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You Have Given Me a Country

Neela Vaswani
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One day in school Vaswani's teacher goes through a list of nationalities. The children are supposed to raise their hands when she names something that was part of their ancestry. Vaswani raises her hand for Pakistani, German, French, Irish, American Indian, Indian "from India," Spanish, African, and Middle Eastern. She only keeps her hand down for Chinese and Portuguese. Her teacher glares at her when her hand goes up again for Greek. "Stop raising your hand," she says. "You're making a mockery of the American diversity lesson."

Vaswani writes about how it feels to navigate through a world she never completely fits into due to her biracial status. The daughter of an Irish-Catholic mother and Sindhi-Indian father, she stands out in the white culture of America as *too* Indian and in India as not Indian enough. "I pledge allegiance to the in-between," she declares.

Vaswani's first book, *Where the Long Grass Bends*, is a collection of short stories. The lyrical prose style of that book is also evident in this one, a biography that she states is both "real, and imagined." It is a love poem to her family in many ways, which shares the disparate histories of her parents' families. Her tone is stoic when telling of her grandmother Julia's thirteen-year battle with mouth cancer, and her style becomes almost epic as she describes her father's family fleeing the horrific bloodshed that devoured their home state of Sindh after Partition.

Though her story is steeped in difference—Irish/Indian, Catholic/Hindi, brown/white—it is also embraces the similarities shared with those around her. She tells of the scientist in Egypt who pointed out the square jaw she and her mother share and of singing along to the Mool Mantra, a Sikh prayer, with her father. She describes the intense emotion she felt when filling out the 2000 US Census and, for the first time, being able to check more than one box for ethnicity, finally able to honor both sides of her family on the government form.

This book is part history, part memoir, and part social commentary. At the heart of all its pieces is the story of family, and how love can hold it together in the face of obstacles. "There is no such thing as too different," Vaswani writes. "There is only an unwillingness to love enough."

CHRISTINE CANFIELD (August 16, 2010)

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