An Interview with Himani Bannerji

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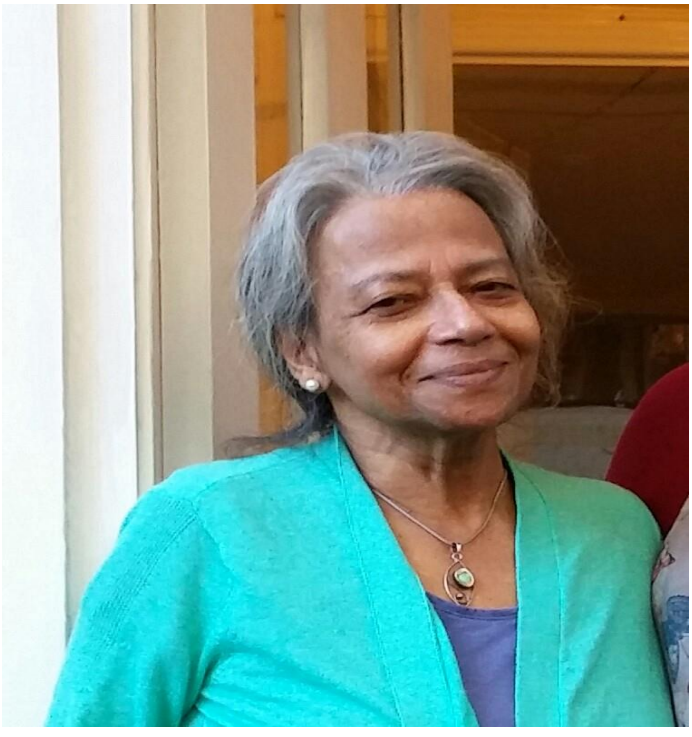

HimaniBannerji (1942-) is a Bengali-Canadian writer, sociologist and philosopher from Kolkata, India. She teaches in the Department of Sociology, the Graduate Programme in Social and Political Thought and the Graduate Programme in Women's Studies at York University, Canada. She is also known for her activist work and poetry. She received her BA and MA in English from Visva-Bharati University and Jadavpur University respectively, and her MA and PhD from the University of Toronto.

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She is a member of the York Centre for Asian Research, York University, Canada. She was Honorary Visiting Professor at the Institute of Development Studies Kolkata 2004-2007. She has done extensive research and writing on patriarchy and class formation in colonial India as well as in different strands of nationalism, cultural identity and politics in India. Her current research areas include Marxist theory and anti-racist feminist theories of development, as well as historical sociology and postcolonial studies. She is especially focused on reading colonial discourse through Karl Marx's concept of ideology, and putting together a reflexive analysis of gender, race and class. Bannerji also does much lecturing about the Gaze and othering and silencing of women who are marginalised.

Her publications include *Demography and Democracy: Essays on Nationalism, Gender and Ideology* (Canadian Scholars' Press and Orient Blackswan, 2011); *Inventing Subjects: Studies in Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism* (Tulika, 2001); *Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Racism* (Canadian Scholars' Press, 2000); *The Writing on the Wall: Essays on Culture and Politics* (TSAR Press,1993); *Thinking Through: Essays in Marxism, Feminism and Anti-Racism* (The Women's Press, 1995) and *The Mirror of Class: Essays on Bengali Theatre* (Papyrus, 1998.

Apart from some short stories, her only novel is titled *Coloured Pictures* (Toronto: Sister Vision, 1991). She also has two volumes of poetry to her credit: *Doing Time: Poems* (Toronto: Sister Vision, 1986), and *A Separate Sky* (Toronto: Domestic Bliss, 1982) – the latter her translation of Bengali poems by Subhas Mukhapadhyay, Manbendra Bandyopadhyay and Shamshur Rahman.

Bannerji also co-authored and edited *Of Property and Propriety: The Role of Gender and Class in Imperialism and Nationalism* (University of Toronto Press, 2001); *Unsettling Relations: The University as a Site for Feminist Struggle* (The Women's Press 1991) and *Returning the Gaze: Essays on Gender, Race and Class by Non-White Women* (Sister Vision, 1993). She is the recipient of the Rabindra Smriti Puraskar 2005.

This interview begins with the diasporic status of Himani Bannerji. Born in erstwhile East Pakistan and then raised in Kolkata, she moved to Canada in 1969, not as an immigrant but as a graduate student deeply engaged in teaching, research and writing. It was in Canada that she encountered racism in various forms for the first time. As a Marxist, anti-racist feminist, much of her critical writing has been on India, especially on patriarchal, casteist, capitalist politics in India itself. Unlike other diasporic theoreticians she does not think of herself to be suspended in mid-air like the proverbial Trishanku image, but instead believes in one world that comprises of various nation states. Bannerji also does not believe in the notion of "art for art's sake" and her commitment to social transformation and socialist revolution remains consistent throughout. She returns to India regularly every year and misses the ambience of Bengali culture

in Canada. For her therefore home and homelessness are modes of feeling that are experiences of travelling.

Welcome Prof. Bannerji for agreeing to give us an interview for Asiatic. As you already know this is a Special Issue on the South Asian Diaspora and though many of our questions will be geared in that direction, we would like our readers to be first acquainted with your oeuvre.

My pleasure.

Let us begin with the first phase of your diasporic status when you were born in what is now Bangladesh and then migrated to India. What is your reaction to that exilic shift?

Exilic shift is not exactly the word I would use about myself accompanying my parents to India at the age of 17. We did not migrate to India, but rather my father became ill and died in Kolkata after some time. It was not a planned departure, and under no harsh circumstances. Kolkata was actually a very nice experience for me, since the world that we inhabited in the then East Pakistan, where my father was a high court judge, was a restrictive one. It was restrictive not because we were Hindus, but because as members of the highest echelons of bureaucracy and myself studying at a very expensive private school, I didn't have almost any access to a local middle class world. Our stay in Kolkata provided me with a path out of that highly classed world, where I had never used public transport and rarely went anywhere alone. After the death of my father, Pakistan came fully under martial law and my mother stayed on with us, myself and two younger brothers, under conditions of great privation. Financially things were very difficult, as India and Pakistan ceased to have any contact with each other, and my father's provident fund and future pension were blocked. This situation freed me and allowed me to become much more independent and to mix freely with the kind of people that I did not encounter in Dhaka. My entry into Lady Brabourne College and years of university education were very happy ones for me. The political outlook and the friendships I developed then continue up to this day.

You moved to Canada in 1969. As an academic, poet and short story writer how do you share your identity crisis with other diasporic writers from South Asia?

Coming to Canada in 1969 as a graduate student, and not an immigrant, was still a very shocking affair. I was teaching at that time in Jadavpur University and had come on leave, joined by my (ex)husband and daughter within the year. Though I never thought of not returning to Kolkata, I was still shocked by various forms of racism that I encountered and gradually began to understand their nature and

origin. In this journey I met many writers and activists who taught me a great deal. They were mostly black and also South Asians from former colonies. I also met aboriginal activists. I shared my identity "crisis" with many, many people I met who were facing the same problems that I was. I came as an academic and 27 years old, and gradually developed as a writer, critic and activist. I would consider this experience to be the most valuable one for the person that I have become, and what could become a "crisis" became the point of departure for my deepening of consciousness about both Indian and Canadian societies and international politics. There was pain in my loss of previous status, the privilege of being an ordinary self, but this is a pain that taught me a lot, and I decided not to lose my world in Kolkata entirely, and to this day continue to live in both Toronto and Canada.

A true "crosser of borders," Canada is now your world. Physical geography of the place is probably no longer much important to you as you religiously return to Kolkata every year. Your comments please.

What I have said above more or less answers this question. I have added to my lived experience the city of Istanbul for the last many years, where I also returned religiously on my journey back and forth, to be stopped now by the crisis faced by Turkey under the extreme right wing government of Erdogan.

As a creative writer, your volumes of poetry and short stories speak much about Himani, the diasporic Indian, sharing the same predicament as other writers living a hyphenated existence. Please tell us your views.

The notion of "Himani the diasporic writer" is not exactly accurate, as I have lived almost 50 years in Canada with deep engagement with my teaching, research and writing. When I write about racism in my creative writing I am talking more about the experiences of the racialised subject. It really is the pain that racism inflicts upon all non-white "others" at various levels of governance, social relations and cultural impositions that I have spoken to. These are the themes I also explore and analyse in my non-fictional writing. I have never been able to live on nostalgia, but rather in the real present, imperfect as it is, both in India and Canada.

In your writing too there is a state where the sense of nostalgia and the sense of assimilation are juxtaposed. Do you agree?

No, these are not my terms, and I don't think and live in that binary paradigm. Being a Marxist, anti-racist feminist is not only a theoretical stand on my part, and I have never thought that my return to India was a return to an idyllic space.

Much of my critical writing has been on India – patriarchal, casteist, capitalist politics in India itself. In the last few years I have been exclusively working on the rise of the Hindu right in India and the perils of cultural nationalism, the crisis faced by the communist parties in India and disastrous deprivations faced by large sections of the Indian population – in fact the majority. This is the framework within which I live and think. I have comrades and close friends in both parts of the world.

According to several diasporic critics, "home" is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. It is also a place of no return. Do you, like Uma Parameswaran, propagate the myth of the Trishanku, who is suspended between two worlds but belong to none?

With all respect to those who inhabit the empty space between two worlds, suspended in mid-air, I cannot join their company. For me it is indeed one world, which encompasses all the nation states of this world within the compass of capitalism. Capitalism is not just an abstract theory for me, but a concrete set of social relations which have pulled into themselves, though in very specific ways, the different countries of the world. So anywhere I may live at this point in time I see the enmeshing of different aspects of the capitalist system. It is inherently violent in its organisation and tasks of expansion.

As we are discussing this straddling between two worlds, I am reminded of your short story "The Colour of Freedom" where the unnamed protagonist does not want to die in Canada on a wintry day in a dim February afternoon but longs to die "in the sun – and in the freedom of colours, not in the stifling monotony and purity of snow." Your observations, please.

From what I have said above it should be clear that the title of the short story, "The Colour of Freedom," is an ironic one. That world of the yellow thistle flower, which is a child's memory, is neither present in India nor in Canada. The sunny world of India has to be understood in the light of other things the woman remembers, the horrors of the Indian partition – fires, dead bodies, smoke and dust – which are deathly as is the snow. The woman longs for something that is not here with us – her mother's faith in Gandhi, the beautiful flowers in the train tracks, and the mellow sunlight are unrealised and perhaps unrealisable spaces.

There is another young black protagonist in your story "The Other Family" who faces trouble when unaware of colour consciousness she draws a picture of an ideal family with Caucasian features later [t]old by her mother that it does not represent them, the "others." What provided you the inspiration for writing such a story?

The immediate inspiration of the story was not any one event, but the experience of my daughter as a non-white child growing up in a highly racialised

environment. Written almost 40 years ago, this story is not only about one family but countless others, as the story has been used in numerous anthologies, textbooks for schools, and translated into Chinese, Farsi, Portuguese and French. So it must have resonated with what many others know, think and feel.

A major segment of your writing is devoted to issues of culture and politics – away from the romanticised, nostalgia of diasporic writing. We are amazed to read of your wide range and subject matter. Through critical discussions of Marxist theatre in Bengal, the anti-racist and feminist poetry of Dionne Brand in Canada, the revolutionary poetry of Ernesto Cardenal in Nicaragua, a recent popular trend in Bengali fiction and the films of Andrei Tarkovsky, your essays provide acute yet dispassionate insights into politically committed cultural activity. Your opinion please.

I have never been a fan of "art for art's sake." I'm not sure I even understand what it would mean to strip art of its social content, of its location in society or of its social intentions, directly articulated or not. It doesn't mean that we have to look at social reality from a clear ideological position, but accept the fact that all linguistic, artistic utterances are intrinsically aspects of the social and historical forms prevailing among us. It is true that cultural forms and traditions are specific, but at the same time their specificities arise from certain general ways of seeing, standpoints of knowing and experiences emanating from a certain social setup. This does not mean a chauvinistic approach to culture or art, or that we cannot use forms in particularly suitable ways to our own reality. As an example, we can mention Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's adaptation of English novels into great Bengali novels. Similarly, Michael Madhusudan Dutt's adaptation of the sonnet forms from Petrarch and blank verse from Shakespeare and other writers. So the boundaries of literature are not rigidly laid down, and sensibilities of people are also dynamic and innovative. The question of influence, then, makes evident to us the two sides – that which is influenced, and the influences that come in – and altogether synthesises a new form. All of this may be read in the context of class, colonialism and gender, for example – all social relations of power which are augmented or resisted by cultural production. So divorcing culture or art from social reality is neither possible nor desirable. It is undesirable to use culture as a veil that hides culture's own social existence. To do that would be an aestheticisation which is fundamentally reactionary. I'll end by quoting Walter Benjamin, who said in his essay "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," that fascists aestheticise the political, and communists politicise the aesthetic.

Could you tell us how upon your arrival in Canada you encountered a new form of violence which unlike patriarchy and class related violence in India was "racism."

In my specific situation in India as an upper class and upper caste woman I had not encountered exclusion and repression through caste. When I was growing up in Bengal, caste and untouchability were relatively minor themes in the social analysis available to us. Sometimes caste became a part of consideration of class, but class was a sovereign category. Perhaps if I were a low caste or untouchable person, and grew up in a rural society, I would have understood caste better as a part of my existential condition. But as things stood, I did not encounter it as an important aspect of my life, did not read much about caste as a way to understand class, or know much about the anti-caste movements of southern India. Even though I was not rich, and belonged to a professional middle class world, I enjoyed the quiet privilege of remaining unaware of certain forms of struggles either in my own life or of those surrounding me. Gender was more obvious in our personal lives – and class, from living among countless poor.

Caste is something that is similar to race. However, the impact of racialisation, that is, of being rendered into a member of an inferiorised social group, was imposed on me with a violence that was sudden and previously unexperienced. I had never faced such exclusion on the ground of being who I am rather than what I do. I also did not know that the set of stereotypes that I had read about in relation to the South African apartheid system or of southern United States are regularly visited upon non-Europeans in the West. I felt the common bond that binds me to the people of African descent living in England, the US and Canada – three countries of which I have personal experience. There was obviously a lot for me to learn, and instead of hiding from it I owned all these experiences, which extended my sense of identity from being Bengali or Indian to that of being "black." In my opinion, South Asians coming abroad still need to travel the path that I did.

In most of your essays you transform how theory is written by seamlessly moving between subjective – a poet's language, passionate – and political and disciplined theoretical formulation. As a non-white woman in the postcolonial world what is your stance at present?

What you say is right, about the way I connect theorisation with experience. I'm not sure what you mean by the term "subjective." It's not so much about the personal "I," but more about experience in/of everyday life that provides the entry point for my attempts to understand the world in terms of social organisation, forms of consciousness and their relationships to economy. Experience therefore becomes the door through which I enter into social inquiry. This is not exactly a descriptive use of experience alone, but looking for the historical, social/material elements that go into the making of that experience. I consider my personal experiences to be social experiences, and the same goes for the experiences of others. In this approach, there is a legitimate role of feelings, passions and responses of all kinds. Anger and resistance necessarily play a part,

since the world we inhabit is created through relations of inequality, oppression and injustice. I believe that attempts to understand the world should not only consist of nuanced description, but that such descriptions must motivate questions and practices of transformation. Thus, my commitment to social transformation and socialist revolution remains consistent throughout.

M.G. Vassanji, the publisher of TSAR, who has helped many diasporic writing see the light of day, had once made fun of you as a writer in a novel like No New Land. *Could you tell us a little more about this? Also, you have drawn our attention to the fact that none of the works by the South Asian diaspora that have won acclaim actually challenge the Canadian establishment. Could you tell us why you think so?*

I will answer these two questions together. Much of the South Asian diaspora came to Canada as economic migrants in search of prosperity, and without knowing anything about the country they were coming to. In their "home" countries they had no quarrel with caste, class or capital and when they came to Canada they did not identify with either the aboriginal people, from whom the country was taken, or with the immigrants of African descent who came into Canada from the West Indies, the African continent and the United States. South Asians tend to identify with the white population and see the "others" as socially inferior to themselves. They have a legacy of patriarchy that is all their own, which blends in well with the racist patriarchy that characterises Canada. So they have no problem with any of these aspects of political, cultural and economic marginalisation of a large population of Canadians. For these reasons, South Asians are exemplified by the Canadian state as model minorities. They tend to keep apart even from mainstream politics, though now that is less so, especially in relation to the Liberal Party of Canada. But certainly, they do not see themselves in any sense involved with resistance politics. Of course, some South Asians with left politics and with refugee backgrounds, fleeing from Sri Lanka for example, or dictatorships in Pakistan, have shown interest and initiative in challenging the Canadian status quo. But by and large, as the writers of these communities are themselves deeply middle class, some very religious, and refuse to speak critically about their lives in Canada, they love to tell stories of their past. Many of these novels are not even their personal memories, but rather second or third hand reported experiences of older generations become the content of their narratives. Some of the novels are not only acts of merchandising memories, but also have a touch of anthropology which dishes up the everyday life of the people of their countries as native informants are supposed to do. There is an insatiable search for this kind of literature in the West, which becomes a niche for South Asian diasporic writers.

Moez Vassanji's novel, *No New Land,* is no exception to this type of writing, but what is more, it makes fun of not just myself, but of the protests mounted by

non-white anti-racist organisers. What is ironic is that his own market in Canada and the West largely depends on the cultural-political struggle of the very people whom he caricatures.

In the introduction to your volume of essays, Thinking Through: Essays on Feminism, Marxism and Anti-Racism (1995), *you mentioned that you have spent half of your life in Toronto, coming no near and going no further than you did in the first few years. You called your journey in Canada "like an arc, suspended, which has not found a ground yet…." Now after more than two decades, has your point of view changed or do you still believe in a similar manner?*

After these two decades I have resolved this existential crisis to some extent, partly because I have been coming to India almost every year, and as a result the reality of everyday life, the political struggles, changes in lifestyles of the middle class, as well as the fast rise of the Hindu right have helped to reduce the mythic quality that the notion of "home" has for the migrant. My attachment to India and the problems that I research about, my associations with Jadavpur University's School of Women's Studies, Marxian Studies, and the fellowship that I held for so long at the Institute for Development Studies Kolkata all combined to provide me with a critical analysis and politics at an anti-imperialist level. The problems encountered in Canada and India are part of a massive global expansion of capital, and the huge degradation in lives and work of people is created by the same forces. In my immediate vicinity I might add the United States and Mexico. More than ever I am convinced that capitalism and forms of consciousness this system gives rise to, its ever-expanding destructive potential ranging from slavery and colonialism to neoliberalism, has to be defeated and replaced by democratic socialism. So I suppose that arc has lost its suspension.

When asked in an interview with Arun Mukherjee about what it meant to be ethnic and what ethnicity has to do with being a "visible minority," you had responded that it meant that you all werenot considered to be Canadians. You were "immigrant women." Could you elaborate on this issue a little?

In my interview with Arun we considered the political appellations offered by the Canadian capitalist settler colonial state and the political meanings and possibilities that they contained. Though formally invested with citizenship, which promised a universal equality among peoples living in Canada, we noticed the mechanism of disempowerment at work. This mechanism constructed with notions such as "immigrant women," "visible minorities," "Canadians" and "new Canadians." Observing closely the populations who were drawn within these categories, I found that they excluded people with European backgrounds, no matter how recently arrived. I considered this to be a manipulation of citizenship

into finely graded hierarchies, and found the terminology to be an avenue for disempowerment and creation of systemic racism. It was of great interest to me and others how the work of racialisation could be done by the state – it's citizenship, migration and labour laws – by creating different political locales, by distinguishing between "Canadians" and "others." While a "white" person from Poland was unquestioningly "Canadian" from the moment of arrival into the country, even as a permanent resident, the third generation of South Asians living in Canada's west coast continued to be called immigrants. Smuggled within this categorisation is the factor of "race," which tended to marginalise and dilute the quality of citizenship of non-white peoples arriving to or residing in Canada. Finally, the peoples who pre-dated the colonial incursion of the French and the British in this land mass they named Canada, ancient as their lineage was, figured nowhere within the map of Canadian citizenship. Another set of laws ruled their lives, laws promulgated by the British Crown culminating in the 1876 Indian Act. The genocide that followed (the United Nations accuses Canada of cultural genocide) was not only cultural, but physical, social and political. It is on this plinth of utterly racist settler colonialism that the liberal democratic Canada was established.

When you went to Canada way back in 1969, there were terms like "racism," "decolonisation," and "anti-imperialism" that were the most prevalent. What about "multiculturalism?" Do you notice any difference after the state-induced policy of multiculturalism came into existence in Canada in the 1980s?

The 1960s, '70s, up to the mid-80s were years of great anti-imperialist revolution and of radical social transformations in North America, when I arrived. The symbiotic relationship between anti-racist movements, feminist and gay movements were at their peak at that time. This radicalism was infused with desires for socialist revolution. Altogether, the international and national environments of politics were very threatening for the bourgeois status quo, consisting in Canada of a settler colonial capitalism hard-wired by patriarchy and racism. The state of Canada, which recruits labour for Canadian industry through processes of immigration, had "opened up" in the '60s and '70s, bringing very large numbers of people of African descent from former colonies, brought to the West in the context of slavery and plantation economies. Doors were also opened to South Asians who brought with them skilled labour to Canada. This labour import was closely connected with lack of a substantial working age and skill population poised for an industrial take-off. There were of course also pre-existing racialised minorities which included the aboriginal peoples, the Francophones, the Chinese and Indians brought in the late 19th and early 20th century, and numerous groups of "white" migrants brought in to settle and cultivate the land. The Canada I encountered through the '70s was riven with

national claims by the Francophones and aboriginal people, and socio-economic and cultural claims of others. This crisis in the legitimacy of the state as arbiter of diverse and contradictory claims was managed literally introducing a legislated form of multiculturalism. In my book on the character of Canadian nationalism and racialised citizenship, *The Dark Side of the Nation*, I speak about the problems of this multiculturalism policy and programme, which produced stereotypes of different groups in Canada, converting demands of political representation into trivial cultural recognition. This move on the part of the state, which I call "multiculturalism from above," was radically against kinds of meaningful social transformation and was nuanced with a sense of revolution, which were truncated and managed by the state's legislative manoeuvre. Political subjectivity based on feminism and anti-racist class oppression morphed into co-optative categories of "visible minorities," "immigrants" and "new Canadians" and so on. This liberal discourse changed the political environment, creating "communities" which were clients of the state. At the level of civil society, the solidarity and involvement of immigrants with each other and with the aboriginal peoples was deformed through community politics and state-prescribed cultural identities. In a classic manner of divide and rule, multiculturalism from above manipulated these groups, managing to substantially dissipate the fundamental transformational thrust of social movements rising from below.

One last question. When you declare, "I am the diaspora," you feel that you are also an alien in India. The diaspora has in fact objectified you. How would you respond on this?

I'm not aware of where and in what context I said that. I can only say that I don't feel objectified by living in different parts of the world, and that the experience of having lived in Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan) until the end of my high school and the unplanned arrival in India for a holiday which turned out to be a stay of ten years in Kolkata and Santiniketan, and subsequent departure for Canada all contributed to my becoming the person that I am. Very personally speaking, this has entailed senses of both gain and loss. I have found ways of being in the world, cultures and social relations that are quite similar to each other though they present themselves in very specific forms. As such, I think I moved out of the tropes of "home," blood and belonging, and now live in intimate relations, activities and politics which are very familiar to me. Perhaps the major difference I feel is that in India I'm not an overtly racialised subject, but I am a member of the dominant class and caste, and in some ways I become the subject which in the context of "race" is called "white." My unawareness of the oppressive social relations immediately impacting upon me are substituted by the privilege of not having to be sustainedly self-aware. So becoming the "self" rather than the "other" is indeed a place of power. Forty years or more of living between India and Canada primarily, and visiting many other countries, I am at "home"

in my worldview and politics. I don't think that I fully belonged when I lived in India or East Pakistan, and that anyone, anywhere, doesn't have a sense of non-belonging to many of the aspects of the societies they come from. Perhaps things would have been different if I had not lived, worked, researched and taught in both countries, and left India "for good." I have created a kind of a path by constantly walking on the space between the two countries, and found Kolkata and Toronto connected through multiple relations of capital, class, patriarchy, colonialism and other relations of oppression – for example, caste playing the role of race.

In conclusion, I guess what I am trying to say is that home and homelessness are modes of feeling that are experiences of travelling. My "home" is perhaps in my politics now, which consists of an awareness of myself as a Marxist and anti-oppression feminist. However, there is something culturally that I miss in Canada, which is Bangla, my mother tongue, my language of certain kinds of social involvement, the literature of which and whose images of landscape are rooted in me since early childhood. Though there are reified and commodified forms of "Bengali culture" which are imported in the suburbia of North American cities, they arrive frozen and packaged, like *ilishmachch* from Bangladesh. It's very hard to breathe any life into these imports. But as I return to India yearly I don't depend on this reified culture.

Thank you very much for giving us this interview.