

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 16 ISSUE-2, APRIL 2025

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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Book Review

S. Bedi. 2024. *A Place Called Home: Stories* by Susham Bedi. Edited Rekha Sethi and Hina Nandrajog. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 179 pages.

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The Janus-faced predicament of the diaspora, at once rooted to the past while also foraging the future is a much explored trope in the literature of the diaspora, particularly for first generation migrants in the later decades of the last millennium. Novelist and poet Susham Bedi's short stories reflect the tensions of the new migrant, in awe of the new land and caught up by nostalgia for the past left behind. The recently translated anthology of Bedi's stories, published by Sahitya Akademi, *A place called home*, is a reminder of the multiple conceptions of home which still remain dominant in the discourse of diaspora identity. These translations, from Hindi into English, are a timely intervention at a moment when Indian migrant identities are being re-explored, given the exigencies of technology and globalization. Evocative, nuanced, and authentic, this translated anthology reflects the experiences of first-generation migrants caught between the certainties of their past lives and the complex possibilities of the future.

This collection consists of 14 stories, an interview with the author, as well as a reflection on Bedi's works by one of the editors. The interview is said to be the last one ever given

by the author and is framed as an obituary as well. The collection also includes an insightful narration of the process of translation undertaken by the team, exploring issues of literary translation, cultural gaps and authenticity.

The stories chosen for this anthology are poignant explorations of the changing nature of home in the diaspora. As Avtar Brah (1996), in her pathbreaking study *Cartographies of Diaspora* states:

On the one hand, ‘home’ is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust.... (p. 192)

Bedi’s stories evoke these multifarious relationships to home, at once a place left behind but one whose memory is evoked at every step. Thus, home is the certainty of rituals and patterns of everyday life of the past, but it is also the excitable uncertainty of the present, somewhat like the Azaleas flowers which can be “grown anywhere and everywhere” (p. 13). Often, the uncertainty of physical homes is reflected in defining oneself, such as in the story ‘Third Eye’ where the character chooses to retain an Indian passport, and yet, standing in a tourist line among Indians, asks ‘What am I? What do I want to be? How do I want to look?’ Clearly, there are no easy answers to such questions.

A place called home explores physical spaces, but more importantly, it explores the metaphorical homes, liminal spaces which provide clues to one’s identity. Characters negotiate between hybrid identities and older, firmer, more established ones. Children, foreign spouses, friends and colleagues are set against the certainties of a past life, painful

as that may have been. The 60-year old widow thus has to marry again, even when it seems to go against her ingrained values and expectations of being taken care of by children who are quick to abandon her. In fact, the new land recreates the gendered hierarchies which are part of the baggage brought from old homes, reproducing patriarchal power, often in the form of protection, love or plain power. “Although her husband’s job was relatively easy, yet with his masculine superiority, he did not touch household chores, taking them to be the woman’s responsibility,” [p. 78] says a doctor who eventually leaves her marriage, much to the chagrin of her son. A mother feels lectured to by her daughter who takes her father’s advice more seriously, professional women let their husbands control their finances and mothers watch out for their children, blinded by love and traditional expectations.

The female body itself becomes a site for negotiating and understanding identity – when to disrobe, and how to confront the body is seen as directly related to a traditional code, understood by fellow Indian women who share hesitation at confronting nakedness – a sort of trope of hiding behind one’s cultural trappings.

The moralistic quality of Bedi’s work is not difficult to discern. The new home may have possibilities and opportunities, and provide an escape from the homeland, but it is also replete with temptations and moral compromises. The values of the old home are no longer valued, the expectations for women appear unchanged, and the spiritual impulse to turn to age old customs become necessary in death. The land left behind remains real, with all its limitations and absences.

This work is as much metaphorically translated as it is a literary one. It is about transposing, transplanting, translating homes. But the process of translation itself is an important

component towards appreciating the series of stories which evoke a sense of home, and despair at achieving it. In fact, migration itself is an act of translation, according to Bedi to states that ‘[w]hile living an immigrant life, one is constantly translating oneself. One understands the adopted country’s culture through translation and explains one’s own culture, too, in the same manner” (Bedi, 2010, p. 264).

The extent to which the translations evoke Bedi’s control on her prose will remain debatable. As the editors themselves suggest, “The intent was to make a volume that was a meaningful as well as an interesting read for both Indian and global audiences (p. xxviii)”. Yet, there is a wistfulness for the original for the bilingual reader. Consider, for example, the “There were so many palpable emotions between the two still alive!” with the original ‘kitna kuch to tha un dono ke beech, jo abhi bhi saans le raha tha,’ with the evocation of breathing life between the two friends.

The interview given by Bedi addresses many of the issues brought forth in the collection and frames the fiction, pointing to ways in which to understand the conflicts and tribulations of the characters. As Rosenstein (2005) notes, home has a single word in Hindi, ‘ghar’ and this seems inadequate to express the multiple emotions experienced by the diaspora in their various dwellings of houses and homes. The challenges of translating these stories offers another dimension to the creative process, itself complicated through geographical travel.

The editors reflect on these challenges in a preface where they note the act of translating in this volume as a continuous process of discovery and intellect, a debate between the ‘originalist’ and the ‘activist’. Their focus on translation as a process, a dialogue and a

creative endeavour centres the work as one version of Bedi's stories, rather than the definitive one. This allows for multiple interpretations of the texts, much like the stories of dislocation and re-invention themselves.

Stylistically, the volume showcases Bedi's evocative narrative style, preferring clarity over ornamentation. The restrained voice may hide the many contours of external and internal struggle, her calm and controlled prose hiding the many demons underneath. Reminiscent of Jhumpa Lahiri's early work, these stories depict a rush of emotions, hope, despair and expectation beneath the veil of the prosaic, mundane everyday reality.

At times, these voices take on a poetic quality like in 'Bird and Kite' where the mother oversees a domesticated sparrow spring from one branch to another, avoiding going into the cage, being watched over by the kite ('cheel'). All the while, the mother's complex emotions, willing her daughter to fly responsibly but nervous that she may take a wrong turn frames the narrative as she waits for the sparrow to come back home. 'Pari', another ephemeral tale of a beautiful young girl married to an older man who beats her in a jealous fit, blends the magical with harsh reality, commenting on social issues like domestic abuse in a fleeting style of an unhappy fairy tale.

This translation of a selection of Susham Bedi's short stories explore the multiple meanings of home as an evolving space. At times didactic and formulaic but always engaging, these stories capture the subtleties of creating metaphorical homes. While home remains an unfulfilled longing for the past, it is also a dynamic site of negotiation and reinvention. Bedi's works reveal the complexities of creating homes built on complex memories, combining iridescent nostalgia with harsh reality.

The loss of home and the struggle to create a new one in a foreign land is a reminder of the fleeting nature of home itself and its many re-inventions. Within the diaspora, this is entangled with expectations of return or, in its absence, creation of new homes in physical and symbolic ways. Susham Bedi's stories are a reminder that, while home is an aspiration, it is wrought in complex tangles of cultures and habits which make it almost impossible to produce or retain a permanent home. As an intersectional space of negotiation, home remains a complex metaphor for the human condition.

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