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*Making the Difference: The Differing  
Presentations and Representations of South  
Asia in the Contemporary Fiction of Home  
and Diasporic South Asian Women Writers*

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**Introduction**

Contemporary South Asian women writers write from almost anywhere in the world; from all parts of Asia, from Africa, Australia, Canada, Europe, and USA. Many of these women writers choose to focus their writings on their experiences of life as *South Asian* women. In this article, the diasporic literature I will be working with is by South Asian women writers from Canada, UK, and USA, and I therefore may occasionally group these countries under the term, ‘the West’, for ease of reference. For the same purpose, writers writing from *within* South Asia have been designated the term ‘home writers’.<sup>1</sup> (It must be noted that home and diasporic South Asian women writers are inclined to define themselves as such, based on race, culture, and family background, rather than on nationality and political status.)

It is perhaps unsurprising to find that the literature of diasporic writers differs in style and content from the works of those writing from within South Asia. Because there is a *pattern* of difference, this gives rise to the presumption that the geographical locations of the authors influence, to no small degree, their approach to writing in English, the

<sup>1</sup> One may well have reservations about the potentially misleading term ‘home writer’; the term was chosen to imply that the writer resides within South Asia, or is a national of a South Asian country. It is not possible to ascertain the nationality of every diasporic writer, but the purpose of this differentiation between home and diasporic writers is less to determine the political status of the authors, and more to register the geographical residences and locations of the writers, which goes a long way in influencing the writing.

audience for whom they write, and the concerns which they choose to draw attention towards. This difference and its implications is the primary focus of this article, which argues that the diasporic writers enjoy an advantage in terms of their (global) profile, and this in turn has had a significant impact on the representation of South Asia, especially beyond the Indian sub-continent.

The next section of this article will discuss the prominence of diasporic authors within this literary subculture of South Asian women's Literature, and the following section will proceed to discuss the implications of this dominance on the literary scene. The fourth section contains illustrations of the various types of diasporic and home texts, discussed with particular attention to the theme of identity in these texts. The article concludes with a discussion of the similarities and differences in the contemporary home and diasporic writings of South Asian women, paying particular attention to the pattern of difference, which is shaping and creating the image of South Asia.

### **The Prominence of Diasporic Authors Within the Genre**

To understand the extent to which the literary subculture of South Asian women's writings is dominated by diasporic authors, it is useful to list the works of fiction (novels and short story collections) published in 2001 and 2002 (Table 1) and observe the proportion of diasporic authors.<sup>2</sup>

The table includes information on the author's country of origin as well as the current residence of the authors because it was found that many of these authors have emigrated from South Asia to the West, especially to USA. The vast majority of the authors in the table are in fact currently residing in the USA. Many, therefore, are diasporic American Indians, and it is this group of writers who are the most prolific of the contemporary South Asian women writers, which in turn implies that it is *their* portrayals of South Asia and South Asian women which will be most widespread and dominant. It appears that it is predominantly the diasporic women writers who are the creators and keepers of the global literary image of South Asian culture, and this trend looks set to continue.

<sup>2</sup> This list does not claim to be exhaustive, but it does compile the prose fiction I have managed to access by South Asian women writers published in 2001 and 2002.

TABLE 1  
*Publications of South Asian Women's Writings in 2001–2002*

Author	Genre	Author's country of origin	Current location of author	Primary location of plot	Publication details
Talat Abbasi	Short stories	Pakistan	USA	Pakistan	Oxford, UK, 2001
Brinda Charry	Novel	India	USA	India	Penguin, India, 2001
Chitra Divakaruni	Short stories	India	USA	USA	Abacus, UK, 2001
Chitra Divakaruni	Novel	India	USA	USA	Random, USA, 2001
Suguna Iyer	Novel	India	India	India	Penguin, India, 2001
Amulya Malladi	Novel	India	Denmark	India	Ballatine, USA, 2002
Rani Manicka	Novel	Malaysia	UK	Sri Lanka & Malaysia	Hodder & Stoughton, 2002
Bharati Mukherjee	Novel	India	USA	India	Hyperion, USA, 2002
Anita Nair	Novel	India	India	India	Penguin, India, 2001
Meera Nair	Short stories	India	USA	India	Pantheon, USA, 2002
Kavery Nambisan	Novel	India	India	India	Penguin, India, 2002
Tahira Naqvi	Short stories	Pakistan	USA	USA	TSAR, Canada, 2001
Kamila Shamsie	Novel	Pakistan	Pakistan & UK	Pakistan & USA	Bloomsbury, 2002
Preeti Singh	Novel	India	India	India & Egypt	Hodder & Stoughton, UK, 2002
Indu Sunderesan	Novel	India	USA	India	Pocket Books, USA, 2002
Manjushree Thapa	Novel	Nepal	USA	Nepal	Penguin, India, 2001
Thrity Umrigar	Short stories	India	USA	India	Picador, USA, 2001
Vineeta Vijayaraghavan	Novel	India	USA	India	Soho Press, USA, 2001

Of these 18 publications in 2001 and 2002, there are 11 debut authors represented here, which indicates that there are more and more newcomers joining the literary scene.<sup>3</sup> The momentum of South Asian women writing literature in English only seems to be accelerating, judging by the increasing numbers of first-time authors.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The debut authors on the table are: Abbasi, Charry, Iyer, Malladi, Manicka, M.Nair, Singh, Sunderesan, Thapa, Umrigar, Vijayaraghavan.

<sup>4</sup> In an online interview, the Publishing Director of Harper Collins had said that a saturation point of South Asian women's literature will eventually assuredly come, but

Curiously, this list does not seem to contain any second-generation diasporic South Asian writers. Most of the writers on this list were born and raised in India. However, there are three Pakistani writers—Naqvi comes from Lahore and Abbasi and Shamsie from Karachi, and all write about the Pakistani community. (Naqvi writes about the diasporic Pakistani community in her latest publication.) For the first time, there is even a Nepali writer publishing a novel in English—Thapa, from Kathmandu. Nevertheless, it is the writers from India who still prevail in sheer numbers, and it is their writings which dominate the South Asian literary subculture.

Meenakshi Mukherjee had expressed a fear that the increasing prominence of literature in English would cause a less than representative view of India to emerge.

The category of writers called ‘The Third World Cosmopolitans,’ who are globally visible, who are taught in postcolonial classrooms the world over, and who are hailed in the review pages of Western journals as interpreters and authentic voices of the non-Western world hardly ever include a writer from India who does not write in English . . . . the precondition for belonging to this club is that s/he must write originally in English. Implicit here is an erasure of the diversity of India (Mukherjee, 2000).

Judging by the list of recent publications on this table, however, it would appear that Mukherjee has more to fear than the erasure of India’s diversity, or even the erasure of South Asia’s diversity, because even the women writers from India writing in English are easily outnumbered by their diasporic American-Indian sisters.

It is a curious fact that although the majority of the authors on this list are currently located in USA, their stories are mostly written against a backdrop of locations *within* South Asia. All the debut writers have situated their writings within South Asia (at least in part), perhaps due to their familiarity with both the culture and the geographical location of their countries (and cities) of origin. It is possible that having settled outside South Asia, they may choose to write of South Asia in order to inform other non-South Asians about their culture. It is remarkable, however, that all eleven debut writers have independently decided to start by writing of life for people in South Asia even though most of them are now living in USA. (Vijayaraghavan is a slight exception in that although her

at this juncture in time (2001), it appears that the saturation point is still nowhere in sight.

novel is situated in India, she writes of a diasporic protagonist on a summer visit.) There is usually a wealth of local detail in these books, suggesting that these authors are drawing on personal experiences and memories.

It is also worth noting that although all the debut novels and short stories on the list have located their plots and characters in South Asia, Divakaruni, and Naqvi did not choose to do so in their writings. It must be remembered that these are *not* debut writers. Continuing their literary careers, these authors have chosen to turn from writing of South Asians in South Asia, to writing of the diasporic experience for South Asians in USA. It remains to be seen whether these debut novelists will also be turning to situate South Asian characters in the West instead of in South Asia.

### **Positioning Home and Diasporic Writers**

Whether moving from South Asia to the West, or vice versa, or having been born and bred in the West, the one clear message from diasporic South Asian women writers is that they are different, very different, from their Western and South Asian counterparts. They are people who are as multi-cultural as they are multi-lingual. They do not regard themselves as fully belonging in either culture, and have practically evolved a sub-culture peculiar to themselves. They try to take the best from both worlds, but suffer the sense of hybridity and cultural entanglement. 'Transplanted, the individual is transformed; the "I" is no longer a speaking subject with a clear history and a distinct voice but rather becomes a composite product of historical antimonies and contradictory impulses' (Balkan, 1998).

Apart from the cultural entanglement (which can also be regarded as hybridity), diasporic South Asian writers have in common the deep desire to 'look back' to South Asia, to write and discuss at length the confusion of identity they are experiencing. This process of 'looking back' which has been described as nostalgia, seems irresistible to diasporic writers. Salman Rushdie explains that for Indians,

.... exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not

actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (Rushdie, 1983).

Rushdie highlights a vital point—namely that some of the Indias created by the diasporic communities may be no more than imaginary Indias. Be that as it may, the images of South Asia propounded and disseminated by the diasporic writers have the power of creating/recreating a South Asia to the wider world, (especially to a Western world, given the readership), and through the countless retellings, the ‘true’ portrayal of India may be warped, skewed, and distorted. Rushdie further explains that this skewed perspective may not be due to authorial irresponsibility, but is in fact the inevitable consequence of diasporic life because ‘it may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost’ (Rushdie, 1983).

Although the diasporic writers may reflect their identities through fragments of broken mirrors as Rushdie puts it, these reflections are imbibed by others in the diasporic community, namely, the readers. Some readers do of course challenge the accuracy and completeness of the portrayal of South Asia, but for many, the literary images advancing and propagating (and even prescribing) a certain way of life which is then labelled as ‘diasporic South Asian’ results in the diasporic community trying to reproduce what they have read. Writers are therefore at least partially responsible for contributing to the creation of a diasporic culture. In brief, the imagined and fictionalised diasporic experience may have become more real than reality.

It must also be noted that outside the Indian subcontinent, it is generally easier to obtain the publications of diasporic South Asian women writers than to obtain the work of home writers. This may in part be due to the audience and the demand for specific literature. Diasporic South Asians, especially those living in countries where they have facilities for publication and publicity available to them, are better positioned to formulate the image of South Asia. It is ironic that these articulate diasporic South Asian women writers may be so much more effective than their South Asian counterparts in marketing their ideas and ideals, that they almost consign the home South Asians to the position of subalternism. Diasporic literature is not only a reflection of diasporic life; it also plays a part in the propagating of certain ideas and ideals which contribute to the shaping of the identity of the diasporic

community. In short, diasporic literature produces a culture which it then circulates and legitimises (Said). This diasporic culture is initially an imagined culture, but having grafted itself into the imagination of the diasporic community, it becomes part of the thriving culture.

In terms of sheer numbers, as has been observed in Table 1 above, their prominence on the literary scene is considerable. Moreover, with their greater access to publication, promotion, and wide-spread distribution channels, the diasporic South Asian women writers find themselves in a position of disproportionate influence and reach, and their portrayals of South Asian women regarded as representative. Although the portrayals by these diasporic writers are regarded as representative, these images makers occasionally appear to be slightly unsure of the culture they are portraying. It is quite ironic to then find these diasporic authors requesting that their work be checked by other South Asian women to ensure that the details and local colour in their writings (particularly for ceremonies and festivals) are authentic and accurate. The positionality of diasporic South Asian women writers can therefore be understood to be a somewhat uneasy one as they simultaneously struggle to negotiate their identities and yet find themselves occupying a vantage point relative to those writing from within South Asia.

This position, however, may not necessarily be an enviable one; as Spivak pointed out, by making an individual a representative of their race/religion/nation, it was actually distancing that individual from the group represented by differentiating the individual from the group. In addition, it has been pointed out that there are numerous pitfalls for writers who set themselves up, or are set up by others, as 'emissaries', 'mirrors' or 'the authentic insiders' (Narayan, 1998). One major pitfall is that diasporic communities are inclined to succumb to 'totalisations' (defined by Uma Narayan as casting values or practices which pertain only to specific privileged groups within the community as values of the 'culture' as a whole). Totalisations are one of the results of deterritorialisation, the displacement of identities and meanings (Kaplan, 1987); diasporic writers more vulnerable to this than the home writers. In the following discussion of the literature by diasporic South Asian women writers, it can be seen that nostalgia, totalisation, and deterritorialisation are all factors which play their parts in shaping the imagination and identity of the diasporic community, and consequently, their presentation of the image of South Asia to the world.

### Justapositioning Texts

It must be acknowledged that upon close analysis of the literary and personal backgrounds of the authors (such as are available to be studied), a definition of what precisely constitutes a diasporic writer is neither easy nor exhaustive. Many South Asians now travel widely, frequently, and for extended periods of time. Many reside both in South Asia and in the West, having family and bases in both locations and thus moving freely and frequently from one to the other. Some have immigrated, some hold dual-citizenship, while others have permanent residence status in countries outside their own. The distinction between travel (however frequent) and diaspora needs to be made, and it is worded most succinctly by Clifford who says, 'diaspora is different from travel (although it works through travel practices) in that it is not temporary' (Clifford, 1997).

This travel and mobility, which was scarcely possible only several decades ago and far more uncommon, now slightly blurs the boundary between the home and diasporic writers. This suggests that these very boundary markers are negotiable, and certainly questionable, and it is important to keep in mind that the distinctions are not set in stone. Nevertheless, for the purposes of comparison, and in order to trace the emerging pattern in the writings of the South Asian women, in this article diasporic writers are so defined if they either do not write from within South Asia or else are not *primarily* based in South Asia. (This is a working definition rather than an attempt to classify writers into watertight compartments.)

The geographical location of the women characters in the novels of diasporic South Asian women writers largely fall into three broad categories: South Asian women who were born and bred in a Western country and have subsequently either been sent back to South Asia for a prolonged stay or to be married, or have simply chosen to 'return'; South Asian women who were born and bred in South Asia and subsequently have either been sent or have chosen to live in the West; and South Asian women who were born and bred in a Western country and continue to live there. Notions of identity differ significantly in each of these categories as formal textual interpretation in the following section will illustrate. The textual interpretation will also include an example of a home author, for the purposes of comparison. (The texts selected for the following analysis have been chosen for their deliberate engagement with issues not only of being a woman, but of being a *South Asian* woman, wherever she may find herself.)

### From West to East

Vijayaraghavan's *Motherland* tells the tale of teenage protagonist, Maya, sent by her parents from USA to Tamil Nadu, to spend a summer with her mother's relatives. This trip is intended to remind Maya of her roots and culture, and is an attempt to dissipate some of the undesirable influences of Westernisation. As Maya renews her acquaintance with the way of life in India, and accustoms herself once again to living under a different set of rules, standards and expectations, she discovers new aspects of herself. Dinner parties, visits to friends of relatives, dealing with servants, all these daily events bring home to Maya the confusing and disturbing knowledge that in some way, she is different from her relatives.

Maya is confused because, to a greater extent than she recognises, at unexpected moments, she finds herself tempted to identify herself as American. In conversation with her uncle and aunt, Maya suddenly discovers her latent loyalties and affinities, "Why would America want to do that?" I asked. I was careful not to say "we" for America' (Vijayaraghavan, 2001). It appears that amongst her Indian relatives in Tamil Nadu, Maya feels American, whereas amongst her white American friends, Maya feels Indian. Wherever she is, Maya compares herself with others and finds herself balancing between two sets of experiences which seem worlds apart from each other, and yet are both contained within her. In containing these separate worlds within her, Maya feels she is not completely a hundred percent from or of either.

Maya discovers that with each trip to India, she finds herself struggling harder not to feel out of place, 'If I scrubbed hard enough, I hoped I would peel away that layer of Americanness that made me feel clumsy and conspicuous here; I wanted to unearth that other person who had felt at home here and known how to fit in' (Vijayaraghavan, 2001). Maya's problem can in part be attributed to the fact that she is unaccustomed to the less comfortable living conditions, but the problem is also augmented by the fact that her relatives notice her 'clumsiness', remark on it, joke, or otherwise draw attention to her being from USA, however inoffensively. Her relatives regard her foreign status with a mixture of pride and deprecation, proud to be able to claim a niece and therefore connections in USA, and deprecating because they fear she may no longer be one of them.

'Now more than on earlier trips, I felt how hard and how exhausting it was to translate, even though we were all speaking English. There

were so many ways of being and expressing myself that I had to leave behind, so many I had to relearn' (Vijayaraghavan, 2001). Maya makes an interesting point when she says she has to *translate* even though all are speaking in English. The English spoken in India and in America are naturally different and the teenage Maya feels obliged to change her manner of self-expression, which in turn necessitates some shift of self-identity also.

The older Maya grows, the more it is brought home to her that she has to come to terms with the dual identities she has inherited, and that both worlds are increasingly demanding of her loyalties. She finds herself walking a finer and finer line as fewer and fewer allowances are made for her youth. Part of Maya's problem is the approach and attitude taken by her relatives in India. She finds herself presented with only two options, "Look Maya," said my aunt, with an edge of exasperation. "It is up to you. You can come here and be a tourist, do whatever you like to do, or you can come here and be a member of the family, with responsibilities and obligations. You choose" (Vijayaraghavan, 2001). Her aunt's words convey to Maya the implicit warning that she must conform if she wishes to retain the privilege of her place in the family, leaving Maya little room to be both Indian and American simultaneously, leaving Maya little room to be the Indian-American which she is. Little occasional remarks or reminders such as, "You've been Indian longer than you have been anything else," my aunt said. "Don't forget that" (Vijayaraghavan, 2001) are designed to instill in Maya a sense of owed loyalty and duty.

Diasporic South Asians in Maya's position often feel the conflicting tug of loyalties, and to different degrees, seek a sense of belonging when in South Asia. According to Vijay Prashad, it is not only issues of identity which the diasporic South Asians have to grapple with, they also have to deal with both the notions and the reality of a distant homeland, 'Those in India too struggle with the reconstruction of culture. The only advantage they have over the desi<sup>5</sup> diaspora is that they do not have to labour under the illusion that there is a distant land that is home of pure religion, of the dharma that Hindu American children are told to long for' (Prashad, 2000).

When in South Asia, many diasporic South Asians find that they are part of a large joint or extended family, a very different experience and position from interacting only with a nuclear family. All the diasporic

<sup>5</sup> Desi: defined as those who claim South Asian ancestry.

South Asian women writers, without exception, compare either implicitly or explicitly, the closeness of family ties within and without South Asia. Most portray family ties in South Asia as being stronger and closer than in Western countries, where they are more likely to feel their individualism to a greater extent, and more alone. Some write of this aloneness with relief and pleasure, portraying it as a welcome haven away from the suffocation of family pressure and interference, while others describe it as loneliness, alienation and exile. This comparison is carried out both by diasporic authors describing moves from the West to the Indian subcontinent, and vice versa. This leads us into a consideration of the second category of diasporic South Asians: those who have been born and bred in South Asia, and who have immigrated to Western countries in their adult lives.

### **From East to West**

In most of the diasporic South Asian women's writings, the journey from West to East is a brief one, a trip made during vacation time or in times of family emergencies, a time away from work and the usual routine of everyday life. More often than not, it is a trip which involves meeting relatives and old friends, very frequently, staying with the nuclear and/or extended family. It is usually a brief sojourn from the familiar to the forgotten or distant familiar. Journeying from East to West, however, is portrayed by the South Asian women writers as being a very different cup of tea altogether. It is a move from the known to the unknown. It is usually for a considerable amount of time, to be calculated in terms of years rather than weeks or months. It may be a traumatic journey due to the certain knowledge that those left behind in South Asia have invested much and are eagerly awaiting news of success. It is a journey away from close networks of family and friends, to the loneliness of being a stranger in a strange land. Return to South Asia is usually assumed, but at an indefinite point in the future.

Baldwin's stories of Sikh communities in Canada discuss how immigrants cope with their new environments. Baldwin's stories demonstrate that each character experiences the same sense of dislocation and displacement, but for different reasons, to different extents, and consequently evolve different methods of coping.

'Montreal 1962' is Baldwin's tale of a young housewife who has immigrated to Canada with her husband. She is deep in thought

about being away from her community as she lovingly handles the turbans which she is washing. Being nostalgic for home, she reflects only on the way her distant homeland compares far more favourably than Montreal, where she finds herself. This short story hints at the problems of preserving one's culture in a place which does not comprehend such a culture, let alone sympathise with it. For this protagonist, the turban becomes the symbol not only of the Sikh identity, but of her pride in this identity. Although aware that her husband has been disadvantaged in seeking employment because he wears a turban, she nevertheless resolves, 'And so, my love, I will not let you cut your strong rope of hair and go without a turban in this land of strangers . . . . Then we will have taught Canadians what it takes to wear a turban' (Baldwin, 1996). This indicates that the diasporic South Asian may be very conscious of being a representative of his/her race/religion/culture/country of origin. Baldwin's words suggest that there is a need on the part of the diasporic South Asians to prove something to Westerners, a fear or a refusal or a precaution against being despised, pitied, or patronised. The turban may no longer be worn only because it is part of one's culture, but may in part be worn because in the public eye, one's cultural identity has to be constantly demonstrated and reinforced.

Whether attempting to stand apart or to integrate, it appears that diasporic South Asians are self-consciously representatives of their race and culture, aware of being cast in such a role, and accepting it, occasionally even welcoming and exploiting it. One frustrating outcome of such a role is that 'as emissaries, third world individuals are often expected to be virtual encyclopaedias of information on all sorts of different aspects of their complex "cultural" heritage. Their encyclopaedic expertise is often expected to range from the esoteric to the mundane, from popular to High Culture, from matters of history to contemporary issues' (Narayan, 1998). Even diasporic South Asian women writers are not exempt from such pressures and expectations and find themselves needing to verify their cultural facts before publishing. This concern with accuracy of cultural facts suggests a lack of confidence in their own knowledge of the culture, and a possible difference in the way they themselves practise their culture on a daily basis.

The sense of being an 'emissary', in Narayan's terminology, is simultaneously annoying and gratifying. It does serve to set the diasporic South Asian apart, perpetually labelled as 'the Other' in a Western environment, but if the difference is regarded as privileged, exclusive, or desirable, it may well be welcomed. It appears that being 'the

Other' is acceptable and even pleasant, as long as the wider community regards their difference as an asset rather than a liability or a lacking.

### East in West

This subsection focuses on South Asians who have never known a home within South Asia, i.e. the second-generation diasporic South Asians. One author who falls into this category is British-Punjabi Meera Syal. Syal's first novel features a protagonist called Meena, for whom home is Tollington, England.

*Anita and Me* depicts Meena growing up and learning early to juggle two identities—one for home and family life, and one for public life amongst her English peers. Meena clearly enjoys her cosy family life, but she also strives to be regarded as a 'Tollington wench'. She enjoys the company of her parents' friends—the diasporic South Asian community in Britain, the 'aunties' and 'uncles'—but she also hankers after the company of Anita Rutter, a brazen, hard-boiled English girl.

Although deeply attached to her parents, Meena learns from childhood that she has two sets of morals to juggle and contend with, one applicable at home, and the other applicable outside her home. For example, Meena is well aware that stealing would horrify her parents, and yet she does steal, because it affords her a pleasing sense of bravado, and it is the passport to acceptance amongst her peers. Meena is impressed by her parents and the way they live their culture, but it is their culture, rather than hers. She is aware that the standards and practises of her parents' culture would earn her little by way of street credit, and accordingly, she learns to deal in a different moral currency, just as she learns to speak with a different accent and slang when outside her house. Although just a child, Meera perceives that life inside the home and life outside it are divided into two separate worlds.

Syal shows that even a child as young as Meena (nine years of age), although identifying with her parents' culture to some extent, already understands that she is different. She notes that although her parents are respected and approved of by the general community they live amongst, they do not completely respect or approve of their neighbours. They choose not to belong and set themselves apart from the English community. Meena, in comparison, is comfortable thinking of herself not only as English, but as belonging to Tollington, '..... I had won them over with my cheeky charm..... and my deliberately exaggerated Tollington accent, thus proving I was very much one of

them, they did not need to shout to make themselves understood or think they could get away with muttered swearing and I would not understand, that I belonged' (Syal, 1997). She enjoys her easy inclusion in the Tollington community and it is not until she is a little older that she would realise the underlying racial tensions and realise too, that she does not, in fact, belong. This, in a curious inversion, is the same experience as that of Maya in *Motherland* who also finds that in visits to India, as she grows older, increasingly she is being forced to choose her set of affiliations. This indicates that for diasporic South Asians, wherever they go, whether in South Asia or in their new homes in the West, they continue to experience the sense of double-consciousness.

### Home South Asian Women Writers

Home South Asian writers also portray protagonists being concerned over the issue of self-identity, but this struggle is not with the maintaining of a South Asian identity in a Western world, but in finding individuality in a community which is highly prescriptive of each person's role. Kavery Nambisan is an author who tells the tale of a young Indian woman who travels to resolve her own identity. Shari, the protagonist of Nambisan's novel *Mango Coloured Fish* is a young woman who travels to understand what she has to escape from. When Shari feels her social personality is being created at the expense of her private personality, she makes up her mind to put some distance between herself and her home.

Shari's is only a partial identity crisis because she has already figured out what she does not want to be: she does not want to be the woman her mother is attempting to mould her into. Shari's family is run by her dominating mother, who exercises control with a mixture of unscrupulous charm and uncompromising determination. Shari's older sister, having the same goals and ambitions as her mother, had been the 'perfect daughter'. Shari's older brother had not been a perfect son, and as a result, had been the black sheep of the family and chose to live far away in Vrindaban, happy in his choice of a wife and in his work as a low profile doctor. It is to this brother that Shari escapes, with her marriage fast approaching.

Nambisan highlights the North-South divide of India in Shari's family. Although they are Tamils from Madras (Chennai), her mother had decided that Delhi culture is more refined, and has tried to erase their Tamilian origins. Her husband had meekly complied with

her wishes, which ranged from choice of attire and food to personal interests, 'Father gave up the dhotis he wore at the house for kurta-pyjamas, and rubber chappals for kolhapuris; ate rotis instead of rice, drank tea instead of coffee, and listened to Begum Akhtar and Bade Ghulam Ali instead of Mali or Chembai' (Nambisan, 1998). Shari's mother seems equally determined to shape Shari's identity as she has done with her husband's.

Fleeing her family (especially her mother), and fleeing marriage with Gautam, (a man whom she herself had chosen), Shari flies to Vrindaban, and then on to Delhi to stay with her old school friend, Yash. Shari flees her family because she wishes to escape the type of lifestyle her marriage to Gautam would inevitably comprise. On the verge of assuming the new identity as Gautam's wife which her mother fervently wishes for her, Shari also flees because she loves an unsuitable man, one who does not wish to marry her, but one who understands her and does not seek to change her. In Delhi, Shari moves out of Yash's house, and finds a room for herself in a hostel, for several weeks. Although such accommodation lacks the comforts she has been accustomed to, it does afford her the time and space to do as she, and she alone, wishes. Shari realises that accepting Yash's hospitality, just as accepting her family's support and later Gautam's support, would require a conforming of her personality to their wishes, to some extent.

A large part of Shari's identity crisis lies in the fact that her society's structure does not leave her much opportunity to define herself. Living with Yash, she realises that Yash has allowed her society's wishes and values to form her life, and that Yash is unhappy and dissatisfied in and with her identity. Nambisan portrays the bait of social sanction and financial security trapping South Asian women like Yash. Nambisan also portrays that it is so subtle and insidious a trap that although Shari instinctively struggles when she feels it closing around her, she is not entirely sure what it is, precisely, that she is struggling against. This makes it more difficult not only to resolve an identity crisis, but to recognise one as such in the first place. Nambisan's novel hints that some societies are so highly structured that there is little room for exploration of self-identity.

### **Differences and Similarities**

Wherever contemporary South Asian women writers may be writing from, it is clear from the outset that many grapple with issues

of identity. Identity is one of the most common themes in their literature, and in many cases the search for self-identity is portrayed as confusing, painful and only occasionally rewarding. Some write semi-autobiographical novels, delving into personal pasts in order to either discover or re-examine their motivations and affinities. Others use fictional characters and situations to question traditional norms, testing, trying, and occasionally reinforcing (whether intentionally or otherwise) notions of race and culture. Many contemporary South Asian women writers write with a sense of attempting to make their individual voices heard over a cacophony of long-standing stereotypes and expectations.

The writings of the diasporic South Asian women writers clearly demonstrate that their notions of identity are intimately bound up with concepts of home and place, as the space of return and of consolidation of the Self, enabled by the encounter not with the other, but with one's own (Grewal, 1996). The writings also suggest that the notions of self and identity, as conceived of by the women characters, change over time, and significantly, change depending on their location and environment. Diasporic South Asian women writers, almost without exception, testify to a sense of dual or multiple identities. 'The South Asian diaspora looks to the sub-continent as an anchor for identity formation, however mythical and uncomfortable . . . .' (Bhattacharya, 1998). Many also hint at a 'double consciousness', as it was termed by W. E. B. Dubois. Many go on to perceive the East and West as being in cultural conflict and/or opposition, and set up their stories accordingly, always emphasising the sense of being torn in two directions.

It is noteworthy that although the vast majority of novels and short story collections written by diasporic South Asian women are concerned with the roles, positions, experiences, situations and circumstances of the women, writings by home South Asian women writers are far more diverse in theme and concern.

Broadly speaking, issues of identity for diasporic South Asian women are bound up with ideas of home, roots, and belonging, whereas issues of identity for home South Asian women are inclined to be concerned over individualism and realising self-potentials. 'In general the migratory experience can lead to more embracing identifications on the margin of the host society. Those who do not think of themselves as Indians before migration become Indians in the diaspora' (Van der Veer, 1995). It appears that these notions and debates, and the very self-consciousness of what it means to be South Asian, is primarily

contested and shaped by the diasporic community, to a much greater extent than by the South Asians within South Asia.

Clifford points out that diasporic women are 'caught between patriarchies, ambiguous pasts, and futures. They connect and disconnect, forget and remember, in complex, strategic ways. The lived experiences of diasporic women thus involve painful difficulty in mediating discrepant worlds' (Clifford, 1997). These diasporic South Asian women are also inclined to form their identities in reaction to the culture they have brought from South Asia, either in conformity with it or in rebellion against it.

From the contemporary writings of the diasporic South Asian women, it appears that South Asian women of the diaspora feel the tug of loyalties and confusion of identities until they learn to balance dual-identities or double consciousness, and combine those into a certain equilibrium. Many diasporic South Asians appear to labour under the assumption that there has to be a trade-off between being 'authentically South Asian', and being 'Westernised'. There is a habitual attempt to set up a situation where the 'traditional' is pitted against the 'modern'. In a search for cultural purity, too many fall into the unrealistic assumption that tradition is at polar opposites from modernity, seeking to designate one as desirable and the other as undesirable. In the temptation to oversimplify or dichotomise, diasporic South Asians engage in a process of 'selective rejection of Westernization' (Narayan, 1998). This selectiveness is in turn a reaction to or an influence of post colonialism. In much of the literature of the diasporic South Asian women writers, the protagonists are portrayed learning to negotiate a hybrid identity, forging a new self which manages to co-exist more comfortably both in a South Asian environment and in a Western one. In discussing the tensions which dominate 'colonised lives', Aligiah describes these tensions as 'the attempt to build a bridge from one culture to another without falling into the ravine in the middle in the process' (Aligiah, 2001). This hybrid identity is therefore presented as something of a balancing act.

The strong polarisation of East and West, with comparisons drawn and juxtapositions made between these two supposedly socially opposing or even conflicting cultures, is all too common in the literature of diasporic South Asian women writers. It is only a tiny handful of writers such as Anita Desai whose works do the opposite and explore the similarities between East and West rather than set them up as irreconcilably different. The majority of diasporic South Asian

women writers portray their protagonists fighting the dual battle for ethnic/racial rights and recognition, and the battle against patriarchy and traditional cultural restrictions and taboos. These battles are made even more complicated by the fact that the protagonists are usually seeking acceptance both within the inner circle of their families and in the outer, racially and culturally different world.

In comparison, the writings of the home South Asian women authors do pursue the notion of identity, but not through a comparison of what lies within South Asia with what lies without. Home South Asian women writers are inclined to analyse the way their protagonists try to develop themselves in ways which are different from those traditionally prescribed by society. Women are portrayed attempting to rise above gender stereotypes and powerful social expectations of them as women, wives and mothers, and striving to gain some degree of autonomy and individuality. Their struggle is primarily against the patriarchal nature and habit of their society rather than a sense of double consciousness. Like the diasporic South Asian women, they are also regarded as keepers of their culture, and burdened with the role of being guardians of the sanctity of their traditions, but unlike the diasporic community, they need not fear distance from the homeland causing the loss or dilution of their culture.

Another commonality in terms of notions of identity in the literature of diasporic and home South Asian women's is that both sets of writers highlight the cultural practice of holding up ideals of the good South Asian women to be emulated. In this sense, wherever they may live, South Asian women find that their identities as such are predefined, by cultures which base *their* identities on the womenfolk.

### Conclusion

In the comparison of diasporic and home writings by South Asian women, the primary difference observed is how identity is perceived and engaged with. For South Asian women of the diaspora, nostalgia, familial expectations, and the notion of the distant and perfect homeland continue to dog their notions of identity and belonging, '...women in diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by, a "home" culture and a tradition—selectively' (Clifford, 1997). The word 'selectively' is significant—diasporic South Asian women do indeed practise only certain elements of their culture and tradition, and certainly not the culture in entirety. While some diasporic South

Asians attempt to emulate mainstream society and integrate, there are others who deliberately flaunt their difference, marketing it as exotic, mysterious, exciting, or in whichever form would enable them to best use it as a means to their ends. These diasporic South Asians brandish their skin colours, accents, clothes, and all other symbols of their difference, either as weapons or as trophies, or both.

The selectivity of the culture which diasporic South Asians live and practise, results in diasporic South Asian culture becoming a partially reinvented culture. Perhaps it is as a result of this, that there exists a constant anxiety over the authenticity of the culture they claim as their South Asian heritage. (It is an irony that both the non-South Asian world as well as the diasporic South Asian communities look to the literatures by the South Asian writers for understanding and knowledge of South Asian culture, when some of these very writers (the diasporic ones) feel the need to have their writings checked for cultural accuracy and authenticity.) Diasporic South Asian women's literature is a space in which self-identity is frequently discussed and negotiated. Consequently, it was found that the diasporic South Asians in particular read and respond to writings by South Asians as a way of informing themselves of their culture and social identity.

Diasporic literature inevitably produces some generalisations. In making certain generalisations, some diasporic South Asian women writers are seen to be propagating certain cultural images, implying that that which may apply only in a certain section of society, is in fact the norm in the wider South Asian community. It is a diasporic tendency, Avtar Brah tells us, that 'tradition is itself continually invented even as it is hailed as originating from the mists of time' (Brah, 1996). Narayan further reminds us that people are 'susceptible to the suggestion that practices and institutions are valued merely by virtue of the fact they are long-standing' (Narayan, 1998), a susceptibility that the diasporic South Asian community have no monopoly over. In circulating stereotypes and playing with clichés, some diasporic writers play a role in providing (mis)information on South Asians, thereby contributing to the creation of the global image of the South Asian culture.

It is clear that the writings of diasporic South Asians have greater influence over the shaping of a global South Asian image and identity. In most cases, their writings are more widespread, more easily accessible, and better promoted than those of the home writers.

One important factor contributing to the accessibility of diasporic South Asian women's literature (as opposed to literature by the home authors) is that diasporic writing is generally more inclined to a hybridity of cultural norms, explaining South Asian culture even as it portrays it.

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