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**Vijay Agnew**. *Where I Come From.* Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2003. xiii + 291 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-88920-414-0.

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## The Value of an Autobiography

In the early stages of planning this book, Vijay Agnew did not imagine that she would write an autobiography. "I did not set out to reminisce about my life in India and Canada, or to document my reflections on Canadian society," she claims. Rather, Agnew intended to write a jargon-free, easily accessible study of feminism: "I anticipated that an easy-to-read book on feminism would give people a clearer idea of its fundamental principles and that trying to write it would help me to understand them better too" (p. 275). The final product does indeed meet Agnew's early aims. *Where I Come From* works very well as a history of second wave feminism. But by writing of her experiences and thoughts as a Canadian immigrant from India, this book also provides interesting reading on a range of issues relating to international migration and identity. As a result, *Where I Come From* should attract a wide audience. As a teaching tool, the book, as a whole or in part, would work well in women's history courses, in women's studies courses, and in courses on migration. It is stimulating and entertaining reading for other academics interested in the issues that Agnew highlights in this book, but it would also be an enjoyable and educational read for a wide range of members of the public.

The basic structure of the book is chronological. It begins with Agnew's arrival in Canada when she was twenty-four years old, in 1970. After a couple of chapters dealing largely with her first two or three years in Canada as an M.A., and then as a Ph.D., student, the study moves backwards in time to explore the social contexts in Delhi and Bombay from which Agnew came. After the pre-Canada digression, the autobiography continues on in largely chronological order to the present. This chronological structure is overlaid with thematic foci. For example, individual chapters explore subjects such as being a "Third World Academic" at an ethnically homogenous, "white" university; being a mother in a middle-class Toronto suburb; "Life Among the WASPs"; interactions with other successful female Indian immigrants; and visiting India as a westernized Indian-Canadian.

As with any biography, *Where I Come From* offers a personal, and thus specific, history of Canadian immigration. Vijay Agnew is an immigrant who really made it. She is now a full professor at York University, and she owns a home in Rosedale, one of Toronto's most prestigious, "old money" neighborhoods. Clearly, Agnew has experienced much racism. Over the course of the book it becomes evident how her personality and self-identity have been shaped by these experiences. But because Agnew has been, for some time, a relatively privileged member of Canadian society, her book has quite a different feel than if it had been written about the more typical immigrant experience of limited opportunities, low income, and hope invested in the possibility of a better socio-economic future for the next generation. This is not to say that Agnew's insights are not valuable beyond what they can tell us about immigrants who come out on top. Indeed, the lessons that can be learned from this book are many and varied. On one level, the fact that Agnew continues to harbor such a deep conviction that she is peripheral to the mainstream of Canadian society can tell us a lot about both the long-term impact of "subtle" racism on an individual and the racialized workings of Canada's urban, middle-class, WASP society (it would be a stretch to argue that the environments in which Agnew lives and works–Rosedale and the world of academics–are "mainstream"). But more interesting, I think, are Agnew's reflections upon the intersections of race, class, gender, migration, and identity. Agnew is a well-read and insightful academic who has a long career of activism, teaching, and writing behind her. Her analysis of this subject would have been interesting material to read in a more scholarly format. Yet by opening herself up to our scrutiny, an extra set of insights are allowed. The autobiographical nature of this text highlights inconsistencies in perspective, self doubt, and intellectual evolution. For example,

Agnew grew up in a class-conscious, privileged family in India. It is clear that while she has become deeply critical of that privilege and its attendant cultural baggage, this aspect of her past is an integral part of who she is. It affects how she interprets the world around her and–though she suffers some guilt as a result–it influences the choices that she makes.

*Where I Come From* is a delightful way to learn about the history of feminist engagements with issues of racial difference. It is also an engaging study of the evolution of one immigrant's values and identity. One does not have to agree with everything that Agnew has to say (clearly, even she does not whole-heartedly agree with all of the perspectives put forward here) to appreciate that there is much that is intellectually stimulating in this book.

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