

*Beyond Trishanku: Diaspora Poetics and Homing in South Asian Women's Writing*

Ed. Shilpa Daithota Bhat

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Reviewed by Lauren Bettridge

It was a Sunday afternoon in late Summer when I received an email telling me that Renu was “no more”.<sup>1</sup>

The next evening, I joined her family and friends at her home, where we offered prayers and were offered *prasad*.<sup>2</sup> A family member mused that after her vast suffering, she was at last in heaven, at peace and at home. But on my way home, as I drove through the deserted suburban streets, I found myself wondering: was Renu's home her family *haveli* in North Delhi, or was it here in Western Australia? That night, restless in the heat, I wondered if she was there yet—was she in heaven, at home, or still somewhere in-between.

The unique paradox of being in-between is nothing new for the field of diasporic/postcolonial studies, and nor was it for Renu. We had discussed the homeland/hostland, motherland/otherland quandary many times. I hear her voice often, but I hear it particularly in the pages of Shilpa Daithota Bhat's edited collection “Beyond Trishanku: Diaspora Poetics and Homing in South Asian Women's Writing.” Bhat has assembled an anthology that considers how the South Asian diasporic woman negotiates notions of home in her writing. Bhat's aim is “to gather a wholesome interpretation of the epistemological dimension of unhoming” (xvi), and she succeeds.

Crediting Uma Parameswaran's 1980s poetry collection (titled *Trishanku*), Bhat fashions the myth of Trishanku as a lens through which to view women writers from the South Asian region and the way they navigate notions of identity, home and nation from a space *in-between*. A king in Hindu mythology, Trishanku was granted yogic powers by Sage Vishwamitra and sought to enter heaven (but was denied entry, on account of still being mortal) and then, suspended between heaven and earth, ultimately created a heaven of his own in the sky and remained there happily. As Bhat writes, Trishanku, functions as “a prototype for the homing concept and looking at the challenges of South Asian migrants in this anthology” (xxviii). Bhat's contribution to the postcolonial field here is to emphasize and give voice to the (subaltern) South Asian woman writer. Both Bhat and the writers contained within the book move the diasporic discourse beyond the binaries familiar to any scholar of postcolonialism: motherland/otherland, localisation/globalisation, past/present and tradition/modernity to chart new territory.

In the introduction Bhat maps out the terrain of migration the book will traverse. By placing the idea of the “traveling woman” as central to the book, Bhat works to “challenge the popular perceptions

about the women from South Asia community who have often been perceived as marginalized, victimized; and more specifically inhabiting a ‘neither-here-nor-there’ trope, alluding or implying the analogy of the mythological figure of *Trishanku*” (x). As Bhat suggests, the book does not seek to fetishize the hyphenated or the in-between identity, rather to invoke both as powerful tools in which South Asian women writers are able to enter into a subversive dialogue about identity, gender, nostalgia, nation and home.

The book is divided into three parts (Trishanku committed three sins, hence his name): the first, “Realizing *Trishanku*”, the second, “Configuring Home” and the third, “Exploring Hostlands.” The triptych paints a compelling picture - moving in a largely chronological sweep of postcolonial Indian women’s writing, the first section covers early Indian migration and the indentured female labourers working in the sugarcane fields of the Caribbean; the second considers the notion of “home” and representations thereof; and the third, examines how the hostland can (re)create the homeland.

The scarring legacy of colonialism is writ large in Marina Carter’s opening piece, “Representation and Memorialization of the Experiences of Women in Indenture.” Carter’s comprehensive work considers the subaltern body of the indentured Indian female labourer and the routine physical, sexual and psychological violence waged on her body while indentured to British occupied colonies. The piece opens in the sugarcane fields of the Caribbean and closes in South Africa—allowing María Jesús Carbarcos Traseira to pick up where Carter ends, by interrogating South African Indian diasporic women’s writing (by way of Farida Karodia’s writing). Chapter 3, by María Alonso Alonso, travels on—examining the Indo-Trinidadian migrant in Canada. In her close reading of Ramabai Espinet, Alonso Alonso’s work is particularly interesting, delving into the doubly displaced diaspora, and how the scars of the first-displaced indentured diaspora bleed into contemporary Indo-Caribbean identity in Canada. The first section ends with Gurbir Singh Jolly reading three Indian post-immigrant women’s texts about travelling in India and the uniquely diasporic paradox of being theoretically at home yet feeling otherwise: “For Indian post-immigrant writers, conceptualizing travel as a process of existential transformation begins with asking, “Who am I in India,” or “Who can I be in India”? (44).

The second part of the book opens with Setara Pracha’s pithy piece “A Passage from India—The Darkly Funny in Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me*,” where Pracha reads Syal’s semi-autobiographic 1996 novel thus: “Syal’s text posits that individual experience is an essential node of enriching historical accounts and correcting the narrative to reflect all those involved in the development of today’s India and today’s Britain” (85). Shuhita Bhattacharjee’s “Relocating Home and Diasporizing the South Asian Queer” finds authors whose works “install instead a framework of South Asian queer experience—unique, nuanced, ambiguous, and even subversive”

(100), and Sam Naidu's 'Negotiating Home and Homeland through Women's Life-Writing' is a thoughtful mediation on the diasporic female field of life writing. As Naidu writes: "By writing her own story, the woman writer takes charge of her subjectivity and is able to resist imposed subject positions" (108).

Reshmi J. Hebbar opens proceedings for the third section of the book with a contemporary reading of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* that considers how the heroine "makes her way cross the world and then *across* America" (134). Mitali P. Wong continues with a timely analysis that considers "race, oppression, and the search for racial harmony in the poetry of three contemporary South Asian American women poets" (137) in a post-9/11 America, before Izabella Kimak returns us to Bharati Mukherjee, in the chapter that most meditates on the concept of "home." Kimak's insightful study considers how the late Mukherjee's work grapples with women seeking both to locate themselves and a place to call home.

This anthology returns repeatedly to the in-between, to the liminal space, the hyphen, the hybrid identity, and while the book's premise is ambitious, each of the writers construct and deconstruct what it means to be uniquely hyphenated—or as Bhat writes, "[t]heir perceptions about home and recreating it abroad solve the dilemmas of the homeland-hostland binary" (xxviii). The postcolonial voice that speaks through the book is polyglot; each writer breathes life into their subject, giving agency to those often denied such a voice. In inventing the myth of Trishanku as a framework in which to explore notions of nostalgia, nation, home and migration, the book ends with a last word from Vanita Seth, whose stirring epilogue *Abbey and Me* is a deeply personal reflection about returning to Australia—which in a way, brings me full circle, back to Australia and back to Renu.

## Notes

1. Renuka and I bonded over a shared love of bhaijaans and Bollywood cinema. She welcomed me into her home, her family, her radio-show and her life; and I remain eternally grateful. A guiding light throughout the writing of my thesis – she was a fierce intellect who would've enjoyed discussing this book.

2. *Prasad* is a devotional offering, usually of the vegetarian or sweet variety, that is offered to a God or Deity who it is believed partakes in the eating (therefore blessing the food) and is then consumed by devotees.