

Immigration and Sexuality in Rakesh Satyal's *No One Can Pronounce My Name*

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Abstract

Rakesh Satyal's novel is a multi-generational tale of Indian immigrants navigating the complexity of family and culture in America. The bulk of the story takes place in and around Cleveland, where Harit, an isolated middle-aged man mourns the death of his sister Swati and cares for his mother, who has gone nearly catatonic in her grief. The closest thing he has to a friend is Teddy, his fabulous coworker at a local department store. *No One Can Pronounce My Name* tackles complicated questions of identity and cultural nuance, but in a way that never feels preachy or cerebral. The novel is in fact compulsively readable in a way that imparts doses of wisdom and empathy along with entertainment and real connection. The experience of finishing Satyal's sophomore effort is everything you can hope for in a great book—a touch of grief that your time with new friends has come to an end, but an overwhelming sense of joy and gratitude that you've been invited along for the ride.

Rakesh Satyal's new novel checks off a lot of boxes, but its charm lies in the fact that it wears all of its various identities so lightly. This is an immigration story, a coming-out story and something of an old-school feminist story about a timid woman learning to roar. Yet, there's nothing preachy or predictable about Satyal's novel ... Their shared situation may sound glum, but because *No One Can Pronounce My Name* is essentially — and delightfully — a comic novel, the intertwined plots here are buoyant rather than blue ... *No One Can Pronounce My Name* explores the politics of sexual identity, as well as the immigrant and first-generation American experience, but, unfashionable as it may sound, the novel's greater achievement lies in the compassionate, comic way it explores the universal human experience of loneliness.

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navigating the complexity of family and culture in America. The bulk of the story takes place in and around Cleveland, where Harit, an isolated middle-aged man mourns the death of his sister Swati and cares for his mother, who has gone nearly catatonic in her grief. The closest thing he has to a friend is Teddy, his fabulous coworker at a local department store. That begins to change when he meets Ranjana, who works at a proctologist's office by day and writes Indian paranormal romance stories in secret at night, all while convinced her husband is having an affair.

The parts of the story that take place outside of Ohio follow Prashant, Ranjana's son, who's in his first year at Princeton University. He is quietly struggling with changing his major from chemistry to literature, trying to get girls to notice him, and constantly being embarrassed by his parents.

Much of the conflict within the book comes from the various characters' attempts to either assimilate with or shut out entirely American culture as immigrants or first-generation citizens. Harit, in particular, desperately holds on to the divide between his Indian culture and the society in which he now lives.

Satyal writes early on in the book

“The distinction between Harit, the Indian immigrant, and Teddy, the exaggerated American was important to maintain, and to conflate the two images was bizarre.”

It's meeting Ranjana who herself is still experiencing many American things for the first time but is worlds ahead of Harit in terms of fitting in with the world around her that begins to blur this line and pull Harit out of his shell.

Prashant struggles in his own way as he tries to forge his own identity as an Indian in the Ivy League world. But this is one area in which Satyal excels at making his characters both culturally specific and universally recognizable. Prashant is tense and moody during his first visit home during fall break should be familiar to nearly everyone who's ever left home and then returned again, unsure if he recognizes the parents he left behind only months before.

Satyal's main characters are so beautifully drawn, but he doesn't neglect the secondary lives that inhabit Ranjana, Harit, and Prashant's world. These peripheral characters include Ranjana's coworker Cheryl, Harit's mother, and Teddy, the latter two are gifted their own achingly humanizing chapters of backstory.

Queerness permeates this world as well, particularly in Teddy's flamboyance and Harit's discovery of his potential to love—emotionally and physically—another person for the first time. Memorable moments include Ranjana's first time at a gay bar and a tender scene between Harit and Teddy toward the end of the novel. Sexuality in *No One Can Pronounce My Name* is one of many swirling and changing identities that the characters must grapple with, which makes for a nuanced and complex examination of what it means to be an outsider in contemporary America.

No One Can Pronounce My Name tackles complicated questions of identity and cultural nuance, but in a way that never feels preachy or cerebral. The novel is in fact compulsively readable in a way that imparts doses of wisdom and empathy along with entertainment and real connection. The experience of finishing Satyal's sophomore effort is everything you can hope for in a great book—a touch of grief that your time with new friends has come to an end, but an overwhelming sense of joy and gratitude that you've been invited along for the ride.

No One Can Pronounce My Name, is an immigration story. The novel checks off a lot of boxes, but its charm lies in the fact that it wears all of its various identities so lightly. It is also a coming-out story and something of an old-school feminist story about a timid woman learning to roar.

The title of the novel itself sounds aggrieved when, instead, this is novel that invites readers to be amused. Satyal wants us all to laugh, together, about the comedy of errors that often typifies everyday life.

No One Can Pronounce My Name is set in an Indian-American community in suburban Cleveland, Ohio. Ranjana is a middle-aged wife and mother whose son has just departed for college — Princeton, no less. Ranjana's husband is an out-of-shape academic who sports what she thinks of as the common Indian male physique: second trimester with a possible sail into the third. For years, Ranjana has lived a secret life. She writes erotic supernatural fiction, modeled on the work of Anne Rice.

Ranjana first read *Interview With a Vampire* when she and her husband immigrated to America; we're told it was her way of trying to permeate the wall that separated her Indian life from the omnipresent glitz of American pop culture.

After Ranjana's son leaves home for college, Ranjana's days are too solitary in her empty house. So, she takes a job as a receptionist in an Indian proctologist's office. This job, along with her participation in what turns out to be a vicious writer's group, are Ranjana's tentative ways of trying to enter a wider world.

The other main character here, also a middle-aged Indian immigrant, is even more adrift. Harit lives with his mother, who is deranged by grief for his older sister, the victim of a stupid, deadly accident.

To comfort his mother, whose eyesight is conveniently dimmed by cataracts, Harit dresses up every night in his dead sister's saris and pretends to be her. In ways Harit dare not name even silently to himself, this dress-up game has become consoling to him, too.

Clothes also become the conduit for leading Harit out of his isolation. He lands a job in the Men's Accessories Department at the quaint Harriman's Department Store. There, an older gay man named Teddy takes Harit under his wing and introduces him to the cheering ritual of happy hour at T.G.I. Friday's in a nearby mall. But not everyone at Harriman's is so welcoming. Here's Satyal's description of the daily dynamics in the employee break room.

By eight-thirty, the fifteen or so salespeople of the morning shift would gather and loiter with their coffees, bagels, stinky fast-food breakfasts, and gossip. It wasn't that they were mean to Harit, but except for a smile in passing or an odd question about his ethnicity like,

"In India, do you drink eight glasses of tea a day instead of water?"

They rarely engaged him directly in conversation.

For the most part, they left the socializing to Teddy. His status as Harit's companion in Men's Furnishings made him the obvious stand-in for a conversational partner, and there was an unspoken relief that no one else had to handle Harit.

Both Ranjana and Harit pine for some kind of deep connection to other human beings, but they are clueless as to how to make that happen. Their shared situation may sound glum, but because *No One Can Pronounce My Name* is essentially — and delightfully — a comic novel, the intertwined plots here are buoyant rather than blue.

It says something about both the reach of Satyal's story and his wry skill as a

storyteller. Barbara Pym wrote mostly about the lives of tweedy English spinsters with similar warmth and humor. *No One Can Pronounce My Name* explores the politics of sexual identity, as well as the immigrant and first-generation American experience, but, unfashionable as it may sound, the novel's greater achievement lies in the compassionate, comic way it explores the universal human experience of loneliness. The on-going global asylum crisis, the difficulty to cope with jihadi terrorism and the radicalization of a part of the European youth, have fuelled the "social alarmism" that already existed in many countries¹². These factors have also led to a further emphasis on securitization in the debates and policies dealing with human mobility and migration. This is illustrated by the fact that many countries are constructing walls that are intended to "protect" them from the feared invasion of migrants and refugees. In such a context, issues related to cultural diversity and how to manage it have unfortunately continued to step down on the political, policy and media agendas. The process started in the 1990s and accelerated in the decade 2000-2010, which truly began with the attacks of 11 September 2001. In the immediate few weeks following the drama, its impact on inter-ethnic relations and immigration and integration policies seemed rather limited. Major problems, such as very restrictive migration and security policies, the growth of numerous forms of Islamophobia, the rise of various forms of Islamism, the persistence of ethnic and racial discrimination, and inter-group urban tensions were easily perceived. However,

they existed before the attacks of September 2001 and they could not, therefore, be viewed as direct consequences of these events. Today, with about 15 years of hindsight, we can better understand the real impact of the events of September 2001 and those that followed. They paved the way for the eruption of a pre-existing groundswell, but one that had remained rather discrete until then: the discursive retreat from any form of multiculturalism and the vigorous affirmation of a post-multiculturalist or neo-assimilationist agenda as the safest way to manage migration related cultural and identity diversity. This anti-multiculturalist wave became, and still remains, dominant in Europe and the United States.

The mobilization of certain minorities around cultural and identity issues have been interpreted as attempts to establish a sort of dictatorship of minorities. The thesis of the Islamization of Europe regularly feeds the columns of newspapers and Internet forums. Moreover, some of these events were presented not just as evidence of the failure of policies implemented to manage or to promote cultural diversity, but also as evidence of the failure of any project of society inspired by multiculturalist ideas.

All these events, for various reasons, have been presented as evidence of the failure and/or dangers of multiculturalism and of the impossibility of building a durable multicultural society. Specifically, ethno-cultural and religious diversity of European societies, particularly the increasing number of Muslims, has been presented as a threat to social cohesion.

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