

Review

## Of Continuity, Change, and Courage

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### *Antiman: A Hybrid Memoir*

By Rajiv Mohabir

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In the version of the *Ramayana* that Rajiv, then Raimie, first hears from his grandmother, Kekahi (Kaikeyi in the more popular parlance) takes out a splinter from the king Dasharath's fingers, thereby easing his agony. Pleased, the king offers her two boons, and the queen claims them later. As is well known across all versions of the Ramayana, Ram, the crown prince, must go into exile, for Kekahi wants her son, Bharat to be king.

There are, however, other versions of Kaikeyi's rescue of Dasharath. One has Kaikeyi saving the king at a critical moment during a battle by driving up in a chariot.

But it is the former version, Aji—as Rajiv calls his paternal grandmother—has grown up with. The one that has travelled with her forebears when they left their home in eastern Uttar Pradesh in the 1880s, bound as indentured or 'coolie' labour for the sugar plantations of the Caribbean. The Ramayana's story of exile echoes that of Aji's own grandfather, who travelled from his village near Benares to Guyana. Aji herself has been uprooted again, and at the time Rajiv begins his narrative, she lives in Ontario, close to her daughters. For her, it is a life of forever exile unlike the 14-year exile Ram accepted.

Mohabir is a teenager when he is first intrigued by his Aji's songs, and the language that she speaks. Guyanese Bhojpuri, an amalgam of several north Indian languages—Bhojpuri, Avadhi, Oriya, Hindustani, as well as the Creole and English picked up in plantations is in danger of dying out, just like her songs. It's a matter that leaves almost everyone else in the family quite indifferent; they are even dismissive and patronizing about Aji's endangered language. And it is a search of discovery, of resurrection, of finding out more that Rajiv embarks on.

It's a search that is multi-pronged, that will move in concentric, ever spreading circles. A journey out into the world, and a journey within his own self and identity. One that will invoke derision and ridicule from his family and one that has to be secret as well, for as he has been warned, he risks being disowned if he comes out to his family, especially his father. A quest that encompasses several things, the need to save Aji's songs and words, to recover histories in danger of slipping away, to preserve these little histories, and stories, to speak up for those

considered ‘broken’ – like his Aji who speaks a broken language, and like Rajiv himself, the ‘antiman’ of the book.

‘Antiman’ is, as his cousin Jake tells him, a Caribbean slur for a man who loves men, but it is a word Rajiv accepts, and willingly takes on, over the course of this wide-ranging, hybrid memoir, secure in his self-knowledge. All these journeys will leave him estranged, separated from his family and yet lead to knowledge, and a community of like-minded souls.

These myriad journeys make up this unusual book. *Antiman*, a sensitively written hybrid memoir that this year won the annual Restless Book Award for Immigrant Writing. Mohabir is a poet, and his previous collections include *Cutlish*, *The Cowherd’s son*—that won in 2015, the Kundiman Prize— and *The Taxidermist’s Cut*. He is the translator into English of *I even regret Night: Holi Songs of Demerara* by Lal Bihari Sharma; a work that is a collection of spiritual poetry like the Bhakti poet-saints, written in Bhojpuri by Sharma, who travelled as an indentured labourer from Chapra in Bihar to Guyana. It was discovered in the British Library by the writer and academic Gaiutra Bahadur, author of *Coolie Woman*, who has an afterword for Sharma’s book (published by Kaya Press).

As Mohabir translates:

*“From abroad Piya sends no word. / I’m listless in the month of Phagun without my love. // I’m overcome by this distance between. / He stole away to another country without telling me.”*

In his translator’s note on the publisher’s website, Mohabir writes of the “erasure of such communities and how texts like these bring it alive.” This time, with *Antiman*, the task of resurrection and restoration is closer home and more intensely personal. Mohabir’s multi-pronged search gives a multi-tonal, prismatic quality to his memoir, with evocative accounts of family gatherings, interspersed with Aji’s own reminiscences in her own language, and Mohabir’s translations and poems, in his own hypnotic voice, by turns, angry, introspective and brooding.

Everything Raimie, as he is called in early appearances in the book, does or more clearly, doesn’t do, disenchants his family, especially his father who has left his own past behind in order to assimilate in American society better. Rajiv (Raimie) knows the signs of self-hate and recognizes the warning signs—*the bell is ringing*, as a refrain sounds in his mind at such moments—and yet, he finds in himself the resilience and courage to persist. And in large part, his courage builds on Aji’s own story of exile, departure, erasure and resilience. In telling her story, recovering her songs, and recording them, he finds other stories of loss, and the courage too, to tell these stories and his own.

Growing up in Florida, Raimie finds identity—the right way to describe oneself—hard to gather and find. They, his family, make up the ‘brown-skinned other’, an invisible, yet a starkly visible unwanted minority; they are often told to ‘go home.’ The Mohabir family has seen immense displacement: India, to Guyana, London, and then Chuluota, Florida. Another branch moves to Ontario in Canada. They move where it’s easier for them to settle.

But his awareness and consciousness grows when he realizes that such ‘othering’ has been a common trope of White domination and appropriation, especially of land. Almost everyone, as history tells him, is a victim of white settler colonialism. The workers at the Whole Foods he works in are similarly exploited and badly treated. In the history he reads, he finds out about the decimation, the exodus of the Native American tribes (Seminole) once dominant in Florida to the west. Such losses are compounded by the losses he sees closer-up. Those done voluntarily, such as his father’s insistence on their use of English, the conversion of the family to Lutheranism, his dismissal of his mother’s (Aji’s) and his wife’s stories; these losses slip away almost unobtrusively.

Recovering these histories and stories is in tandem with Mohabir’s own struggles with his own choices, his acceptance of his queer identity, and life as a gay man that make him seek his own community. He leaves Florida for New York, a more thriving, bustling and accepting city. But it is a journey where he also confronts his own losses: betrayal and condemnation by his own family, a tale told thrice over mimicking the way we relive a trauma. He finds himself exiled, cut off, excommunicated so that he finds himself mourning alone for Aji when she passes away. But in every exile, things are found anew, discoveries are made, and truth emerges. Just as Ram fights against evil during his period of exile.

Like every received story, Mohabir understands that the *Ramayan* too is blind to some things. Sita’s suffering, her anguished cry to her own mother, the earth, is perpetuated in myriad ways in the present. Yet these old stories impart continuity and with that comes change, and courage. As he writes in *Antiman*:

“If we forget our ancestors, they disappear. We disappear.”

Listening to Aji tell him of her *Ramayan* becomes a metaphor for Rajiv’s wish to tell his own story.

*Kekahi wish what you will  
Rani, you saved my life that day  
Ayodhya is yours  
What you wish is yours.*

*Whatever you want, ask.  
I want Ram in exile,  
for Bharat to rule the throne  
Whatever I want is mine.*

Or as he listens to a baba in Ghazipur, when he travels back to India, the land of his forebears: “There are many differences in the way that people tell the *Ramayan* story here from how they do in Ghazipur. The real *Ramayan* is in the heart.”