
*Unreliable Truths* explores how transcultural narrative unreliability informs the creation of South Asian diasporic homeworlds. Sissy Helff analyzes a selection of texts that span the multiple and varied South Asian diasporas in order to perform a comparative study of unreliable narration. Helff bases this analysis on the idea that modern homeworlds are constructed concepts and constantly in flux. For Helff, “It is important to realize that transcultural narrative unreliability, as a storytelling strategy, reflects, describes, and also invents experiences of modern homeworlds” (39). This experience of modernity, with its uncertainty, doubt, and constant negotiation of the self, finds expression in transcultural unreliable narration. Helff proposes this narratological concept “to describe plural realities, multiple homes, and various truths represented” (xv). While Helff’s analysis contributes significantly to postcolonial and diaspora studies, it also challenges the rhetoric of multiculturalism and assimilation. Given that scholars across many disciplines have problematized the idea of multiculturalism, this book is interesting in that it offers an alternative concept, “transculturality,” to describe the cultural tensions experienced by global individuals.

Helff begins part one of *Unreliable Truths* with a discussion of South Asian homeworlds, arguing that today there is a struggle for meaning in the transcultural South Asian diasporic imaginary and a concerted challenge to traditional ways of life in their homeworlds. For Helff, these tensions have generated a new creative landscape in recent South Asian literature. One important aspect of these texts is the spatial implications of modern homeworlds. Helff reads “modern homeworlds and the transcultural imaginary in the context of the social and cultural conditions of modernity” (7). Emphasizing the “social practices” that create transcultural homeworlds, Helff speaks to emerging scholarship on spatiality and the everyday practices that construct place. Utilizing Arjun Appadurai’s critical work on modernity, migration, and mass media, Helff argues that modern life has opened up the possibilities for the construction of self, enabling “new spatial and imaginative independence and flexibility” (13). As a result, individuals engage with these new spaces by employing the social practice of what Helff terms “critical doubting,” which is essential to the creation of social and cultural homeworlds as well as transcultural narrative unreliability in fiction. Not only does this analysis carry significant potential for spatial...
readings of postcolonial texts, but it also connects to discussions of the
effect on culture and the concept of multiculturalism in a globalized
(and some would argue homogenized) world. Helff’s analysis invokes
Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* when she argues that “a
globalized world is thus more, not less, culturally diverse” because of
the way in which culture is interpreted by individuals (14).

Helff continues in part one with Chapter 2 “Common Narrative
Ground: Transcultural Narrative Unreliability” where she both defines
what constitutes a “transcultural” text and proposes a new approach to
narratology that attends to the function of unreliable narration in the
creation of diasporic homeworlds. Helff defines “transcultural”
narratives as including: self-doubting characters, uncertainty which
influences also the mode of narration, “radically individualized
constructions of home,” and questionable views of the world (32). She
also suggests that these narratives vacillate between the transcultural
and the “intercultural,” which characterizes the tension between an old
home and a new home and between majority and minority culture.
According to Helff, a novel is transcultural if at least one applies: 1) a
challenge to the collective identity of a community, 2) border-crossing
and transnational identity are present, 3) traditional views of home are
contested. Helff further claims that the transcultural narrative is
uniquely suited to the South Asian imaginary: “In combination with
unreliable narration, the transcultural novel, with its deep structure of
doubt, represents Indian homeworlds and global diasporas far better
than narrative patterns that claim to present an ultimate truth” (47). By
proposing the concept of “transcultural narration,” Helff attempts also
to intervene in the critical conversations about cognitive approaches to
narratology. According to Helff, none of the approaches sufficiently
analyze “the text-reader relationship with its embedded cultural
practices” (41). Helff’s project, however, seeks to address this
oversight with a theory of transcultural narratology that attends to the
complexities of cultural practices.

In part two, Helff presents her archive which consists of South
Asian women writing from Australia (Suneeta Peres da Costa’s
*Homework*), South Africa (Farida Karodia’s *Other Secrets*), the
Caribbean (Oonya Kempadoo’s *Tide Running*), Canada (Shani
Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*), and Great Britain (Meera Syal’s
*Anita and Me*). She includes India as well with Shobha Dè’s *Strange
Obsession* because it explores what she describes as “internal
migration.” Helff’s purpose in spanning the globe for her study is to
perform a comparative analysis of unreliable narration. Helff claims
that while previous scholarship has explored the concept of unreliable
narration in postcolonial and diasporic texts, her study is the first book-
length examination of unreliable narration in this literature, and that
previous scholarship on the subject has traditionally focused on “contextualized analysis while little attention has been paid to narratological approaches” (xvi). She is thus concerned with closing this gap with her study of diasporic South Asian women’s literature. Interestingly, Helff omits a discussion of one of South Asia’s most famous diasporic unreliable narrators: Saleem Sinai in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Although Rushdie was not the first South Asian author to create an unreliable narrator in postcolonial or South Asian fiction, his character Saleem remains one of the most studied postcolonial unreliable narrators. Rushdie himself has performed a critical reading of Saleem as an unreliable narrator in his essay “‘Errata’ or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight’s Children,*” explaining the function of such a narratological approach in the processes of memory and construction of historical narrative. Though Helff relies on Rushdie’s conceptualization of “imaginary homelands” in Chapter 2, she does not call upon his analysis of unreliable narration in South Asian postcolonial and diasporic fiction. While it is clear that Helff is mainly interested in the perspectives of female protagonists for this study, it is curious that she does not at least mention this well-known example of postcolonial narrative unreliability.

Further, it is also unclear why exactly Helff focuses exclusively on South Asian women’s diasporic literature for a study of unreliable narration. Helff only briefly mentions the reason why she looks exclusively at female protagonists:

instead of an almost genderless cosmopolitan intellectual ethic that can only be experienced and lived out by a small minority, the perspectives of the female protagonists highlight the importance of transcultural domestic spheres in connection with transnational family relations as decisive spaces of globalized modernity. (27)

It is clear from her analysis why she considers these characters as key to understanding transcultural, modern homeworlds. For example, Karodia’s decision to write women into a story of historical migration “suggests a transcultural reconciliation with the past” (70-71). These perspectives also enable Helff to investigate “gendered identities and queer and gay life-worlds” (81) as significant markers of transcultural negotiation. However, this decision to include only female South Asian authors in a study of transcultural unreliable narration provokes a few critical questions; not only whether or not and why female protagonists are uniquely suited to express transcultural experiences, but also whether or not and why female authors are more apt to write transcultural narratives. Despite these oversights, this study makes a significant contribution to the critical discussion of “home” in South Asian Diaspora. Scholars and students of postcolonial and diasporic
literature will find her examination of the concepts of “home” and the “self” in modernity to be provocative and constructive. Her detailed literary analysis of transcultural unreliable narration in these texts offers a valuable departure from more established approaches to postcolonial literature and poses an important challenge to the concepts of multiculturalism and assimilation in narratives of diaspora.

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