

Angshuman Kar, ed. *Contemporary Indian Diaspora: Literary and Cultural Representations*. Jaipur, India: Rawat Publications, 2015. 241 pp. ISBN 978-81-316-0708-04.

All of us in the twenty-first century have finally accepted the plain and simple fact that we all have lost our roots and are fated to be perpetually diasporic entities. The concept of diaspora has become integral to the human condition today, with concepts like “roots,” “home,” “exile” and “migration” becoming more and more complicated every day. By trapping the citizens of the global village today in a cunning vortex of unprecedented technological sophistications and unavoidable cultural multiplicity, the phenomenon of globalisation has created a state of perpetual tentativeness and instability, forcing them to reframe their narratives constantly. Consequently, in the last few years, academia has kept itself relentlessly busy in exploring these shifting sands of Diaspora in innumerable authored and edited volumes, trying to record the patterns of its changes and the new dimensions added to it almost daily. Many of these works are remarkably good ones and Angshuman Kar’s edited volume is a welcome addition to this corpus.

Kar has done well to have concentrated exclusively on the Indian Diaspora, for it has been one of the most complex varieties of Diaspora. In recent times, there has been an astronomical rise in the number of people moving into and out of India. Statistics presented by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social affairs indicate that during 2012-13, India was home to at least 3.2 million Bangladeshi residents who settled in the host country. On the other hand, during that same time, the UAE had 2.9 million migrants from India, Saudi Arabia had 1.8 million and the US had no less than 2.1 million. This is just one small example to show how India has been a site of millions of people in flux, people who are relentlessly caught up in the tension between the homeland and the hostland and therefore, have fluid identities. And it is not merely a question of number. What is actually interesting in any study of Indian Diaspora is the consideration of how diverse socio-economic, linguistic and cultural issues continue to add to its complexity every day. Contemporary Indian Diaspora, therefore, demands a constant, close watch and regular, responsible research. Kudos to Kar, for his anthology seems to facilitate this research.

The anthology accommodates fifteen brilliant essays, some of which are by the most formidable scholars in the field, and they are arranged into four sections: “Theorizing Contemporary Indian Diaspora,” “Contemporary Indian Diaspora in Fiction,” “Contemporary Indian Diaspora in Films” and “Contemporary Indian Diaspora in Plays and Poems.” As the editor, Kar sets the tone by sensitising the readers at the outset to the thought-provoking issues that the essays seek to address in the book. At the core of this edited work lies the

assumption that Diaspora in general, and Indian Diaspora in particular, are evolving subjects that elude generalisation, with varieties nuancing the entities every day. Having defined the premise of the book, Kar outlines the main issues that this book seeks to examine: a) the evolution of the new Diaspora from the old Diaspora, b) the interesting subsections within the Indian Diaspora, c) the question of authenticity in a writer of the Indian Diaspora and d) the interesting space of interface between the Indian Diaspora and the Indians in the homeland. The essays in the book, which include one by the editor himself, pick up one or more of these strands and elucidate them.

The four essays in the first section (two of which, by Satchidanandan and Sahoo, are reprints), give a strong foundation to the book by trying to outline neatly the theoretical premise of the entire discussion. Jasbir Jain's essay, for example, warns us again and again against the dangers of the tendency in Diaspora Studies to generalise and oversimplify. All existing theories on (Indian) Diaspora need to be closely examined and updated regularly, Jain suggests, lest they should fail to address the new issues that problematise the subject further, and we "end up in myth-making and generalities" (24). K. Satchidanandan and Ajaya K. Sahoo, two other known scholars on Diaspora Studies, echo Jain in their essays. Satchidanandan concludes his essay with an observation that may not be novel today, but nevertheless underlines one of the key issues the present anthology engages itself with. He points out that in a country like India, which is visibly multicultural and multilingual, "it may be possible to extend the concept of the Diaspora at least in relative, linguistic and regional-cultural terms, *within* the country" (34; emphasis added). We have always been enthusiastically looking at the Indian diasporic community abroad, but hardly have we paused to think that if diasporic condition entails an unhomely space, then the Diaspora within the country should be given equal attention, because diasporic unhomeliness affects all people who have been segregated from their roots within the nation or abroad, alike. What is the nature of the diasporic angst of, say, a Bengali Hindu woman from a low-income group who has been forced to move and settle in Jammu for a job in a multinational company? Another interesting essay in the anthology by Mohan Ramanan, "Diasporic Meditations," addresses this issue at length. Set in an autobiographical note, Ramanan lucidly narrates how he grew up as a member of the Tamil Brahmin community in Kolkata in the 1950s. He was segregated from his "roots" in his childhood and thrust into a diasporic entity. But, throughout his essay, Ramanan, who is in his late sixties now, celebrates his joy in recreating home with aplomb everywhere he has been since his first dislocation, and his ability to feel at home even when he travels "abroad" at this age. This is where the secret of power lies for the new Diaspora: like Mashima in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), the new Diaspora has learnt to create "home" even in the most "unhomely" places. And this achievement has precisely given the new Diaspora an edge over its older counterpart. Hybridity or liminality

are no longer constraints today, but are often enriching experiences, as they add new dimensions to one's life. Celebration of the gradual dissolution of diasporic angst also forms the crux of the essays by Ashok K. Mahapatra, Himadri Lahiri, Somdatta Mandal, Vimal Mohan John and Aysha Iqbal Viswamohan. Taking the cue from Alaa Alghamdi and citing the example of *The White Teeth* (2000), Mahapatra succinctly observes that, "... liminality... is not necessarily a psychic handicap... nor are the effects of hybridity necessarily negative" (125). Mandal, too, begins her assiduous research article on the evolution of Indian diasporic cinema in Britain with her categorical statement that "the first essential quality of Indian diasporic cinema is its manifestation of fluid identity" (159).

Krishna Sen draws our attention to a couple of other very interesting dimensions of Indian Diaspora in her essay "Globalization, Diaspora, and the Dynamics of Genre." To begin with, Sen talks about the differences between the privileged transmigrant and the subaltern migrants from India which makes it almost impossible to club these two groups together. For example, for the poor and illegal immigrants, "diaspora is still exile and home a poignant dream. But for the privileged transmigrant home is just a Skype call or plane ride away, and can also be accessed in other forms due to liberalized policies" (68-69). Then again, in this era of rapid changes, the memory of home in India does not match reality. Consequently, one can hardly go back to the home which s/he had left once and, to quote Sen again, "the dilemma of the globalized diasporan is thus an ontological, and not just a localized, homelessness – s/he is not at home anywhere" (70). Sen's ultimate concern in the essay is to explore the ways the writers of the (Indian) Diaspora choose to negotiate the challenge to represent this "outlandish" experience artistically. Sen proposes "Imaginative Realism," as distinguished from Magic Realism as the best possible tool in this regard.

While T. Vijay Kumar bases his essay on history rather than on contemporary Diaspora, Angshuman Kar and Nilanjana Chatterjee, in their very relevant analyses of contemporary Indian diasporic fiction, bring up the disturbing but crucial issue of authenticity. These days, virtually every week, some one or the other is publishing something which s/he claims to be an Indian diasporic fiction, because fortunately or unfortunately, the genre has created an immensely lucrative market, particularly in the West. So, it has become absolutely important that we cautiously test the authenticity of both the writer and his/her product. Jhumpa Lahiri, Chatterjee points out, is particularly a case in point. Kar probes into the problem further in his essay, elaborating on the intricate issue of production and consumption in this regard. Falling back on Uma Parameswaran, he points to the problem of the reader, who seems to be baffled on this question of authenticity while dealing with Indian diasporic fiction.

Subodh Sarkar's piece on Meena Alexander, along with an interview with her carried out in 2009 (and originally published in Sahitya Akademi's journal),

have indeed enriched this anthology. Readers of Meena's poetry know that the source of much of Meena's exquisite poetry has been repeated dislocations from her roots since her childhood. Poetry for her, therefore, has been an incessant quest for identity. In the long run, it has been a hyphenated existence for her. Sarkar, a poet himself, beautifully examines this hyphenated existence that Meena has all along been trying to cope with and give a poetic form.

And finally, there is the infamous 9/11 incident, the shadow of which looms large over all discussions on Diaspora Studies. The fumes from the debris of the Twin Towers have not subsided yet, and will not for a long time to come, for the terrible scar it has left on the modern psyche is difficult to heal. It has brought about severe fissures in the life of the Asian Diaspora in the West, and has engaged it into another painful, strenuous journey to overcome an unprecedented trauma. Arnab Kumar Sinha and Sanjoy Malik have made useful contributions to the anthology by attempting analyses into the nature of this trauma and the endeavours of Hanif Kureshi and Imtiaz Dharker to cope with it.

Given the evolving nature of (Indian) Diaspora, no book on Diaspora can claim to offer the "final" verdict on the subject. Observations on issues addressed today may need to be reviewed tomorrow, for new dimensions are endlessly added to Diaspora Studies, keeping the subject open to further review. This open-endedness is not only interesting but also important, for only then will it continue to be an inexhaustible treasure trove to researchers in the fields of Social Science and Literature. Keeping with this trend, Kar will surely think of supplementing this anthology with further volumes in future where he may plan to explore at greater length how Dalit, Feminist, caste and language issues bring interesting shades in the studies of Indian Diaspora. We would particularly look forward to having in-depth research articles that would address the feminist issue, for since the early days of diasporic movement from India, there have been stark differences between male Indian migrants and their female counterparts. But till then, our thanks are due to Kar and the contributors to this volume for their valuable initiative. Rawat Publications has presented us with several good publications in the past; this anthology is another welcome addition to that collection. Particularly worth mentioning is the fact that I have not found any typos in the book – a rare occurrence in Indian publication – which points to the sincerity and the meticulousness of both the editor and the publisher. Researchers would be eagerly waiting for more such relevant anthologies from the present editor as well as other scholars of diaspora studies.

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