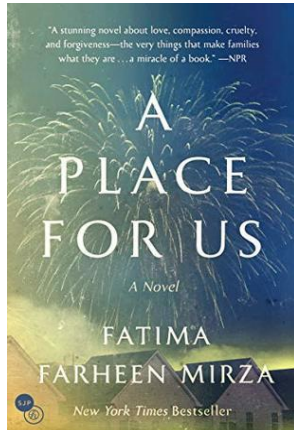


Book Review

Ramchanso Awungshi Shimray

Mirza, Fatima Farheen (2018). *A Place for Us*. New York, NY: Hogarth. ISBN: 9781781090701. Print version \$ 10.99



One of the latest works of diaspora fiction in the field of Indian Writing in English is *A Place for Us*, published in 2018, by Hogarth publishing house, and authored by Fatima Farheen Mirza, an Indian descendant in California. This debut novel narrates the lives of an Indian-American Muslim family of five members in California. The elder sisters, Hadia and Huda, the younger brother, Amar, and the parents, Layla and Rafiq, constitute the diaspora family. The narrative opens up with the gathering of the family in their Californian hometown to celebrate the wedding of their eldest daughter, Hadia. The climax of the story lies in the anticipation of Amar's presence after his estrangement of three years from his family. He had lost faith in the family. The narration goes back in time.

A Place for Us highlights second-generation immigrants who struggle to maintain a balance between the American culture and the home culture their parent(s) originate from. The third-person narrator views through the eyes of not just one but significant respective characters, Amar's perspective of his secret love affair with Amira and grudges against his father, Hadia's romance with the eldest Ali, and Layla's betrothal and marriage to Rafiq while leaving her boyfriend, Raj, the ice-cream seller. The novel highlights the new transition of faith and lifestyle from an Indian Muslim to an American or western version. The children are affected by the rays of Indian Muslim light from their parents during their childhood till date, and thus the transition of experience in American life is not smooth and easy. Amar experienced the clash proportionately more than his sisters, Huda and Hadia. They have been more successful in carving out their American identity while also remembering the lessons their parents taught them, first-generation immigrants. It is later disclosed that Rafiq, the father of the protagonist, is a second-generation immigrant and not a first. However, his imposition is as strong and influential as that of a first-generation immigrant.

The success of the narrative lies in the juxtaposition of the protagonist and Hadia, the eldest daughter of the Muslim family. On the one hand, Amar, the protagonist, the only male child, who seems to be the favorite of the parents, which we could see by their attention to him, seems to have let his family down while carving out his wishes and identity. One significant circumstance of the parents' favoritism points is the watch, the family heirloom, which was passed on to his father by his grandfather. Rafiq declares that this watch will soon belong to Amar and not the daughter in spite of the fact that Amar is not as responsible as Hadia or even Huda. Another situation is the secret love affair which he thinks is a way of upholding his family tradition (he does not build such relationships with American girls or girls from outside his Muslim community but with Amira because he thinks this is only right) becomes one of the major crises for the estrangement of Amar from his family. It would not be wrong to say that because he is the parents' main focus, they also want him to be

more adherent to their guidance because he is the heir or the successor to the family tradition and identity. Hadia, on other hand, is made responsible like Layla, her mother. She becomes the mother in terms of responsibilities during her mother's absence. Rafiq tells Hadia, 'It's your job as the big sister to take care of them. You are like their mother when Mumma is not here (29; part 2, ch. 1).' In terms of tradition and family identity, Hadia seemed insignificant, but as far as her individual identity and behavior are concerned, she is still expected to behave like a Muslim girl. For instance, on Hadia's birthday, Baba answers Hadia's question of if she should wear a hijab already now that is nine years of age. 'I think that you should. It would be good if you did. And it is wajib on you now, you know. It would be a sin not to. But it is your decision (82; part 2, ch. 3).' As is expected of his daughters, Amar is expected to be the heir to whatever remains of the family.

However, the journey of the juxtaposition is quite intriguing. Amar and Hadia are juxtaposed in terms of identity and independence. Amar, who seemed so independent, becomes the one who is monitored, while Hadia receives freedom from the shackles of patriarchal custom and tradition. She had worked so hard to be as valuable as any son that she even got the watch that was supposed to be inherited by Amar, the only begotten son. She married the man of her choosing, and pursued the career she most desired, she was the one who got the ancestral watch instead of Amar. Amar, on the other hand, feels handled and within the shackles of his family. Amar learns that the reason for the breakage of his relationship with Amira ended because of his mother. This devastated him greatly from doing so fine to angry frustrated Amar at the reunion at the wedding after such a long period of estrangement. Here is what Amar had to say, 'Maybe who I am hurts you, Mumma, but I have no choice over that. But you have intentionally hurt me (272; part 3, ch. 2).' He continues his cry, 'I did exactly what Hadia is being celebrated for. No, I did what I thought was so important to you—I chose someone from the community. And I loved her, Mumma. I loved her (269; part 3, ch. 3).' In spite of his efforts to please his family, his decisions and actions are disapproved altogether from all angles.

Coming back to the inheritance of Baba's watch, a family heirloom, according to the Muslim tradition, he, not Hadia nor Huda, is their main progeny or successor. As the only male child in the family, he will inherit the family heirloom, the watch which had been passed on to Baba by Dada, generation after generation (130; part 2, ch. 5). But we see that he was not the inheritor of the watch. It was given to Hadia, Amar's sister, for her good work, behaviour, and responsibility. Rafiq bequeathed the watch, a symbol of a family heirloom, to Hadia, his daughter. Hadia was surprised as well to receive such an honour, Hadia's first question in surprise was 'Are you sure?' and 'But, Baba, isn't the watch for a man (130; part 2, ch. 5)?' The tradition will hardly matter in this case anymore. Never had this been the case in the family history for the watch to be given to a girl. What Amar deserves as the man in the family is denied. His identity as a progeny in the family is tarnished. Amar is no different from Huda or other girls in the family then, or he is not seen as a boy or man in the family.

The very ultimate moment of Hadia's freedom is her choice of husband. She is a woman and is expected to be a package for her husband in marriage. Layla's marriage was arranged. She did not possess the power to choose Raj, the ice cream seller over Rafiq. But Hadia is educated and employed in a hospital. She is endowed with financial stability from which she derives her executive power of marriage of her choice. Unlike her mother, Hadia freed herself from the fetters of the family and the culture of arranged marriage. At the time of her wedding, she is on the stage with Tariq, but she complies with Mumma's wishes to not make the matrimony obvious. Her mother had requested her, 'You chose your husband. He is not Shia. Please do us

the kindness of not making it appear so obviously a love marriage (230; part 3, ch 1).’ To Layla, this is such dishonour or shame, and therefore, she advises Hadia not to flaunt that the marriage was a love marriage, a marriage that had disgraced the family. At least Hadia was to pretend that she abided by the traditional codes and behaviour when she was already so independent. She was marrying who she wanted, a man out of the family or the community tradition.

Due to her successful overcoming of the crises in her identity formation, she seems to exceed Amar, the protagonist. There are instances in the family which change over time when she matures and takes things into her capable hands as a wise and heroic character which is never expected of her in a set-up such as hers. For instance, Hadia resolves an issue of Amar with five hundred dollars due when even Baba could not resolve it (192; part 2, ch. 8). This gives the impression that Hadia is powerful and wise even above her father. She serves as the saviour figure in the distraught moment between the father and son, or, say, in the family. She even advises her father on how to manage his subject. She tells Baba that he cannot get angry with Amar like he used to, and that time has changed. She attains the position of a father under which all the family members fall. Not the father nor the mother or Huda or Amar could resolve the family tension. The divide or chaos was becoming wider without the presence of Hadia. Before she left her home, the family was somewhat under coordination. But after she left for her medical study, without her at home, this so-called kingdom of Baba is in peril. Hadia, not only does the work of a woman by taking care of the household chores and babysitting, but also the administrative duties of diplomacy, management, advisor, and control, so that Baba’s kingdom does not collapse. Within so many social constructs, expectations, and condescension toward women, she outlived to be a hero. Although Amar is the protagonist of the novel, the narrative could always translate Hadia as the true protagonist. She fulfilled her household chores and duties as an ideal eldest daughter- she could even assume the role of her mother, she achieved her dream career, her medical profession, and also was able to unite her family as a fatherly figure when the rest failed- this we see at her wedding. The long-separated brother comes home to the reunion and forgiveness with Baba and the family. Only through her, the climax of the narrative is attained. Thus, with all these factors, she is undoubtedly the hero.

In the end, the novel is successful in delivering the cultural phenomena of immigration, cultural shock or transition, hybridity, alienation, identity issue, nostalgia, and certainly, feminism. The uses of historical events such as the infamous 9/11 and the actual setting of California, with the cultural set-up of the Indian immigrants there, provide for a sense of truth and realism in the reading. Interestingly, it is understood that the novel has taken a lot of biographical elements in the narrative as she had mentioned in her interview with the PBS books in November 2018. The use of the flashback technique and the point of view seem to disseminate the narrative focus from continuous unified attention thus leaving the readers in a maze but they, at the same time, intricately deliver the wider spectrum, perspective, relevant and complete experience to the readers. This novel, surely, is an amazing read in the genre of Indian diaspora literature in English. As a debut novel, Fatima has intricately designed the plot and the narrative, and the outcome is commendable.

Dr Ramchanso Awungshi Shimray
Assistant Professor, *Spicer Adventist University*
ORCID [0000-0002-4957-0501](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4957-0501)