You Have Given Me a Country: A Memoir

by Neela Vaswani



About the Book

You Have Given Me a Country is an emotionally powerful exploration of blurred borders, identity, and what it means to be multicultural. Combining memoir, history, and fiction, the book follows the paths of the author's Irish-Catholic mother and Sindhi-Indian father on their journey toward each other and the biracial child they create. Neela Vaswani's second full-length work thematically echoes such books as **The Color of Water**, **Running in the Family** and **Motiba's Tatoos**, but it is entirely unique in approach, voice, and story. The book reveals the self as a culmination of all that went before it, a brilliant new weave of two varied, yet ultimately universal backgrounds that spans continents, generations, languages, wars, and, at the center of it all, family.

Discussion Guide

1. The epigraph of **You Have Given Me a Country** reads: ?What follows is real, and imagined.? The book is a memoir, but it is infused with fictional writing techniques. Can crafting a story bring out a deeper truth? What is the difference between history and story? How is this book both different from, and similar to, other memoirs you have read?

2. Most of the revelations and experiences in **You Have Given Me a Country** are tied very specifically to place. What are some significant settings in the book that stand out for you? In each instance, how do you think this place affected the characters in the book? Are there places in your life that have shaped you? Do you agree with Vaswani that ?the in-between? is a location in and of itself?

3. India is often described in Western literature as ?exotic.? Did the India described in **You Have Given Me a Country** strike you in the same way? If yes, how? If no, how?

4. What are some of the things that love has to overcome in this memoir? Do you think the people in the book succeed in loving each other? How do you define success in love --- both filial and romantic?

5. What role do photographs play in the book and its unfolding narrative? How do the photographs enhance or change your perspective on what you are reading?

6. Vaswani?s mother uses the phrase ?Life is suffering? as a way of accepting pain and hardship. How do different characters in the book cope with inevitable heartaches? Do their coping mechanisms match your own? How? How do they differ?

7. On page 71, Vaswani states that her mother could navigate certain social situations more easily because she was less ?different? culturally in the eyes of the majority. What does it mean to have ?American-ness?? ?Whiteness?? ?Pretty femaleness??

8. On page 99, Vaswani notes her mother?s distaste for weeds versus her own love for them. She writes: ?Weeds make borders into landscapes, full of life and growth.? What does she mean by this? What are some other instances where Vaswani suggests that borders are rich with possibilities? And where in the book is categorization depicted as limiting?

9. In what ways are the characters? understandings of religion different from the traditions in which you were raised? Do you think religion is something that can be taken piecemeal, selectively? Or is it something that must be taken as a whole? Why?

10. Like many children, Vaswani questioned how people could believe in God when religion caused terrible things. In response to this query, her mother says, ?What does God have to do with religion?? How would you answer that question? What does this statement tell you about how faith and religion are defined in the book?

11. On page 133, Vaswani responds to someone saying that love is too hard for people from different cultures with: ?To me the point of love is to overcome difference?Nothing is too hard for love. Nothing.? Do you agree with this statement? Is the capacity to love in this way innate? Or is it something that must be learned, or shaped by experience?

12. ?Sexuality is not a choice. Skin is not a choice. Being visible is a choice.? What does this statement say about sexuality? What does this memoir imply about the similarities between issues of interracial marriage and the current dispute over same-sex marriage? Do you think it?s important that people be visible with who they are in terms of sexual identity? What is lost, and who is hurt, if sexual identity is hidden?

13. Note how characters in the book use spoken and written language, familiar and formal language, foreign and native language. Are there characters you remember because of their specific use of language? What relationship between characters and their different cultural contexts does this reveal? What do you think of the way Vaswani herself uses language throughout the book?

14. ?Beauty *is* utilitarian. Beauty is political.? What do you think this means? What is your definition of ?the beautiful?? What do you think is the power, or use, of beauty? Do you agree with Vaswani?s statement: ?Beauty comes from juxtaposition??

15. Julia Sullivan, Vaswani?s maternal grandmother, graduated from high school. After that, she was what Vaswani describes as ?a reader, a self-educator,? who called the library ?church without the collection plate.? And on page 181, Vaswani?s mother equates education with power. What other connections between class, education, and power do you see in the book? How do you value ?life experience? versus ?book learning??

16. Vaswani writes that?based on physical appearance --- she is often associated with her father, but not her mother. What are the pros and cons of such physical or aesthetic judgments? What are some moments in the book when Vaswani feels parts of her identity are invisible? When is this uncomfortable or comforting? How does physical appearance affect your identity --- the way the world perceives you, or how you perceive yourself? Do you remember a time when someone made an assumption about you or put you in a category that didn?t properly identify you?

17. Do you think a woman loses more of her identity in marriage than a man? How do you think gender expectations are learned? In what ways do the women (for example: Rudra, Sheila, the author) in **You Have Given Me a Country** push against the boundaries of their gender? What do you think Vaswani means by, ?I was an archetype for the sake of the photographs??

18. There are various moments in the book where themes of translation appear. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you had to be a ?translator?? How did you navigate the gap between cultures or people? Did it broaden your understanding of the other party? What does Vaswani mean by, ?There is always the other??

19. Who is the most recent immigrant in your family? What is his/her story of arrival?

20. Throughout the book, the reader learns how Vaswani either incorporated or discarded her parents? experiences when shaping her own world-view. Can you think of times in your life when you have done this?

21. Vaswani?s mother was raised Irish-Catholic, but felt close to and comforted by Buddhism and Hinduism; Vaswani?s father was Indian-born but felt close to America in his youth, even before he became a U.S. citizen. Are there traditions outside of your upbringing to which you feel close, and why? With what group to which you technically do not ?belong? do you feel a connection? Why do you feel this way? What do you think makes a family?

22. What do you make of the book?s title: **You Have Given Me a Country**? Were you surprised by how the 1965 Immigration Act and **Loving vs. Virginia** affected Vaswani?s family history? Did you know about this legislation? If not, why do you think you didn?t know about it? How do you define the term ?American?? Do you think there is more than one way to be a good citizen?

Author Bio

Neela Vaswani is author of the short story collection **Where the Long Grass Bends**, and a memoir, **You Have Given Me a Country**. Recipient of a 2006 O. Henry Prize and 1999 Italo Calvino Prize, her fiction and nonfiction have been widely anthologized and published in journals such as *Epoch*,*Shenandoah* and *Prairie Schooner*. She has been a visiting-writer-in-residence at Knox College, the Jimenez-Porter House at the University of Maryland, the Whitney Museum in New York City, IIIT Hyderabad, India, and other institutions. She has a Ph.D. in Cultural Studies, lives in New York City, and teaches at Spalding University?s brief-residency MFA in Writing Program. An education activist in India and

the United States, Vaswani is founder of the Storylines Project with the New York Public Library.

Her father is Sindhi-Indian and her mother is Irish-Catholic. By the time Vaswani was 18, her family had lived in 13 homes and traveled to 25 countries on doctor swaps and teaching tours. Vaswani has held a number of waitressing jobs, from chicken shacks to comedy clubs, and she paid off her school loans by cocktail waitressing at a fondue bar in NYC. Her first job was at a one-hour photo booth on Long Island. She has also dressed Armani models, delivered telephone books, worked cattle round-ups and barbed wire fencing, ripped tickets at a movie theatre, been a maid, a stage manager, a secretary, a prop girl for two independent movies, and driven an ice cream truck. She is left-handed although she plays the fiddle and knits right-handed. She loves paleontology, the Indian railway system, female detectives on television, goats, bats, bad-tempered camels, her husband, and online Boggle. Visit her website, ttp://www.neelavaswani.com/home-static.php.

Critical Praise

"With her fiercely beautiful memoir, **You Have Given Me a Country**, Neela Vaswani takes her place among other great innovators of form --- Aleksandar Hemon, Maxine Hong Kingston, Michael Ondaatje --- who write eloquently and ardently about the land of in-between. Vaswani?s extraordinary, inimitable book is part tender love letter to her Sindhi-Indian father and her Irish-Catholic mother and part razor-sharp, history-rich exploration of multicultural identity. What is most striking of all, perhaps, is the portrait that emerges of a keenly observant, big-hearted writer with talent to burn."

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