75 | book reviews

Shards of memory: woven lives in four generations

Parita Mukta; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 2002, 225 pp, HbK ISBN 0-297-60728-6

This evocative book is a loving account of four generations of Parita Mukta's family – her paternal grandmother (Ba), her father (Harshad), her uncle, i.e. her father's brother (Raj), and finally her daughter (Sonpari). *Shards of Memory* is a homage to Parita Mukta's family, and through this tender narrative Mukta weaves the web of attachments, connections and bonds that exist between her grandmother, aunts, uncles, father, sister, daughter and nieces. The book explores the lived experience of a particular family. Central to this book are two interwoven themes – the texture of how, and through whom, we become who we are; and the importance of family connectedness and belongingness.

This is also a book about the ordinary rhythms of living and the importance of nurture and sustenance that can be, and is gained, through everyday rituals and ordinary comforts. Mukta interweaves thoughtfully the social, political and cultural domains and how these different spheres impact profoundly on a specific family. It has become a commonplace assertion to insist on the impact of the political, social and cultural spheres of influence on lived experience and 'structures of feeling'. It is unusual, however, to read such a careful account of the effects that these domains produce on ordinary lives. It is the ordinariness of this family that is striking and touching, and in that way the book is a shot across the bows for those who have to search out exotic subjectivities, or the unique as that which is worthy of attention. This is not a book in which the narcissism of self-bewitchment wins out (to draw on a sharp expression of Freud).

Mukta interlaces this family's biography with myths, stories, spiritual wisdom, tales of Gods, Saints and iconic figures from Indian lore. She draws our attention to those spoken tales that permeate family life, and pervade our psychic and emotional beings. Myths, stories and similar narratives are useful as they help us to come to terms with our lives, make sense of the inchoate, and they can make life seem better. As Marina Warner (1994) puts it, '[T]hey lived happily ever after consoles us, but gives scant help compared to Listen, this is how it was before, but things could change – and they might' (Warner, p. xvii). Parita Mukta pays attention to two matters that are normally marginalized within family accounts – those everyday tales and homilies that keep families and individuals intact; and she places emphasis on those normally neglected within the family narrative – grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings and cousins. She quietly draws attention to their continual

significance. I am personally grateful to her, for reading this book allowed me to re-think my family narrative, which previously had centred on the narrow and rather banal focus of parents and siblings. My attention has now widened appreciably to include previously subordinated relationships with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins.

Parita Mukta's *Shards of Memory* is a careful insistence on how the past is imbricated, embedded and embodied in the present. The past and the attachments contained within it form who we are. It is, moreover, inescapable and cannot be sloughed off by discovering and re-telling another story, by focusing on acts of resistance or other narratives. The past is relentlessly in the present, inexorably in the here and now. As Mukta puts it '[M]emories are inscribed not solely on the mind, but also on the body: they score the face, furrow the heart, flute the lungs, make ravines of hands whose fingers knot into mounds at each survived collision' (p. 179). In this way, Mukta's book shares much with contemporary work on memory with its theoretical emphasis on the inextricability of the past and present, and its analysis on how the past is re-worked persistently in the present. Much of this work, for example, Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone – *Contested Pasts* and *Regimes of Memory* – two erudite collections of essays (2003), is scholarly and analytic of the public polity, while Parita Mukta's book weaves her conceptual understandings to think about her family. In this way, this book is similar to Annette Kuhn's *Family Secrets* (1995), which also interweaves popular and individual memory and locates it within the social and cultural milieu. Mukta is concerned not just with the collectivity of family life but also with how a sense of self is formed through the pleasures and disappointments of the shared past of the family.

Hunger is the leitmotif throughout this book. The book describes with painful detail the experience of hunger, of wanting and of having to repress appetites and longings. This hunger is not just physical; because this book is also driven by Mukta's longing to know, to place herself in a nexus and to tell the story of a family that she loves. This hunger, though, does not turn this family into solipsistic beings driven by personal greed, but rather makes them into human beings who are profoundly concerned with others. This complex of human beings assert, and insist they do, that it is simple to do one's best for others and to say that one is not in this world for oneself; that they declare is straightforward. Instead, Mukta's father Harshad argues that to make the world better is something else altogether, as this enterprise has to draw on altogether more difficult human capacities. Mukta describes poignantly hearing Stuart Hall's plea 'you have to do this for *all* children, so that they do not go out *and eat this world*' (p. 62), and this statement resonated. Coming from a family that was hungry for so much – justice, equality, freedom to be and to love, the end of exploitation and oppression, Hall's appeal reverberated, evoking shards of recognition. This family suffered nobly, but it suffered, nonetheless, through the experiences and memories of hunger, through

the memories of humiliation. To be noble in the face of material deprivation requires moral, spiritual and emotional effort.

Yet, cracks in these efforts show through – Mukta tells of an aunt who cannot stop spending, buying and providing too much food – to be found wanting again is unbearable and the thought and memory has to be fended off. It is not just this aunt who has resisted this past with such audaciouschutzpah, but the hunger has marked them all – for as Mukta points out that this family knows, along with other families, how desire has to be pushed away and the effects are multi-layered. She writes '[T]he necessity for collective renewal of family life on limited material resources meant that the personal desires of the individual women and men were necessarily trampled upon. Perhaps closer to the grain is that this particular subsistence ethic prevented the leap up into the air, the reaching for the stars. My father, mother, aunts and uncles all became adept at crushing the expansion of their needs, stamping down on novel ideas and tastes' (p. 89).

There are some heartfelt political challenges to academia that are more than welcome. For example, Mukta writes in a world 'sated with material goods and desires, where the reigning intellectual paradigm has made the fashioning of the sleek, able body into an overriding aesthetic, my father and I talk about the steady corrosion of public culture, of the professional space being occupied by commercial considerations, of a globalised intelligentsia that is not much interested in writing about bodies that labour to feed metropolitan tastes, without being able adequately to replenish themselves' (p. 86). In a confrontation to academics, Mukta warns that no amount of sophisticated theory can take away from the reality of hunger, of war, of the way that food is used so cruelly as a political weapon. To witness poverty and hunger is tough and fraught, but to witness is not enough; there is still continual and pressing political work to be done to 'build up structures that can ensure that no one remains hungry on this earth' (p. 94).

There are many difficulties when thinking about one's own family, for how can any of us gain enough 'distance' to reflect on the truth, to become cognizant of who is marginalized or made absent, to become aware of what other narratives can be. This book, which is nuanced, careful, full of care, can at times feel sealed, and in that way it mirrors many, if not all, family and social narratives. At times I found it difficult to get a different take, and to raise other questions from a different space. I felt at risk of being churlish and of somehow missing the point. The word 'shard' means slice, splinter, fragment, flake, that which is fragmented, that which hurts and is difficult to get out. Of course, if we cut out the shard the wound remains, and while Mukta explores these persistent sores she can bypass them by resorting to an assertion of the goodness of her family (which I am sure is there), or a spiritual explanation, or a comment that indicates more is going, but the issue is raised and then left hanging adrift. It is of course difficult to write about such personal matters, and I do not want to underestimate the troubling subject of

how to explore and write about family dynamics when they do not have the same authorial voice or access to putting their own interpretations in the public arena. However, memory in this account is not questioned – memories are taken as real accounts and family narratives that are passed down are represented as authentic. The vexed issue of how memories and narratives are shot through with fantasies (conscious and unconscious) is not explored. Mukta is admirably careful on tracing through the effects of these memories and family stories – on how the family has been haunted by the past, but is less thorough at exploring the gaps and absences of these family stories that are held so dear. At times, and at the risk of being impertinent, it is almost as if Mukta wishes that memories, stories and words can obliterate that which has been. The strength of this book lays in her insistence that the past lives on and haunts; and its fracture line centres on a lack of exploration on the way that there is more than one way of reading and knowing the past.

There is the understandable tension of what to explore head on and what to leave unsaid and this strain arises from the necessary acts of repression and partiality, and the need to protect loved ones. Parita Mukta herself raises this matter, and writes '[E]mbedded within us at the same time is the terrible pull between remaining loyal to the family script, and breaking with it – distinctively, irrefutably. But can memories be obliterated so easily, and can stories be refuted so peremptorily, even over a lifetime?' (p. 103). This is no easy matter, and I have no answers but I would have liked more exploration of the tensions that are hinted at but not followed through, which left me at times wanting these shards of experiences, tensions, absences to be explored with the same intensity and care as the bonds and the love. The resort to the myth at times can help all of us to bypass pain and hurt. Mukta's use of an Indian mythic tale to tell about the raw, unbearable feelings between her father and herself that arose when she chose a white partner is unsatisfactory. It avoids so much of the unbearable tensions that arise when daughters break from fathers and do not follow the emotional and social paths laid down for them by their beloved fathers. Similarly, her own mother is barely mentioned and within this narrative is oddly sidelined. My responses, however, also raise questions about the responsibility, and voyeuristic desires and needs of the reader.

The colonial formation is there as a persistent pulse in this book and in this family, in her father's response to her choice of partner, in the letter found in her uncle's belongings. Her uncle – Raj, a kind, gentle, giving man who kept everything and in the normal way of those who 'have made it' – kept all his certificates and among them a letter is found of a widow of a close friend of his. This close friend had married a white English woman to the absolute fury of his family – they cut off all contact. In recounting this letter, Mukta brings into sharp relief how the wounds of colonialism and racism live on. Her uncle had good experiences and was loved by his landlord and landlady when he was a tenant but this care is unusual; but the letter found reveals the wounds that her uncle kept hidden inside. The continual

wounds, scars, shards of colonialism live on in her grandmother's struggles, in the harsh community's attitudes towards her – both men and women are implicated; in the descriptions of unrelenting conditions of poverty, exploitation, of racism. Yet, good lives are made even of this – lives filled with love, affection, care, bonds, magical stories that conceal and reveal, narratives and a strong spirituality that sustain, a past that both haunts and nourishes, a past and a present that provide a sense of belonging which is precious. Parita Mukta explores the purpose of writing thus: '[W]riting knowledgeably. Writing words. Words have a way of reaching out, of binding, of opening up different universes: they can also undo, pierce, rive. Words contain that magic which dissolves the boundary between a hard rock and the ether of the inner eye, and the power to scythe through the tinsel wrappings around the world to reveal the house of poverty and the house of arson – look, there, right at the heart of the globe, where genocide takes many forms' (p. 179). This book reveals contradictory and multi-layered realities that are inhabited. Reading and receiving Parita Mukta's memoir is pleasurable, thought provoking, emotional and demanding as it challenges the reader not to reach out for the already thought, because as she herself warns '...unless we are vigilant we will always be tugged by the pull of the known' (p. 184).

Amal Treacher

references

- Hodgkin, K. and Radstone, S. (2003) editors, *Contested Pasts*, London: Routledge.
 Kuhn, A. (1995) *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, London: Verso.
 Radstone, S. and Hodgkin, K. (2003) editors, *Regimes of Memory*, London: Routledge.
 Warner, M. (1994) *From the Beast to the Blonde*, London: Chatto and Windus.

doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400124

Beyond the frame: feminism and visual culture, Britain 1850–1900

Deborah Cherry; Routledge, London and New York, 2000, 288 pp, PbK ISBN 0-415-10727-X

This scholarly but accessible book charts the complex relations between feminist politics, women's art practices and new forms of urban life in the 19th century Britain, to explore: 'the sexual politics of vision in the modern city and pictorial perception in a colonial theatre' (p. 1). As this suggests, Deborah Cherry is particularly attentive to the multiple sites in which women were active participants