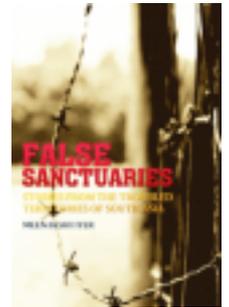


Review

False Sanctuaries: Stories from the Troubled Territories of South Asia

by Meenakshi Iyer (New Delhi and New York: Promilla & Co., Publishers in association with Bibliophile South Asia, 2013, ISBN: 978-93-823370-72, Rs. 395)



The five stories in this collection capture the volatility of this region as they move through India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, tracing the fragility of lives which are affected by the divisive politics of South Asia which fragment families and societies.

The stories depict displacement and loss, while capturing human tenacity and the ability to bond amongst people splintered by mindless violence.

The first story, 'From 'Delhi to Derajat' is in two parts: 'Walled in Shahjahanabad' and 'Home,' the titles embodying the post-Partition struggle and the cross-border trajectories of individuals troubled by the concept of 'home' and identity. Ratan Sahgal, with his mother Kammo, are the surviving members of a family who have been forced to flee their ancestral roots in Pakistan. The story moves back and forth in time in Ratan's own *bildungsroman* and his dedication to

the care of his grandson, Purab, which mirror their fragmented lives in shifting narratives that defy a chronological timeframe.

The business of dry fruits which Ratan inherits from his uncle is the same business that keeps Arif's family going in 'When the Sun Goes Down in Srinagar,' which challenges the idea of separate nations through a trade that causes borders to melt. Here again is a doting grandfather, Wani, in a troubled relationship with his grandson, Riyaz, betrayed by a conflict which divides generations with clashing political loyalties. The women, Ratan's old love, Laaddi, his wife, Bitto, his raped and abandoned sister, Rani, and Riyaz's mother, Aziza, are sensitive glimpses into the chequered lives of women who survive the ordeal of political change in their social existence.

'Split Wide Open' centres round the first person narrator, a woman reporter,

forced to move to Mumbai from Delhi, just as Purab, her counterpart in the first story, is compelled to move from Delhi to Islamabad. All the stories end with a twist in the tale, and an ambivalence that signifies the reality of South Asian politics. The theme of the chameleon nature of identity as 'Ratan Shirazi' and 'Jehangir Sahgal' slip across borders to (re-)claim 'home,' takes on a sinister tone in the bloated floating body of the once friendly, affectionate elderly commuter, Mr Purandare, being transformed to a possible 'terrorist' after the Mumbai blasts. A daughter's search for a lost mother who vanishes, like Rani, across national borders, sees the missing jigsaws fall in place as Surya's transformed identity from Indian interpreter to the Pashto speaking Hafiza, the one legged survivor of Taliban violence in

Afghanistan, lending the title, 'Out on a Limb in Kabul' its macabre significance.

The final story, 'The Teardrop Island' is drenched in the blood and tears of Tharmambal's multiple dislocations as she finally finds an adopted granddaughter in Chinnakili in a refugee camp in Sri Lanka. Tharmambal's body is later discovered in a pit after she steals out from the camp when she discovers the truth of her son, Muhuntan, being an LTTE 'terrorist.' Riyaz too has been arrested in Srinagar as a 'terrorist' and Wani has warned him earlier 'The enemy is right there – inside our homes,' problematising the dichotomies of friend and enemy, family and foe in a collection that follows the floating, flotsam existence of individuals who strive to create meaning in fragmented nations across shadow lines, which will resonate with a global audience today. 🙏

Prof Bashabi Fraser

Edinburgh Napier University, B.Fraser@napier.ac.uk
