

An Interview with author Githa Hariharan

by Jennifer Porter

I felt compelled to read Githa Hariharan's new collection of travel writing essays, titled *Almost Home—Finding a Place in the World from Kashmir to New York* for two reasons: she was inspired by Italo Calvino's writing, and because I too have, at one time, found a home in another part of the world.

Githa Hariharan was kind enough to answer my questions through email.



JP: My first encounter with a person of Eastern Indian descent, someone from India rather than an indigenous person from North America, was, of all places, in São Paulo, Brazil in 1975. She was my sixth-grade social studies teacher at a private American school and every day, she wore a beautiful sari and a red bindi. She taught us about the world and in particular, Brazil. Your collection

reminded me of her. It takes a certain level of bravery to leave our home country and live abroad, but it is precisely those sorts of experiences that allow us the space and perspective to reflect upon our country of origin. I feel that in *Almost Home*, you are bouncing your experiences abroad off your knowledge of what makes India, India. Can you speak to that?

GH: India is such a diverse place, that moving from one part of Bombay to another as a child changed my languages. Till then I had been “Tamil”—South Indian—and now daily life was filled with other languages, food and customs. I was thirteen when my parents moved to Manila. I learnt then that abroad I was viewed as “Indian.” That’s when I began probing what this identity may be. Understanding the numerous identities each one of us has is a lifelong business. In Algeria in 2012, I saw the aftermath of settler colonialism, a colonial experience different from the Indian one; I also saw the choices the colonized made after independence. Algeria chose a one language, one religion formula. It made me sharply aware of the Indian choice: of the great Indian experiment of a secular, multi-lingual, diverse republic. Far away from India, I was seeing clearly how precious the choice our freedom fighters made for us was; and how hard we must work to safeguard this vision.

But I think of travel in two ways: the literal and the metaphorical. The Moroccan feminist and writer Fatima Mernissi had a wonderful story about her grandmother, Yasmina. Yasmina, who lived in a harem, had never been outside those walls on her own. But she must have vaulted over those walls in her imagination, because her advice to her

granddaughter was that she had a duty to travel; to explore “Allah’s beautiful planet” to get to know others, but also herself. There’s another story about physical and mental travel being inseparable. This one spoke so eloquently to me that I used it as the epigraph of my book. Italo Calvino describes the scene when Marco Polo tells the emperor Kublai Khan about his travels. Marco Polo lists a dizzying series of wonders in every city he has passed through; at the end, it turns out that all along, he has been describing his home, Venice. This happens, in a sense, to all storytellers of travel. Meanwhile Kublai Khan, the listener, takes apart all the elements of the cities Marco has described, rearranges them and creates, in his mind, new pictures.

As I wrote *Almost Home*, I found I could not keep Marco Polo and Kublai Khan apart. You see difference when you travel—in the landscapes, the languages, and in the individual stories specific to that culture and history. But you also see an astonishing amount of sameness. Most cities, for example, have been founded on certain pillar-like ideas, aspirations for freedom, justice and equality. And most cities fall into a remarkable pattern of falling short of these ideals, and the varied, home-grown versions of efforts to set this right. So medieval Hampi in South India, Washington D.C., Algiers and Ramallah, different as they are, share some sort of map of ideas. And when you start comparing their experiences, you learn as much about your own home as you do about elsewhere.

I must add that I feel quite strongly about the ownership of ideas; all the knowledge people all over the world have built through time belong to everyone. So a historian may point out that such and such idea germinated in one place at a certain time, say 11th century Cordoba, then flowered in Europe during the Renaissance. But in practical terms, all

progress, in terms of how we should live, travels, and should travel, across borders.

JP: On page 28, when you talk about New York in 2004, you write that a friend advised, “... New York could never be just America. It will always be an island off the mainland of America.” I was hoping you’d elaborate on this point, why you included it, and what you think it is really saying about America. Or about New York City. For me, as an American, I felt very much a New Yorker on 9/11. I had the television on that morning and watched the second plane attack and the towers fall, and it devastated me. I think New York City is America.

GH: Of course your take on it is valid and powerful, as any eyewitness report is. But if we were to think that, we have to literally experience everything to understand it, or to try and fathom it, we would live rather impoverished lives, don’t you think?

If there’s one thing I have learnt from living in a diverse country, and from my travels, it is that there are multiple views of every event and every place. Sometimes, it is hard to “fly above” your own experience—say seeing the World Trade towers come down, or seeing your country partitioned, or seeing violence against women or people of a certain race or caste. You have a strong personal version of what happened. But to make sense of it, it’s useful to combine your version with other versions, the takes other people have, possibly more detached versions. It’s not that one narrative is truer than the other. But different perspectives, different storytellers, always complicate the narrative; that’s good because what we are trying to make sense of is complex.

Incidentally, when I said “New York is not just America”—and I was quoting an

American friend who loves the city—it was meant as a tribute to the multiracial, multicultural nature of the city. It was a question too. Does living in the midst of diversity help, whether in New York or Mumbai, to cope with fear and danger without becoming suspicious of anyone who is not exactly like you?

JP: You also go on to say that “from America to India the cities get cleaned up with the years, beautified so they hide their memories.” And it made me think you must be unfamiliar with the Midwest and in particular, the enormous fight it has been for many rustbelt cities to get cleaned up. Where in America have we made sure to clean up our cities over the years rather than simply abandon them and those in it, as we have Flint, Michigan?

GH: I was alluding to changing the landscape of a place so you forget the layers of history underneath. Also, there’s cleaning up and cleaning up. What I have in mind is the shallow aspect of beautifying a city, pretending there is no poverty or underbelly of discrimination and violence, or filth and pollution. I think of Imelda Marcos more concerned with lining up hundreds of fully grown palm trees outside a cultural centre in Manila than addressing the appalling slums in the city. I think of Delhi in 2010, hosting the Commonwealth Games, pretending there are no poor people, screening their huts with great big boards. I think of someone telling me in Abu Dhabi that once a building “goes bad”—as if it were fruit—it’s abandoned and another high rise built.

It’s this pretence in large parts of the world that I was referring to. But to address your question about America. I agree with you. What we need is a real cleaning up – so there are no miserable ghettos, no pollution, no unsafe water.

We have to clean up the environment, yes; but we also need to “clean up” the stark differences in the life choices people have. We need to really clean up the places in which people are forced to live because of their limited opportunities.

JP: I found your trip in this collection through the cities of your life fascinating. It’s interesting to think how “our places” change us. In what ways are you different from having made home in different places and how does it inform your work as a writer?

GH: I think all writers (and readers) are travelers in some way or the other. In fact, throughout history, people have moved from one place to another in search of a better life, carrying their baggage with them, letting that mingle with the baggage of the places they pass through. This is exactly how the writer works. Once you have known someone other than yourself, you are never the same, are you? I think it works pretty much the same way with places. Sometimes you travel to a place, or the story of another person, and you experience the adventure and fear of difference. Other times, you travel and find the comfort and disillusion of sameness in two different places or people. And then, in a magical moment, you find similarity and difference living in the same place or person, you see that both what we share and what we don’t share are important, and your imagination soars. You have something to say, to write.

JP: You write: “The White House personifies world power, and what this power is capable of doing to the rest of the world.” I think that is only true to someone looking in at America from another country. As an American, I understand that our constitution limits the power of the President and in my view, the power

resides within the U.S. Congress. When I think of visiting the White House, it doesn't evoke in me the same response as above. I think of Congress holding that power as America acts through legislation and we've seen what Congress has done to cripple the President's agenda over these several years. For instance, the President could not even appropriate funds to children over age 5 in Flint, Michigan, where the water is toxic without legislative action. Can you speak on why there is such a disparity in the world between how foreigners view America and how America is for its citizens?

GH: My view of the Indian system of democracy, its parliament or courts and other state institutions, may be very different from someone less privileged than I am. If a poor woman, say a woman from a lower caste or a minority group, goes to the Indian courts or any other institution that is there for her too in theory, do you think she has a real chance of being heard? I think not. Similarly, in America, a poor African American may have a somewhat different degree of trust in the White House, or the President, or, indeed, the Congress. If you extend this argument to an international level, you see how US power – symbolized by many things including the White House – may make people in several parts of the world nervous. I am not taking issue with the institutions, American or Indian. I am acknowledging the fact that they exert tremendous power on people's lives, and that the relatively powerless and voiceless view them in that light; occasionally, perhaps, with hope, but mostly with resentment.

JP: The plight of the people of Kashmir is very disturbing to read about. Why do you think it is that this situation is really not brought to

the forefront of the world's attention? I was struck by the lack of empathy India has for Kashmir, when India itself was ruled for so long by the British.

GH: Again, you have to differentiate among the "state," the "nation," and the "people." Just as I should not confuse an official US stance, say on the occupation of Iraq, with the stance of many Americans individuals and groups, I cannot say what the Indian government and its army and security forces do in Kashmir necessarily represents what many Indians feel. In fact, right now, there is great upheaval on Indian campuses where students are asking sharp questions about what the day-to-day suffering of Kashmiris.

You have also compared India's colonial struggle with the Kashmir situation. We should be quite clear that, rightly or wrongly, no nation gives up a part of what it considers its "territory" out of empathy. The American civil war to keep the South is just one example. Both India and Pakistan are in the mix that makes up the Kashmiris' troubles. Finally, the only sensible stand an Indian can take is that the Kashmiris must decide for themselves what, or be allowed to decide for themselves, what they want.

JP: I very much enjoyed the biographies you insert within the essays. We learn about the warrior poet Hafsa Bint, who was born in Granada around 1135. I wondered if Hafsa ever did marry? And what were the unusual choices she made after her lover's death?

GH: I am not sure, but I think she never married. She might well have had lovers; at least I would like to think that. What we know with greater certainty is that she travelled and made a new home, and a new life as a teacher. She must have been quite an unconventional teacher,

considering what an independent life she led. For me, these stories of Muslim women in Cordoba, in the so-called dark ages in Europe, underlines the danger of stereotyping people from particular religions or parts of the world.

JP: In the essay on Algeria, I wondered if you had considered that it sounds like the French conquerors took a history lesson from the early Americans in their treatment of the indigenous peoples of America: “The French conquerors tortured, massacred, smoked out, and deported villagers; they scorched the earth as policy and burned harvests; they seized land; they emptied granaries. By the time the people were thoroughly subjected, they had been reduced to half their numbers by war, famine, and disease.” Despite the French having at one time, been a friend to some of our Native Americans, they were taking good notes.

GH: Just as people in different times and different parts of the world have taken inspiration from the ideals of the French Revolution, or the American declaration of independence, or Frantz Fanon’s teachings, so people take lessons from history on waging war or controlling other places and people. This is sad but true. You needn’t even go back in time to the subjugation of Native Americans or Algerians. I read about the razzia tactic in Algeria – the tactic of “smoking out” your native “enemy” – in a paper published in 2009 called “Razzia: A Turning Point in Modern Strategy”. This is what the abstract of the paper says: “The razzia, a tactic of swift and brutal raids used by the French military against recalcitrant tribes in Algeria in the 1840s, was a necessary step in modern military thought... [It] appears as a necessary historic precursor for contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine.”

JP: You even take us into the life of Hans Christian Anderson, and I was wondering how much Hans Christian fabricated his fairy tales and how much he based them on folklore?

GH: Once a tale or story is written, it may be hard to separate the strands of invention, folklore, or the twisting of folklore for the writer’s purposes. I can only recall for you that Anderson wrote at a time when Europeans were fascinated by the “fantastic tale” from elsewhere. So that would be another strand in the mix. Finally, whether you write about the exotic, or the fantastic, or the magical – in short, whether you are writing a realistic novel or a fairy tale – you are writing about yourself, the place you come from, and your times.

JP: While I’m deeply sympathetic to all peoples in distress, I have to admit that I did find your writing on the situation in Palestine leaning heavily toward one side. I’m not sure the debate over who was on the land first (and how far back we go on this) really offers any insight into how to solve the problems there and I almost felt as if you romanticized Abu Nidal’s refusal to leave his plot of land. When his children are threatened and he’d been offered large sums of money for his land, I didn’t understand the point of his continued resistance to the Israelis. To me it is like trying to beat through a bolted solid door when an open one is nearby. Sometimes a people’s survival depends upon their concession to the aggressors, as is the case for the Native American. But you continue to show us in the essay, Palestinians who remain on their land despite horrific treatment from the Israelis.

GH: You are absolutely right. What I have written about Palestine is “one-sided”

because I make no bones about which “side” I am on. This position has its roots in our idea of India from the time of the freedom movement. Our freedom fighters were clear that as a people who were colonized, we have to be in solidarity with others who are colonized and denied their right to self-determination.

You ask why Palestinian farmers like Abu Nidal and Abu Jamal don’t take the money offered, hand over their land to the aggressors, and leave. I am a city person and my relationship with land is limited. But when I meet farmers like Abu Nidal, I see, very sharply, how the identity of a person, his or her sense of self, is completely bound to the land. This is especially true in a place like Palestine where generations have lived in an agrarian economy. Those contested olive trees are old. It may seem like romanticism to many of us who do not have the relationship with the soil, the trees and the springs as those who have worked the land as long as they can remember do. For such people, resistance is not just some political abstraction. It is staying on the land, staying with the only home they know. And a very real sense, if they lose their land, they lose themselves.

It’s actually impossible to romanticize what he and his family—and many many others like them—are going through in Occupied Palestine. There is nothing romantic about daily life under occupation. Seeing people and places in great distress stuns you with their suffering. But equally stunning is the determination people are capable of, their courage.

JP: Finally, I wondered if you could speak to your research process. How much research did you do to begin the collection and at what point does this research insert itself into your writing process, particularly during the writing of the historical sketches

and anecdotes? Conducting the right research and translating what is learned into the narrative can seem overwhelming at times. Would you care to pass along any tips for making that any easier?

GH: I have written fiction for three decades now. But I have also written essays and columns. The details of research for fiction and non-fiction may vary, but at its core, this is what I do for both. I talk to people; I listen as much as I can. I read, read, read. I classify my notes, I look for linkages. This is the first stage. Then I put it all away, as if I am shutting my eyes to the research, and begin to write. It’s only when there is a first draft that I go back to the second stage of research—chasing new questions my draft asks me, filling up gaps, dropping links that are unconvincing. The third stage of research is going through it all with a fine toothcomb, checking up facts. A good editor is very useful at this point. The real challenge is to rewrite and revise, polish and polish, till the research does not “show”; it blends into the narrative and becomes an integral part of it.

Hariharan will be traveling across the U.S. in March and April on a book tour. You can read more about her at her website: www.githahariharan.com.

