

*India and the Diasporic Imagination*

Ed. Rita Christian and Judith Misrahi-Barak

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Over the last decade, South Asian diaspora criticism has developed into a thriving field of its own not only in the social and political sciences but also in literary and cultural studies worldwide. Several key publications in the field, such as Susheila Nasta's *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* (2002); Judith M. Brown's *Global South Asians: Introducing the Modern Diaspora* (2006); Gita Rajan's and Shailja Sharma's edited collection, *New Cosmopolitanisms: South Asians in the US* (2006); and Vijay Mishra's *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2007), come to mind. While these authors have convincingly conceptualized South Asian diaspora and its representations in literature and film in accordance with a primarily transnational framework, most authors now agree that the South Asian diaspora should also be seen as being inextricable from global modernity. The essay collection *India and the Diasporic Imagination*, edited by Rita Christian and Judith Misrahi-Barak, now joins this critical tradition as it illustrates how writers and artists conceive transnational links and global Indian modernities in and through their creative work. The book presents a wide range of approaches to film, literature, and popular culture in its dealings with India and its global diasporas and includes a decisively francophone perspective in its attempt to flesh out Indian diasporic imaginations.

In providing a broad perspective on the field of South Asian diaspora criticism, *India and the Diasporic Imagination* challenges a body of scholarship in which Indian diasporas in the United States and in Great Britain have been dominant. Christian and Misrahi-Barak's collection explores lesser-known South-Asian diasporic territories and somewhat understudied areas without neglecting the North American and British hubs. The result is an abundance of fresh approaches to the ties between "Mother India" and its globally scattered diasporas.

In the opening contribution, Clem Seecharan sets the tone of the volume when he takes the reader to British Guiana and the "many Indias" which were essential in the formation of a modern Indo-Guyanese identity. By providing a special focus on the time span between the 1890s and the 1930s, Seecharan's subtly nuanced sketch of an emerging Indo-Guyanese middle class excavates an Indian diasporic sensibility which was marked by strongly felt ambivalences towards embracing a "coolie" past. As Seecharan vividly points out, however, such an embrace was needed in order to come to terms with the emergence of Indian national pride. Vijya Mishra addresses similar ambivalences and contradictions in relation to a different context,

arguing that diasporic identity is necessarily “at once anti-colonial and at the same time so firmly located in colonial discourse”; he stresses that “it is this contradiction, which informs the literature” (59). Mishra’s essay eloquently combines discourses of diaspora memory, food, and Bollywood film to examine how authors such as V.S. Naipaul, Sam Selvon, and Ramabai Espinet narrate memory, home, and belonging.

In addition to Seecharan’s and Mishra’s far-reaching overviews, a number of close readings in the collection examine writing by the usual suspects in the South Asian diasporic writing scenes of the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, namely: Salman Rushdie, M.G. Vassanji, Shani Mootoo, Kiran Desai, Monica Ali, and the rising stars of Pakistani and Bengali British literature, Nadeem Aslam and Tahmima Anam. This critical panorama is further broadened by Selwyn R. Cudjoe’s focus on Indian diasporic life in Trinidad and Tobago. The Caribbean republic certainly presents one of the powerhouses of Indian diasporic writing having birthed a number of highly acclaimed authors such as Naipaul, Earl Lovelace, and Mootoo. Simone A. James Alexander’s essay on Ramabai Espinet’s first novel *Swinging Bridge* and Myriam Moise’s on Lakshmi Persaud’s literary oeuvre beautifully supplement the collection of essays dealing with Caribbean literature. More adventurous in many respects, but no less essential, is Valérie Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo’s essay on Indian indenture novels from the francophone world, including La Réunion, Guadeloupe, and Martinique.

The collection strives for an even more comprehensive view of the Indian diaspora by adding critical studies to writing by leading authors such as Vikram Chandra (India); Ananda Devi and Khal Torabully (Mauritius); and Michael Ondaatje and Romesh Guneseckera (Sri Lanka). While including Indian literature and diasporic writing from Mauritius perfectly fits the book’s conceptual framework, the inclusion of Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan diasporas in Britain and Canada is in many ways more complicated since it challenges the book’s title and the editors’ announcement in their introduction that it aims to explore the ties between “Mother India” and its diasporas (17).

A thoughtful addition to the collection includes Laurel Steele’s essay, “Writing Class with Mr. Khan: No Luncheon at Longchamps for the Jumbie Bird,” which sheds new light on the sensitive issue of canon-formation against the backdrop of historicising a global urge for postcoloniality in popular culture and literature. In her critical take on Ismith Khan’s writing and his literary topoi, Steele makes the important observation that in the 1960s and early 1970s Khan’s cosmopolitan aesthetics might not have been entirely welcome in an American literary scene which at that time was primarily interested in excavating “postcoloniality” in the form of more “authentic” perspectives. Steele is probably right when she suggests, with Rhonda Cobham, that Khan was simply not in the right place at the right time to achieve success as a critically acclaimed author. All in all, Steele’s self-reflexive autobiographical account is surprising in its sensitive

observations and provides a refreshing look at Khan and his work in the context of diaspora.

One series of essays in the collection is dedicated to visual and cultural studies. In this series, the essays explore a wide range of texts and cultural realms, including Mira Nair's filmic adaption of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake*; literary representations of cricket; South Asian diasporic soundscapes; and the virtual world of internet blogs and cybertexts. This section also concludes with a prosaic piece taken from Khal Torabully's multi-part poem "Voices from Future Past."

With fine contributions from Selwyn R. Cudjoe, Valérie Magdelaine-Andrianjafitrimo, Vijay Mishra, Clem Seecharan, Laurel Steele, and Mar Garcia, among others, this essay collection skillfully contributes to the field of academic criticism on India and its diasporic imagination. The standard of scholarship is high and the collection's wide scope elegantly brings together Francophone and Anglophone perspectives on the field of diaspora criticism that have so far remained largely unconnected.