

Book Reviews

Passport Photos

Amitava Kumar, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000, 308 pp.

What does it mean to be a migrant, to be itinerant, to forever engage in a "dialogue of civilization"? How do migrants make sense of their identity in a world where every aspect of it is constantly under negotiation by border-keepers and original settlers and earlier immigrants? In his bold new book *Passport Photos*, Amitava Kumar, a professor of English at the University of Florida, examines some of the problems faced by diasporic communities through the study of an important document, the passport. To the immigrant, the passport is an important intersection between "identity" and "document." This deep, sensitive and, at times, funny reading of the passport makes for a very thought-provoking book, and I unreservedly recommend it to anyone who is interested in a sensitive portrayal of the immigrant experience. The book is like immigrants themselves. It speaks in multiple languages, and is obsessed with documents. Among its many tongues, it speaks in academic and political cadences, mixes prose and poetry, sprinkles Urdu and Spanish, quotes Namdeo Dhasal, a poet from India and Louis Arrago, the Mexican poet-activist. It layers Urdu upon Spanish, words upon pictures, and best of all, garnishes it with Kumar's poetry, which is quite magical. There are several poems, each of which is worth the price of admission on a stand-alone basis.

In the second paragraph of its preface, the author makes his point clear: "this book is a forged passport." There is, of course, a delightful wordplay here. We can read the act of forging as illegal duplication, but we can also read it in terms familiar to a blacksmith, the book is forging or creating a new way to understand passports, borders, being an immigrant and being foreign. As someone who personally knows several "illegal immigrants," I used their reality as a touchstone to judge the book. If the book speaks to their condition, without romanticizing them or being condescending to them, displaying both their bravery and their baggage, then it is a good book. If the book cannot reach them, it is little more than words and I will dismiss it as yet another piece of desultory identity politicking.

The book certainly fulfills the above criteria, and much more. It represents the multilayered experience of immigrants without reducing it to wordplay. At

the same time, the book does not forget the power of words and their evocativeness in describing the condition of the immigrant. Kumar wants his words:

Words numerous and glittering, drawn like
 shiny fish in nets by men with darkened skins.
 Words that swing like the new cricket
 ball on the pitch surrounded by the hills of Peshawar.
 Those words that the women burn in their fires
 to keep hearts from shutting with malice.
 Words that repeat themselves like the music
 in the wheels of the postman's bicycle.
 Words that are secret, holding close a hidden love.
 If there are no words like that, I want those essential few
 that will say north, that will say south.
 That will say past, that will say future.
 That will say poor, poor, poor, poor.
 That will say fight, fight, fight, fight.
 That will say hope, hope, hope, hope, hope.

The book also works because of an extremely inventive structure. Using the information structure of the passport, a document “that chooses to tell a story about us,” Kumar writes an alternative story of such terms as “Name,” “Photograph,” “Place of Birth,” “Date of Birth,” “Nationality,” “Sex,” “Profession,” and “Identifying Marks.”

In his discussion of names, for instance, Kumar explores how members of the Indian diaspora in the Caribbean ended up with names like “Chris Garcia,” refracting their identities through Venezuelan birth certificates to appease bureaucratic border-keepers. He provides a delightful litany of stereotypes to which the South Asian immigrants are subjected; for example, “everytime an American shakes my hand, he or she has to pledge their love for Indian food, and I can't even say I thank you — on behalf of Indian food.”

What is the date of the immigrant's birth? For some, it may be the moment when staying back in the homeland was no longer an option. The forced migrations due to religious and ethnic bigotry, the complete betrayal of minorities by the nation state, the dismemberment of diasporic communities by purported “nativitists” all over the world, all these wrenching moments are sensitively laid out. But Kumar does not forget the equally important displacements produced by capitalism. When the metropolis becomes an agent of sucking out all the resources from the hinterland, the native has no option but to move.

Tum na jaane kis jahaan mein kho gaye
Hum bhari duniya mein tanha ho gaye,
 You got lost in another world unknown
 I was left in this one alone

Kumar depicts the hopelessly fragmented nationality of the immigrant in a series of photographs of Kashmir. He also talks about the way in which multinational corporations compete for our identity as nations once did ("I have lost India. You have lost Pakistan. We are now citizens of General Electric"). These corporations bring the promise of progress to the Third World, but unleash primordial oppressions (like the ultrasonographs that are used in the hinterland for fetal sex determination and female feticide.)

Ultimately, words are only useful when they lead to principled action. Even immigrants need to be engaged with homelands, either through bonds of love or through bonds of activism. As Kumar mentions in another delightful poem:

This is not a song or an anthem
 This is only a letter
 This is a letter in search of the name of the taxi driver in Queens
 Who calls each week to talk to his daughter in Ambala ...
 The students in Pittsburgh burdened with their own studies
 Who print pamphlets to fight those
 Who from this distance dream of destroying old mosques

Such vignettes, pieces of analysis, poetry, pictures, quotes and wit characterize this book, which ultimately fulfils its promise as a forged passport, which exposes the document's cruelty, its arbitrariness, its truncations, its caprice, and above all, its profound silliness. After Kumar's exposé, Passports will never appear the same to me.

My only peeve with the book is the fact that its polemic prose left very little space to articulate the more light-hearted and heartwarming experiences of the immigrant. While it is true that we should be wary of the tendency to valorize the act of immigration as "liberation" or "escape," I am sure there is a lot to be said about it that is positive and funny. The encounter of the immigrant with the "native" and with other fellow immigrants is often enriching. It is also ludicrous and hilarious. While I understand the position that Kumar assumes in his book, I wish he had made more room in his prose for those lighthearted moments in the immigrant's experience when a common humanity is enacted. There are some moments that have hilarious possibilities (including an imaginary conversation between the author and a U.S. police officer at the Mexican border), but they are fewer and further between than I had hoped.

Sometimes, though, his poetry makes up for this lack. The book ends with a delightful poem that outlines his emerging romance with a Pakistani beauty:

You, however,
 Soraiya Hasan Ali from Pakistan, whom I've just met,
 You are not wearing any Nehru jackets today.

You've cast your dupatta aside and come out
 Wearing an ivory-hued kameez with the tiniest
 Mirros that make your shape look thirsty like water.
 ... It has been two days since I met you.
 The world that was two days ago seems so old now.

Reading this book with its wonderful poems, I was reminded of two lines by the Indian poet Javed Akhtar, which can be translated thus:

It is not enough to have pearls on your eyelids
 One also needs the skill to weave them into a necklace of words

In *Passport Photos*, Kumar demonstrates that the pearls in his eyes are strung skillfully and evocatively in a wondrous necklace of words. Buy this book.

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