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Thematic Concerns and Discourse in Diasporic Literature

A number of cultural theorists have expounded on the fluid and unstable status of 'culture'. Stuart Hall speaks of unfixed identity; James Clifford's traveling theory, Doreen Massey of identity and place, Homi Bhabha of mimicry, hybridity, and 'third space'. Stuart Hall claims that identity makings are "never singular but multiple, constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions". (1)

In our 'post-colonial' world, the concept of identity is linked to a local sense of place, and identity-creation shifts on account of the effect of colonialism and globalization. In terms of Doreen Massey's concept of identity and place, tying the traditional sense of place to one's original roots can offer a stable identity. Nevertheless, "the concept of place is not static but unstable" and "places are processes" (2). Massey says of the reproduction of place:
Places do not have single, unique "identities"; they are full of internal conflicts [...] [such as] conflict over what its past has been (the nature of its "heritage"), conflict over what should be its present development, conflict over what could be its future. None of this denies place nor the importance of the uniqueness of place. The specificity of place is continually reproduced. (3)

Diasporic discourse, like other minority discourses, is mainly about the location of culture. This newly emergent literary study describes an on-going process of identity loss and identity recovery for non-Westerners. In the domain of diasporic literature, different ethnic groups, based on their different original cultural heritages, have their ethnic, cultural, and historical specificities; hence, the condition of the dislocated and dispossessed is especially poignant and complicated because they cannot find a 'home' of their own. Andrew Gurr argues that "deracination, exile and alienation in varying forms are the conditions of existence for the modern writer the world over. The basic response to such conditions is a search for identity, the quest for a home, through self-discovery or self-
realization (4). The slave colonies of the West Indian Islands exemplify this genre to which many displaced people belong. They have been uprooted from their native land to be transplanted into an alien environment which gives rise to their sense of homelessness, placelessness, alienation, and deracination. Lacking a sense of belonging, they may nonetheless be able to develop an inner urge to construct their subjectivity in order to confirm their own identity.

The important fact to consider is that the zone of marriage and family has altered a lot in its internal structure resulting in varied inter-racial and inter-cultural social-sexual relations. This has left its mark in the racial, cultural and sexual aspects of characterization in diasporic Indian English fiction. Interracial marriage in the diaspora meditates the work, for instance of Bharati Mukherjee, Sunetra Gupta, Meena Alexander, Sujata Bhatt, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni among women writers; and of Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, among male writers; and its sexual and familial boundaries are ruptured by the thematization, for example of homosexuality in Agha Sahid Ali's
writing, of bisexuality in Vikram Seth’s poetry and fiction, and of lesbian identity and queer politics in Suniti Namjoshi’s works.

Another point to remember is that many of the Indian English writers in the diaspora come from non-Christian backgrounds and continue to occupy a remarkable spectrum of identities and backgrounds in relation to religion. Though broadly secular in content and perspective, the sheer diversity of the religious backgrounds of its authors – and hence also of their related ethnic, linguistic, regional, and cultural origins on the subcontinent – constitutes one of the great strengths and sources of fascination of this literature. We have several Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Parsi writers representing India in the diaspora and a quite often their own religious background consciously or unconsciously shapes the development of characters and themes in their own work.

**Anita Desai - Bye-Bye Black Bird (1971)**

Anita Desai is one of the very perceptive women writers of India. In almost all of her novels she has tried to depict the existentialistic dilemma of the modern man with a microscopic
concentration and lyrical attitude. *Bye-Bye Black Bird (1971)* delineates the predicament of Indian immigrants in England as reflected by their agonizing contention with the problems of acclimatization or adjustment brought about by displacement. It images the movements in the consciousness of each of each of its major characters- Dev, Adit and Sarah- as each of them confronts a crisis of identity caused by their existential exposure to situations which develop in spite of themselves. The novel, significantly, has been described by the author in an interview with Atma Ram that of all her novels it is “most rooted in experience and the least literary in derivation” (5), which explains its being charged with a certain intensity of feeling that may be ascribed to her not having distanced herself from what is projected. Most of Anita Desai’s characters live apart from the excitements and the turmoil of modern India.

The novel opens with the arrival of Dev, a Bengali youth seeking admission into the London School of Economics, for higher studies in England. To support himself he tries to get a job and after repeated failures which are extremely frustrating, he manages to get the job of a salesman in a bookshop. Dev’s
humiliating experiences in London turn him into an Anglophone-experiences like a peddler's refusal even to tell him the price of a Russian icon stating "oh very much. I wouldn't even name the price to you" (6), ostensibly under the impression that he is too poor an Indian to be able to afford it. Further, he finds it intolerable to be insulted and called openly 'wags' and 'Macaulay's bastards' and to be discriminated against as reflected in the signboards of the lavatories at the London Docks, viz., 'Ladies', 'Gents' and 'Asiatics'. Dev experiences a kind of cultural shock and tells Adit, "I wouldn't live in a country where I was insulted and unwanted" (7) He is depressed by the climate of England, and declares, "You must be masochists to live in this climate" (8). He has a traumatic experience when he travels by the 'tube', finding himself virtually suffocated inside the Clapham underground railway station.

Furthermore, he is unnerved by the silence and seeming emptiness of the houses and streets of London as he cannot understand "the English habit of keeping all doors and windows tightly shut...of guarding their privacy as they guarded their tongues from speaking and their throats from catching cold..."
Resenting the snobbery of the English, Dev denounces the obsequious attitude of the Indian immigrants who bear all the insults affronts to their self-respect just to say on in England. He calls his friend, Adit, a "boot-licking today, spineless imperialist-lover" (10), ignoring Adit's protestations of his being happy in England.

Significantly, as Dev starts wandering in London like a tourist, he begins to shed his prejudices and inhibitions when learns to appreciate the brighter aspects of the English scene and life.

The change that occurs in Dev, however gradual, confronts him with what is essentially an existential choice. He has to decide whether he should stay on in England or return to his native country, which will not be easy, since he is affected with schizophrenia which all Indians abroad are prone according to him. It is the yearning for 'a place in the sun' that stems from the feeling of being rootless which Dev like any other immigrant would feel. Dev overcomes it by regarding himself as an ambassador out to show:
...these damn imperialists with their lost colonies complex that we are free from people now, with our own personalities that this veneer of an English education has not obscured, and not afraid to match ours with theirs. (11)

"I am here..." he says, "to interpret my coming to them, to conquer England as they once conquered India, to show them, to show them" (12), which, though smacking of braggadocio, suggests his having made up his mind not to return to India. He even indulges in a kind of wishful thinking. Dev's wind, wishful thinking is suggestive of his desperate need to rationalize his decision not to leave England despite his being treated as an unwanted man, which may in part be attributed to the hedonistic streak in him as is endorsed by his own admission: "...All I want is – well, yes, a good time. Not to return to India, not to marry and breed, go to office again but – to know a little adventure, to know, to know –". (13)

In contrast to Dev, Adit, who has married an English girl, begins to feel nostalgic for his homeland occasioned by the visit of his in-laws, the Roscommon – Jameses, which was "married by tactlessness, by inane misunderstandings, by loud
underlining of the basic disharmony of the situation” (14). Further, the outbreak of Indo-Pak war seems to have kindled his innate sense of patriotism making him want to fight for his country in its hour of peril. He even longs for the Indian landscapes, in comparison with which the English ones appear to him anaemic:

The long, lingering twilight of the English summer trembling over the garden had seemed to him like an invalid stricken with anaemia, had aroused in him sudden clamour, like a child’s tantrum, to see again an Indian sunset, its wild conflagration, rose and orange, flamingo pink and lemon, scattering into a million sparks in the night sky. (15)

Adit soon finds his nostalgia becoming ‘an illness and ache’ with the result that he starts feeling stifled. He unburdens himself to his friend Samar, telling him:

Sometimes it stifles me – this business of always hanging together with people like ourselves, all wearing the label ‘Indian Immigrant’, never daring to try and make contact outside this circle. This burrowing about these grisly side streets, looking for Indian shops and Indian restaurants...It’s so stifling –
all the time, all the damned time being aware of one is
and where one is. God, I am fed up! (16)

What Adit experiences is of the nature of an epiphanic
revelation of his true condition, which makes him disenchanted
with his adopted country. He moves about London relentlessly
like a lost soul in a kind of morbid search. For something that
would dissolve his felling of being stranger, a non-believer. It is
not surprising that he shouts at his English wife Sarah,
accusing her of xenophobia, when she, to please him, dons a
sari and a gold necklace on the occasion of their wedding
anniversary, jokingly comparing herself to a Christmas tree.

Adit’s growing disgust with the English ways assumes
such proportions as to make him decide to return to India with
Sarah who is expecting her first child. Adit’s decision is
symptomatic of existential despair, which had he stayed on in
England would have plunged him into darkness. Though Sarah
does not experience any such existential despair as Adit does,
she is confronted an identity crisis as is brought out by her
musings. Significantly, Sarah awareness of her ambiguity or
role playing making her engagement with life does not seem to
have brought about any emotional crisis in her, since she seeks truth, not any certitude, for coming to terms with life.

It is ironic that Adit, who has “found himself a pleasant groove to fit into with his English wife and the education that he hold, he so repeatedly told them brought him up to love and understand England” (17) should leave England for good, while Dev who has found everything English obnoxious should decide to stay on. As Dev who has come to see off Adit and Sarah watches the train carrying them leaves Waterloo Station, he wonders “what had made them exchange the garments of visitor and exile” (18), since ”if plans and prophesies had any strength in them at all , it would have been steaming out on the train to catch the boat back to India” (19).

The cases of Adit and Dev exemplify the different responses that a country evokes in its immigrants, which are essentially psychosocial in that they are related to their attempts at acclimatization involving the play of the autochthon in their lives as the author poetically suggests:

...some where at some paint that summer, England’s green and gold fingers had let go of Adit and dutched
at Dev instead England had let Adit drop and fall away as if she had done with her and caught and enmeshed, his friend Dev... (20)

Though the 'action' in the novel mainly concerns Dev, Adit and Sarah, if feature a few other characters-Indian and English — who, though largely undeveloped, help reinforce its significance through their interaction with the main characters as well as with one another. They are Samar, Bella, Mala, Jasbir, Swami and Krishnamurthy among Indians and Emma Moffitt, Roscommon-James, Oristine Longford and the Millers among the English, whose roles are skillfully inter-wined with those of Adit, Dev and Sarah, so as to present a fascinating scenario marked by a crisis-crossing of emotional responses to the developing action involving them.

In juxtaposing Adit's decision to leaves England with that of Dev to stay on, the novel brings out the extraordinary configurations of psychic and social forces which save them from a gnomic plunge into darkness.

Meena Alexander- Manhattan Music (1997)
Asian American literature is generally defined as literary works written by people of Asian descent who were either born in or who have migrated to North America. This body of literature has undergone dramatic changes ever since it emerged as a distinctive field in the wake of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s more than three decades ago. In recent times, there is a visible shift in focus in this area and whereas identity politics, with its emphasis on cultural nationalism and American nativity, governed theoretical and critical formulations in earlier times, the stress at the moment is on heterogeneity, hybridity, exile dislocation and diaspora. As a result, the literary canon has moved and shifted from seeking to ‘claim America’ to forging a connection between Asia and Asian America.

Meena Alexander is one of the recent South Asian American immigrant writers who have emerged and gained from this shift in focus. “A poet and one of the finest thinkers of Asian American aesthetic” (21), in the words of Ketu H. Katrak, Alexander who has lived in New York city since 1980 and teaches English and Creative Writing at Hunter College NY,
has published several volumes of poetry and has been widely anthologized in journals both in India and abroad. Having spent a major part of her childhood in Khartoum, Sudan, where she grew up, after being taken there at the age of five and from where she started making annual trips to her grandparents' home in Kerala each summer, Meena is passionately involved with issues like immigration, ethnicity, culture and race relations and focuses in her works on what she calls, in an essay entitled “Is There an Asian American Aesthetics?” “an Aesthetic of Dislocation”. (22)

Here this writing tries to look at some of Alexander's works up to her second novel Manhattan Music (1997) in the light of her 'aesthetic dislocation', focusing in particular on the pain and violence of dislocation in her works which is often accompanied by a poetics of loss, as well as emergence of a sensibility enriched by the simultaneity of geography, which involves the possibilities of living here in body and elsewhere in mind and imagination, traveling in Alexander's works 'back and forth, forth and back', in a state of suspended animation and inhabiting many different spaces at the same time.
The dislocations and relocations are certainly marked by violence, affecting equally the artist and the artistic process. The writer says in her essay:

In India no one would ask me if I were Asian-American or Asian. Here we are part of minority, and the vision of being "unselled" comes into our consciousness. It is from this consciousness that I create my work of art. Because of this dialectical element there is "violence" involved for me even in the production of the work of art. (23)

For Meena Alexander, therefore, the function of the Asian-American artist gets clearly defined. To quote from her essay again:

For me, in the United States, the barbed wire is taken into the heart and the art of an Asian-American grapples with the disorder in the society, with violence, and in our writing we need to evoke a chaos, a power equal to the injustices that surround us. (24)

The evocation of chaos is the subject matter of the second novel *Manhattan Music* but the 'barbed wire', a recurrent motif and metaphor for the pain of negotiating barriers
and dislocation, occurs as early as her first book of poems. The poem is entitled “June 1977”:

Barbed wire
Drips rust, an engine hoots...
Your centuries are brackish, India.
A black vessel, I
entirely yours, float
hull scraping towards her. Barbed
wire knotting water between us. (25)

The pain and violence of dislocation is the subterranean motif in Meena’s first novel *Namplly Road* where the protagonist suffers from dislocation and “comes back to India to have continuity with what she was”(26). Journeying back and forth in time, more recently, *Fault Lines* (1993), her autobiographical memoir, epitomizes a quest wherein the writer plants herself in her early days in Kerala, recounting events from distant childhood, the source of her beginnings. History, myth and memory interact as she recreates strongly felt images of her childhood in Kerala. “The conch Shell, that seashore, those bellies, that dung” (27) and “the rooms enfolded each within the other, the distant houses all have held me” (28). As the
narrative advances through the gallery of characters, parents are portrayed with fond nostalgia. The personal memory dissolves into a universal dilemma of the immigrant traveling through different locations- Allahabad, Tiruvella, Cozencheri, Pune, Khartoum, Cairo- blending with ‘this other who I am’- in Delhi, London, New York, speaking a multitude of languages: Malayalam, Hindi, Tamil, Arabic, English, French, ending up as a ‘nowhere creature’, questioning herself in an existential manner ‘Who was I?’ The painful confusion of continuous dislocation is sharpened by the experience of racial hatred and colonization. Earlier in her narrative, she had referred to her first novel as a work that ‘marks a crossing, a border’. Now the sharp edges of the barbed-wire of the border begin to make her ponder philosophically: “Can I make lines supple enough to figure out violence, vent it and pass beyond”. (29)

The writer-protagonist comes back to her existential dilemma:

Who are we? What selves can we construct to live by? How shall we mark our space? How shall we cross the street? How shall we live another day? (30)
The construction and reconstruction of the self is an ongoing process and the violent pain of the 'barbed-wire' ever present. In a poem published in the volume *Night Scene, The Garden* in the same year as *Fault Lines* (1992), Meena Alexander's invocation to the Muse is expressed in highly charged words:

My back against barbed wire
No man's land
no woman's either
I stand in the middle
of my life...
Come ferocious alphabets of flesh
Splinter and raze my page
That out of the dumb
and bleeding part of me
I may claim
my heritage. (31)

In 'ferocious alphabets of flesh' come out strong and the evocation of chaos finds full expression in Meena Alexander's second novel *Manhattan Music* which problamatizes the issue of dislocation, its pain and violence and the possibility of relocation and a partial resolution of the immigrant dilemma.
towards the end. In the story of Snadhya Maria Rosenblum, a Syrian Christian Malyali immigrant in New York, the novel examines the repercussion of migration, the disruption of certitudes and the continual intrusion of memory. All these elements in the novel create and recreate, construct and reconstruct a new and unblemished Snadhya. Through dislocations—physical and psychological, though fragmentation and a fractured psyche, Sandhya finally has an identity which is not totally fragmented or fractured but a reconstructed whole and towards the end of the novel almost relocated and somewhat simplistically, reconciled to her ‘multiple anchorages’.

In Manhattan Music, the protagonist Sandhya is initially in an unhappy and confused state of mind. “Nothing felt right” (32), she says. She is also “a black woman married to a white man” (33) and mother of a small daughter Dora, suffering from a growing awareness of the incompleteness of her marriage to Stephen who is totally baffled by her gradual withdrawal, distancing and alienation. To quote:
Sandhya was growing thinner he could tell, there were circles under her eyes and he sensed something was growing at her. He did not dare ask what outright.

What could she have said in any case? (34)

Sandhya’s own perception of her situation is summed up in these words:

The emptiness was growing in her. Something Stephen did not touch, a gnawing hunger, a desperation even. (35)

Stephen tries hard to understand and grapple with the situation in order to help Sandhya and also to salvage the relationship. Sandhya looks at her own life with Stephen as a diminished reflection of her husband’s. At the same time, she looks critically at Stephen and is also skeptical about “the scope of Stephen’s own soul” (36) and looks outside for “a passion that could simplify life” (37). Stephen on the other hand, tells her that she should take America head on now that she has a Green card and Dora is safely left in a day care centre.

Sandhya tries to escape from this unhappy situation through dreams of the homeland, Kerala of her childhood and...
youth. 'Barbed wire' reappears as a metaphor, again as a symbol for her disrupted passion for Gautam in India:

Which had never been consummated and with his death, sexual memory was knotted in her head with the "barbed wire", the Hyderabad police used to torture their victims with. (38)

Sandhya finds a momentary stay against this chaos and confusion in a torrid affair with Rashid el obeid, an Egyptian post-doc Fellow in Columbia who looks Indian "perhaps a Punjabi" (39) but the affair fizzles out because she is searching for much more than temporary escapes and simple distractions. Neither memories of home in India nor an affair with Rashid el obeid whose tumultuous past and cultural history is like her own and who fills her with a longing "to dive in his past, be stung into newness by him" (40) offer any solace to her tormented self. After her break-up with Rashid, Sandhya feels a sudden emptiness in her arms, nothing to hold on to. True, that Stephen offers her a stable and sanitized world but she becomes more and more alienated from it as also she distances herself from Rashid. Stephen, who is comfortably cocooned in his safe status as a first class citizen in white
U.S.A. does not understand her anxieties and neurosis or those of people like Rashid who come from a similar context but he tries his best to help his wife Sandhya and understand the situation of immigrants in general.

Interestingly, the immigrant is presented in the novel as the monster Frankenstein who, Sandhya recalls, in Mary Shelly's story is "a monster made up of bits and pieces of flesh" waiting for electricity which would make it come alive. In Rashid's words to Zabir:

Immigrants are like that — our spiritual flesh scooped up from here and there. All our memories sizzling. But we need another. Another for the electricity. So we can live. (42)

and

better to have all the bits than to cleanse, blow up, destroy. For that is the other option, isn't it? A hatred for all the parts of flesh that forms us, wanting the pure blue, the perfect slate. (43)

It is significant to point out that at this stage Sandhya is equally burdened by the unreliability of the past as well as the uncertainty of the future in India and America. When she comes
to India on a visit to see her ailing father, Rajiv Gandhi ia
assassinated in Sriperambedur and communal riots become
rampant in India. On the other side of the globe, the Gulf war
escalates and religious fanatics contemplate revenge in
America. It is chaos everywhere and there is No Exit.

Totally unable to confront or understand this turbulent
world, when even Rashid’s love fails to provide any
support and certitude from pain. Sandhya breaks
down and tries to kill herself with a rope around her
neck in her friend Draupadi’s flat. (44)

Draupadi, a tough and resilient woman like her namesake
in the Mahabharata, a second generation immigrant from the
Caribbean unlike the new migrant Sandhya, saves her. Inspired
by Peter Brooke’s Mahabharata at BAM, she tells Sandhya:

We each have to be many women... After all, how
many lives did the Mahabharata lady have? Crawling
through the tunnel to save her life, wasn’t she quite
different from the princess in the palace? And then
the woman bartered in the dice-throw between men,
think of her shame, her rage. (45)

But unlike Draupadi, Sandhya cannot retrieve heroism
and inspiration from the derogation of history. Her release must
originate from ‘the dark vessel of her past’ the load of accumulated past memories that constrict her and hamper her growth as a human being. Sakhi, her cousin takes her to a woman’s meeting in New York City. As Sandhya sits in the large, ill-ventilated room at Columbia University, among many Asian-American women, Sandhya feels as if she has entered a country where she needed neither a passport nor a green card, nor any other sign of belonging. In the midst of these immigrant women, listening to their woeful testimonies on the platform, Sandhya also begins to ‘remake her life’. In the story of the old woman from Lahore, partly blind in one eye, brought to New York as an Ayah two decades ago, cast out on the streets when she could no longer work, roaming the streets, sleeping on park benches, hiding her face in her dupatta every time she saw a policeman- Sandhya sees reflections of her own life. The story of the younger woman – delicate and well-made, her body buttoned into a dark sweater embroidered with roses – her narration of a violent husband, difficult pregnancy and her flight into the night air, down the cold streets – open up Sandhya’s eyes to the diasporic situation of Asian-American women and
join them in asking "Why should I care?" Very soon Sandhya finds that "There was no way she could turn back the clock, return to Hyderabad" and "she cannot go back. She would stay close to the ground and not be suspended in mid air." She was racing into America from the dark vessel of her past and she could hear it singing in her, ready to break free, the load of her womanhood, of the accumulated life breaking free into an inconceivable sweetness.

Finally, in a chapter significantly entitled Staying, Meena Alexander structures Sandhya's reconciliation and relocation, her 'electric moment of illumination' and self-realization when Sandhya "knows that she would live out her life in America" and "Now she couldn't just lean on others. She had to trust herself if she wanted to go on." During a walk in the Central Park, approaching the fence by Harlem Meer where earlier her cousin Jay had drawn her attention to "Manhattan Music", the sounds, subtle as flesh, countless voices singing Asian "Diaspora Ditties", bits of Rock, African dance, Tandava steps woven to the act of dancing. Sandhya finally arrives at her moment of truth. In the Central Park lake, during the
midmorning light, Sandhya watches the emergence of the "dragonfly on the water lily, struggling out of the translucent pupa, large eye coverings left behind in the crumpling skin...the new body gleaming with moisture." (53)

Having passed through the purgatorial fire of self mortification and chaotic near-neurosis, Sandhya experiences a transformation similar to the dragonfly's, the bits and pieces of her flesh coming alive in an electrifying moment, the ugly pupa of *Fault Lines* finally, on the concluding page of *Manhattan Music*, becoming a butterfly:

She was no longer fearful of the shadows in the trees of the sharp cry of the strange bird with long tail feathers...there was a place for her here though what it might be she never could have spelled out. And she who had never trusted words very much, knew she would live out her life in America. (54)

In her negotiations of past and present, Meena Alexander links her protagonist Sandhya's heritage with that of other Asian-Americans. This is a useful strategy of relocations. To quote from her essay:
I want to find a way that we can make a durable and usable past that is not just nostalgia but exists in the present. The present for me is the present of "multiple anchorages". It is these multiple anchorages that an ethnicity of Asian-American provides for me, learning from Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, African Americans, Indian Americans and everyone juggling, jostling, shifting and sliding the symbols that come out of my mind. (55)

In the same essay, Alexander warns us against playing with our ethnicity in the post-modernist fashion as it is located in our bodies, and not outside it.

For Meena Alexander in the same essay, art is always political, even if it is most abstract, even if it is simple visual image of a leaf falling from a tree. Dislocation of a leaf from the tree and its multiple transformations in the possibility of becoming a leaf and by extension a tree again, symbolize an immigrant's dilemma. Alexander expresses this dilemma powerfully in a deeply felt 'aesthetic of dislocation' that places her protagonist as well as the artist herself, both within ancestral history of an immigrant relocation in the U.S.A.
simultaneously. In doing so, she successfully emerges as a powerful writer, whose sensibility is enriched by the simultaneity of geography, which involves the possibilities of living here in body and elsewhere in mind and imagination, inhabiting multiple spaces at the same time.

Jhumpa Lahiri – *The Namesake (2003)*

The Namesake is a cross-cultural, multigenerational story of a Hindu Bengali family's journey to self-acceptance in Boston. Jhumpa masterfully explores the themes of the complexities of the immigrant experience and foreignness, the clash of lifestyles, cultural disorientation, the conflicts of assimilation, the tangled ties between generations... and paints a portrait of an Indian family torn between the pull of respecting family traditions, and the American way of life. It's a tale of love, solitude and emotional upheavals with an amazing eye for detail and ironic observation.

Lahiri knows the terrain like the back of her hand: the community of expatriate Bengalis in the Boston area; their peculiarly lonely lives with ersatz extended families made up of
fellow expects; the customs and world view through which they see their own everyday experience; and the struggle of their American children with their own questions of identity and belonging.

The protagonist, Nikhil 'Gogol' Ganguli, a young man about the same age as the author, born like her to immigrant parents from West Bengal, grows up in New England in the seventies and eighties, moves out, and struggles to find himself through successive ill-fated relationships. His inner thoughts are the vehicle through which the author explores the other characters, including his parents and sister.

Lahiri has a gift for inhabiting the emotional space of her characters while describing the most mundane occurrences. Combined with her authentic familiarity with the lives of the Indian diaspora, this gift lets the reader identify with her characters. As children, Gogol and his sister Sonia accompany their parents to live in India for eight months. When they return, their American friends ask them nothing about where they've been. This little observation, thrown in casually toward the end
of a section, speaks volumes about the children's condition and the experiences from which their sense of identity is built.

The novel begins in Boston in 1968, with the birth of a boy named Gogol Ganguli. Gogol comes by his name through a series of random accidents and misunderstandings that will come to represent for him the unexpected trajectory of his family's life.

When a letter from his great-grandmother, suggesting a formal Indian name for him, fails to arrive from India, his father, Ashoke, impulsively settles on the name of Gogol, after the famous Russian writer whose book of short stories helped save his life many years ago in India. He had been reading the book when the train he was traveling on derailed; rescuers spotted him only because they saw a page of the book flutter from his hands in the dark.

It was on that same train that Ashoke met a stranger, who gave him the advice that would change his life: Do yourself a favor, the man said: Before it's too late, without thinking too much about it first, pack a pillow and a blanket and see as
much of the world as you can. You will not regret it. One day it will be too late.

That is how Ashoke came to be a doctoral candidate in engineering in Boston, and that is how his new wife, Ashima -- whom he married in an arranged ceremony -- came to start a new life in a cold, gray city in New England. Ashima tries to hide her disappointment when she first sees the tiny three-room apartment that is their home: so different, she thinks, from the homes she remembers from American movies like Gone With the Wind and The Seven-Year Itch.

She is terrified at the prospect of raising a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare.

And yet slowly, cautiously, the Gangulis make their way in America. Ashoke becomes a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Ashima has a second child whom they name Sonali (soon to be called Sonia). And the family moves to the suburbs, buying a new house in a development.
Their garage, like every other, contains shovels and pruning shears and a sled. They purchase a barbecue for tandoori on the porch in summer. Each step, each acquisition, no matter how small, involves deliberation, consultation with Bengali friends. Was there a difference between a plastic rake and a metal one? Which was preferable, a live Christmas tree or an artificial one? They learn to roast turkeys, albeit rubbed with garlic and cumin and cayenne, at Thanksgiving, to nail a wreath to their door in December, to wrap woolen scarves around snow men, to color boiled eggs violet and pink at Easter and hide them around the house.

But while their house on Pemberton Road looks like all the other houses on the street, while the Ganguli children take bologna and roast beef sandwiches to school like all their friends, the family never feels quite at home in the cozy suburb. News of their relatives in India comes through the mail or noisily by phone in the middle of the night, and there is always the sense of making do and making substitutions.
Newly made Bengali friends fill in as aunts and uncles at holiday celebrations; Rice Krispies, Planters peanuts and onions are mixed together to approximate a favorite Calcutta snack.

Being a foreigner, Ashima thinks is a sort of lifelong pregnancy — a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts.

In a Newsweek interview after her first book, Lahiri said, ‘I like to write about people who think in a way they can't fully express’ The extract in The New Yorker is an example. Ashoke Ganguli names his son ‘Gogol’, after an old Russian author. The reasons are complicated. They involve a horrendous 1961 wreck of the Howrah-Ranchi express that almost killed Ashoke in his youth, his subsequent recovery, and his move to the United States to pursue an education at MIT. Ashoke often struggles to express his reasons. When at last he tells his son the story, it has a profound effect on the boy, who until then has hated his strange name, and it marks a change in their relationship.
The beginning of the book is a series of episodes that could stand on their own as short stories, but they serve to introduce and build up the characters of Ashoke and Ashima and of their son Gogol. After he moves away from home, the narrative takes us with him on his lonely journey through a rather unfair share of bad luck and tragedy. Eventually, as he begins to find answers to some of his deepest held questions, a fresh breath of optimism enters his life.

It is easy to mistake Lahiri's style of recording minor everyday observations for just another novel employing exotic Indian-American backdrops (breaded chicken cutlets, chickpeas with tamarind sauce) to peddle ordinary storylines. But nothing could be farther from the truth. She has a keen sense of what makes her characters and their dilemmas unique, and an extraordinary talent for empathy.

Since the Indian diasporic writers do not belong to a monolithic hegemonic construct, but continue to occupy a remarkable spectrum of identities and backgrounds in relation to religion and zone of marriage, they leave their individual
mark in different shades of interracial and intercultural social sexual relations. In exploring the relationships between East and West, Amit Chaudhari prefers to fracture time and move sinuously between continents so that the text becomes a picture of a consciousness forever in transit between continents so that the text becomes a picture of a consciousness forever in transit between different orders of experience. Cf. *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1989), *Afternoon Raag* (1993) and *A New World* (2003). Take also the case of Sunetra Gupta’s fiction. Beginning from her Sahitya Academi winning first novel, *Memories of Rain* (1992), the author excels in her depiction of cross-cultural human relationships. Bringing together Anthony and Moni, two characters disparate worlds in a Calcutta rain storm, Gupta weaves a provocative and utterly empathetic tale of their fragile love. Anthony is English intelligent and artistic; assured and mysterious; Moni is a bright but sheltered young Bengali woman, seeped in cultural protocol and taboo. She finds herself both repelled and fascinated by this classmate of her brother’s, a visitor from the Europe of her fevered and literary imagination. They fall in love, apprehending
unconsummated passion and years of unsatisfying, sorrowful memories. Instead, they are able to marry and make their home in London, where Moni intensely and silently meets disappointment. Once in London, she encounters prejudices, sexism and betrayal by the husband who had seemed so captivated by her beauty and virginal purity. His blatant disrespect for her being shocks her. Her emotions are heightened and accentuated by the grey British weather, the drab buildings, and the bewildering pace of life in a new world. When Anthony begins to stray even when his mistress becomes practically a member of the household, Moni believes his divided heart, but cannot bear it when his manner changes to kindness and indifference.

Unlike the binaries of Calcutta and London where the first novel was set, the characters in Sunetra's second novel, The Glassblowers Beath (1993) live in trans-national spaces that are somewhat outside of being anywhere. The protagonist of this novel is a young Indian woman in search of ideal love and companionship who marries and settles into a home and assumes the guardianship of an orphan niece. Though the
novel's settings move between London, Calcutta, Paris and New York, none of these cities can be considered the true home for any of the characters. Like true post colonial migrants, the characters, the characters themselves, though born in one of these cities or somewhere else, wander through these urban settings, living in each one at sometime or the other and yet always detached from them. When an acquaintance replies that he hates London, the narrator's response is simply, "When I get tired of London, I go to Paris" (56). The landscapes of these three great cities, full of urban menace, thus form an almost surreal backdrop for this unsettling tale of a young, intelligent Indian woman who struggles but fails to confirm to society's blueprints for marriage, family and friendships. The heroine of the novel is thus seen to be caught between her own almost limitless capacity for experience 'emotional, intellectual, and sexual' and the desire of the men in her life to capture and define her. In spite of her education, freedom, social positioning and the privileges she enjoys, she is still condemned to repeat her gendered functions, i.e. her role as daughter or wife.
Sunetra's third novel *Moonlight into Marzipan* (1993) is a story of marriage and its ultimate betrayal. Promothesh and Esha, two promising scientists who were classmates at Calcutta University, find their relationship changing after marriage. In keeping with the Indian cultural expectations, Esha turns into a decided and submissive wife but Promothesh collapses under her dedication and feels incapable of living up to her grand expectations. He resumes his research in their Calcutta garage and steps into celebrity status when a chance experiment turns grass into gold. Proceeding to England for further scientific investigations, he initiates the break up of their relationship. Ultimately, Promothesh's infidelity causes Esha's suicide. Into his morass of ambition and self-pity slips love in human form of his Russian biographer Alexandra Vorbyova and in the very human form of Yuri Sen, another Indian researcher, whose project is of course unknown.

The same kind of cross-cultural juxtaposition of cosmopolitan characters also occur in Sunetra's *A Sin of Colour* (1999), which is about the choices made by its two main protagonists, Debendranath Roy and his niece Niharika, during
two different time periods, when both are in the last phase of youth. As the narrative shuttles between Oxford and the U.S. and Calcutta and rural Bengal, both characters are victims of unrequited love; this colours their lives profoundly, eventually leading them to adultery – Debendranath Roy with Reba, who is married to his brother, and who is famous, an artiste, musician and an actress, and Niharika with Daniel Faraday, who is married, and a friend of Morgan, the last man to have seen Debendranath alive. When she was asked to describe her 'growth' from the first novel to her third, Gupta told her Rediff on the Net interviewer, 'my concerns have become more and more spiritual and there is an obvious effort – a religious dedication if you may say so – to come closer to the truth'. The initial self-consciousness, and the desire to present India or Bengal in her own work, and to be included in a certain community of writers were now over, she said. Writing for Gupta can be termed as a kind of spiritual exercise, where she is not involved in any political movement but tries to uncover human conditions. The romantic love and human understanding in the conventional sense cannot exist in the hard-headed post-colonial world of
ours becomes the subject of Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999). This novel stands apart from all his other narratives in that it is his first attempt to deal with the theme of love, where even the word has become devaluated where the London barmaid calls you 'luv'. Implying a symbolic parallel between a modern love story of Vina, a singer who is worshiped by her lover, Ormus Cama, and an ancient legend, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, Rushdie gives an interesting twist to the story where it is Eurydice who brings Orpheus back from the dead, and not the other way round. The lovers finally get separated for good, and Vina disappears, literally swallowed up by the 'ground beneath her feet' in an earthquake in Mexico. The tissie of conventionalities becomes all the more unconvincing when one remembers that Vina continues to flirt with her friend Rai all the time, and on the night previous to her death, she has had a man warming her bed.

The plethora of relationships in the contemporary globalised society is also beautifully handled by Boman Desai in his comic extravaganza, *Asylum USA* (2000). In this novel we find the protagonist, Noshir Daruvala portrayed as a young
Parsi student in Chicago, who must get a green card or be deported to Bombay. He gives Barbara a thousand dollars to marry him, so that he becomes an American citizen, but discovers that she is a lesbian with a live in woman lover. Later he meets Blythe, but she too has a boyfriend... and so he lurches on from one woman to another.

The most complicated case of depicting unconventional human relationships is presented by a category of writers whose origin is India but whose works have no connections such as with the mother country. Bidisha Bandopadhyay (who incidentally never writes her surname) is a second-generation Bengali writer born and brought up in England. Her debut novel, *Seahorses* (1997) is an urban pageant about three young British men in the midlands and is in no way even remotely connected to India. There is no expatriate angst, no intercultural relationships adorning her writing. Another interesting example of how our younger generations of expatriate writers have moved along with the times and also beyond our conventional expectations of depicting stereotypical characters often juxtaposes in binaries, is that of Abha Dawesar. Her debut
novel *The Three of Us* (2003) is not what we usually expect from a twenty-six year old immigrant South Asian woman writer. In this novel Dawesar creates a story that shrewdly explores sexual dependency from the perspective of a white male investment banker in Manhattan, New York whose affairs range from having sex with his boss as well as his wife, all neatly timed with the help of a mini-planner. In a recent article called “India Away from Home”, Dawesar explains her predicament and raises several pertinent questions that can be applied to many others as well:

My novel was about and in the voice of a young man: Andre Bernard. A white man. A gay man. An American. The book was not of India in any sense of the term: Can I be considered an Indian writer by virtue of my birth alone? Do I remain an Indian writer if I write in the voice of a white American man? Is it my literature that makes me Indian or my passport? This class of questions will gain in significance as diasporic writing speaks in more and more tongues.

Examining the fiction of such writers also raises the question whether we should always expect writers residing
outside India to write about cross-cultural relationships and also whether writers living outside India forfeit the right to comment on behalf of an entire nation or not. An Indian writer abroad is hardly ever looked at as anything else but an Indian ethnic writer. So it is good that at least some young writers are attempting to do away with stereotypes.

Let us also examine the case of Jhumpa Lahiri, whose *Interpreter of Maladies* took the literary world by storm. Though belonging to the younger generation of writers, Lahiri's stories usually hover around cross-cultural relationships in the traditional sense. Born in London, raised in Rhode Island, Connecticut, and presently living in New York, Jhumpa set some of her stories in Calcutta because of "a necessary combination of distance and intimacy" and in an interview said:

I went to Calcutta neither as a tourist nor as a former resident- a valuable position, I think, for a writer ... I learnt to observe things as an outsider and yet I also knew that, as different as Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way. In the ways I didn't seem to belong in the U.S. (57)
Whether it is Mrs. Sen who feels an alien in the American cultural setting, Mrs. Das who has to confide her maladies to an Indian interpreter in one of her visits to India, Lahiri too loves to maintain the cultural binary formula in her characterization. In her novel, *The Namesake*, Gogol Ganguli’s relationships are once again dictated by his otherness, his immigrant angst, something that his parents are unable to fathom.

In a slightly different manner than Sunetra Gupta or of Rushdie or Boman Desai, or these two young women like Bidisha and Abha Dawesar, in all of his novels, Amitav Ghosh too experiments with various forms of cross-cultural interactions between his characters. *The Shadow Lines* centers around Tridib who has spent a year in London in 1939 when war broke out. He had stayed with Mrs. Price, a family friend. May was a little baby when Tridib had first seen her in London. Later a romantic relationship develops through correspondence transcending the shadow lines of national and cultural boundary. The narrator questions the validity of geographical boundaries and celebrates the union of two cultures. Tresawsen (May’s mother) and Mayadebi (Tridib’s mother),
Tridib and May, Jethamoshai and Khelid, the rickshaw-puller thus rise above the prevailing passions of war, hatred and political logic of partition. Also, as a story of alienation and a quest for meaning in life, the development and growth of Thamma’s character expresses total futility of the political freedom. On her visit to her old home place in Dhaka, she becomes a foreigner to her own land, more foreigner than the English May, who does not need a visa to East Pakistan.

That characters cannot be understood through the traditional east-west binaries becomes clear in Amitav Ghosh’s other novels too. In An Antique Land bears testimony to his interaction with at least four languages and cultures spread over three continents and across several countries. Calling it not a novel but ‘a technical innovation’, Ghosh tells us about Abraham Ben Yiju, a Tunisian Jewish merchant who came to India via Egypt around 1130 A.D. and Ben Yiju’s slave Bomma who is from Tululand of ancient India. Focusing on the interrelationships of the people rather than on nation-states and their rulers, the book explores some basic traits of human character and some fundamental human feelings and attitudes.
that persist through the ages despite socio-political upheavals and geographical changes. As a complex, fascinating and highly imaginative story of quest and discovery that weaves past, present and future into an intricate texture, *Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) is much more than a thriller or a detective fiction. It is the work of a social anthropologist and Ghosh crosses all intercultural and intercontinental barriers by presenting us the life-story of Antar, the Egyptian computer clerk, the Indian born American scientist – L. Murugan and the early twentieth century characters in Calcutta who revolve around Ronald Ross’s discovery of the Malaria parasite.

Sometimes cross-cultural experiences of multilocality could be a positive sign also. Ghosh’s latest novel, *The Hungry Tide*, though firmly and intractably, rooted in the treacherously attractive mudlands of the world’s largest delta in the south of Bengal, decapitates the barriers posed by the Queens language in one fell swoop. Apart from the social and political history of the Bengalis who settled down in the Sunderbans for the past one hundred years, the novel is an excellent example of the multifarious nature of human relationships and non-
verbal communication. The three main characters in the novel, Kanai, Pia and Fokir, come from and reside in totally three different social setups. Kanai the professional translator, full of urban arrogance, is a man who steps into the mud banks of memory and into Piya’s life. The rustle of language, of which he is a connoisseur, achieves no harmony with the songs of the tide country. Piya, an American with a Bengali parentage who is a cytologist on a mission to study the rare Gangetic dolphins, is unable to connect with Kanai on the same wavelength. Fokir, the illiterate fisherman with an intuitive understanding of the elements, acts as Piya’s guide and relationship between the two of them form the heart of the novel. The river unites them; it reduces the cultural and linguistic gap between them. He can read the secrets she is searching for; he, the child of the river, can see them before her binoculars reach out to them. They have no words in common. Silence and gestures, movements of eyes and fingers, translate their emotions for each other and dramatize the tension both elemental and erotic. Take for instance Ghosh’s manner of describing their communication or lack of it, on the boat:
She flipped over and lay on her stomach, turning her attention back to the dolphins ... she imagined the animals circling drowsily, listening to echoes ping ing through the water, painting pictures in three dimensions- images that only they could decode. The thought of experiencing your surroundings, in that way never failed to fascinate her; the idea that to 'see' was also to 'speak' to others of your kind, where simply to exist was to communicate.

And in contrast there was the immeasurable distance that separated her from Fokir. What was he thinking about as he started at the moonlit river? The forest, the crabs? Whatever it was, she would never know: not just because they had no language in common but because that was how it was with human beings, who came equipped, as a species with the means of shutting each other out. The two of them, Fokir and herself, they could have been boulders or trees for all they know of each other: and wasn't it a better way, more honest, that they could not speak. For if you compare it to the ways in which dolphins' echoes mirrored the world, speech was only a bag of tricks.
that fooled you into believing that you could see
through the eyes of another being. (59)

Fokir is almost indistinguishable from the landscape he inhabits
and ultimately becomes a part of it in his death. The climatic
episode, in which he tries to hold out against the diabolic
cyclone, using his body like a human shield to save Piya, is one
of the most memorable scenes of love between a man and a
woman that one has come across in recent times. There is a
great beauty in the moment when their bodies fuse with each
other for dear life, with a thin line of sweat in between. Along
with this non-verbal communication Ghosh also stresses a lot
on the idea of translations- of speech, text, from the realm of
idealism to that of reality – all of which appear as a leitmotif in
this novel. Kanai runs a thriving translations bureau in Delhi.
The Rilke poems that Nirmal is so besotted with come to him in
the form of translations. Piyali, born of Indian parents, raised in
Seattle and back in India on the trail of dolphins, needs to have
the words spoken in Bengali translated to her. The author
himself has translated a longish poem extolling the glory of
Bonbibi, the presiding deity of the forest and interpolated it into
the text. Are translations therefore a metaphor, a comment on how we human beings need to stay connected and in close proximity to each other to hold our own against the dark, unknowable forces? Thus this novel remains the most delicate register of human connection till date.

The English wife, Sophie Mol, in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is stereotypical in her manners. In her novels and short stories, the prolific writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni loves to concentrate on the trials and tribulations of the Indian American Community, their identity crisis and the larger issue of immigrants. As someone who has spent more time outside India than in it, she has been accepted as an Asian-American writer living with a hybrid identity and writing partially autobiographical work. In an interview published in *The Sunday Statesman* on February 2, 2003, when asked what she felt she was – an Indian. An American or an Indian living in the U.S., Divakaruni confessed:

I have to live with hybrid identity. In many ways I'm an Indian, but living in America for nineteen years has taught me many things. It has helped me look at both
cultures more clearly. It has taught me to observe, question, explore and evaluate.

We can say, in some cases, that Indian fiction in English, especially as represented by the diasporic writers in the last few decades of the twentieth century has changed so radically in its handling of human relationships that the so-called "Indianness" or the East-West binaries of characterization has probably disappeared for ever. The phrase 'Indian writer' becomes thus a misnomer or a paradox, and one is forced to recognize what Rushdie reiterates in his *Imaginary Homelands*, 'the folly of trying to contain writers inside passports'. The random examples and analysis of the interactions of characters placed in this changed scenario herald new understanding, definitions and contours of human relationships. With Indian English fiction emerging as a major selling commodity in the global cultural market, as we move towards a global monolingualism, the our / their binary disappearing fast and turning India into a global village, the increasing corrosion of values in the Indian middle-class who are the custodians of values in society, a pan-Indian readership- all these socio-political changes are responsible for
a different Indian English fiction, embarrassing all the key themes and images of post-colonial literature, i.e. journeying, loss, search for community, arrival of the stranger – these ideas are expanded and redefined.
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