

Linen Press

FINE WRITING FOR WOMEN, BY WOMEN

May We Borrow Your Country

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A Title Laden with Meanings

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With only a fortnight to the launch of *May We Borrow Your Country*, the new anthology from The Whole Kahani (TWK) collective, I'm being asked more frequently about the title and having more discussions about its wider interpretations.

It was a tongue-in-cheek choice, of course, TWK deciding (with dark humour) that it would create interest and intrigue. And yes, the question mark is deliberately left off at the end of the sentence. You will soon discover that the short stories and poems in the book are about the universal experience of displacement, both physical and emotional.

People take the title literally and apparently with a single perception. I'm not sure if this is to do with the current climate of fear around migration, but most people assume it is a reference to an immigrant asking the question of British people. What if this is not so? What if we have different perceptions in mind when we consider the title?

Let's turn the question around. Let's assume it refers to British people asking the world: 'May We Borrow Your Country?' A quick glance at history tells us that such politeness would certainly have been absent. European colonising nations, among other colonising powers through the ages, *borrowed* lands mostly by wars and violence. Centuries later, many of the lands are still being borrowed, and not much courtesy is extended to the peoples who previously occupied these territories.

Humans have always migrated. Nations and borders have always been fluid. Some lands have had more of an influx than others, either because of their location (the UK, for example) or because of their resources (India, for example).



The anthology's stories are set mainly in two modern nations: England and India. Historically, the English population is descended from several peoples – the earlier Celtic and Germanic tribes that settled in Britain following the withdrawal of the Romans, including Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians. Collectively known as the Anglo-Saxons, they founded what was to become England, along with later Danes, Normans, and other groups. One only has to look at the British Royal Family to see that spousal

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imports (mainly from Europe) are a British tradition. It has been mooted that a culture of being English (closely aligned with a culture of being British) is the defining and binding factor for the people of England, not their ethnicities. This little known element, perhaps even a fact, of *Britishness* being the greater glue is ignored by groups whom this version doesn't suit.

India has a history going back thousands of years and a prehistory going back hundreds of thousands of years. In 2700 B.C.E., the first genuinely urban civilization in the Indus Valley and western India emerged. After its disappearance around 1500 B.C.E., there was a bewildering variety of princely states and kingdoms, small and large, throughout the subcontinent, creating a long history of war and conquest that was punctuated by foreign invasions and the birth of some of the world's largest religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism.

Despite some political factions in India trying to categorise the majority of Indians as belonging to a single ethnicity or religion, this is patently untrue. The religion of the tribal people who've lived in the Andaman Islands for 60,000 years, and who were recently in the news, is Nature. Some of these tribes migrated to these islands from Africa, which, according to current scientific thinking, is the cradle of the world's entire population.

India is and always has been occupied by various incomers, of differing ethnicities, languages, cultures and religions. Narrow nationalisms may try to deny history but history will have its say. This applies to the current xenophobia in both countries: the UK and India. On an optimistic note, we live in an evolved, reasonably intelligent, if not completely compassionate, world. We do have the lessons of history behind us and readily available online should a reader care to look. This prejudicial type of nationalism is not shared by everyone in either nation. It is why this wry title elicits a chuckle from people who sometimes then embark on a further discussion of what it could mean.

It is our common human history after all that each one of us walks on borrowed land.

Some information here (the history of lands) has been paraphrased from Wikipedia, among other sources.