Vijay Mishra. *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. London: Routledge, 2007. 312 pp. $110 USD.

There are at least three ways of describing this remarkable book, which I venture to say is possibly the best work so far on the literature of the Indian diaspora. It is, on one level, a concise and incisive reading of some of the key texts in the area, including those by leading writers such as V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh, Hanif Kureishi, Ramabai Espinet, Jhumpa Lahiri, K. S. Manian, Sudesh Mishra, Shani Mootoo, Bharati Mukherjee, Mira Nair, Shyam Selvadurai, Sam Selvon, Subramani, and M.G. Vassanji. To the extent possible, Professor Vijay C. Mishra's commanding survey of this literature covers six continents and scores of countries where the Indian diaspora, numbering over 30 million, have spread over the last 175 years. Not all texts are discussed at length or in-depth, but the range of reference is so large and informed that the discussion is unfailingly rich and productive.

The pride of place goes, not surprisingly, to Naipaul who emerges in Mishra's account not only as the foremost writer of the Indian diaspora, but in several ways, the archetypal one. The first and second chapters of the book are both predominantly about Naipaul and writers like him. Mishra places these in the history of indenture, which engenders what he calls the "girmit ideology." "Girmit" is a corruption for "agreement," that legal document which an impoverished peasant was induced into signing, and by signing became a virtual slave:

> Naipaul's importance to any study of the Indian diaspora cannot be overstated because his works allow us to understand how life-worlds in the old plantation diaspora are mediated in the literary archive…. (94)

It is to Mishra's credit that he insists that we must read Naipaul with this history in mind if we are to understand the real basis of his art. Mishra challenges the easy appropriation of Naipaul by the dominant canonical tradition of English fiction and the consequent commonplace claim that Naipaul is modernist and neo-colonialist. He argues instead that Naipaul is haunted by the trauma of his indentured ancestors and cannot shake it off. His works, then, need to be seen as allegories not of nations as Fredric Jameson suggested, but of diasporas. Invoking Homi Bhabha and Amitav Ghosh, Mishra suggests that *A House for Mr Biswas* is actually the "absent epic" of the diaspora, akin to a sort of diasporic Ramayana, another key text for Mishra, especially

in its vernacular, Avadhi version by Tulsidas. The story of the exile of Lord Rama, to Mishra, speaks directly to the heart of the diasporic experience because the latter too is characterized by loss and trauma. No wonder Mishra uses a couplet from the Tulsi Ramayan as his epigraph at the beginning of the book, along with quotations from *A House for Mr Biswas* and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. Similarly, it is not surprising, though no less audacious, for Mishra to suggest that *A House for Mr Biswas* is a sort of "bedraggled" epic of the Indian diaspora, full of melancholy characters and degraded settings. By locating Naipaul in "a diaspora poetics of classic capital" (100), Mishra, thus, gives us a powerful way of (re)reading him.

Next in importance to Mishra is Rushdie, whose major texts are discussed not descriptively or discursively, but very insightfully, as if they come both to the author and the reader as already read. These are the only two writers who have a chapter each, the third and the sixth respectively, devoted exclusively to them. While diaspora theory is invoked to explain or add to our understanding of these two major writers, in case of the others, it is their texts that are often used to illustrate issues in theory. This makes for a curious, double layering of textual analysis in the book, and a compressed, intense texture. It would take several careful readings, therefore, to unpack the full significance of Mishra's achievement. Though one of the best, this is certainly not the easiest of books in the field either to understand or digest.

If at its most obvious level the book is a reading of the texts of the Indian diaspora, it is also, at a second, somewhat deeper level, an astonishingly recondite engagement with diaspora theory. This, indeed, is Mishra's forte. Almost classical/Brahminical in the complexity of analysis and erudition, this is clearly an account by and for an aficionado of theory; by the same token, for those somewhat familiar with both the primary and secondary archive, it is a real treat. What is perhaps Mishra's strongest point in this regard is his total abnegation of obfuscation or jargon. Concepts are seldom invoked without (re)definitions; Mishra has no use or need for careless name-dropping or pretence of cleverness. But, by the same token, the book makes unusual demands on the reader, like an advanced-level course with formidable prerequisites.

If the list of primary texts in the book is impressive, that of the secondary works is even more daunting. Mishra engages with a varied and eclectic set of interlocutors including the likes of Theodor Adorno, Arjun Appadurai, Matthew Arnold, Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, the Bhagavad Gita, Pierre Bourdieu, Dipesh Chakrabarty, James Clifford, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Immanuel Kant, Jacques Lacan, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Karl Marx, William Safran, Edward

Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Slavoj Žižek, among others. But if the primary texts have two heroes, Naipaul and Rushdie, the secondary has only one, Freud. Though often read via Derrida or Lacan, it is Freud to whom Mishra returns again and again for his basic theoretical armoury. Indeed, a special combination of Freudian "structuralism" combined with Derridean "post-structuralism" gives Mishra's argument its peculiar inflection and purchase; the deep structure comes from Freud but its method of application is often drawn from Derrida. Interestingly, a fundamental critique of capitalism informs Mishra's overall analysis, thus never allowing the book to deviate too much from a materialist-culturalist reading of diaspora. Yet, what really moves Mishra is the more "spiritual" idea of trauma, dislocation, and unending longing, which comes from Freud. The wounds are, hence, material, but the persistent agony is spiritual. Such theoretical layering makes for a complex, even unique rendering of the experience of the Indian diaspora and its texts.

Mishra's key move is to make the idea of "impossible mourning" the cornerstone of his reading of the diaspora narratives. Going back to Freud via Derrida, Mishra reiterates distinction between melancholy and mourning. The diasporic subject, like Goethe's Werther, suffers a loss that s/he does not "want to replace because to do so would taint the purity of the object lost" (9):

> The subject turns away from reality and clings on to the object of mourning even when reason dictates that the object can no longer be grasped, and the 'work of mourning' has to be completed before the ego can become free and uninhibited again. In the context of diasporas, we need to ask, 'When is the subject cured?' 'Does he/she want to be cured?' I want to suggest that the diasporic imaginary is a condition … of impossible mourning that transforms mourning into melancholia. (9)

This, the theoretical crux of the book indicates, in fact, a shift in Mishra's own earlier position.

In his earlier writings on the diaspora, Mishra affected a celebratory Rushdie-like manner, regarding migrancy as the defining condition of late capitalism and hence typical of the (post-)modern condition itself. In this book, however, not only has such a view matured and mellowed, but it has actually undergone a sombre transformation. Unlike those who consider the diasporic subjects as "twice blessed," enjoying the best of both worlds, Mishra takes a somewhat grimmer view of their predicament. The diasporic imaginary is marked in Mishra's view by the never-healing wound, which is passed

from generation to generation, that is as long as the memory of the initial trauma can be remembered or recuperated.

The "diasporic imaginary," which also features in the subtitle of the book, is defined by Mishra as "any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously, unconsciously or through self-evident or implied political coercion, as a group that lives in displacement" (14). Though mobile, even affluent, the diaporic subject can neither return to the motherland nor fully belong to the adopted country. Indeed, Mishra tends to be somewhat sceptical of the label "diaspora" being applied to anyone who considers their dislocation in happier terms. Call them immigrants, trans-nationals, or global people, he seems to suggest, but not diasporic. That last term is reserved for an unhappier breed, whose growing fortunes cannot really compensate for the pain they continue to suffer, the never-ending shock of severance from their object of love, an object which no longer exists in reality and can therefore never be regained.

Naturally, such a thesis needs to be grounded in some commensurable material event that marks this initial trauma. Mishra identifies this to be the experience that the indentured labourers of the old diaspora suffered during the middle passage, the horrible, dehumanizing, almost fatal journey across the black waters, thus affiliating slavery and indenture in a shared victimhood of mercantile capitalism. The ship presents a one-way journey, like a chronotope (74), a unit in which the old identity is pulverized forever even when its sufferers are as yet fully to realize its implications. What little may be saved from such a voyage is destroyed by the barracks of the plantation, the second moment that seals the irreparable break with the former self. These two events, passage and plantation, to Mishra define the experience of the old diaspora.

To the extent to which the new diaspora of global capital characterized by upwardly mobile and highly qualified professionals cannot share this experience of loss, their situation is actually quite unlike the old diaspora. Mishra, a purist, cannot accord the same status as the latter to the title of diaspora or to its tales of disillusionment, thereby distancing himself theoretically from narratives of arrival into privilege in promised lands of various kinds. Mishra wishes to underscore this condition in the very first line of main body of his book, playing on the famous opening of *Anna Karenina*:

> All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport.… They are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imag-

> ined displacements, self-imposed sense of exile; they are haunted by spectres, by ghosts arising from within that encourage irredentist or separatist movements. (1)

Thus, Mishra puts paid to any idea of unproblematic or felicitous assimilation—where it exists cannot be termed "diaspora."

Apart from being a reading of texts and a discussion of diaspora theory, this book is also, at a third level, a deeply personal, almost autobiographical narrative. This is evident at once in an obvious manner, as in the longish "Acknowledgements" and the beautifully evocative "Prologue" so suggestively subtitled "That time is past" (xv–xix). The latter actually speaks of a defining moment in Mishra's life over forty years ago, when as an undergraduate at Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, his tutor asked him to gloss the Indian references in Arnold's poem "Resignation." This Indian identification of the author, though born and raised in Fiji, sent him scurrying to Lambton Quay to the best bookstore in town (Whitcombe & Tombes, now Whitcoulls), to spend nearly half of his weekly scholarship on a book that he was not able to read in the original, the Sanskrit Bhagavad Gita. Mishra recounts how that tiny Indian reference in Arnold eventually led him to study and master the sacred language of his ancestors, which he got to learn in the very sanctum of the temple of imperial higher education, Oxford University, where he completed a second PhD.

Mishra, thus, prepared himself for an academic and scholarly program that not only paid his debts to his discipline, English, his adopted homeland, Australia, but also to his classical Indian heritage. If the "Prologue" recounts a defining moment in his undergraduate career, the "Acknowledgements" offer generous and lavish thanks to all those who helped in the formation of this book. In addition, it serves the more subtle purpose of outlining the author's own journeys to re-map the cartography of the diaspora across many continents, the numerous visits over the years to present papers, gather material, meet authors and critics, and thus to academically (re)cover a deeply lived and personal terrain. With this book, as the "Acknowledgements" show, Mishra has completed the fourth line of a scholarly quadrant in his brilliant account of the history of his ancestors who arrived as indentured labourers in Fiji. Not surprisingly, in the middle of the "Acknowledgements," there is this sudden revelation:

> Before my father died in 1989, he reminded me about a promise I made to him many years before. I confessed again that I was not a creative writer because I had no capacity for metaphor but,

> as promised, I would make up for this lack through scholarship as intellectual autobiography.… I said I'd write something about our own lives, about diaspora. This book completes the promise made then. The promise could be made and executed because, with all his limitations, my father (basically a self-taught man still struggling to get out of the detritus of indenture) valued education and the place of the intellect in our lives. (xiii)

But if the "Acknowledgments" and "Prologue" are overtly autobiographical, the rest of the text is rather more subtly, even covertly, so. For instance, revisiting, in passing, the tragedy of Fiji, the second displacement of the Indians from "paradise," Mishra asks rather provocatively:

> (a) When do we die for a political party? (b) When do we die for a nation? (c) When do we die for a cause? Diasporas, of course, refuse to die. And herein lies a question which may also be posed as a dilemma: Can diasporas be anything else but travellers, happy in their travel/travail…? (37)

Almost a requiem for the loss of the (second) homeland, this passage seems to suggest that Mishra is well-aware that nations demand blood libations; those who are unable to offer them will be doomed to impartial belonging, never fully "owning" the nation. According to him, whether in "Suva or Sacramento, in Trinidad or Toronto, Mauritius or Melbourne" Indians will remain in diaspora because they are unable to die for a cause (37).

Those of us who know Mishra personally can also relate to this book at a much more fundamental, individual level. That is why, this very review can be read as an act of homage by a scholar-academic from and stationed in India, to one whose ancestors left these shores generations ago, but who has made a more lasting and substantial contribution to our shared narratives and pasts than anyone I know in the home country. It is time for the homeland to stand up and acknowledge the diaspora.

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