldua, the boundary exists as a perpetually bleeding wound, where "the third world grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms, it haemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merge to form a third country – a border culture" (25). Chicana women, who cross the border in search of livelihood, are victimised by the intersection of race, class and gender discourses that create a culture of violence and sanction the violence against working-class women of colour. Furthermore, the women have to conform to discursive demands that come from within the community. Chakraborty takes up Ana Castillo's *So Far from God* to explore the powerful ideology of self-sacrificial motherhood central to the Mexican Catholic culture. Castillo's work offers a subversive feminist critique of not only the violent culture of the outside that objectifies Chicana women but also the patriarchal forces that wear away their lives from within.

The volume has a section on visual culture and performance in which five contributors focus mostly on Bollywood and Indian dance. There has been a clear transmutation of representation from the VCP age to the DVD and the satellite era: Bollywood has come a long way from the age of pirated video cassettes of Amitabh Bachchan blockbusters viewed in the Gulf countries with Arabic subtitles, or Mithun Chakraborty's films dubbed in Russian. The DVD era star is Shah Rukh Khan, born with films such as the iconic *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) and *Pardes* (1997). This breed of films lift the Indian immigrants from a culturally negative space traditionally ascribed them in Bollywood to a central and celebratory one, depicting their route towards becoming an industrious and colourful model minority in the United States or Europe. Articles by Mou Mukherjee and Abhishek Chowdhury in this section make two noteworthy suggestions: first, the diasporic media representations wield power in favour of a section of the migrants, creating a national imaginary through recurring images, and forcefully negotiating the community's future in the policymaking arena. Secondly, there are cracks and shadow lines in the Asian, and even in the Indian diaspora, possibly because they carry cultural and political baggage from their home countries. Mou Mukherjee's article discusses the roles played by the regional and English-language print media, FM and TV channels run by the diaspora: they successfully create public opinion and play an instrumental role in policy decisions made not only in the host countries but also in India. An obvious example would be the pressure exerted on the US policy decisions in favour of the H-1B visa migration from India. The migrant community is powerful enough to exert pressure on the Indian government to take notice and act, as it did in the days of Nirbhaya rape public demonstrations in New Delhi.

Bollywood plays a far subtle role by attending to the insecurity and inferiority in the diasporic consciousness. Multicultural entertainment, Chowdhury points out, has been long dominated by African-Americans: this is a domain that has traditionally kept out Indians or South Asians. Bollywood song-and-dance performances show a multicultural entourage following the dance moves of the Non-resident Indian (NRI), placing them in the powerful leading position in the American popular culture. The volume could have benefitted from an article on Youtube videos of Bollywood Flashmob dances where this dream of cultural power is increasingly coming true in Europe.

An interesting aspect touched upon, but not really developed in this volume is ghettoisation and stereotyping of migrant communities in the US by their jobs: Patels own hotels and motels, the Bangladeshis do working-class jobs, Sindhis are successful business people – Bengalis from India are highly educated intellectuals and so on. Sindhis and Punjabis, and also Bengalis from two sides of the Indo-Bangladesh border do not really get along very well. And then, all of them think that they speak better English than other East Asian communities. The entrepreneurial competition between the Indians and the Chinese in *Kal Ho Na Ho* not only shows the existing racial tension but also a tradition of hostility that lingers on from the 1962 Indo-China war.

The East Asian diaspora, which includes under its umbrella migrants from China, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and other countries, who were referred to in the nineteenth century as the “yellow peril.” They have similar mongoloid features and are often put in the same box despite vast cultural differences. Srma Nandi’s article takes up Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* to explore the feeling of uncertainty in the first and the second generation of migrants about their “home.” The article makes extensive use of historical information to trace the migration of the Chinese people to the USA to escape the communist atrocity at home (the same reason drove some of them to India too). They joined the California Gold Rush until strict laws in 1868 expelled forty thousand miners. Children or younger migrants did not want to go back. Women had their own reason: in traditional Chinese families, girls were considered slaves (the grandmother in *China Men*, for example, asks her son to return to China and get the passage money by selling his daughters). They did not wish to forego, in spite of experiencing racial prejudice, whatever freedom they found in America. Nandi explores in her article how generations of Chinese grandfathers and great-grandfathers contributed to the making of what America is today. They have embraced the culture of the host country and made sincere efforts to merge with the mainstream. Even then, Hong Kingston’s novel shows that the Americans of Chinese origin are still treated as “strangers within.”

The Diasporic Dilemma is a welcome addition to the Diaspora Studies bookshelf. The volume, authored by Indian scholars, does a good job though

treads on familiar path: “diaspora” here mostly translates to communities that have migrated to the West, and more specifically, the United States. Perhaps it is now time to reverse our gaze and discuss how the postcolonial Indian subcontinent has so far treated its diasporic communities: the Parsees, the Sindhis, the Tibetans, the Chinese and so on. Alongside the work of Hong Kingston, we should also explore the exiled Tibetan authors such as Tenzin Gyatso and Tsering Wangmo Dhompa; and Chinese-Indian exiles such as Yin Marsh who wrote about the incarceration and deportation of her community after the Indo-China war.

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