Chapter 5

Conclusion: The Way Forward …

People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It’s not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and biographies and histories rewritten.

(Kundera, 22)

The mass migration to Britain from South Asia, African and Caribbean locations following the Second World War have altered the demographics of Britain to a much greater extent than seen from any other single era. These immigrants have brought with them their literary heritages, cultural traditions and diasporic sensibilities that have had a most profound impact on British national culture, leading to a more complex and inclusive sense of its past. It is important to review what constitutes diasporic identity for the contemporary people of South Asian origin who live in Britain. The diasporic sensibility is one where the immigrants and their children have either retained a memory of, or a cultural connection with the homeland which is seen in their orientation to either the homeland culture or its religious practices. They often face internal doubts about being fully accepted in the host country and its majority community. They are usually committed to their survival as a distinct community within the majority community of the host country. They also often harbour a myth of return, though it may be manifested in significantly different ways among the immigrants and their children. In the novels of Rekha Waheed, a second generation Muslim British chick lit writer of Bangladeshi origin, though the protagonists visit their country of origin, Bangladesh, to do the
wedding shopping they aspire to settle in Dubai – a place that is as cosmopolitan as London with as many job opportunities but closer to ‘home’, warmer and welcoming of their modern, educated and headscarf or ‘hijab’-wearing Muslim women status.

Indian diaspora is, much like India itself, one of the most diverse diasporas of the world. It has never been homogenous and is divided along the lines of religion, region, language, class, caste, their proficiency in the host country language and education levels. Diaspora experiences are also divided by their contexts. The twice migrant third, fourth or fifth generation children of the indentured labourers who have memories of two homelands, imperial migrants, the intellectual and technological migrations of the present day, the global souls who are the products of globalization have vastly different diasporic experiences and sensibilities. Their writing, a product of their diasporic sensibility, also reflects a great range in terms of content, motifs, forms and techniques. Diasporic writing includes all forms of scripting: literature and performance, fiction and films. For a piece of literature or film to be classified as diasporic, the identity of the author, the location of the story and the plot of the story play major roles. Diasporic writing must be on diasporic experiences and the author must be an immigrant living away from homeland. It is argued by critics that failing to satisfy either of the conditions the writing should not be considered to be diasporic.

Diasporic writing has emerged into a distinct literary genre today. The word ‘diaspora’, derived from the Greek word diaspeiro, means a scattering of people away from their homeland. Though initially limited to the dispersal of Jews from their homeland, in this increasing era of globalization, it is applied to the numerous ethnic and racial groups living away from their homeland. The immigrants who left their home countries for various reasons, voluntary and non-voluntary, had to construct afresh a sense of community, culture and nationality in a country where they were a minority. Thus, their writings deal with their own experiences of geographical dislocation, displacement, cultural ambivalence, social and
political alienation and absence of centrality. On the one hand they express a longing for their homeland through memories, oral testimonies, remembered histories and stories, and on the other hand they give voice to their reaction to the new country where they have settled as immigrants.

One of the central features of diasporic writing is mapping out the journey that all immigrants must undertake. The journey starts with a movement away from one’s homeland to an alien land. This is followed by a phase of experiencing loss and rejection in a hostile and unfamiliar society. Then gradually the immediacy of the sense of loss begins to fade away and there follows an intense struggle to create a space for themselves in the adopted country. Finally after all these phases, the immigrant moves towards a process of reconciliation, assimilation and affirmation of the new culture. This process can be summed up as a moving away from the centre of the immigrant’s home culture to the periphery of the alien culture and again moving from the periphery of the alien culture to a different centre representing multi-culture, that is, a consciousness of at least two cultures or more. Malathi Ramanathan writes in her essay “Voices from Within: Diaspora and Women Writers”:

Individuals and families who live at the juncture between two cultures can lay claim to belonging to both cultures, yet for reasons of being born into one culture and living in the second, they are marginal people, very different to the norm set by majority. Marginality leads to the psychological conflicts of a divided self. The story of the diaspora is the different stages in the resolution of this conflict in the lives of individuals, families, and generations. With the loss of sense of security of a known historical past and a shared geographical space, the need “to belong” becomes constitutive of the Indian diaspora. (Ramanathan, 187)
How does one define a writer of the Indian diaspora then? Does one include Zadie Smith who provides a counter-perspective on Indian diasporic writings? Does one include V.S. Naipaul and Bharati Mukherjee who have consistently insisted away their hyphenated identities and claimed they are not Indian writers? For a writer of the Indian diaspora perhaps it is more significant to consider their cultural associations with the homeland than their remoteness or closeness to India and therefore Naipaul and Mukherjee are writers of Indian diaspora whether they want to be labelled as such or not. However, there are numerous other writers who cannot be classified easily. What happens to writers to continue to write in their vernacular languages from the foreign soil such as Alokeranjan Dasgupta one of the major Bengali poets who has been settled in Germany for decades? Though he is listed as a Bengali poet, he is hardly ever referred to as a diasporic writer. Though he writes in Bengali he feels the same emotions as a diasporic writer writing in English. Or writers like Meena Alexander who left for the US for better academic pastures only in her middle age? Or writers such as Anurag Mathur who lived abroad for a few years and then permanently settled back to India?

In his essay “Another Kind of British” Cary Rajinder Sawhney discusses the growing number of British films with Asian themes that saddle the dual identities of the British Asian diasporic population in Britain. These films have infused their distinctive culturally hybrid identities, aesthetics and experiences into British films and showcase the lived experiences of the Asian communities of Britain. Many of these films have kept the song and dance sequences and the narrative structure of trademark Bollywood Hindi movies. The emergence of this new class of films which included cast and crew who were themselves also simultaneously British and Asian reflects the reality of modern multiethnic Britain that is slowly embracing the plurality of its citizens. One of the most prominent directors of British Asian origin, Gurinder Chadha’s first film *Bhaji on the Beach* which released in 1994 narrates the story of a group of
Asian women who are each strikingly different from each other except for the fact that they all topple the notion of passive, demure and traditional Asian women.

These women love flirting with British boys, fall in love with men who are outside their caste, class or race and have ambitions that go beyond managing the family-run corner store and domestic chores. In Chadha’s third film *Bend it Like Beckham* released in 2002, the young Punjabi-British protagonist Jess aspires to become a football player like Beckham, something unheard of within the insular, traditional and conservative Punjabi community in Britain. Television and radio shows too joined the growing coterie of British Indian films being made by and about the British Indians. Some of the films had a distinctly ‘anti-ethnic’ theme while others adopted a more ‘feel-good’ attitude towards the diasporic experience. However, more than the tone it is perhaps even more significant to note that British Asian filmmakers are beginning to react, feel strongly about the depicting their realities and resist the labels that had been imposed on them previously. These films and shows are interestingly subversive as they explore instances of both confrontation and assimilation of Asian and British cultures, tradition and modernity and is equally irreverent of stereotypes from both the cultures.

British black and Asian literature is a testimony of the impact that the post war migration has had on the rejuvenation and renovation of British culture. These immigrants has had a major impact on the British society and the British society has had a major impact on them. The first generation settlers’ energies were at the helm of rebuilding war-damaged Britain into an incontestably multicultural society. These post war first generation immigrant writers employed cultural self-maintenance as a strategy against racial hostility. They also critiqued the malpractices and inequalities of British society through their writings. Many of these writers had grown up studying the white colonial traditions due to the colonial education they had received back at home. They could thus compare the actual reality of the British society they lived in with the glorified accounts they had studied through a creative bifocal lens. Their
children either British born or at least raised and educated in Britain however strove to situate themselves as British citizens with a migratory legacy. The British school system they were educated in had failed to represent their Asian and African heritages positively. This has also had a lasting impact on the children of the settlers. Since the 1990s the transfer of power to regional bodies in the UK has further contributed to fluid identities by releasing nationalisms, regional affiliations and affiliations based on language, ethnographies and cultural traditions. This has also had a lasting impact on the second generation writers.

The literature of the ‘British Asian’ label in its present avatar started emerging in the 1990s with the success of books, films, plays, music albums and TV shows by and about the British Asians. From Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* published in 1990, it has been an exciting journey to see South Asian immigrants find more visibility and representation in mainstream British literature. Though post war immigrant writing was initiated and dominated by male writers, black and Asian women writers in Britain have used prose fiction to achieve literary self-determinism. In any society, and even more so in diasporic societies, women are the carriers and preservers of culture and identity of the community.

Diasporic women’s writing is a way of determining and shaping their own identities against a prescriptive social order. Their writings of self-determination offer an alternative to ‘malestream’ diasporic writings and restore women’s creativities and perspectives to contemporary British literature and its post war history. Contemporary British Asian women’s writing have grown from a complex mesh of political, social and cultural allegiances that could be formed between women through their multiple identifications such as Asian, feminist, lesbian, working class and so on. British Asian women’s writing thus carves out a new space that is simultaneously female and British Asian.

The post-1990s writers differ from their literary foremothers because though they continue to question fundamental diasporic issues such as racism, identity, belonging and self-hood
these writers take their British nationality as a given. Their self-determinism consists of being British in the widest possible way – on the one hand they refuse to restrict their writing to themes of racial representation and on the other hand they make no effort to hide or obscure their ethnic inheritance. Nikita Lalwani and Preethi Nair, the two authors examined in this study are two of the newest and finest voices of female Indian diaspora in Britain. Though they have received many awards and recognitions for their novels, they are still relatively unknown voices and this study aims to expose their writings to a larger audience.

Borrowing and developing a unique critical perspective by mixing new historicism, postcolonial feminism and critical race studies the study has examined five novels of the two selected authors. Though there is great diversity in themes, form and content there are some recurrent motifs that reflect their social milieu. All the five novels are ‘coming of age’ novels or *bildungsromans*. The protagonists are young second generation immigrants who have been born or at least raised and educated in the UK. Some of the motifs that recur in the novels are feelings of both alienation and belonging that these immigrants experience towards Indian and British culture. They are both insiders and outsiders at the same time and ironically both their Indian family and British friends and colleagues think of them as the ‘other’. These young protagonists move from a state of confusion about their hyphenated identity towards multiculturalism and creating a third space for themselves where they define their identity in their own terms and start living for themselves as opposed to being puppets in the hands of their parents, community elders and even their British colleagues and friends who expect them to be stereotypes and clichés rather than individuals with unique personalities.

In keeping with their Asian heritage, the protagonists are strongly tied to their families except for Lalwani’s *The Village*. Here too, though Lalwani doesn’t say anything about the protagonist Ray’s own family life the novel is built around the stories of the inmates of Ashwer and their families. While love is ever present amongst the closely knit families it is not always
benevolent love. It is love that suffocates and chokes. Parents love their child as their duty and responsibility. The first generation immigrants go through immense hardships so that their children can have education and all the privileges that they lacked. Their love is rooted in expectations that the children will be obedient and they would walk the path that their parents have mapped out for them. However, for the children who have been raised in the more liberal philosophy of the West freedom and personal choices matter. The burden of excessive parental expectations is stifling and in the fight for control the parent – children bond often turn abusive both for the children and for the parents who are losing their children. Family instead of becoming a source of emotional sustenance thus often becomes the cause of their greatest grief, betrayal and heartache.

One of the most recurrent motifs in these novels is the vastly heightened importance of education and white-collar jobs among first generation Indian immigrant parents. First generation Indian immigrants to the UK mostly arrived to fill the gap in unskilled labour after the Second World War. Uneducated and often having no access to English language, they went through indescribable hardships to fit into a hostile and unwelcoming land. Being a minority in the host country most of these immigrants had to face racism and discrimination in their adopted homeland. The only way they could cope with these hardships was through hope. Hope that their children would have all the opportunities they didn’t have. Education in premier institutions would lead their children to respectable and well-paying careers such as law, medicine, engineering and finance. Education was the only tangible insurance for a secured future that most parents could think of. Respectable jobs in respectable professions and a solid education held the keys to social standing, prosperity and a better standard of living. Happiness is measured by the first generation immigrant parents only in terms of the money a person earned and a career in liberal arts where the earning prospects were uncertain was dismissed as
hobby and not worthy of pursuit because it did not have the assured track record of making as much money or earning as much respect.

Education and white-collar jobs in respectable professions served another important purpose too. They were the only way to secure good matches with well-settled and prosperous families within the community for arranged marriages. The second generation immigrants on the other hand born and raised in a Western culture have very different notions of happiness and freedom. Having grown up in a culture of abundance and a more liberal environment they want greater freedom to choose careers that bring them happiness and fulfilment. Conflicts arise and the second generation immigrants are forced to live a stressful dual life filled with duplicity and lies. The parents associate the children’s desire for personal happiness with loss of Indian values, disobedience, bringing dishonour to the family name and selfishness. The parents instead of becoming the protectors become the abusers of their children in their determination to save the children from being polluted by Western philosophy. The children are filled with guilt, shame, anger and resentment and feel trapped in destructive relationships with the parents. The close-knit Indian family that used to be filled with love is contaminated with conflict, abuse, resentment, shame, guilt and lies.

Arranged marriages is another motif that is examined by these writers in great depth. The young protagonists who are all second generation immigrants examine the arranged marriages of their parents and find that like love marriages some work and some don’t. The marriages of the elder generations are steeped with patriarchal traditions and value systems that are unfair to the mothers though the mothers don’t seem to mind. The ‘list’ system drawn out by the parents and the community elders about finding suitable partners for the second generation immigrants is often used as a last alternative or on the rebound after a break up and thus the success rates are lower. Love marriages outside the community are on the rise and
though they do not always guarantee greater happiness they are expressions of exercising greater individual choices among the second generation immigrants.

Food is another important theme in these two writers as it is with many writers of Indian diaspora such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Divakaruni, Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Naipaul and many others. Food is one of the strongest markers of culture. For the first generation immigrants eating food that had been prepared exactly the way it would have been cooked at home becomes sometime the only accessible part of home. It assuages their nostalgia and provides them a sense of continuity and comfort that make them carry on in a foreign land where everything is strange. For the second generation immigrants raised and exposed to Western culture from birth or an early age British food is very attractive and it becomes a metaphor for fitting into the culture they were growing up in and considered their own. So food becomes an area of conflict between the generations as does clothes and what is considered to be ‘appropriate’ dressing.

The common thread that runs through all these motifs is that the second generation immigrants are often denied the freedom to make choices about their own lives, education, careers, friends, food habits, clothes and who they fall in love with and marry while their British friends take these for granted and cannot even think of being denied these choices. The parents think it is their duty and responsibility to guide their children to respectable and prosperous lives. Jasvinder Sanghera in her autobiography Shame recalls the horror of having had to run away from home because her parents had fixed her marriage to a stranger in India who was more than double her age. She was just sixteen and wanted to go to college like her friends. Two months after running away from her home she finally mastered the courage to call her mother and tell her she wanted to come home and that she terribly missed her family. Her mother responded by hurling abuses and curses for bringing shame to the family and labelled her a prostitute:
I had never felt so alone. It was as if someone had taken all my childhood memories and ripped them apart. In the next few days the conversation played over and over in my mind until I thought I would go mad.

‘You’ve shamed us …’

‘You are dead in our eyes …’

‘You’ve shamed us …’

‘You are dead in our eyes …’

Had I really done something so terrible that my parents could disown me?

Had they really stopped loving me? Was it such a crime to want my own life? (Sanghera, 4)

Preethi Nair and Nikita Lalwani along with many other talented young women writers of the contemporary British Asian diaspora such as Meera Syal and Jasvinder Sanghera are multifaceted personalities. They have multiple interests and professions and have used various mediums to tell their stories. Though these writers have predominantly used fiction to tell their stories they have experimented with many forms and techniques. Preethi Nair has used the technique of magic realism and food imagery to weave heart-warming tales of following one’s heart and realizing one’s full potential rather than existing in the shallow pool of parental expectations. In Lalwani’s novels the protagonists are more isolated and lonely. Their struggles are unique and cannot be labelled easily with some of the more overt racial and political motifs of diasporic writings. Meera Syal uses a mix of the silly and the satirical in her novels as her protagonists gently poke fun at both the majority white community and desi community of British Asians, belonging to neither completely. Jasvinder Sanghera, herself an honour abuse and forced marriage survivor in her autobiographical *Shame* trilogy does not hide behind fiction
as she passionately pioneers against honour abuse, community crimes and forced marriages among the Asian communities in Britain.

The novels are a process through which the diasporic writers construct their own new identities where they are caught trying to straddle between conflicting labels of being women, Asian, British and Hindu, Muslim or Sikh. The women writers write from their own experiences and from those of their mothers and friends about straddling multiple identities. Sometimes this straddling is relatively harmonious and sometimes this straddling can become quite acrimonious. They feel an alienation from and a belonging to both the cultures and the definition of ‘home’ is often fluid. While for the first generation immigrant ‘home’ mostly means the country of the origin, for second and third generation immigrants ‘home’ is firmly Britain and India is often referred to as the home of their parents. Many of these women, especially the older immigrants, are educated and successful outside their houses but revert to the patriarchal Asian traditions the moment they step into their houses. Tania one of the protagonists in Meera Syal’s *Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hee Hee* comments:

> Ask most of my girl-friends ranging in hue from copper to Dravidian blue-black; between them they run empires, save lives on operating tables, mould and develop young lives… Then they reach their front doors and forget it all … within a minute they are basting and baking and burning fingers over a hot girdle … soothing children … packing lunchboxes … and telling everyone who will listen they don’t mind. (Syal, 145)

Syal’s novel is one of the first open acknowledgments about the immense impact that Asian women have had on almost every sphere of British public life. Asian women have successfully entered the British corporate world, the medical field, the law and technological arenas. The novels of younger writers like Nikita Lalwani and Preethi Nair show younger
protagonists breaking free of traditional Asian roles of obedient daughters, wives and domestic goddesses. These young protagonists are shaping their own identities, on their own terms though sometimes they have to pay the high price of being alienated from their parents. The mixed-theory framework and the author interviews conducted for the study bring out the uniqueness of each novel in shaping the history and context of modern multiethnic Britain. The diversity of the content as well as the experimentation with form, setting and techniques used in contemporary British Asian women’s novels expand our understanding of their complex identities and expose the realities of modern multicultural Britain. The term British Asian and British Indian have been used interchangeably in this study and both indicate British writers whose ancestral origins emanate from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka – the Indian subcontinent.

At the start of the new millennium, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) burst into the scene of British black and Asian Literature. One of the first novels to articulate the experience of multiple ethnic communities and mixed races, the novel chronicles the predominant themes of diasporic British literature: migration, racial tension, mixed identities, generation gap and cultural integration. It is one of the first novels that ambitiously attempted to trace the generational history of modern multicultural Britain. One of the recommendations for further research on British Asian women’s literature is analyzing these mixed race experiences in contemporary novels. These novels are a mirror of contemporary multicultural Britain. Apart from Zadie Smith and Monica Ali, Roopa Farooki’s novels would be a very rewarding study for she writes about moral conflicts, emotional displacements and mental landscapes as much as she does about the more obvious aspects of diasporic sensibilities and geographic displacements.

Another recommendation would be to explore new, emerging voices from the British Asian diaspora who are writing about the diaspora from a fresh perspective. British Muslim
chick lit would be a fascinating area of study because there are a lot of talented writers who are writing from a perspective of what it means to straddle four different identities of being British, Asian, Muslim and woman that constantly pull them in conflicting directions. Their navigation is especially important for understanding the multicultural fabric of modern Britain. It would be rewarding to study how young Muslim women protagonists perceive the teachings of Islam and compare it to the radicalization of the Muslim boys as Zadie Smith shows through the character of Millat in her novel *White Teeth*. In a growing Islamophobic world these novels could provide invaluable windows into the world of British Muslims from their own perspectives.

In the present era of globalization, voluntary migrations for better opportunities and hyphenated identities, diaspora writings primarily focus on harmonious amalgamations of cultures and identities. The world is shrinking every day due to the advancements in technology and has become reduced to be referred to as the ‘global village’. However, an immigrant’s straddling of cultures is not always harmonious. The voices of discord are expressed through what is dismissed as ‘misery memoirs’ like Jasvinder Sanghera’s *Shame* trilogy and Sathnam Sanghera’s *The Boy with the Topknot*. Honour killings and community crimes are still rampant among the Asian immigrants in Britain. Sometimes discord is manifested as diseases like schizophrenia, bipolar disease and eczema. Sometimes the assimilation process crushes even a high-spirited protagonist like Sarna in Priya Basil’s *Ishq and Mushq*. Sometimes, even in the era of globalization home remains a place where the protagonists can never return even for a visit like the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Roshi Fernando’s *Homesick*.

A British Asian immigrant’s indigenousness is recognized by mainly two factors – his birth in the UK and his naturalization marked by a British passport. Yet visual ethnic markers of his Asian appearance can undermine his sense of belonging in his home country Britain by producing an outsider and marginalized status. He is much more susceptible to racism and has
to keep proving his British citizenship unlike the white majority British citizens. This divide is
even more prominently visible in writings set in rural Britain. While the cities are much more
cosmopolitan and multicultural, the British countryside remains dominated by the white
majority and function as a nostalgic ideal of Britain prior to post war migration. This is reflected
in the black and Asian writings set in the countryside where the black and Asian protagonists,
a clear minority, have to face racism routinely in their daily encounters.

British Asian literature along with black British literature offer plural counter-narratives
for representing lives that are often rendered negatively and reductively in mainstream
literature, culture and politics. These stories provide deeply insightful counterpoints to the
mainstream British literature and help to capture the diversity of contemporary British
literature. Britain still has some way to go before these talented, marginalized voices Asian
voices are welcomed into mainstream British literature. To echo Stephen Greenblatt it is these
voices that would shape not only the context and history but also the texts of mainstream
modern multicultural Britain. New writings of British black and Asian experiences will only
become increasingly complicated and convoluted in the present age of globalization. Asian
experiences will grow to mean Afghan, Nepalese and Tibetan and not just Indian. With new
global movements and fresh patterns of migration there will be new identities, new societies,
new thinkers and new theories that would revolutionize the way we look at diasporic literature
today and contribute to the continuing relevance of Diasporic Studies in the future.