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Intimate Epics

*Contemporary South Asian Women's Fiction:
Gender, Narration and Globalisation*
by Ruvani Ranasinha

Ruvani Ranasinha presents the first comprehensive, comparative discussion of a new generation of female writers from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India working from a place of multiple belongings: to the subcontinent, Britain, the United States and Canada. Bringing a feminist perspective to bear on the novels of Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Tahmima Anam, Monica Ali, Kamila Shamsie, Sorayya Khan and other contemporaries, Ranasinha explores how their Anglophone fiction since the 1990s provides prisms both transnational and local through which their complex engagements with gender, nationalism, migration and globalization can be read. 'The challenges women face in how to bear the weight of culture and how to maintain selfhood' (19) is, Ranasinha argues, one of the crucial connecting threads to these new writers' works. Aiming to repudiate 'monolithic, ahistorical constructs of third world women' (20), this study also presents analyses of several lesser-known contemporary novelists such as Roma Tearne and V. V. Ganeshanathan, as well as confident comparative readings of more familiar names such as Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri.

The 'geographic multilocality' (11) Ranasinha identifies in her authors' works at the outset is no facile shorthand to prompt some theoretic gymnastics on the decentredness of the diasporic situation, or to privilege the exilic experience. This reading is grounded in the texts in question, and contextualized via Ranasinha's introduction on her authors' respective personal and national narratives; the history of South Asian migration to Britain and North America; the material forces of globalization; and the theoretical and critical debates that lie 'at the intersection of contemporary postcolonial feminism and diaspora theory' (19). Often through a necessarily complicating lens that deploys the intimate, familial and personal, these writers fracture marketable, celebratory multiculturalisms as well as challenge masculinist national histories. They bring global issues including war, gendered violence, religion and nationalism to bear on the intimate — and relationships, private spaces and domestic contexts to bear on the global. Ranasinha is keen to emphasize they do so differently from their male South Asian contemporaries such as Rushdie and Ghosh, however; in contrast to their 'national epic' mode, these women pursue an 'intimate epic' through a 'rupturing' usage of the realist form. Keeping the above larger socio-political and economic frameworks in her reader's mind, the book explores how such formal 'rupturing' enables a multi-layered critique: examples of this can be found in the use of gaps, silences, elisions and group retelling in transmitting traumatic memory, as in Sorayya Khan's *Noor* (2003), or in the multiple narratives employed by Kiran Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) to trace the two simultaneous and unequal constitutive experiences of globality: integration and fragmentation. Ranasinha's first chapter argues the formal and thematic interventions of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) inspired many writers from the subcontinent, and that

Monica Ali and Kiran Desai take up where Roy left off on migration and diaspora in the light of globalization. Desai's critique of the economic processes of globalization revisits Roy's locating globalization within a broader history of modernity and as a continuation of imperial dynamics of influence, control and hegemony. Ranasinha reads the spatial with particular insight here through Desai's character Biju, an illegal immigrant working and living in the basement kitchens of a French restaurant in New York. Examining at multiple levels - from the macro-economic to structures of feeling - how internal conclaves of the 'third 'world are constructed within the 'first', Ranasinha locates Desai's criticism of the rhetoric of mobility and freedom that surrounds the discourse of globalization.

Such dynamics between centre and periphery, privilege and subalternity are not considered in isolation or taken as stable categories. Their inter-relatedness is examined with particular insight in a chapter on the postcolonial city, which explores the recreation of Kolkata, Karachi, Dhaka and Peshawar in the works of Shamsie, Anam and Lahiri. Although the urban is often foregrounded as the space where tradition and modernity are daily negotiated in their male predecessors' novels, these women contest the notion of urban and rural as separate (or the urban as the privileged site of the political) via the simultaneity and co-dependence of urban storylines and events in the countryside. For instance, in both its ordinariness and extremities, Shamsie's Karachi in *Kartography* (2002) becomes a space that nevertheless begets civic existence via its contradictions — especially where Shamsie narrativises the formation of feminist solidarity in the city in the 1980s. The multi-decade and layered representation of Calcutta/Kolkata in Lahiri's *Lowlands* (2013), too, traces the far-reaching political impact and role of women in the rural Naxalite movement on the metropolis miles away. These writers weaken the local/global dichotomy, maintaining a dialectical tension between the two. Their novels thus fuse realism and their feminist postcolonial critique to challenge questionable theoretical positions such as 'glocalisation' (Robertson, 2006), wherein globalization merely becomes the process by which multiple localities are linked. As Roy, Desai, Lahiri and others insist, any such linkages to the 'centre' can seem multidirectional whilst still remaining fundamentally asymmetric and exploitative.

In another chapter, on war, violence and women, the works of Ameena Hussein, Roma Tearne, and J. Arasanayagam are examined for their representations of gendered abuse, female abduction and disappearances during the Sri Lankan civil war. These writers foreground gender-related violence in South Asian nation building, which Ranasinha argues challenges standard national historiographies in manifold ways: Khan's *Five Queen's Road* (2011) unearths the social impact of female abductions, while Anam's *The Golden Age* (2007) pressurizes the nation-as-mother nationalist trope with a story of an actual, politicized mother who feels at home in both Urdu and Bengali. A chapter on Islam and resistance, meanwhile, reads Shamsie, Ali and Hussein for their explorations of how globalization and westernization have defined Muslim women's identity, especially where religion fuels conflict within and between nation-states. Ranasinha briefly questions the extent to which some of these novels work within a Euro-American model of secularism, which could have benefited from discussing in tandem with her comments on the limitations of her authors' diasporic positions. However, she does demonstrate how, if that be the case, these fictions can still be 'rethought on the basis of the history of secularism within the subcontinent' (141). Such rethinking includes considering faith-based oppositionality to fundamentalism, notions of citizenship that could articulate identities smaller or larger than the national and, crucially, the 'gendered parameters of the relation between piety, secularism and agency' (147).

Ranasinha's study fulfils her promise of breadth across subcontinental and diasporic locations; touching on relevant theoretic frameworks, it nevertheless takes its foremost cues from close readings of the texts themselves. Problematically homogenous and homogenizing categorisations such as 'South Asia', 'the national', and 'women' are not taken at face value, but clarified and contextualized within a particular critique. These historicisations are attuned to the geopolitical backdrops to her texts as well as the distances — geographical, educational and social — necessarily negotiated by these women as diasporic writers choosing to write on the subcontinent. However, Ranasinha convincingly demonstrates how these authors both acknowledge and complicate these limitations; their skilful writings render them surmountable barriers as their novels seek to imagine non-hegemonic, non-reductive South Asian female solidarities.