

Book Review

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India and the Diasporic Imagination

By Christian, R. and Misrahi-Barak, J.,

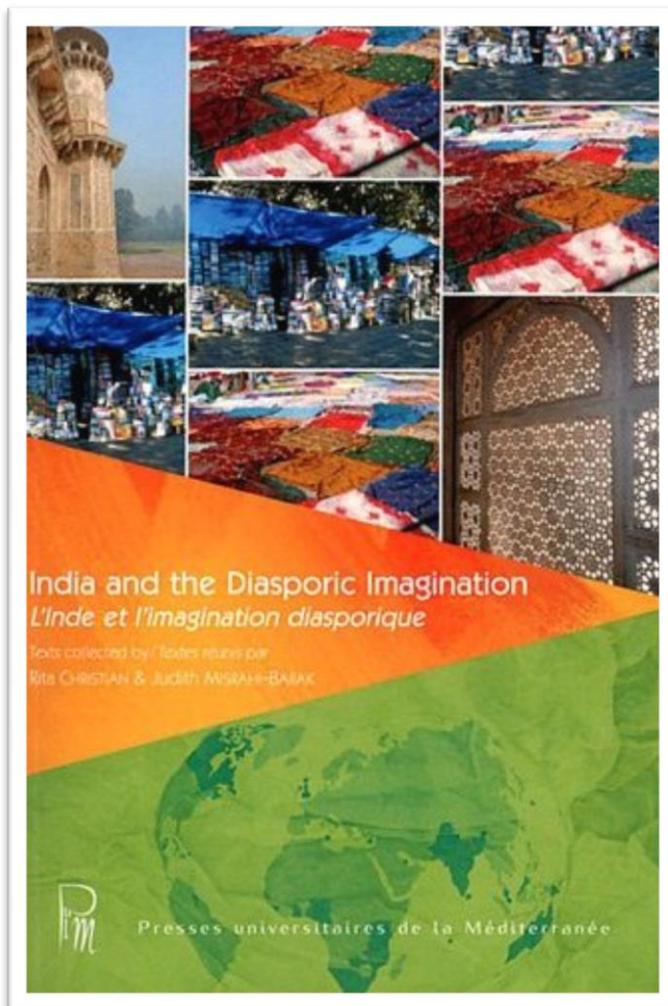
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The past few years have witnessed a proliferation of inquiry into the global Indian diaspora, exploring the historical evolution of the complex identities of the twenty million people of South Asian origin living outside the subcontinent. The literature and cultural texts of the Indian diaspora have become an important touchstone for examining the ways in which



Indian diasporic identities are produced, resisted, contested and manipulated in various ways across time and space. Recent collections such as Vijay Mishra's *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (Routledge: London, 2007) and O.P. Dwivedi's *Literature of the Indian Diaspora* (Pencraft International: New Delhi, 2011) have undoubtedly deepened scholarly understandings of the divergent ways in which trauma, mourning, spectre, loss and displacement associated with the diasporic condition are reflected in the production, dissemination and aesthetic styles of literary accounts written by Indian diasporic communities and their writers.

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Scholarship that captures not only the sense of loss associated with displacement but also its hopeful and playful possibilities is increasingly required, one that can contribute much needed evidence regarding the multidimensionality of diaspora as felt and experienced. Whilst Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991) has been used extensively as the analytical basis for much scholarly writing on diasporic identities, scholarship must now move beyond the relatively fixed, mythologized and ossified notions of homeland that he deploys to capture the fluid affective and lived realities of Indian diasporic communities and their writers in the global twentieth and twenty-first century. This expansive collection of works by twenty-four authors, edited by Rita Christian and Judith Misrahi-Barak, sets out to do just this. Taking very seriously the ways in which such narratives unfold within ever-evolving social and political contexts, this book grapples with geographically and temporally diverse locales from which Indian communities and their writers represent India. The book combines a broad range of new Anglophone and Francophone empirical studies interspersed with autobiographical accounts and literary work by acclaimed French poet and filmmaker Khal Torabully, who uses his poetry to imaginatively deal with the history of loss under colonial rule as well as movements towards reshaping Indian cultural selfhood. Taken together, the authors provide rich and wide-ranging insights into the transitory and fragmented nature of producing and reproducing narratives of an Indian homeland in context of cultural hybridization and assimilation, nostalgia and cultural alienation and internal stratifications associated with religious, class, gender and linguistic identities.

The strength of this book lies in the range of trajectories and migration and settlement that it follows, providing multidimensional accounts of the historical and geographical intricacies of how identifications and counter-identifications with India are arrived at. Chapters examine literary and cultural texts from the descendants of traders, entrepreneurs and forced Indian indentured migrants who moved in the British colonial and pre-colonial eras; from the descendants of those who moved from the subcontinent after the Second World War, whether through the forced cross-border migrations of Partition or the movement of skilled, unskilled and semi-skilled workers for the economies of North America and Europe; and twice migrants such as those moving from East Africa and the Caribbean to North America. In tracking such complex, contested identities and experiences through the geographically diverse set of locations from which India is imagined and remembered, the book provides rich comparative material that is essential to realizing the contingent nature of Indian diasporic homeland identification. Nevertheless, it is a pity that the introduction does not make more of the evolving and diverse nature of India itself, for this matters too in how diasporic subjects come to remember and imagine the homeland, a point made by many of the authors. A discussion of India's geographically differentiated and often highly-contested regional, kin, caste, class and religious specificities would have helped to flag-up those chapters that do explore how those specificities come to matter to the articulation of diasporic belonging. In particular, I was surprised that there was no discussion or justification for using the term *Indian* diasporic imagination as opposed to *South Asian*, particularly given how many of the subsequent chapters deal precisely with this tension as it is articulated within different colonial and postcolonial texts and contexts.

The book's organization into six thematic rather than geographic sections allows the reader to make important analytical connections between pre- and post-independence migration trajectories, a binary that is too often reproduced in much historical, sociological and cultural academic work on the Indian diaspora. 'Part 1, 'Setting the Diasporic Stage', provides an important steer away from any quick prognosis on the fixity of the Indian diasporic imaginary, instead foregrounding multiplicities of caste, class and religion as a backdrop for the unfolding of multiple and tenuous articulations, performances and enactments of Indian diasporic identity. Clem Seecharan discusses the ever-evolving nature of Indo-Guyanese constructions of India under its time as a British colony, arguing that different migrant trajectories gave way to multiple modes of selfhood in ways that gave Indo-Guyanese the strategic flexibility to adopt and reinvent their identities as a 'potent instrument of self-assertion' (p. 35). Vijay Mishra's and Laurel Steele's chapters also analyze the negotiation of Indian diasporic subject positions by foregrounding the particular moments in which those negotiations are forced to surface: in colonial discourse, food and filmic image (Mishra) and in the space of a creative writing class (Steele).

The chapters that comprise 'Part 2, 'Loss Mourning and Trauma', analyze literary representations of the experiences of colonization, exile, dislocation and indenture during and after the British Empire, which, taken together, move beyond historical and contemporary analysis that privileges experiences of disenfranchisement and othering. Both Savitiri Ashok and Sophie Croisy's chapters explore the *selective* process of remembering past trauma, whether through Salman Rushdie's interweaving of fact and fiction as a means of re-appropriating the past (Ashok) or Shani Mootoo's exploration of the fragmented dissemination of trauma histories (Croisy). For Kerstin Shands, Maria-Sabina Draga-Alexandrou and Catherine Pesso-Miquel, multidimensional narratives and story-telling techniques used by authors such as Nadeem Aslam, Kiran Desai and Vikram Chandra help to foreground the complex temporalities of colonial and post-colonial experiences and are central to efforts to redefine and re-appropriate experiences of loss and trauma.

How to capture, map and categorize 'return migration' has been a question that has occupied statisticians and social scientists since the 1970s. The papers in Part 3, 'To go home or not to go home', take a different approach to return mobility by exploring the importance, richness and variety of affective, experienced and imagined return to ancestral homelands. Whilst return often implies an endpoint, the collection of chapters in this section explore a range of felt return spatialities and temporalities, organised around a web of different times, distances and genealogical variations formed in the interstices between Tanzania, India and Canada (Chun-Fu); Tower Hamlets and a Bangladeshi village (Sabine Lauret); and between Sri Lanka, Britain and the USA (Pascal Zinck). Together, the authors remind us of the contingent nature of home as it becomes defined and re-defined through the complex and interrelated experiences of travel and dwelling.

The notion of diasporic agency that is explored implicitly in parts 2 and 3 is developed more clearly and pointedly in part 4, 'From Diasporic Dis-Locations and Re-Locations to Diaspora as Thirdspace'. Edward Soja's *Thirdspace* (Malden: Blackwell 1996) is useful here insofar as it explores how binaries become disrupted not through their dismissal but through a

creative process of restructuring that draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open new alternatives. The creative reconstruction of binaries into thirdspaces is explored in this section through literary reimaginings of Bengali Muslim/Hindu Partition (Louise Harrington); the blending of different elements of 'home' and 'away' in the theatrical plays of Indo-Trinidadians (Selwyn Cudjoe) and in the reimagining of femininity and patriarchy in Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge*. For all of the authors, the process of borrowing and appropriation found in literary and cultural texts encapsulates processes of creativity and resilience, emphasizing the agency and empowerment of diasporic subjects rather than their 'otherness'.

Part 5, 'The Visual and the Oral, the Playful and the Virtual' carefully sidesteps easy celebrations of both hybridity, drawing attention to the embodied processes involved in mediating and constructing diasporic imaginations by examining the production of cricket fiction (Alexis Tadié), Indian cinema (Florence Cabaret, Zeenat Salah), bhangra and hip-hop (Claude Chastagner) and cybertexts (Pia Mukherji), an aspect that postcolonial literary studies tends to neglect. While previous sections had a tendency to focus on *representations* of the complexity of Indian diasporic identities, the chapters here deal explicitly with the processes of *producing* those representations, highlighting the intensely political nature of translating tangible experiences, external landscapes and objects embedded in time and space into textual and aesthetic form. In doing so, this section reminds the reader that diaspora carries an important tension with regard to the concepts of borders, in that it simultaneously transgresses and reinforces the boundedness of national and gendered identities.

Finally, Part 6 focuses on the narratives of the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean Francophone colonies, bringing the volume full circle by reminding the reader of the geographically contingent nature of the Indian diasporic imagination as it unfolds in tandem with the political vicissitudes of migration, displacement and resettlement.

Overall, this collection offers a range of important and provocative contributions that expand our understanding of the diversity and complexity of literary and cultural texts of Indian diasporic communities and their writers. Whilst many of the accounts tread over well-known texts by authors such as Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul and M.G. Vassanji, the contributions provide insightful reinterpretation and analysis using different theoretical frameworks and approaches. Beyond these well-known literatures, there is a wide range of texts by less well-known authors, analysis of which provides important assessments of the complex and dynamic history of Indian settlement. Part 5's foray into visual, aural and cyber-media offers an important and timely exploration into how diasporic articulations are evolving in response to contemporary changes in India. As stated above, the editors might have done more to foreground the insights offered by this diversity by using the introduction to explore the significance of specific religious, regional and linguistic specificities and indeed, could have pushed further to speculate on *how* and *when* these diversities and specificities become amalgamated into more essentialist renderings. *India and the Diasporic Imagination* is nevertheless an important and beneficial contribution to Indian diaspora studies.