An Interview with Avtar Brah

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Avtar Brah is Emerita Professor of Sociology at Birkbeck College, London. She spent 1980-82 as a research associate at Leicester University and then three years as a lecturer with the Open University, before joining Birkbeck in 1985. She spent a year as Visiting Professor at the University of California in 1992 and at Cornell University in 2001 and is a member of the Academy of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences, UK and the British Sociological Association. She is a specialist in diaspora studies, race, gender and ethnic identity issues. She was awarded an MBE in 2001 in recognition of her research. She is a member of the editorial collective of the journal *Feminist Review*, and the international editorial board of the journal *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*. Her books include *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996); *Hybridity and its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture* (edited with Annie Coombes; 2000); *Thinking Identities: Racism, Ethnicity and Culture* (1999) and *Global Futures: Migration, Environment and Globalization* (1999; both edited with Mary Hickman and Mairtin Macan Ghail).

In this detailed interview Avtar Brah speaks about various issues. She begins with the new breed of diasporic South Asians and how contesting identities are

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still very much around. Speaking about issues of interculturalism and hybridity she tells us how generational changes have been affecting the Asian communities abroad, the notion of the border and what borders do in practice, and how experiences of each migrant group is different from the other. Brah also speaks about her personal experience of displacement and dispersal as she has lived on four of the five continents of the globe, namely Africa, Asia, America and Europe. She mentions her complicated status as part of the ethnic group of South Asians in the UK. Towards the end of the interview she focuses on the paradigm shifts in Diaspora studies and how she still believes that the diasporic imagination serves as a filter for contracting modalities of "home."

Hello, Professor Brah. On behalf of Asiatic, focusing on a special issue on "South Asian Diaspora," it is a pleasure to begin a conversation with you.

I am pleased about it too.

The pre-1962 British migrants were primarily working class. Now things have changed. Kindly give us your opinion on this new breed of diasporic South Asians.

The post WWII migrants to Britain came predominantly from its former colonies and came to occupy semi-skilled and unskilled jobs in Britain, although even at this stage there were some professional entrants such as doctors. Of course, in terms of their position in South Asia, they were not the poorest members of society. Many came from rural areas, some owning small land holdings in countries of origin. Over the years, the pattern of migration has changed. The immigration control has been restrictive; the 1962 and 1971 Immigration Acts largely stopped primary immigration, although family members of already settled migrants were still permitted though not always without difficulty. Currently, a points-based system, which was phased-in between 2008 and 2010, is in operation. It is composed of 5 "tiers" which replace the previous work permits and entry schemes. These "tiers" include potential applicant categories of entrepreneurs (they must have over £200,000 in funds to qualify), investors with potential millions to invest, those with exceptional talent, skilled workers with a job offer from a UK based employer and students. This means that increasingly the flow of working class South Asians has decreased, while simultaneously there has been an increase in the arrival of those with substantial capital, students and professional groups. South Asian migrants who came during the late 1960s and early 1970s from East Africa were mainly from middle income groups with various professionals and entrepreneurs represented among them. We are now talking about three, even four, generations of British Asians. The class structure has become quite differentiated with a few South Asian billionaires, substantial

number of millionaires, a visible presence of professionals and yet there still remains a significant proportion of the working class which is at the receiving end of the current economic crisis and austerity policies of the government. Overall, British Asians make a very significant contribution to the economy, politics and culture. The current Mayor of London is an Asian with a working class background, and 22 Asian candidates were elected as Members of Parliament to the House of Commons in May 2015, ten of whom are women. Of these 22 MPs, ten are of Pakistani origin, eight of Indian origin, two with a Bangladeshi background and one with a Pakistani and Scottish heritage. A number of Asians peers also sit in the House of Lords. There was a time in the 1980s when we could speak of South Asians as a collective category, but since the Rushdie Affair of the 1980s, and other events, religious affiliation has come to the fore as a significant vector. Religious identity is now an important component of the British South Asian identities.

It has been twenty years since your book Cartographies of Diaspora (1996) *was published. Has the idea of "contesting identities" changed now?*

South Asian identities in Britain are heterogeneous, differentiated along such factors as class, caste, gender, sexuality, religion, linguistic group, regional group and country of origin. All these factors make for processes of fission and fusion so that some identities overlap and others contest. Asian communities are faced by a whole range of socio-economic, political and cultural problems in British society which result in contestations. There are groups that work for unity across the spectrum and others which sow dissention. For instance, Islamophobia and racism are rife, especially since the lead up to the Referendum on 23 June 2016, for Britain to stay or leave the European Union. The British Right has been very actively involved in stoking the ambers of racial hatred. They pose a serious threat to Asian identities. Hence, overall contesting identities are still very much around

In this book you mention that difference, diversity, pluralism and hybridity are some of the most debated and contested terms of our time. In the present twenty first century has there been a radical shift in any of these concepts?

These terms remain debated and contested but many changes have taken place since *Cartographies* was written. The seismic event of 9/11 of 2001 in New York has made deep impact on global relations. The "War on Terror" catalysed processes underpinning the construction of new hegemonies and counter-hegemonies. The wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and now Syria and political conflicts in Africa and other parts of the world have unleashed complex conflictual processes in which the USA and Russia are now poised in a new "Cold War." Neo-imperialisms are on the rise again. Economic inequalities between the

global North and South, and the effects of floods, famines and environmental degradation result in dire life chances for residents of large parts of the world.These processes lead to global migrations on a large scale composed of economic migrants, including elite migrants who normally are not designated as "economic migrants," refugees and asylum seekers. Although vast majority of the refugees from the global South move to neighbouring countries, the movement of the smaller numbers to the global North is perceived in the West as a major "Crisis." The "economic migrant" is presently a reviled term in Europe. The European economies with growing aging populations require immigrant workers, especially to do lower paid jobs which the local groups do not wish to do, yet the political rhetoric constructs them as a major social problem. Although the plight of the refugees is marginally better, in that they are seen as "more deserving" than the "economic migrants," they too are seen as a threat to the European "way of life" as if there is just one way of living life as a European. There is certainly ethnic diversity in Europe, (even "super diversity" as Stephen Vertovec has called it), but plurality and multiplicity can be a source of cultural creativity and transformation rather than a problem. Twenty years ago there was a widely recognised discourse of integration in Britain which was seen as distinct from assimilation. Multiculturalism was generally accepted. Now the discourse of multiculturalism has been discredited and when people say "immigrants must integrate," they usually mean that they should assimilate. Processes of interculturalism and hybridity, which are common to most if not all ethnically diverse societies, are currently represented in Europe as a negative light.

Your work Cartographies of Diaspora *maps the emergence of "Asian" as a racialised category in post-war British popular and political discourse and documents Asian culture and political responses, paying attention to the role of gender and generation.*

Gender and generation remain critical axis of social differentiation. As regards gender, all South Asian groups belong to patriarchal social formations. Britain too is characterised by patriarchal social relations, which are continually contested by feminist and other gender equality groups. Asian women are exposed to both those customs and practices which derive from Asian cultural configurations and others elicited from the workings of British society as a whole. Asian women's groups have made very significant improvements in the lives of Asian women on issues such as economic equality, violence against women, forced marriages and "honour-based" violence (although there is nothing honourable about these horrendous practices). Sexual harassment is a fairly common reality in Britain. In September this year, Nottinghamshire police announced that they will be categorising sexual harassment as a hate crime to be investigated and potentially punishable by law. A campaign is in process attempting to persuade all local authorities to replicate this measure. There is much to be done on these issues.

On the other hand, there are successful Asian women entrepreneurs; professionals such as doctors, lawyers and academics; artists and musicians; stage, television and film actors, and other media professionals and so on. In other words, there are tales of success and tales of woe. Overall, the experience of British Asians is marked by class divisions. In certain geographical areas, rates of unemployment are high, and Asians and other minority ethnic groups are disproportionately affected by these. Indeed, women are likely to be more severely affected by austerity policies than men.

There are generational changes, with some sections of Asian communities having done well, but others not. With the post-WWII generation, it was relatively affordable to buy houses, but the housing market now is in such a crisis that the younger generation is struggling to get on to the housing ladder. In the present day structure of the gig-economy, jobs for life are becoming relatively rare, and temporary employment is more of a reality. Some generational changes are not always in the direction that one would predict. It used to be assumed that the British born young people may be more secular and "progressive" compared to their parents, but instead substantial numbers of young people are more religiously orientated, some even "fundamentalist," and less "progressive" than the older generation. At the consumption level, Asians lead a vibrant cultural life – Asian areas are full of colourful retail shops, high fashion outlets, restaurants, cinemas showing films from the South Asian subcontinent, especially Bollywood, clubs and so on. In the early phases of migration to Britain, Asian weddings were largely small scale affairs using local community centres as venues. Now, many "average" families, not just the rich, hold wedding receptions in five star hotels. Gender and generational change is thus quite complex for which wide generalisations across the whole spectrum of the South Asian communities is not possible. And, as I noted earlier, racism remains a factor impinging on Asian lives. Asian mode of dress, especially the burqa, has been singularly picked on by racist groups. There is harassment on the streets when such item of clothing is worn. Racism against Muslims is particularly rife, though other groups are not immune.

Let us discuss the question of borders. Since borders take many shapes – social, cultural, psychological and even experiential – what do you think is the most significant aspect of the border?

The most significant aspect of a border is concerned with *what the border does in practice*. Do borders act as a social division? Which groups does a particular border include, and which does it exclude? In what manner do these processes of inclusion and exclusion operate? How do border discourses construct and represent specific social groups? How do cultural and psychological/psychic borders operate? Territorial borders are a mechanism of inclusion/exclusion par excellence. Members of a territory have certain rights and obligations, as for

example, of residence and citizenship. Visas, citizenship/nationality documents, immigration and citizenship laws all serve to grant certain sets of rights and withhold others. It is currently being argued by scholars and activists that some pieces of immigration practices such as "racial profiling" operate in such ways that racialised groups are made to carry borders on their bodies. Similarly, some pieces of legislation such as the 2016 immigration legislation in Britain which requires employers to disclose the immigration status of their employees, turn these employers into "border guards." Cultural borders can sanction or prohibit certain relations such as marriage between designate groups. Caste is a case in point. Caste endogamy/exogamy pre/proscribe marriage between different castes. As regards the Dalits in India, there is evidence of disadvantage and discrimination in most walks of life. Indeed, caste and class exploitations may be said to articulate in the lives of Dalits. Indeed, caste borders for Dalits are singularly impervious, despite the presence of legislation for caste equality. In other words, borders mark power differentials. *They enact power.*

Social/cultural borders may make deep psychological impact producing all manner of sometimes contradictory responses: as for instance, love, hate, ambivalence; sense of superiority/inferiority; resistance, rebellion, collusion; intimacy and desire for the "other." There is a sense however in which psychic borders are necessary to the emergence of self as a distinct modality. So not all bordering processes are negative.

It is argued that migration can have profound socio-psychological implications and that decades later it can continue to shape individual sense of self and their attachment to relevant social categories. Your opinion please.

It is true that migration has profound and lasting socio-psychological effects but these effects vary considerably and there are no blue prints in relation to how those affected will respond. There are multiple scripts for different migrant groups and individuals. The contact with the new may simultaneously produce a sense of loss and gain, a nostalgia for what is left behind but also excitement about the promise of what the new may hold. The creation of a new home demands all kinds of economic, social, cultural and psychological resources. It depends on developing new knowledge maps to navigate the unknown. The taken for granted customs, traditions and cultural practices from the country of origin may be called into question by the life styles and values of the receiving society. Some cultural practices may clash, but others may complement and be amenable to reworking and renewal. One may be willing to change certain ways of doing things from "back home," but may not wish to give up others. Cultural change is both constructive and destructive. There is a sense in which change begins from the moment one leaves the place of origin. Yet this fact is not always acknowledged in the receiving country where the immigrant might be perceived

as not changing but rather as clinging to the old customs and practices. Then again, the circumstances in which a group arrives is critical. If you are a refugee escaping a war torn region, your needs in the receiving country may be different. The trauma of the circumstances of leaving will warrant psychological support of a specific kind.

In one place you have mentioned, "I have lived on four of the five continents of the globe – Africa, Asia, America and Europe. These experiences of displacement and dispersal have rendered questions of difference, solidarity and identity central to my work." Could you explain this further for the benefit of the readers.

I was born in Panjab in India but migrated with my parents to Africa when I was about six years old. I grew up in Uganda until I finished high school, at which point I went to California to study as an undergraduate at University of California, Davis. I completed my Master's degree at Madison Wisconsin, and was in England at the time when Idi Amin expelled South Asians from Uganda. So I became a refugee in Britain and was stateless for five years until I became a British citizen. I studied for my PhD in Britain. This background has given me intimate insights into the problematic of dispersal and displacement. There is an emotional cost to such migrations and these experiences leave indelible marks on the psyche. In the USA, I was active in student politics and apart from anti-Vietnam war activism, I developed sympathies with the plight of African American and American indigenous people. I became aware that although as an Asian woman, I was treated as "different," perhaps "orientalised," I did not experience the naked racism encountered by Black and Indigenous people. I was protected by my status as a "foreign student." When I was first called a "Paki" in Britain, I realised, at first hand, what it meant to be Black or Indigenous in the USA. Not surprisingly, I became involved in anti-racist politics in the UK. Simultaneously, I also became committed to feminism and socialism. These politics entailed the development of solidarity with a variety of different groups. I am one of the founding members of a feminist group called Southall Black Sisters, which brought together Asian and African/Caribbean Black women in a coalition to work against both patriarchal and racialised practices, such as violence against women and racialised immigration control in Britain. This group is still very active today. In Uganda, as you know, South Asians comprised the middle layer of the "colonial sandwich," below the Europeans but above the Black people, although of course there were some exceptions in that there were some rich Asians, and some rich Africans, especially the African royalty. This hierarchy attuned one to exploring the asymmetries of power from a perspective simultaneously from above and below. One could see how Asians were likely to treat Africans as inferior, even as we ourselves were inferiorised by the Europeans. The psychological impact of the working of these social hierarchies feeds into the

everyday configuration of social relations – the everyday encounters between people. The Asians in Uganda came mainly from India and Pakistan, this period being before the creation of Bangladesh. They were predominantly Gujaratis, Panjabis, Goans and Bengalis. There were Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and some Buddhists. We had school holidays for all the main subcontinental festivals. There was a spirit of celebration in my home town of Jinja, no matter which festival it was that was being celebrated. Although internal recognition of difference and differentiation amongst Asian groups was clearly present, and caste, colour and religious endogamy meant that marriages across these lines were rarely accepted, I do not recall any other types of major incidents of conflict. Our cultures had an East African specificity. However, the barriers of social interaction with Africans on an equal basis were singularly impervious, though social class divisions too had a bearing on these encounters in additional to the racial boundaries.

As part of the ethnic group of South Asians in the UK do you feel empowered or do you feel victimised?

It is difficult to think about these issues in binary terms. In some instances, say when racial attacks take place, those affected may feel victimised. But there is a long history in Britain of politics of resistance against racial violence, and this provides a sense of empowerment. Again, the question of which social class one belongs to is important. Middle class and wealthy Asians are able to avoid many of the inequities and inequalities that the less well-off may be subjected to. The experience of racism is important in shaping our lives, but racism does not structure all of our experiences and our humanity. Overall, there would not seem to be a visible "victim-mentality" amongst most Asian groups. There has been an ethic of hard work, especially amongst the immigrant generation, which has served them well in times of adversity. The young people too seem to persevere when faced with, say long term unemployment. Education is valued generally by all section of the community, although many Asians live in working class areas where the quality of educational provision may leave a lot to be desired. On the other hand, many among those who can afford it are likely to send children to elite private education, thereby further deepening class inequality. Asian life, as perhaps all life, is marked by contradictory tendencies.

Roland Barthes critiques ethnicities to be fixed but ethnic groups mean different things in the US and the UK. What do you feel about this?

You are right. In the post WWII US, the term "ethnic group" was applied as a polite term to describe European ethnicities such as Italians, Jews and the Irish in contrast to the dominant group who were largely of British descent and to

distinguish them from Americans of African descent, whereas in Europe it has been used predominantly to refer to "people of colour" (a concept which stands in opposition to the colonial label of "coloured people"). There is therefore a power dimension in operation. In Britain, the concept of "ethnicities" has been used in contradistinction to "ethnic group" because of the racialised connotations of the latter in this country. Fredrik Barth and Stuart Hall have been particularly instrumental in representing boundaries of ethnicities as being fluid and multiple/heterogeneous. Barth focusses on the mechanisms of boundary formation, and construes ethnicity as *relational* and as a *process* rather than a pre-given essential difference. Hall takes a more post-structuralist position on the concept as a way of signifying specificity of a non-essentialist difference. So ethnicities are not fixed but they have specificities.

How do you see the paradigm shifts in Diaspora Studies?

Over the recent years, there has been a great movement of the uprooted. Some 65 million people have been displaced from their homes. Evidently, 21.3 million of these are refugees. Many migrants die on their desperate journeys across land, desert and sea. The Mediterranean has become a graveyard over the recent years, as people perish from sinking boats. In the face of such tragedies, questions are raised whether diaspora theories retain their relevance for the problems to be addressed. My response is that diaspora studies remains important but for analysing the phenomenon which is specifically diasporic, rather than that which deals with the plight of refugees. A critical insight of diaspora studies is, and I have argued this strongly, that it is essential to analyse the history of each diaspora. That is to say that, the historical and contemporary circumstance under which a diaspora is constituted is crucial to investigate. Robin Cohen has offered typologies of diasporas on the basis of which they were formed. And, scholars have also emphasised that it is important to specify which migrations can be designated as a diaspora. Diasporas are not the same as casual travel. They are settled populations. So, refugees and "economic migrants" who are part of these perilous journeys have particular needs that are distinct from diasporics. They need different analytical tools, some of which may be embedded in trauma studies. But, there are still many diasporas to be studied. In Europe, many of the traumatised refugees and economic migrants are likely eventually to become part of existing diasporas or they may create new diasporas, although I am aware of the acute backlash in certain European countries such as Hungary against refugees and migrants. The actual paradigm shifts are less specific to diaspora studies as such but rather more to shifts in social theory at a general level. There are new theories labelled as the "affective turn," new studies focussing on the mutualities between the human and the non-human forms of life, studies of the

post-human, and new agendas in the analysis of environmentalism. All these may influence specific diaspora scholars. Is this what you meant by this question?

Your quintessential statement to the question of where is home was that it is "a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination." Do you still believe in this concept or have you moved over to a newer concept?

I do still believe in thinking of "home" in this way, although this has never meant that the materiality of home was not important. Rather a sense of the latter is likely to be refracted through matrices of desire. The diasporic imagination serves as a filter for constructing modalities of "home." How does a house, whether in the sense of a building or a country, become "home?" This involves material as well as emotional, affective and psychic processes. Feelings of "home" resonate with the here and now as well as with mythic connections of desire.

Many people now are speaking of internal migration (i.e. migration within a nation) in terms of diaspora. Do you agree with their position?

This is a difficult question to answer. Do all dislocations result in diasporas? I suppose a great deal depends on the context. Depends on the nature and type of socio-cultural, economic and political differences between the place of origin and destination. Can we speak of Bihari economic migrations to Panjab as diasporic? Depends on the length of settlement, on whether Biharis have recreated their own social and cultural institutions which are distinct from those of Panjabis. Whether the families have been reunited; how they are treated in Panjab, how they define themselves, or are defined by Panjabis? In theory, the term needs not be confined to migrations across nation states, yet, not every social migration, e.g. caste or class migration can be seen as diasporic.

How would you consider the terms "diaspora" and "transnationalism" in the context of globalisation and virtual technology today?

I am not clear that I fully understand the question. I would suggest that diaspora is a specific form of transnationalism. Social media, information technologies, virtual technologies, all have a bearing on the formation of new subjectivities. We are not yet fully tuned to the degree and extent of the impact of virtual technologies on the nature of what we call the "human." But at a more mundane level, new technologies and globalisation is said to shrink the world. Virtual networks are vehicles for instant communication and in their virtuality they erode national boundaries. In part this connects with the previous question. Are there "virtual diasporas" or does the erosion of national boundaries within and through virtual technology mean we cannot call this phenomena diasporic? I suppose,

there is no simple and straightforward answer. Depends on whether the use of technologies reinforces or undermines diasporic processes.

In the context of new generations (third or fourth) of the immigrant ancestors, don't you think that they live in the condition of "post-memory" and that their "diasporic identities" need to be dissolved?

This cannot be decided from the outside, so to speak. It is very much a function of how the third and fourth generation are situated within the receiving society, and how they see themselves. South Asian origin people in the Caribbean, for instance have been there for several generations. Although they now rightly proclaim a Caribbean identity, they simultaneously affirm an Asian diasporic sense of belonging. Here is an example of home as a "mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" par excellence!!

Which diaspora theoreticians have influenced you?

Stuart Hall.

Professor Brah, we thank you very much for giving us this interview. It will really be beneficial for all scholars of diaspora studies.