

Ranjit Arora

Finding a New Life

'The person who finds their homeland sweet,' said Hugh of St Victor (born around 1196, died 11 February 1241) 'is a tender beginner.'

He continued: 'She to whom every soil is as her native one is already strong.' He concluded: 'But she is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign place.'

He himself, it is said, rarely wandered far from his home at the St Victor Abbey in Paris. Nevertheless he was a seeker everywhere, happy to be a restless foreigner even in the place where he spent most of his life.

Hugh's threefold typology, distinguishing between the patriot, the bicultural person and the cosmopolitan, was cited approvingly in one of the great seminal books of recent decades, *Orientalism* by Edward Said (1978). This book by Ranjit Arora, *Finding a New Life*, is a painstaking, honest, unflinching exploration of the hurts and challenges, and the longings, energies and commitments of the third kind of person depicted and celebrated by Hugh of St Victor and Edward Said.

Ranjit's protagonist, 'Mona', is at home both nowhere and anywhere, an inquisitive and questing traveller, striving always to find out and to understand, and to live with the consequent uncertainties and unknowing.

Mona's story starts in her homeland, India. It continues in a land whose soil is as sweet for her as the land where she was born and grew up, the United Kingdom. In conventional terms she is a successful high achiever in this second land, as teacher, teacher educator, manager, administrator, researcher, academic, author, for some forty years at or near the centre of multicultural and antiracist education.

In the 1980s she experiences and takes part in debates around the Rampton and Swann reports. In the 1990s there is the Education Reform Act and the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. And in the following decade the Race Relations (Amendment) Act and the gradual transition towards the Equality Act 2010, with its focus on several different dimensions of equality – gender, disability, age, religion, sexuality – not 'race' equality alone.

Then, from 2010 onwards, progress with regard to race equity in education becomes, in so far as it occurs at all, sporadic and haphazard, piecemeal and partial.

Throughout her career Mona is embroiled from time to time in disputes and litigation, and in her personal life she meets and copes with disappointments and much sadness in her search for friendship and love.

Throughout the changes and chances of her life-story Mona is haunted by questions of philosophy and meaning. We her readers learn, as Ranjit puts it towards the end of the story 'what Mona understands life to be, how she has experienced it, is still experiencing it, not sure for how long, but as long as there is breath in her body her life will continue. Life was a mystery to Mona as it is for all of us. We are born without our will, no one asks us if we want to be born or not. We die without our will, or at least most people do. But somewhere between life and death, we have to make the most of life.' Mona finds solace and inspiration in, amongst other places, the poetry of Maya Angelou.

'I've learned,' Angelou is widely quoted as having once said, 'that I still have a lot to learn. I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel.'

Well, at times Mona makes us feel alarm and anxiety for her. But mainly we feel admiration, affection, compassion and respect, and determination to ask and live great questions, questions about how to make the most of one's life, whatever and wherever it happens to be.