

‘Native places’ and Journeys Beyond

Almost Home: Finding a Place in the World from Kashmir to New York

by Githa Hariharan;

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Almost Home: Finding a Place in the World from Kashmir to New York by Githa Hariharan was a journey around (almost) the whole world, in (almost) as many days as it took to read the book. Not quite travelogue, nor sociology, the book is a collection of ten wonderfully written essays on places and people, and their efforts and engagements to find a home, and in some cases, even a home-land. One can be misled by the simplicity of her language into thinking it is a quick read; it is not. The way it is constructed, moving both in time and across space also makes it a complex read, and compellingly so.

In an essay ‘Seven cities and anycity’ which serves as an entry into the book as much as the author, Githa begins with that quintessential Indian question, What is your native place? She frames a beautiful and wry response on the seven cities she has lived in – an experience more common to Indians than ever before – bringing attention to how the ‘native’ is so widely displaced and dispersed today. She then goes on to write separate essays on Hampi and Washington DC, Ooty, Kashmir, Tokyo, Andalusia, Algiers, Copenhagen, Palestine and finally her almost home-town, the city of Delhi.

It took me several pages to get used to the rhythm of her writing, and nowhere does the pace increase. Githa’s words are measured, weighed, shaped and used in just the right kind of way. Her authorial voice is steady and she uses humour as well as empathy in ways which animate the people and places she writes about. What I found interesting and unusual was the dexterity with which she moves effortlessly through time and space, such as between contemporary Hampi and historical Vijaynagara and Washington DC. While thus travelling spatially in this essay (Chapter 2), she skilfully delineates their history to make the connections between a place and its past. In writing about Hampi, for instance, she weaves its history from the founders of the Vijayanagar kingdom Harihara and Bukka into her encounter with an auto driver in such a way as to throw the present town into relief. Similarly, her narratives of war are masterful and bring to life the rise and fall of the Vijaynagara kingdom. In another connect, she recounts the roots of Ooty with the biography of its British ‘founder’, John Sullivan (Chapter 3), and also succeeds in making a political point in this essay when she talks about the Toda woman she meets who has been relegated into a specimen by the government to live “like Todas” in a “real” Toda hut so that it can better ‘preserve, protect and sell heritage’.

Githa talks about places through its people, who are interesting in themselves but also represent larger issues. This is used to great effect in the essays on Palestine where we see the contested territory through her eyes yet experience what it is to live in it through listening to the stories of farmers who eke out a living there. All the facts about Palestine and, closer home, Kashmir, are available to us elsewhere, yet her writing makes these 'facts' ooze blood. She is definitely the one in control of how you interpret 'facts' and her essays are quietly disturbing. There are many, many lines in the book which you will savour, as there are many interesting people to meet in different places.

The places she writes about are united perhaps only by the fact that they are all places she visited and something in each of them resonated within her. Yet, to my mind, they are also united by the theme of violence that is immanent in many places, in one form or the other. Although remaining rooted in geographies, the essays combine history, politics, keen observations, Bollywood films, poetry, and conversations with inhabitants of the various places she visits, and of course, with travel. She uses a variety of understated registers to make gentle points. Although many of the places she writes about are more or less on the well-trod path or have been widely written about, yet Githa makes us relook and revisit them through her incisive gaze and attention to small unknown facts. For instance, knowing that George Washington, the first President of the US owned more than 300 slaves at the time of his death, as she tells us, gives us another perspective into the entire American Declaration of Independence.

Exotic new places such as Cordoza and Algiers are described in ways that stimulate one's interest in them. Places that were familiar to me such as Bombay and Hampi became new ones through her recounted experiences of them. Kashmiri and Kashmiris are filled with the continued poignancy of homes in contested home-lands. In the latter case, she takes no recourse to history and politics, focussing rather on the Kashmir of 'our' imagination constructed by Bollywood films and songs, the Indian army's role in Kashmir and her conversations with Kashmiri women.

I found her description of Palestine and Palestinians even more poignant and tragic. Here she interweaves history, myth and geography, locale and interlocutions in such a manner as to reveal the pathos of that land and its beleaguered people, and makes one immediately support the Palestinian cause yet again. There is no despair in the people she meets there; instead an enduring capacity to continue the fight for a home-land, as in the lives of the farmers Khalid and Abu Nidal. This was the essay I enjoyed most in the collection as it combined aspects of the personal with the political, the cultural with the social. No other account I have read on the Holy Land meets the pathos of her description caught through the checks at security points, the inhuman 'rooftop colonisation', the ironic way in which she describes the 'facts on the ground' versus the reality she witnessed. Most of all she conveys the tremendous dignity of the Palestinians in the face of this war without an end amidst which people continue to search for and live in homes.

A deep exploration of the thematics of home (and homeland) has been painted in a multitude of colours and shades across the ten essays in this book. Githa ends with an essay on Delhi

and remarkably gives it a sympathetic hue, so different from the familiar aggressive tone of that city, through the voices and stories of unfamiliar people like activist Naseem, and refugee-turned-entrepreneur Balraj Bahri Malhotra. Even the world of the inhabitants of jhuggis is delineated through the voice and life of Soniya.

Appropriately enough, *Almost Home* which begins with an essay titled 'Seven cities and anycity', ends with a small section on those without a home - Delhi's street children. Surprisingly though, this section is weak. All the other essays, whether she spoke directly or indirectly of homes and homelands, were all premised on the existence of home, centred or de-centred as they were. But what happens to this idea of home (and home-land) when explored from the point of view of those for whom this idea doesn't exist and is not necessary to their survival? Such homes 'under erasure' may have spoken to us in a different way. The subject would have benefited from Githa's insight and compassion and illuminated our understanding of this unknown world.