

**Raina, M.K., *Before I Forget: A Memoir*. Penguin Random House, 2024, 409 pp., Rs. 999, ISBN 978-0-670-09881-1**

*Reviewed by Indrani Das Gupta*

India's theatre luminary—actor and director, as well as academician, M.K. Raina's *Before I Forget: A Memoir* (2025) is a fascinating narrative that makes you feel, introspect, question, and critique history, truth, and art—all at the same time. Raina's memoir traces the journey of a Kashmiri Pandit, forced into exile due to the political insurgency in Kashmir in the 1990s, and who later emerges at the forefront of a modern Indian cultural renaissance. Raina's work offers not only a treasure trove of retrospective accounts of pivotal events of post-Independence India but makes us keenly aware of the composite culture that underpins the rich legacy of Indian history and politics.

Gosselin remarks that memoirs frequently follow a simplistic narrative thread where the narrator/author either projects themselves as a "victim" or as an "agent," often facing "problems" that have "identifiable causes and solutions" (p. 133). In Raina's work, this simplistic narrative trajectory is taken up only to be deconstructed. The memoir charts the path of a young man navigating conflict, terrorist activities, and an ever-changing socio-political landscape spanning the length and breadth of India. More importantly, this journey intersects with an artistic commitment and an aesthetic creed borne out of, as Raina claims in his preface, "India's socialism" (p. ix). The narrator/author's role often oscillates between victim and agent recurrently confronting insurmountable problems whose solutions are not easily forthcoming.

Raina's presentation of his autonomous subject compels the reader to grapple with "complications of experience" (Gosselin, 2011, p. 134), repeatedly articulating anecdotes and narratives long forgotten but essential to making sense of our shifting realities. Unlike a conventional linear narrative often found in life writings or autobiographical narratives, the representation of various events in Raina's memoirs, refuse the ordered simplification of lived experiences. His disordered narrative threads underscore the working of a memory which is random and arbitrary. In another vein, Raina's disordered narrative underlines that life is not etched in white or black. Instead, our lived experience,

while subjective like our memories, is also dynamic and public in nature so that the memoir functions both as a personal and social chronicle. In this heartwarming and philosophical chronicle's non-linear arrangement of a variety of anecdotes and vignettes, Raina registers the complexity of modern Indian socio-political and cultural life.

Even as the narrative resists easy categorisations, a few key thematic nodal points emerge. The memoir begins with a description of his hauntingly beautiful childhood, riven apart by rampant fundamentalism, violence, and bloodshed. From the narrow bylanes of Sheetal Nath Sathu mohalla in Srinagar to the unfolding of key historical events like the return of Sheikh Abdullah to power after eleven years of imprisonment; from the assassination of Shrimati Indira Gandhi to the killing of the precociously talented theatre artist, Safdar Hashmi; from SAHMAT's 'Anhad Garje'—a milestone cultural event against the backdrop of the fall of the Babri Masjid to how Kashmir imploded in the 1990s and Raina lost his mother amidst those turbulent times, the memoir culminates in a desire to return to his homeland and to the syncretic culture that defined 'kashmiriyat'. Raina's memoir showcases an artistic faith which embraces change, selfless service, and the tumultuous aspects of our society, history, and politics.

Like the Jhelum River which constitutes the lifeline of Kashmir, Raina's memoir flows to the changing cadences of life—filled with personal struggles, accomplishments and "life-threatening instances" (p. ix). The convergence of the crucial events of the Indian socio-political imaginary is not merely to evoke a postmodern consciousness where identity, history and space-time coordinates are rendered indeterminate and porous. Instead, the indeterminacy and interchangeable representation of events points to how insurgency, and the rising fundamentalism of the 1990s in Kashmir is akin to the Sikh riots of the 1980s, and likewise similar to the events unfolding in the backdrop of the demolition of the Babri Masjid. In all these disparate historical events, Raina posits the loss of the richness of our culture, heritage, social ethos, and to the breakdown of our social fabric. The intersecting of timelines and events underpinned by the lack of a humanitarian ethos forces Raina to interrogate the real meaning and value of independence.

In fact, the title of his memoir, *Before I Forget*, functions as a double-edged sword. At one level, it speaks with an urgency and a nervous,

excitable passion, vying to remember events, places, relationships, knowledge, and art which have died or are on the verge of dying because communities no longer endorse humane values. On the other, the memoir's title emphasises the value of theatre/art to connect, heal, empower and educate, and to rehabilitate broken families. Raina's wonderfully evocative memoir is more than a remembrance of friends and family, of a life once lived, of times gone by, and of the trauma and nightmarish visions which continually haunt us. Rather, Raina's memoir operates as a training ground which enables one to "express one's social and political views," (p. 53) and to "change the world order" (p. 55).

This memoir is a must read for anyone interested in knowing the changing turns and knots of Indian history and to become aware of the various aspects of Indian dramaturgy. Without offering lip service to any particular community or monolithically interpreting the fractured events and socio-political experiences of Indian history, Raina's memoir is a heart-wrenching narrative of art reclaiming lives, lands, and relationships.

### References

Gosselin, A. (2011). Memoirs as mirrors: Counterstories in contemporary memoir. *Narrative*, 19(1), 133-148. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41289290>.

*Indrani Dasgupta* is Assistant Professor of English at Maharaja Agrasen College, University of Delhi.  
[gupta.id11@gmail.com](mailto:gupta.id11@gmail.com)