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***This Red Line Goes Straight to your Heart* by MADHUR ANAND**

Penguin Random House, 2020. \$19.00 USD, \$26.00 CAD

Reviewed by **RITA KAUR DHAMOON**

In *This Red Line Goes Straight to your Heart*, Madhur Anand beautifully draws on her extensive knowledge as a creative writer and a professor of ecology to bring together the worlds of science and narrative. She offers, as it is termed in the description of the book, an experimental memoir. Unlike conventional memoir writing that entails roughly linear story-telling with a discernible beginning, middle and end, the book consists of narrative, poetry, scientific excerpts, fragments from diaries, and notes from the past such that the stories of Anand and her parents are told in the ways that life is experienced—sometimes disordered, reconfigured, and (re)compressed.

This is a book of connected stories about the Partition of India and Pakistan, immigration to Canada, and the intergenerational impacts of both on the lives of a Hindu woman, her polio-inflicted husband who is a science teacher, and their daughter, Anand herself. Anand tells the converging and diverging stories of her parents' lives during the Partition of India-Pakistan by the British in 1947, and the afterlife of Partition for her parents, their marriage, and her trajectories in Canada. The drawing of boundaries through Bengal and Punjab by British lawyer and colonizer Cyril Radcliffe and other commissioners came to be known as the red line of Partition or the Radcliffe Line—hence the title of book. The Partition red line was demarcated within a short five-week period, without adequate local advisors, without specialized knowledge of procedures to draw a boundary, and without time to gather survey and regional information; the effect was the production of a crude border of territories assigned to Pakistan and India and a deadlock among Muslim and Hindu (and to lesser extent Sikh and Dalit) representatives. Historical accounts show that Radcliffe had never been to 'British India', and that he was indifferent to India's independence in part because he disliked the climate and was eager to return to England quickly. Indeed, Radcliffe left India even before the boundary awards were distributed. He also gave the Indian and Pakistani representatives only two hours to study copies of the red-lined border before the division came into effect. And, like other colonizers, he destroyed all his papers before he left India so that no record is left to explain the reasons for the imposed border line. In the end, the Radcliffe line divided people across linguistic lines, religious lines, familial lines, village communities, and infrastructure systems such as roads and irrigation; all of this forced the displacement of some 14 million people and led to mass slaughters by opposing sides, as well as starvation, disease and illness. This is the backdrop against which Anand tells parts of her story and pieces together parts of her parents' lives.

Maybe this historical act of division is why the novel is partitioned into halves, telling different aspects of the same stories. One half of the book is told in her own voice and one half is told from the perspectives of her mother and father, where her voice and the voices of her parents sometimes seem to merge, such that life stories are pieced together in refractive and recursive ways. I started the half that focused on the stories of her parents, but how might have I *felt* the stories differently had I started from Anand's own journey? In the half on her parents, Anand

shifts between chapters written from the perspective of her mother to her father, and back to her mother, all the while moving between the personal and the political. As a creative writer steeped in ecology and science, she meditates on how discourses of difference and power confuse and confound lives; this includes the impacts of polio, colonial partition of a country and people, family dynamics, gendered expectations, immigration, whiteness, 'Canadianess', small-town living, and formal education. At one point in the novel, Anand questions if she has apophenia (a precursor to schizophrenia), which she describes as "The act of gratuitous pattern-finding in random data" (page 156). Yet, the patterns that emerge through journeys of colonialism, immigration, diaspora, gender and race are recognizable and illuminating for anyone examining/navigating global whiteness, even if denied by those who dominate society.

Anand gives the reader signposts throughout her memoir, one of which is *Aap Beeti* or "the story of my life", and the other *Jaag Beeti* or what might be loosely translated as "the story of the world". In-line with her experimental memoir method, she links the two together not only through familial ties but also by referencing political events beyond Partition—sometimes seemingly randomly, which fits her experimental memoir method. These events include Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's 2018 visit to India, the ongoing disregard of treaties between the Canadian state and Indigenous peoples, racist hiring practices in the school system and racism in the academy, Canada's prisoner of war camps, changes in disability laws, the 1975 Emergency Act of India, and the bombing of India by Pakistan. These all contextualize time and place.

How does one tell the stories of people colonially divided, borders forced upon brown and Black people by white colonizers, immigration to settler colonies grounded on Indigenous dispossession, gendered pressures within higher caste (in Anand's case Hindu) families, and disappointments of diaspora parents, without talking about violence and trauma? Anand doesn't spend a lot of time in her novel on the joys and delights of life which necessarily break through the red lines that goes straight to our hearts, and that counter the idea that the lives of differently shaded, classed, and caste-ridden brown people are primarily victimised. But perhaps that is because like so many of us, the weight of red lines pierces her heart so violently, continuously, and intergenerationally.

This is why Anand's combination of creative/poetic with the scientific (ecology, biology, physics, chemistry) works so well—her method of writing simultaneously touches our hearts and offers poignant insights about history, politics, and family while also intentionally connecting us to the scientific world. Both illuminate what is happening in the human relations explored in the book. The gravitational pull of the moon and earth is like the pull between Anand and her family, between her father and his father, between her mother's anger and her choices. Quantum entanglements are like the entanglements she feels towards her parents, her lovers, her history, and her chosen family. Molecular, cellular, tissular, and organismal asymmetries echo the asymmetries between her parents who carry their own traumas and joys, and the asymmetries in her own relationships with friends, her husband, colleagues, neighbours, strangers and children. While the relevance of some of the science was sometimes (perhaps intentionally) obscure, these connections between science and narrative were also beautiful

and innovative. Such interconnections rile against the partitions that tear through the lives of the main characters.

Anand is certainly taking risks in sharing her family story in ‘undisciplined’ ways, and of course, any creative process is circumscribed by the norms of ‘their’ academic discipline, but this book fosters new ways of looking at the world. The author pushes against the divide between poetics and conventional environmental studies. In particular, Anand invites her audiences to seriously think through how colonial and racial histories, contemporary political relations, and converging ecologies of the personal and political change the disciplinary boundaries of environmental studies and environmental communities. For me, this prompts questions about how racial global capitalism shapes food insecurity, how ecological resistance to pipeline development can centre matters of indigenous sovereignty, what sustainability means while Black and Indigenous people are being killed by agents of the state, or how non-white communities are made more vulnerable to natural disasters and infectious diseases due to factors such as language, housing patterns, employment structures, or building construction priorities.

Ultimately, Anand offers an original, intimate and creative entry into the intergenerational lives of diaspora people as well as of colonial political history, dominant racial landscapes, and the confining norms of life. Well-worth a read.

RITA KAUR DHAMOON is a settler of colour Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, at the University of Victoria. The University sits on the traditional territories of the Songhees, Esquimalt and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples, whose historical relationships with the land, water, and nonhuman world continues to do this day.