



Leaving India: My Family's Journey from Five Villages to Five Continents

Minal Hajratwala

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An inspiring personal saga that explores the collisions of choice and history that led one unforgettable family to become immigrants. In this groundbreaking work, Minal Hajratwala mixes history, memoir, and reportage to explore the questions facing not only her own Indian family but that of every immigrant: Where did we come from? Why did we leave?

What did we give up and gain in the process?

Beginning with her great-grandfather Motiram's original flight from British-occupied India to Fiji, where he rose from tailor to department store mogul, Hajratwala follows her ancestors across the twentieth century to explain how they came to be spread across five continents and nine countries.

As she delves into the relationship between personal choice and the great historical forces—British colonialism, apartheid, Gandhi's Salt March, and American immigration policy--that helped to shape her family's experiences, Hajratwala brings to light for the very first time the story of the Indian diaspora.

This luminous narrative by a child of immigrants offers a deeply intimate look at what it means to call more than one part of the world home. Leaving India should find its place alongside Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* and Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*.

Leaving India: My Family's Journey from Five Villages to Five Continents Details

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From Reader Review Leaving India: My Family's Journey from Five Villages to Five Continents for online ebook

gnarlyhiker says

Ms. Hajratwala's *Leaving India* is one of the best books I've read in 2009, 2010 and 2012. Yes, I've read it 3 times. Minal has done a remarkable and outstanding job in regards to the Indian Diaspora and how it relates to her genealogy. While *Leaving India* is historical nonfiction, it is both lyrical and poetic. Brings to mind two of my favorite poets: Audre Lorde and Sonia Sanchez.

Himali says

Wow---this took me months to finish. The idea behind the book is interesting----the author weaves her family's diasporic narrative among the historical trends that led such migration to occur. And while she is a good writer, she goes into what I find an unnecessary depth of detail that really doesn't add much to the overall work. She also tries to maintain this journalistic distance throughout the first part of the book, which doesn't really make sense when you're talking about your own family.

This is epitomized by her parents' stories. While it's great she clearly admires her parents, she characterizes their life decisions as "correct" because they basically did what was expected of their parents and community---- it's irritating that she doesn't question the parochial and patriarchal mindset that surrounded much of their decisions. The author seemed to try to counter-point her parents' "perfect" lives by describing her more working-class cousin, Mala, and her struggles with family and migration. While interesting, I think another author, S. Mitra Kalita does a much better job, and devotes a whole book to this in "*Suburban Sahibs*".

The last few chapters are the most engaging, when the author finally drops her journalistic tone and talks about her own life as it fits into her family's diasporic narrative. She finally starts talking about the context of patriarchy and parochialism when it comes to the expectations of her community---but why cram it all at the end? It would have fit better integrating it with the decisions her family made along their journey across the world, and how and why they returned to their small community to marry, etc.

Madeline says

As the subtitle implies, *Leaving India* is a sprawling kind of book - it deals with a bunch of generations in many different places. The actual narrative threads are, somehow, both more focused and more diffuse than I expected (and, frankly, than I prefer: I prefer a slightly tighter organization). I found that I had a pretty good cumulative grasp on who everyone was, and what their stories were, but sometimes while I was in the middle of the story I was a bit disoriented. BUT, it all worked out, so I guess she knows what she is doing!

Also, there are parts of this that are really memoir-y (it's not *quite* a memoir, though?). They're not the dirt-digging, revenge-getting kind of memoir.

I think of this book as *sensitive*, and I think Hajratwala probably is. No, like, "touchy," but *perceptive* and

open. That's a valuable quality to have, and it comes through strongest in her portraits of her parents, who are vividly and compassionately and compellingly rendered, here. You respect them immediately for their hard work and strength of character. And she also does a good job of exploring the mechanisms of immigration and how they affect individuals. It's good and gripping.

Rekha says

I am of a cultural group that, at its peak, numbered at less than a half million people. That's the size of the population of Cleveland or thereabouts. Add to this an immigration experience to the US, a place where no one I have ever met has any understanding or knowledge of the culture of my parents and grandparents. This is something I am used to, that I expect, that is part of the air that I breathe. There are very few books written about my cultural group- I have read most I can find, and that hasn't taken me very long. Most of the time my group gets maybe a paragraph or two in a larger book about something else. We are a citation, or a footnote, if mentioned at all. I have never read or seen a book, watched a movie, read a poem, or experienced any art of any kind that reflects any part of my cultural experience that I can relate to or that seems real to me. Not one time. Not even a little bit.

So to say that finding this book --where the author talks about her diasporic heritage in depth, from her great-grandparents in India to her grandparents and parents in Fiji, to her parents' move to the US-- BLEW MY FRIGGIN MIND, is kind of an understatement.

So I read the book. And at first, I was so agog that I was ACTUALLY READING THIS, that such a book actually exists, that I could barely take it in. I read paragraphs over a few times. It was like, right there, IN REAL PRINT, you guys. A whole book. About me, about us. My us, which is such a specific us that we don't really get books all our own.

As I got into the book more, there were so many things about the author's family experiences that were vastly different than mine. At first this frustrated me, in the way that all underrepresented people feel when finally, a story or two about them comes to light. "When my friends read this, they're going to conflate this story with mine, and although this is a great representation of one aspect of Indo-Fijian culture, this is not representative of my family." When you don't get any representation at all, for so long, and then finally you get one shot, that shot is never going to be able to speak to the whole of the cultural experience. That's the fucked up thing about having a few representations of something really complex.

Still, despite this frustration, I can't really explain what this book meant to me. It really made me bug out, ya'll.

Dorothee Lang says

I started to read "Leaving India" as part of a global reading challenge – and was amazed by it. It was the title with its reference to five continents that made me pick it, and as it turns out, this book is both an exploration of family migrations, and a fascinating reflection on time and the world, reaching back to the days of the

British Empire and sketching a picture of life in India that explains the migrations of family members to other continents. Minal Hajratwala has a wonderful way to make the places and times come alive, to take the reader into India – and later to Fiji, and South Africa, and all the other places.

It's truly an outstanding book. I wrote about it to a friend, who started to read it, too, and from that, a book dialogue across continents emerged, which starts and returns to "Leaving India", but also includes some other world books and further links. The dialogue now is online at: <http://virtual-notes.blogspot.de/2013...>

Elizabeth says

Highly, very highly recommend!! This is a wonderful family history solidly situated in real history. Minal is curious and courageous. She brings the rigour of an academic to the telling of her family's story. She illustrates the characters and their era with a depth of understanding that broadens our awareness of the strivings of these emigres: their cultural attachment to India, and their relationship to their adopted homelands in the different eras of immigration. Her analysis of her own trajectory is honest and moving. I wish her the best.

Hadi says

The early parts of the book were really interesting as MH traces the migration patterns of her family as they wend their way Fiji, South Africa and the US while providing a sense of the historical contexts and what they meant to individuals. These sections are a little academic and dry but quite compelling.

The last section deals with MH own journey as she 'leaves India' emotionally. The writing is more personal here but this is a story that's been told many many times and she has nothing fresh to say on the subject and the whole section could have been omitted.

There was also a few research errors. For example: the Jallianwala massacre took place in Amritsar not Calcutta; and Hong Kong returned to China in 1997 not 1998. Neither of these is a trivial mistake and it made me wonder about the veracity for the rest of her research.

Overall I'd recommend this book - it provides a great overview of the Indian diaspora.

Marisela Chavez says

I really want to read this, but it's too much for me to follow right now.

Kristy Lin Billuni says

I've waited far too long to post this, perhaps because I had another identity crisis when I sat down to write it. I've written a few "reviews" of writing projects on this blog, all of which have been positive. And I realize that when you are writing 100% positive reviews, you are not so much a reviewer or a critic and more of a

promoter.

And when I read back through previous Amazon reviews, I see that I am no critic. That's probably because when I love a book enough to write about it, I am not critical. I am in love. I loved Drew Banks's first two novel's and MJ Hahn's amazing podcast. I wrote about them and called what I wrote reviews.

But they are not reviews; they are love letters! The Sexy Grammarian is not a critic. She is a teacher. And a lover.

So, I now sit with pen in hand (yes, I do draft most of my blog posts in ink) to write a well-deserved love letter to the incredible and beautiful book, *Leaving India* by Minal Hajratwala.

Every family should have a Minal, a member who records the family story with involved passion that can only come from the inside of a family but also sits back and observes, to give us a journalistic, even critical view. She tells the story of her extended family and its scattering of people and how that fits into the greater diaspora from India to all over the world.

Minal's writing lilts and then reports, questions and then critiques. She is a historian, a romance writer, a gossip, an academic, and a researcher, all at once. Perhaps that's why her book has been nominated for both a Lambda Literary Award and a California Book Award.

At one point there were four copies of this book on my shelf:

- o one for my cousin, a writer who has plans to write about our family
- o one for my mother, who loves to study our family's geneology
- o one for my wife, who kept stealing my own copy before I'd finished it
- o my own treasured copy, purchased from and signed by the author—her inscription encouraged my own writing.

But it's the copy on my shelf reserved for my mother that worried me. Before I picked up my copy of *Leaving India*, I heard that there was some controversy about the "sexy chapter," that critics had complained that Minal snuck some lesbian sex into the pages of her otherwise serious, journalistic endeavor.

In spite of my disgust with a literary world that thinks sexy = not serious, I worried about my mother reading the chapter about Minal, the sexy chapter. "Here is a book about family history, Mom. Oh and watch out for the lesbian sex toward the end." But when I read it I knew this story would not be new to Mom. This chapter of lesbian love, laid out like a collection of tiny, precious poems, tells the tale of heartbroken parents with papers in their hands—papers that told them, your daughter has become something you fear.

And that story would not isolate my mother but bond her even more deeply to the whole picture of this amazing book. She's been through that, even if she hasn't been exposed to this particular picture of diaspora, of family, and of change.

Incidentally, I post this love letter to *Leaving India* just as Minal prepares to help launch *Indivisible*, the first anthology of South Asian American poetry. You can catch her tomorrow night, reading poetry from the book at The Green Arcade, 1680 Market Street @Gough, San Francisco. (415) 431-6800.

This review has been cross-posted to Amazon and my blog.

Kandyce says

i enjoyed this book from the beginning, when the author opens with a quintessentially indian scene- her, seated with her family, on the floor in the back of a house of local "historians" (essentially, men with good memories for major events- eclipses, heavy rains, droughts) inquiring as to whether it would be possible to have her family tree mapped out.

this is a non fictional account of minal's family and their history of emigration from india. who is who, and how they are all related, is confusing at times, but she tells her family's story as a story instead of a dry, historical account of facts. i was surprised by how much i enjoyed it!

Thomas says

I confess: I picked up Minal's publishing debut more out of support for my friend than intellectual interest. But the joke was on me. I got hooked.

And I didn't realize it until maybe the third chapter or so. Minal's thesis is clear -- she's summarizing her own family's experience and offering it as a template for Indian diaspora -- but she hardly ever states it outright. This was not a doctoral dissertation. This is the best kind of scholarship, that demanded by blood, pursued with real hunger, and not rushed by financial aid terms or the tapping foot of an adviser. Before you know it (or before I did), you're wrapped up in her easygoing, unassuming narratives, and by the end of each chapter you've learned a great deal without that glorious fact being tediously explained.

Much of that credit goes to the sometimes eloquent, often easygoing writing. Minal's no poet, but she knows a sauntering, evening-walk way through prose. The end of Part One is a great example. After taking us through the history of apartheid in South Africa through the story of one man's journey there, she sums up the lessons learned with a lovely final section describing her standing on the rocks at the country's southernmost tip, with the cool Atlantic to her right and the warm Indian Ocean to her left. The metaphors are easy, sure, but they sneak up, they frame the chapters, they do their job. They're beautiful.

Globalization has never been more intriguing and refreshing.

Mary Anne says

"Historians used to speak of 'push' and 'pull' as the main factors in migration, principles as basic to human motivation as warp and weft are to cloth...."

So far, even though I normally find history dull and hard to read, am enjoying this. In part because I know Minal, of course -- it's impossible not to be aware of her as the person writing this memoir. But it's also smoothly-written and just plain interesting. Going to have my colonial/post-colonial students read Chapter 2, "Cloth", I think -- should give them a good sense both of what was happening with the cloth industry in

England/India in early colonial days, and of why so many Indians chose to emigrate to the Caribbean.

Also (SPOILER ALERT), the end of the chapter made me cry.

Nirupama Jayaraman says

The author promises a journey and takes you on one. You travel back and forth across continents and find yourself invested in her story, as much as yours.

Vishnu says

Loved it! And yes, probably knowing the author swayed by judgment a bit. And being part of the Indian diaspora myself.

I just saw myself reflected in these pages, and I gained a greater understanding of myself, my journey, and my ancestors in the process. The book did take me a while to get through. At the same time, all the characters seemed to represent parts of me, and that was amazingly moving.

Charlie Close says

Minal Hajratwala has written a sweeping yet personable history of her extended family's migration from India to points all over the world.

She tells stories about her family members' journeys to Fiji, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. She gives their histories, starting over a hundred years ago, and sets them in the context of the culture and politics of their new homes. Like most of the best history, we see the big picture by starting with the details and the individuals, their struggles and successes.

What makes this history unusual is that the characters are the author's own family members, many of whom she visited and interviewed. The book is very thoroughly researched but is written in a conversational style, the way a person would write about their own family.

I feel like I know Minal, at least a little, even though I've never met her, and even better, I feel like I've met many members of her broad and interesting family. I'm grateful for her contribution to history and thankful to have read her book.

(A brief disclosure. I worked for a short time with the author's brother several years ago and I came to know about the book through him. I have not met the author.)
