

**ENCOUNTERING THE WEST: A VERY BRIEF OVERVIEW OF
INDIAN DISPORIC NOVELISTS**

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Abstract

“Encountering the West: A Very Brief Overview of Indian Diasporic Novelists” proposes to give a very brief overview of the different West-settled Indian English novelists – beginning with Anita Desai and Bharati Mukherjee, and concluding with Kavita Daswani and Kiran Desai – who attempt to depict the miseries and disillusionment of foreign-settled Indian immigrants in order to present a postcolonial view of the usually-praised ‘Western opportunities’. Other than referring to different critical approaches to literature of the Indian Diaspora, the essay also very briefly reviews the popular and critically-acclaimed publications of thirteen West-settled Indian novelists. If 21st-century English literature is dominated by publications of writers of the Indian Diaspora, their constant attempt to assume an alternative literary identity to the general and traditional Euro-American literature – ‘the encountering of the West’ – is one of the more important factors for their prominence.

Key Words: Western writings, Indian-English literature, Diaspora, Novelists, Postcoloniality

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The 21st century literary world has come to be dominated by writings by expatriate South Asian writers – especially from India – who have characteristically focussed on different themes common to modern literature: the sense of rootlessness, alienation, disillusionment, and identity-crisis. In the fast-changing post-modern world, immigration to the Western countries – especially to the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Canada – has become more a necessity than a luxury or an issue of ambition. However, immigration to the Orientalist West, where the White inhabitants often demonstrate such undesirable behavioural trends as xenophobia, patronisation of the Easterners, or contemptuousness, often brings unpalatable experiences for the settlers. They can neither adjust themselves to the new country's socio-ethical norms; nor can they quickly return to their country of origin. What results for these immigrants is a sense of hopelessness, indignation, and perplexity. As Crane and Mohanram write, "The notion of (India as) home might be repressed, but it reappears to punctuate the diasporic text, overtly or in disguise, over and over again" (x).

In late-20th and early-21st centuries – several powerful Indian litterateurs settled in the West have begun to address and explore problems faced by the Indian immigrants in an attempt – what can be best described as – to 'encounter the West'. It is not that their publications have led to overnight betterment of living conditions or cultural acceptance of the settlers in foreign countries; but at least the prospective immigrants have come to know what to expect in the West and how to tackle the unpalatable situations. The present paper proposes to provide a very brief overview of the Indian diasporic litterateurs, principally novelists, with highly acclaimed publications – just like what N. Jayaram attempted in his "Indian Diaspora in *Sociological*

Bulletin" (Jayaram 34-43). It may also be mentioned that Sudesh Mishra distinguishes between the *old writers* of the Indians diaspora and the *new writers* on the basis of the formers' dealing with the sensations of being Indians vis-à-vis the latter's reflection on the misfortunes of members of displaced communities (Mehrotra 281-82).

Indian diasporic novelists first seem to have had achieved prominence with the literary success of Bharati Mukherjee (b. 1940), who migrated to the United States of America in the 1960s. Presently a professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), shows how the (female) protagonist Tara, a fiery Bengali based in the U.S.A. and married to an American, faces the patriarchal juggernaut of Bengali society when she returns to India. In *Wife* (1970), the traditionally-married Dimple Dasgupta, who, after relocating to the U.S.A. with her engineer-husband Amit Basu, experiences sense of alienation and rootlessness in the new country instead of in India, which 'shocks' Tara. In *Jasmine* (1989), the seventeen-year-old widow Jasmine has to travel to the U.S.A. in order to survive, but has to change her identity several times to adapt to the Western societal paradigm. *The Holder of the World* (1993) reinterprets Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), and involves time-travelling while the main narrative unfolds in 17th century and post-modern U.S.A. and colonial India. While *Leave it to Me* (1997) explores the feminine power with reference to the myth of Goddess Doorga, *Desirable Daughters* (2002) and *The Tree Bride* (2004) are historical novels dealing with the female versions of Indian anti-imperialistic resistance, simultaneously examining the issue of postmodern Anglo-American immigration. Mukherjee's latest novel, *New Miss India* (2011) focuses on how Anjali Bose, a former call-centre-employee, re-emerges as a fashionable woman to make her mark in a patriarchal world.

Three years senior to Mukherjee and an Indo-German intellectual, Anita Desai (b. 1937) is more famous as an Indian English novelist than as an expatriate Indian writer. Desai, who is presently the *Emeritus John E. Burchard Professor of Humanities* at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, published her first feminist novel *Cry, The Peacock* in 1963, demonstrating in it how the

sensitive young wife Maya, a sufferer from *Electra Complex*, fails to find attention and affection from her lawyer-husband Gautama and pushes him off the parapet of their house in a frenzied mood. In *The Voices in the City* (1965), Desai depicts how a Kolkata-based middleclass and bohemian brother Nirode and his two sisters Monisha and Amala are caught in the crosscurrents of changing social values. *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971) is set in England, simultaneously attractive to repulsive to its thousands of settlers, and explores the lives of immigrants who seek to forge new identities in an unsympathetic, Eurocentric society. The principal narrative of *The Peacock Garden* (1974) unfolds through the young Muslim girl Zuni who, along with her family members, hides inside a mosque during the violence of Indian Partition and later sets out to explore the changed world outside. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), the sensitive young Sita, who is unhappily married, tries to decide whether to abandon the boredom and hypocrisy of middle class or enjoy her ostensibly comfortable existence, realising that the bonds that tie her to her societal status cannot be easily flouted. *Cat on a Houseboat* (1976) was followed by *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), which focuses on the relationship between the aged Nanda Kaul and her secretive and vulnerable great-granddaughter Raka. The eleven-short-story-collection on urban India, *Games at Twilight* (London: William Heinemann, 1978), was followed in 1980 by *Clear Light of Day* which is set in Delhi and describes the tensions in a post-partition Indian family – of the Dases – during and after childhood, starting with the characters as adults and moving back into their lives through the course of the book. *The Village by the Sea: An Indian Family Story* is targeted to tastes of young people and is based on the poverty, hardships and sorrow faced by a small rural, community in India. In *In Custody* (1984), the teacher of Hindi, Deven, abandons his vocation for translating Urdu poetry while remaining connected to the poet Nur. *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) and *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) were followed in 1999 by *Fasting, Feasting*, which contrasts between American and Indian cultures through the developments of the two protagonists Arun and Uma. In the twenty-first century, Desai wrote *Diamond Dust and Other Stories* (2000), *The Zigzag Way* (2004) about a Mexico-travelling American academician, and *The Artist of Disappearance* (2011). The recipient of the *Man Booker Prize* of 2006 and naturalised American citizen, Kiran Desai (b.

1971), is Anita Desai's daughter. Her oeuvre consists of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) – based on the real-life story of Kapila Pradhan and dealing with the exploits of the Shahkot-based Indian, Sampath Chawla, who settles himself on a guava tree and uses the gossip he learned as a former post-office-employee to convince people he is clairvoyant and soon comes to be regarded as a popular mystic – and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), set in Kalimpong and New York and exploring the shortcomings of the life of Indian immigrants in the United States of America.

The controversial litterateur Ahmed Salman Rushdie's (b. 1947) oeuvre comprises nine novels (*Grimus*, 1975; *Midnight's Children*, 1981; *Shame*, 1983; *The Satanic Verses*, 1988; *The Moor's Last Sigh*, 1995; *The Ground beneath her Feet*, 1999; *Fury*, 2001; *Shalimar the Clown*, 2005; and *The Enchantress of Florence*, 2008) and two collections of children's writing (*Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, 1990; and *Luka and the Fire of Life*, 2010). Winner of the 1981 Booker Prize, Rushdie employs *magic realism* in his novels and covers a wide range of topics – from history to partition and the complexities of human relationships. Currently a professor at Emory University (Druid Hills, Georgia, U.S.A.), Rushdie was condemned to death by the Iranian religious leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, in February 1989 for writing *The Satanic Verses*. Rushdie usually avoids writing about the cultural disillusionment encountered by Indian immigrants to the West. His first novel, *Grimus* (1975), is partly a science fiction tale, while his magnum-opus *Midnight's Children* follows the life of Saleem Sinai who was born at midnight just before the Indian independence day and is endowed with special powers and a connection to other children born at the dawn of a new and tumultuous age in the history of the Indian sub-continent. *Shame* is a focus on Pakistani politics but, like its successors, failed to bring as critical acclaim for its author as did *Midnight's Children*.

In 2013, Meena Alexander (b. 1951) works as the Distinguished Professor of English at Hunter College, New York. Primarily a poet whose collections include *Stone Roots* (1980), *House of a Thousand Doors* (1988), *The Storm: A Poem in Five Parts* (1989), *Night-Scene: The Garden* (Short Work Series) (1992), *River and Bridge* (1995), *Illiterate Heart* (2002), *Raw Silk* (2004), and

Quickly Changing River (2008), her two novels are *Nampally Road* (1991) and *Manhattan Music* (1997). In *Nampally Road*, Mira Kannadical returns from the United Kingdom to India after graduate school to teach, but when she moves into a house on Nampally Road in Hyderabad, she is shocked by the conflicts and contradictions of modern Indian life. In *Manhattan Music*, Alexander examines the Indian diaspora in the U.S.A., making her protagonist Sandhya Rosenblum perplexedly decide which culture – indigenous or American – to choose as she is briefly but unsuccessfully attracted to the Egyptian scholar Rashid instead of her American husband Stephen.

A *Neustadt International Prize for Literature*-laureate, Rohinton Mistry (b. 1952) immigrated to Canada in 1975 and has so far published three novels – *Such a Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), and *Family Matters* (2002), and three short-story-collections – *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987), *Searching for Stevenson* (1994), and *The Scream* (2006). While *Such a Long Journey*, with the Parsee bank-employee Gustad Noble as its protagonist, looks at the tumultuous Indian political milieu of during the premiership of Indira Gandhi (1917-84), *A Fine Balance* is in Mumbai between 1975 and 1984, and explores the bondage that occurs between four characters from different societal levels: Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji, his nephew Omprakash Darji and Maneck Kohlah, a student. Nine years junior to Rohinton Mistry, Vikram Chandra (b. 1961) presently lectures creative writing at the University of California, Berkeley, and has three publications – *Red Earth and Pouring Rain: A Novel* (1995), *Love and Longing in Bombay: Stories* (1997), and *Sacred Games* (2006). Chandra's debut novel combines Indian myths, epic history, and the story of three college-students in search of the true face of the U.S.A., while *Scared Games*, with its two principal characters Inspector Sartaj Singh and the gangster Ganesh Gaitonde, reviews Mumbai's criminal underworld. While Chandra has achieved recognition as a novelist, Mistry is primarily known for his *Tales from Firozsha Baag* whose short-stories deal with the sensibilities of Parsees who are expatriates in both India and the Western countries where they willingly or are forced to relocate.

Cultural confusion and alienation of West-settled Indians, so much

obtrusively and singularly absent in Rushdie, is the centre of focus of *The Shadow Lines* (1988), the second novel of Amitav Ghosh (b. 1956), currently a Distinguished Professor of Comparative Literature at Queen's College, City University of New York. Ghosh has published seven novels until 2013 – other than *The Shadow Lines*, the debut *The Circle of Reason* (1986), *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2005), *Sea of Poppies* (2008), and *River of Smoke* (2011). *The Calcutta Chromosome* is a medical thriller; *The Glass Palace* – set in Myanmar, India, and the Malay Peninsula, begins with the 1885 fall of the Konbaung Dynasty in Mandalay, through the Second World War (1939-45) to post-modern periods. The locale of *The Hungry Tide* is the Sunderbans and the novel involves the journeys and love-life of Piyali Roy, a U.S.-settled marine biologist working temporarily in Bengal. The main narrative of *The Sea of Poppies* is set prior to the Opium Wars (1839-42 and 1856-60), on the banks of River Ganges and in Kolkata. However, Ghosh's main recognition comes from *The Shadow Lines* which combines sensations of the Indian Partition with the loneliness the unnamed narrator of the novel feels as a student in England. *The Shadow Lines* was conferred the *Sahitya Akademi Award* and the *Ananda Puraskar*.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (b. 1956), now employed as the *Betty and Gene McDavid Professor of Writing* at the University of Houston Creative Writing Program, wrote fourteen short-story-collections and novels between 1995 and 2013, mostly dealing with the challenges faced by the independent-minded and often single-living Indian young women: *Arranged Marriage: Stories* (1995), *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Unknown Errors of our Lives* (2001), *Neela: Victory Song* (2002), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *The Conch Bearer* (2003), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Mirror of Fire and Dreaming* (2005), *The Palace of Illusions: A Novel* (2008), *Shadowland* (2009), *One Amazing Thing* (2010), *Grandma and the Great Gourd* (a children's picture book released in 2012), and *Oleander Girl* (2013). Tilottama, the U.S.-settled shopkeeper of *Mistress of Spices* who uses different spices to psychologically treat people before falling in love with the American Doug, was enacted by Aishwarya Rai (b. 1973) in the 2005-film of the same name directed by Paul Berges. *Sister of My Heart* is set alternatively in India and the U.S.A. and

centres on the lives of two Indian girls, Anju and Sudha, with the principal focus on family, friendship, and the bond between Anju and Sudha. *The Palace of Illusions*, based on *The Mahabharata* (c. 8-9th century B.C.) is actually a story by Draupadi who is doomed to live in a patriarchal world. Banerjee's poetry-collections include *The Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990), *Black Candle* (1991), and *Leaving Yuba City* (1997).

Kunal Basu (b. 1956), a Professor of Saïd Business School, Oxford University, has published four novels until 2013: *The Opium Clerk* (2001), *The Miniaturist* (2003), *Racists* (2006), and *The Yellow Emperor's Cure* (2011), and a collection of short stories, *The Japanese Wife* (2008), the title story of which has been made into a 2010 film by Aparna Sen. The U.K.-settled Indian is one of the very few diasporic practitioners of historical fiction, influenced by the Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-94). In *The Opium Clerk*, Basu deals with the opium trade in colonial India, while *The Miniaturist* is set in the Mughal court. *Racists*, as the name suggest, is a postcolonial examination of subaltern identity. The principal story involves a scientific experiment in the mid-19th century in which a coloured male and a white female are raised together as savages on a small African island by two rival scientists debating on the issue of racial superiority.

Anita Rau Badami (b. 1961), an Indo-Canadian, continuously focuses on the Indian anxieties and frustrations and the problems of cultural adjustment faced by the diasporic communities in the West, particularly in the North American continent. Her first novel, *Tamarind Mem* (1997), centres on the frustrations felt by Kamini and Roopa as they encounter the discontentment of their mother Saroja, who wanted to be a physician and is married to a railway-engineer husband 'Dadda' almost always on duty-tours. *The Hero's Walk* (2001) is set at Toturpuram, a small city on the Bay of Bengal, and explores the troubled life of Sripathi Rao, an unremarkable, an advertising copywriter, whose daughter Maya and his White son-in-law are killed in a Canadian road-accident and he is forced to visit the country to bring their seven-year-daughter Nandana back to India. *Can you hear the Nightbird call?* (2006) is set in India and Canada and narrates the story of three women –

SharanjeetKaur, LeelaBhat, and Nimmo – who are linked and destroyed by the political turmoil that sweeps through the Punjab first during the Indian Partition and then in the 1980s when the demand for an independent Sikh state called ‘Khalistan’ achieved violent proportions. Her *Tell it to the Trees* (2011) is a thriller set in Merritt’s Point, Canada, and involves the friendship between the writer Anu Krishnan and Suman Dharma, the timid second wife of Vikram Dharma. Anu Krishnan is killed as a result of her growing closeness to Suman Dharma.

Currently a Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, England, AmitChaudhuri (b. 1962) published five novels, especially on diasporic sensibility and the usual themes of rootlessness and disillusionment in the West-settled Indians, between 1992 and 2009: *A Strange and Sublime Address* (1991), *Afternoon Raag* (1993), *Freedom Song* (1998), *A New World* (2000), and *The Immortals* (2009). In his last-published novel, a famous Mumbai-based voice teacher and his sixteen-year-old student are shown to enter into a relationship that has unexpected and lasting consequences in their lives, and the lives of their families. Citing the instance of writers like Chaudhuri and others, Uma Parameswaran observes that the publications of these writers are more often classified as part of literatures of the countries of their settlement than as specimens of Indian diasporic writings (Mittapalli and Piciucco1).

The Vice-President of the *P.E.N. American Centre*, New York, and a member of the *U.S. President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities*, JhumpaLahiri (born ‘NilanjanaSudeshnaLahiri’ in 1967) is settled in Brooklyn with her husband Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, a Senior Editor of *Time Latin America*. The principal focus of her two novels – *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowlands* (2013) – and two collections of short stories – *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) – is the difficulties faced by the Indian immigrants to the United States. The winner of the 2000 *Pulitzer Prize for Fiction*, Lahiri was called ‘Jhumpa’ instead of ‘Nilanjana’ by her kindergarten teachers at Kingston, Rhode Island, because it was easier to pronounce, and she used to feel embarrassed. The novelist’s ambivalence over

her identity was the inspiration for the ambivalence of Gogol, or 'Nikhil Ganguli', the protagonist of *The Namesake*, over his unusual name. As Sunita Agarwal writes, "In her second work [...] [Lahiri] [...] deals with the theme of identity crisis and the problem, of assimilation and adaptation in another country", and interprets that 'generational differences' receive the central focus in *The Namesake* (Agarwal 29). In 2006, *The Namesake* was released as a Mira Nair-directed film, with Sahabzade Irrfan Ali Khan (b. 1967), Tabassum Hashmi (b. 1971), Kalpen Suresh Modi (b. 1977), and Zuleikha Robinson (b. 1977) enacting respectively the roles of the principal characters 'Ashoke Ganguli', 'Ashima Ganguli', 'Nikhil Ganguli', and 'Moushumi Mazumdar'.

An internationally-acclaimed journalist, Kavita Daswani (b. 1971) grew up in Hong Kong before settling down permanently in Los Angeles, U.S.A., in 2000. Her novels usually focus on the changes taking place in the diasporic Indian communities, especially regarding institutions such as marriage, conjugal relationships, and feminist advancements. Combining humour and cultural tensions, *The Village Bride of Beverley Hills* (2005) shows how Priya, who moves to California after marriage, abandons her traditional role as a housewife for a job at a Hollywood-gossip-magazine and challenges her husband to choose between her and his conservative parents. *For Matrimonial Purposes* (2004) preceded *The Village Bride* by a year and the locales are New York and Mumbai. In the hilarious novel, the twenty-four-year-old Anju moves to the U.S.A. to search for a career and a husband. *Salaam, Paris* (2007) shows how the unhappily-married and Paris-settled Muslim girl Tanaya Shah becomes a supermodel and rediscovers the meaning of love. In *Indie Girl* (2007), the teenager protagonist Indie Konkippuddi, whose ambition is to become a fashion reporter, tries to get employment by reporting how a popular Western film actress is having her wedding-dress prepared from a small Indian village but suffers from identity-crisis as a professional. In *Bombay Girl* (2012), Sohana Badshah immigrates from Mumbai to London where she falls in love with Jagdish Sachdev but she is forced to review her place in her family and society when her grandfather's business faces unprecedented crisis. In *Lovetorn*, also published in 2012, Shalini, the

independent-minded woman who has settled in Los Angeles, has to make different cultural realignments while trying to choose between her Indian lover Vikram and the American classmate Toby. Taking in view the fact that a significant section of diasporic publications are written by and based on women, Hussain interprets this phenomenon as the emergence of 'New Woman in South Asian communities' (53).

There are several other powerful expatriate Indian litterateurs – except V.S. Naipaul who does not consider himself Indian, and including writers of the feminist 'chick-lit' subgenre – who are united by their keenness to 'encounter the West' by depicting Indian immigrants' life in Euro-American nations without any romantic excess. In his *Epilogue of The Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, Vijay Mishra develops this as the instance where 'the subaltern [actually] speaks' (245-55). However, Singh and Chetty have noted a basic difference in broad categories of diasporic writings: "Some writers use an assimilation approach to the cultures of the West to such a degree that they find Indian culture monolithically oppressive, while other continue to romanticise Indianness, yet still others exoticise, eroticise, and ethnicise the east for western consumption" (1). Whatever the differences are, Indian diasporic novelists will continue to make their presence felt throughout the 21st century, suggesting the emergence of a powerful South Asian literary community.

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