

*Unreliable Truths: Transcultural Homeworlds in Indian Women's
Fiction of the Diaspora*

Sissy Helff

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Turning away from the contextualised analysis that Sissy Helff identifies as the traditional purview of postcolonial criticism, *Unreliable Truths: Transcultural Homeworlds in Indian Women's Fiction of the Diaspora* focuses instead upon narratological approaches to the field. Helff coins the term “transcultural narrative unreliability” as a means of conveying the “plural realities, multiple homes, and various truths” represented in the literature that she engages (xv). The author distinguishes this “transcultural narrative” from its multi-/inter-cultural forebears due to a differing set of thematic concerns and a uniquely self-doubting, uncertain mode of narration borne of “radically individualized constructions of home” and a distaste for essentialisms apparently inherent in processes of identity-construction played out in the intercultural novel (32).

The book's approach is inter-diasporic in its attempt to provide a “comparative framework for a study of unreliable narration” (x). With a rather hasty dismissal of the “somewhat antiquated, nation-orientated ideas of home and homeland,” Helff turns towards the perspective of the “transmigrant” agent and the “multidirectional flow of images and information” to which they are privy (xii)—a gesture that comes dangerously close to prioritising the perspective of those Simon Gikandi has termed “postcolonial elites,” who “by virtue of their class, position or education, [are] the major beneficiaries of the project of decolonization”(29). *Unreliable Truths* does, however, map new territory in providing a new reading of unreliability that moves away from the “proto-structuralism” of Wayne Booth's model, focussing instead on the inherent unreliability of any project that attempts to reduce South Asian diasporic experience to a common denominator by examining the contested spaces of meaning, authenticity and truth. Helff's reading reveals the importance of doubt as a structuring device for transnational novels that parallel individual self-doubt with “obviously questionable views of the world” (32). She demonstrates that this unreliable mode of narration is crucial for undermining essentializing structures and for reflecting the ever-shifting perspectives of perennial border-crossers.

Following an introduction that sets out the general purpose and approaches of the book, the work is split into two main sections. The first, “Of Social and Imaginary Homeworlds,” takes readers further into the theories of transnationalism and narrative unreliability that underpin the subsequent textual analysis. Helff provides the paragon of good scholarly practice here, engaging in detail the vast number of

critics that have foregrounded or influenced her own take on home, migration, cosmopolitanism, and other key issues and concerns. The critical readings are both sophisticated and nuanced, though it does become a little tiresome after a while to repeatedly find critics discussed in detail, then subsequently dismissed for argumentative flaws. Helff's own argument is sometimes obscured in the process.

The second section, "Homing in on Unreliable Storytelling," is divided into three chapters that apply Helff's theory of transcultural narrative unreliability to a selection of texts. Through analysis of Farida Karodia's South African novel *Other Secrets* and Canada-based Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, a chapter on "Fictionalizing South Asian Diasporic Homemaking" focuses on narratives that draw attention to the subjectivity and multiplicity of stories, which serve to blur distinctions between real and imaginary worlds. A second chapter, devoted to textual analysis, considers novels broadly understood in the Bildungsroman genre. The analysis begins to become slightly predictable and repetitive at this point, as it circulates around problems of subjectivity and identification expressed through an unreliable narrative voice. However, a section on the way in which narrative unreliability can perform a rather conservative function when it is used to reflect madness or sexualities deemed transgressive in order to shore up normativity is considerably more interesting. This marks a distinct shift from the slightly insipid utopianism or transformative potential aligned with the transcultural narrative perspective elsewhere in the study. The author's distaste for the offending book (Shobha Dé's *Strange Obsession*, which Helff argues uses narrative unreliability negatively to frame lesbianism, stigmatise madness, and serve patriarchy) does, however, lead to some fairly rushed generalisations with regard to how "the reader" feels (146). The final chapter of textual analysis uses Oonya Kempadoo's *Tide Running* to explore a complex nexus of affiliations, none of which can be taken in isolation as an explanation of social realities. Unreliable narration, Helff suggests, is an apposite means of conveying the negotiations and layers of meaning present in transcultural societies.

A problem with the transcultural approach is that it becomes difficult to draw meaningful comparisons from such a disparate set of texts and contexts, meaning that the study is necessarily limited. Helff asserts that "[i]t is more productive to illuminate a panorama of modern homeworlds with their manifold, distinctive transcultural practices and life-styles than to provide a normative definition of transculturality (177)." But this is somewhat dissatisfying, as it essentially leaves readers without anything solid to take away, other than some insightful analysis of individual texts. Some excellent arguments arise from close readings of individual texts, but I would have liked to have seen the broader implications drawn out more clearly. The transcultural approach, alongside the relatively small number of texts engaged, leaves Helff at an impasse, unable or unwilling to make bolder theoretical claims. Though the book remains sensitive to local contexts by eschewing broader political frameworks or modes of affiliation (even the unifying thread of the Indian diaspora

seems somewhat incidental), *Unreliable Truths* struggles to make a more lasting impact.

Despite these shortcomings, however, *Unreliable Truths* makes a valuable contribution to studies of narrative unreliability and its relationship to the representation of subjects defined (at least in part) by their transcultural perspective, through a nuanced and careful exploration of texts that are frequently overlooked for not fitting neatly into narrower affiliative categories. The book will prove particularly useful for postgraduate students and researchers of the literature discussed, as Helff comes into her own in her close readings and detailed analysis of the texts.

Works Cited

Gikandi, Simon. "Between Roots and Routes: Cosmopolitanism and the Claims of Locality." *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*. Ed. Janet Wilson, Cristina Şandru, and Sarah Lawson Welsh. London: Routledge, 2010. 22-35. Print.