

**Is there a Koiné in Narrating Diasporic
Experiences of “Indianness”?**
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Abstract

It is our aim in this roundtable to explore common themes, motifs, historical and cultural allusions, etc. that the different works by first generation and other subsequent generations of Indian émigré writers, together with Indian writers in English, explore in conjunction with the notion of “Indianness”. We shall cross reference novels, plays, verses, and fables in an attempt to trace common threads of thought that link to ideas such as: the local and the global, religious fundamentalism vs. secularism, gender, exile, difference, nationalisms, and other common items to define a singular, or rather plural, Indian identity.

Both, first generation Indian émigré writers and other subsequent generations of Indo-English writers maintain an affiliation with those diverse “Indian” homelands, while simultaneously narrating their diasporic experiences and those processes of cultural hybridity they have had to negotiate. Many of them, living in the first world (in U.S.A., Canada, or the British metropolis) had to face class, gender and race discriminations; others, living in colonized countries (in Africa, South-East Asia or the Caribbean) had to cohabitate hybrid spaces. In colonial times they were a racial caste of intermediate status between the colonial masters and the “natives”, loathed and distrusted by both, and this shared experience of rejection, prejudice and scapegoating became the basis for solidarity and group consciousness. Additionally, Indian writers in English (even in India) are victims of a second prejudice, vis-à-vis their regional counterparts. Since proficiency in English is available only to writers of the intellectual, affluent, educated classes, a frequent judgement is made that the writers, and their works,

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belong to a high social strata, and are cut off from the reality of Indian existence. However, they also deal in their narratives—and this dismantles the previous assumptions too—with topics such as fundamentalism in religion, alternative sexualities, caste violence, and the effects of globalization, to name just a few examples.

1. English writing in India

One can often hear or read somebody arguing that the new generation of Indians is disobedient, antagonistic and has little respect for the Indian culture, tradition as well as social values. And that is precisely because nowadays there is a surge of “Indianness” related to the idea of nationalism. The main responsible for that is Hindutva (a movement which advocates for Hindu nationalism), being its stated objective to instil national pride in every Indian with the motto “United Hindus, capable India.” Its final goal is to make India a Hindu nation and prove that Hindus are Vedic Aryans. The most representative political party that sustains this ideology is the right-wing BJP, in power from 1998 to 2004, and a strong opposition nowadays. I believe this kind of Hindutva ideology is significant to understand contemporary Indian literature in English, and more specifically, the question of “Indianness” from the stay-at-home writers’ perspective. Poet Arundhati Subramanina discusses the question of Indianness in the secularist newspaper *The Hindu*, where she states that:

[t]o uncritically applaud the country's nuclear muscle seems to be one way of being Indian. To metamorphose from miniskirts to saris seems to be the popular media's strategy of shedding Western contamination. Local political parties believe Indianness can be acquired by banning Valentine's Day and renaming the Prince of Wales Museum, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya.

And later on, she continues stating that “there are the local ‘back to our roots’ obscurantist who want classical dancers and musicians to be emissaries of a ‘pure untainted’ Indian culture.” There

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are those who believe Indian culture (especially literature) must draw on traditional indigenous idioms if it is to be meaningful and anchored, and most importantly, if it is to be authentically Indian. In that sense, writing in English is not much welcomed in India. In our current times, there is rarely a very few outspoken intellectual voices amongst the English-using sections of India who have had the courage and commitment to critique both Hinduism and Hindutva ideology. Literature often goes against the grain, as many Indian writers have been trying to demonstrate, but the point is that the majority of those who do not convey to the norm of displaying a classical idea of Indianness suffer from invisibility or black mail. And how does this censorship work?

First of all, Indian writers in English, those referred to as the “stay-at-home writers” are victims of a prejudice, vis-à-vis their regional counterparts. Since proficiency in English is available only to writers of the intellectual, affluent, educated classes, a frequent judgement is made that the writers, and their works, belong to a high social strata, and are cut off from the reality of Indian existence. Regarding women’s writing, it has been much criticized that the depiction of the psychological suffering of the frustrated Brahmin housewife is a superficial subject matter compared to the depiction of the repressed and oppressed lives of women of the lower classes that we find in regional authors writing in vernacular languages like Hindi, Bengali, Malayalam, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu... There is the nativist literary bastion, which believes that the whole question of English is a colonial hangover and consequently not Indian enough. However, writers such as Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, among many others, agree with the fact that authors practising in English do not need to write about poverty and tsunamis or Himalayan yogis to prove that they are genuine Indian or sound like authentic Indian, neither are they part of the colonial history.

Another type of censorship relates with the authors’ effort to get published, and when they find a space, they are barely reviewed. In my interview with feminist publisher Ritu menon, she told me that there are many kinds of censorship in India; little formal censorship and others, informal and perverse, which are related to economy, society, political parties, culture, self-censorship, the censorship of the market, the censorship of institutions, including educational

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institutions, and street censorship. Githa Hariharan deals with this issue in her latest novel *In Times of Siege*, in which the protagonist, a History professor in New Delhi, has to deal with Hindu fundamentalists after his writing of a lesson on a twelfth century poet and social reformer, and that attracts the unexpectedly violent attention of a Hindu fundamentalist group, who demands that the lesson be withdrawn from the curriculum. The Munch hires goondas to storm the university and wreck the professor's office. He refuses to apologise, arguing for a plural interpretation of history but the University authorities succumb to blackmail from the fundamentalists' side. As a consequence, what happens in India is that English-speaking writers, in their struggle against right-wing extremism, have played an honourable and often a leading role in spite of the different types of censorship they are suffering from. They have published books and essays documenting the errors and excesses of Hindutva, like for example novelists Kiran Nagarkar or Githa Hariharan and filmmakers Paromita Vohra or Deepa Mehta. So, does the question of Indianness refer to 'The Hindu Way of Life,' as scholar Meera Nanda argues in her book *Breaking the Spell of Dharma*? I agree with the opinion that we cannot offer a definition of Indian identity, as India is a multicultural nation, with thousand of different languages, communities and traditions that cross borders in spite of the fact that the BJP government emphasized a uniform Hindu culture, and some diasporic authors are trying to depict India as a monolithic exotic land where men subjugate their docile, and bound by tradition women.

2. Narrating "India" from abroad

Indian diasporic writing is diverse in its appropriation of literary genres, styles, and themes. Nonetheless, we can discern many converging elements that give Indian writing in English a thread of continuity. Grouped under the umbrella term of "Indian writing", this heterogeneous category continues to express those common concerns of an Indian consciousness, be it of first generation émigrés, or second and third generation Indians who have become anglicised without forfeiting their "other" cultural heritage.

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The Islamic Bind: The cultural clash between the liberal practices of a postmodern state and a theological ideology that imposes its will upon its followers is a recurring theme amongst many “Indian” (in the wider, and perhaps colonial sense) writers from an Islamic tradition. Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants make up a significant number of this group, alongside the diasporic Muslim community from the modern-day Indian state.

Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers* and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* are two good examples of narratives that explore the disjunctive of Muslims trying to come to terms with life in a Western metropolis that views their religious beliefs through the optics of relativism. *Brick Lane* is an Indian *bildungsroman* that explores the adaptation of a young Bengali girl to her new alien environment, while *Maps for Lost Lovers* shows how a tight-knit family structure can be poisoned by the intransigent nature of religious belief. Both novels give us an insight into the question of gender roles through the motif of the arranged marriage. Nazneen, in *Brick Lane* is a young girl who arrives to London to meet her husband to be, while in *Maps* Mah-Jabin must leave her native England to join her husband in Pakistan.

While *Brick Lane* is interesting from the perspective of how an innocent Bangladeshi girl, through circumstances of life, must reconstruct her own Muslim identity, *Maps* is more incisive in its portrayal of the complexities of being a Muslim in Britain. Through a fragmented narrative structure, Aslam creates a kaleidoscopic effect that draws the reader into the heart of the Muslim faith. From this theocratic epicentre, we see how the lives of so many of the novel’s characters are permanently scarred, and, in the worst scenario, taken away from them. This is the case of Chandra and Jugnu, the Muslim-Hindi couple who are killed for the sole reason that they are in love and have decided to defy the mores of the closed immigrant community and live together. The novel uses the detective genre to unravel what is not just a search for the murderers, but moreover a journey into what becomes a microcosm for those urban Asian Muslim communities.

Both novels mentioned above do, in an indirect manner, draw attention to how both first and second generation Asians Muslims define themselves in a post-9/11 era. However, despite this backdrop of politics and identity, the focus is more on the individual and their

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emotional and psychological battlers. The progression in Hanif Kureishi's trajectory as scriptwriter and novelist is significant in how he addresses this specific "Indian" Muslim identity within a diasporic context. Whilst Kureishi is of Pakistani Muslim origin, he clearly states in his autobiographical book *My Ear at his Heart* that both his father and grandfather were devoted secularists. Viewed from his own British liberal positioning (as second generation, Kureishi has come to the conclusion he is first and foremost English) much of his later work tries to map the radicalisation of certain sectors of the Asian Muslim community. The novel *The Black Album*, and the short story "My Son the Fanatic" (later to be adapted for the big screen) both look at this move to radical Islam through the motif of an alienated British Asian youth. Whilst *The Black Album* can be seen as a further development of the themes of identity explored in *The Buddha of Suburbia*, "My Son the Fanatic" is narrated from the perspective of the father, Parvez, who becomes witness to the absurd radicalisation of his son Ali.

Salman Rushdie has no doubt been at the centre of this controversial issue of a Muslim faith at odds with a secular society where "free speech" is considered its corner stone. His *Satanic Verses* brought this religious fanaticism to the public eye, and much of *The Black Album* deals with the controversies that arose out of the *fatwa* pronounced against Rushdie. The fact that Rushdie himself is of Muslim origin (his grandparents are of Kashmiri origin) did not protect him from the wrath of radical Islam, and many diasporic writers such as Monica Ali, Nadeem Aslam, Kuresihi and others feel the increasing negative responses from the diasporic Muslim communities. What their narratives do prove is that cultural hybridity has the power to bridge both British and Asian identities and can serve to dismantle both the stereotypical and racist images of Asians of Indian origin and the essentialism of fundamentalist identity politics that radical Islamic groups wish to impose on their community.

Another good example happens with the East African Asian community. They occupy a strange position within the South Asian diaspora because they do not fit comfortably into either of Vijay Mishra's twofold categories of nineteenth century plantation diaspora (e.g. Indo-Trinidadians) and late twentieth century diasporas of the border (e.g. Indian-Americans). Although the Indian presence in East Africa goes back centuries before the Europeans ever set foot in the

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subcontinent thanks to the long-standing mercantile connection with East Africa as part of the ancient network of the Indian Ocean, the vast majority of East African Asians are descendants of skilled free immigrants (not the railway “coolies”, contrary to popular belief) who migrated during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Many came from destitute and low status groups in India and many, if not the majority, experienced a substantial rise in economic and social status in East Africa. In East Africa they tend to be referred to as “Asians” not Indians or Pakistanis. “Asian” has become an East Africa synonym for all domiciled people of Indian or Pakistani origin, while “Indian” seems to be applied to guests or temporary visitors from India. In his social survey of Asians in East Africa, Agehananda Bharati claims that “there is virtually nothing of sociological significance about the minority which would hold for all its constituent groups” (Bharati, 1965: 15).

The Asians are not really a “community” as they are fragmented into a multiplicity of religious, linguistic and caste groups. They include Hindus, Sunni and Shia Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Roman Catholics and Protestants. They speak Hindi, Urdu, Gujerati, Tamil and Telegu. Yet there is a sense in which East African Asians are a community – in colonial times they were a racial caste of intermediate status between the colonial masters and the “natives”; they played the role of “Jews”, ie scapegoated, pariah minorities of middlemen. So the community is a product of outside forces in the larger society (van den Berghe, 1975: 277) and the shared experience of rejection, prejudice and scapegoating forms the basis for solidarity and group consciousness. East African Asians are a highly urban group –80-90% urban– and they are concentrated in mercantile, service, clerical and industrial occupations. They have remained a small minority, in part because of severe limitations on immigration once Africans replaced them in low-skilled occupations but at the same time a highly *visible* minority (van den Berghe, 1975: 279). Altogether, they are characterized by their high degree of urbanization, relative wealth, physical distinctiveness, enforced ghettoization, exotic culture and style of dress and endogamy. Paradoxically, such a group hemmed in geographically, economically, culturally and socially has unwittingly created the impression of physical omnipresence, economic affluence and occult omnipotence, which is actually the result of the immense

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power of distortion of racial prejudice. Treated as a pariah caste, Asians organized their ghetto existence along pre-existing lines of solidarity, ie religion, language and *jati*. Van den Berghe calls them a “bewildering diversity of little endogamous and mutually mistrustful groups” and claims that “the Asian ‘community’ is, in fact, a culturally modified (and often impoverished) microcosm of the great Indian kaleidoscope” (van den Berghe, 1975: 280).

The arrival of independence brought with it a restrictive sense of nationalism linked rather too closely with race. Indians occupied a predominant position in the economic life of East Africa but were politically isolated. The younger generations of Indian settlers did not appear to have much of an economic and social future in East Africa. Strong apprehensions of post-independence social and economic difficulties were felt by the *duka* owners all over East Africa. Owned almost exclusively by Gujarati-speaking Asians, they were slowly being crowded out by African cooperatives and by the increasing boycott from former African clientele. Only the top industrialists and the very few large-scale Indian farmers seemed to have a clear future ahead of them. Independence constitutions in the new East African nation states made generous provisions for citizenship – a person would become a local citizen automatically on independence or would have an option to become one within a specified time or retain his/her pre-independence status. The entire future of the Asian community would hinge on that crucial choice. The general rush as the period of grace drew to a close led many Africans to see the Asians as opportunists and ‘paper citizens’, only becoming citizens to avoid the adverse effects of Africanization (Simatei, 2001). Regarding production, Vassanji is by no means the sole East African Asian writer and we could mention the work of other notable East African authors of South Asian descent including Peter Nazareth and Behadur Tejani. More recently several young women writers have emerged including Jameela Siddiqi, Yasmin Ladha and Sikeena Karmali. The oral poet performer Shailja Patel has had enormous success with her recent work, *Migritude*. She describes herself as an Asian African poet and spoken-word theater artist. The fact that a young woman of Indian descent should have been received so enthusiastically by Nairobi audiences can only prove that the label of paper citizens no longer applies to East Africans of Asian descent.

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