“SHUTTING EACH OTHER OUT”? CROSS-CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS IN DIASPORIC INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

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With the outward mobility of Indian fiction writers in English from the subcontinent and back, especially over the last two and a half decades, the zone that has expanded the most in scope and effect in the diaspora is that of intercultural friendship and social relations. This division of cultural loyalties has altered their conceptions of what constitutes their Indianness vis-à-vis the East-West encounter and has done away with the earlier formulations offered by Kipling, Forster and Raja Rao. For these writers, who hop, skip and jump continents at will, the tendency to merge the local and the global results in depicting characters bearing the concept of double consciousness — two cultures, two world-views, two languages, two mindsets, two different kinds of experience. As their world shrinks, so initially does space across continents. At the same time, living across boundaries can be an expansive affair, hence an empowering act too. This transnationalism further results in two opposite tendencies — experiences of estrangement on the one hand, which are usually negative, as well as experiences of multilocality that are more positive.

Borrowing the first half of my title, “shutting each other out” from Amitav Ghosh’s latest novel, The Hungry Tide, this paper will attempt to trace the shifting nature of cross-cultural human relationships as found in recent diasporic Indian English fiction. As we are all aware of the fact, the “India incorporate” idea leading to questions of identity and belonging have become hallmarks of diasporic writing in general. These issues of identity are both opposing and complementary markers to define modern fiction. Rushdie tells us about “imaginary homelands,” Indias of the mind; Bhabha explains “Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myth of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye.” In this changed scenario, one of the initial questions that come to our minds is how do characters placed in cross-cultural settings interact? What are the different trajectories involved so that the contours of human relationships also change? While conflicting loyalties, conflicting sensibilities and conflicting behaviour patterns form a striking feature on the one hand, there is a also a kind of extra-sensory harmony and bonding on the other, something that is not so overtly seen in earlier writers. Another direct result of the globalized world is found the way in which novels are now being set in a contemporary deterritorialized world spanning different continents and hence the characters also elude a sort of cosmopolitan identity that was not found earlier.

Historically speaking, this transformation did not happen overnight. In an essay entitled “The Historical Formation of Indian English Literature” (2003), Vinay Dharwadker mentions how migrant and itinerant writers have energized Indian English fiction in most of its historical phases: from Din Muhammad and Rammohan Roy at the inception to a host of others in the early postcolonial decades. Despite such precedents,
however, the literary-cultural output of the contemporary diaspora has metamorphosed the inner kinetics of Indian English fiction on an unprecedented scale. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, the very centers of Indian English literary culture appear to have migrated from the subcontinent, as writers of the Indian diaspora – particularly in Great Britain and North America – have rapidly and increasingly come to dominate the international literary marketplace in the English language. The principal change is that the zones of contact that have provided a social framework for Indian English literary culture since the late eighteenth century is now geographically located overseas. Now in its foreign setting, the writer comes into contact with people of many more races and nationalities than it did earlier on the subcontinent, absorbing them into a radically multicultural and multilingual international scenario. Well-educated, professionally successful, and financially secure diasporic and itinerant Indians in the zone of employment abroad currently constitute networks of a few million Anglicized, Europeanized, or Westernized men and women scattered around the globe. This fragmented yet interlinked community has produced many of the newest authors of Indian origin in English, besides serving as an extensive, enthusiastic international readership for contemporary Indian English fiction.

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

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

The zone that has expanded the most in scope and effect in the diaspora is that of intercultural friendship and social relations that has proved vital for the maintenance of the Indian component in a culturally ambidextrous, cosmopolitan identity. This division of cultural loyalties in the diaspora has contributed to the extensive revision of a key feature of Indian English fiction. It has altered their conceptions of what constitutes their Indianness vis-a-vis the East-West encounter and done away with the binary formulations offered by some of the earlier writers. For instance, in R.K. Narayan’s The Sweet Vendor (1967), centered in Malgudi, we find Jagan’s ambiguous and dangerous ground of his
relations with his son, the sullen westernized Mali, whose American-Korean wife turns out—dumbfoundingly to the conventional Jagan—only his mistress, and whose contemptuous explanations to his bewildered father of a scheme for manufacturing a fiction-writing machine include all the divisions which so maddeningly separate the two of them—the division of East and West, of young and old, of child and parent. In Ruth Jhavwala’s fiction, her characters, Indian and Western alike, remain always at a clinical remove. She divides her characters into two groups, the seekers and the sufferers. Cf. How I became a Holy Mother & Other Stories (1981). In her essay “Myself in India,” she describes how she lived when she was there, retreating from the climate and from the people into the air-conditioned, shuttered solitude of her Delhi flat. Her most typical characters are prosperous urban Indians whose lives are spent studiously cultivating their ignorance of the country in which they live. Nayantara Sahgal developed Jhavwala’s themes and characterization. Rich Like Us (1985), for example, examines and exposes the survival strategies of prosperous urban Indians, and in Plans for Departure, she explores the experience of a young European woman in Edwardian India in a manner that recalls Heat and Dust. Most of Anita Desai’s characters too live apart from the excitement and the turmoil of modern India. In Bharati Mukherjee’s first novel Wife, an Indian woman uprooted in New York goes mad. In her later fiction, she chooses rather to celebrate the freedom available to the deracinated to become the person one chooses to be rather than to remain the person one is born. Even the English wife, Sophie Mol, in Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things is stereotypical in her manners.

Since the Indian diasporic writers do not belong to a monolithic hegemonic construct, but continue to occupy a remarkable spectrum of identities and backgrounds in relation to religion and zone of marriage, they leave their individual mark in different shades of interracial and intercultural social-sexual relations. In exploring the relationships between East and West, Amit Chaudhuri prefers to fracture time and move sinuously between continents so that the text becomes a picture of a consciousness forever in transit between different orders of experience. Cf. A Strange and Sublime Address (1989), Afternoon Raag (1993) and A New World (2003). Take also the case of Sunetra Gupta’s fiction. Beginning from her Sahitya Akademi winning first novel, Memories of Rain (1992), the author excels in her depiction of cross-cultural human relationships. Bringing together Anthony and Moni, two characters from disparate worlds in a Calcutta rainstorm, Gupta weaves a provocative and utterly emphatic tale of their fragile love. Anthony is English—intelligent and artistic; assured and mysterious; Moni is a bright but sheltered young Bengali woman, seeped in cultural protocol and taboo. She finds herself both repelled and fascinated by this classmate of her brother’s, a visitor from the Europe of her fevered and literary imagination. They fall in love, apprehending un consummated passion and years of unsatisfying, sorrowful memories. Instead, they are able to marry and make their home in London, where Moni, intensely and silently, meets disappointment. Once in London, she encounters prejudices, sexism, and betrayal by the husband who had seemed so captivated by her beauty and virginal purity. His blatant disrespect for her being shocks her. Her emotions are heightened and accentuated by the grey British weather, the drab buildings, and the bewildering pace of life in a new world. When Anthony begins to stray—even when his mistress becomes practically a member of the household—M oni believes his divided heart, but cannot bear it when his manner changes to kindness and indifference.
Unlike the binaries of Calcutta and London where the first novel was set, the characters in Sunetra’s second novel, *The Glassblowers Breath* (1993) live in transnational spaces that are somewhat outside of being anywhere. The protagonist of this novel is a young Indian woman in search of ideal love and companionship who marries and settles into a home and assumes the guardianship of an orphaned niece. Though the novel’s settings move between London, Calcutta, Paris, and New York, none of these cities can be considered the true home of any of the characters. Like true postcolonial migrants, the characters themselves, though born in one of these cities or somewhere else, wander through these urban settings, living in each one at some time or the other and yet always detached from them. When an acquaintance replies that he hates London, the narrator’s response is simply, ‘When I get tired of London, I go to Paris’ (107). The landscapes of these three great cities, full of urban menace, thus form an almost surreal backdrop for this unsettling tale of a young, intelligent, Indian woman who struggles but fails to conform to society’s blueprints for marriage, family, and friendships. The heroine of the novel is thus seen to be caught between her own almost limitless capacity for experience “emotional, intellectual, and sexual” and the desire of the men in her life to capture and define her. In spite of her education, freedom, social positioning and the privileges she enjoys, she is still condemned to repeat her gendered functions, i.e. her role as daughter or wife.

Sunetra’s third novel *Moonlight into Marzipan* (1993) is a story of a marriage and its ultimate betrayal. Promothesh and Esha, two promising scientists who were classmates at Calcutta University, find their relationship changing after marriage. In keeping with Indian cultural expectations, Esha turns into a dedicated and submissive wife but Promothesh collapses under her dedication and feels incapable of living up to her grand expectations. He resumes his research in their Calcutta garage and steps into celebrity status when a chance experiment turns grass into gold. Proceeding to England for further scientific investigations, he initiates the break up of their relationship. Ultimately, Promothesh’s infidelity causes Esha’s suicide. Into his morass of ambition and self-pity slips love in the human form of his Russian biographer Alexandra Vorobyova and in the very human form of Yuri Sen, another Indian researcher, whose project is of course unknown. This kind of cross-cultural juxtaposition of cosmopolitan characters also occurs in *A Sin of Colour* (1999), which is about the choices made by its two main protagonists, Debendranath Roy and his niece Niharika, during two different time periods, when both are in the last phase of youth. As the narrative shuttles between Oxford and the U.S. and Calcutta and rural Bengal, both characters are victims of unrequited love; this coloured their lives profoundly, eventually leading them to adultery -- Debendranath Roy with Reba, who is married to his brother, and who is famous, an artiste, musician and an actress, and Niharika with Daniel Faraday, who is married, and a friend of Morgan, the last man to have seen Debendranath alive. When she was asked to describe her ‘growth’ from the first novel to her third, Gupta told her Rediff On The Net interviewer, “My concerns have become more and more spiritual and there is an obvious effort -- a religious dedication if you may say so -- to come closer to the truth.” The initial self-consciousness, and the desire to present India or Bengal in her own work, and to be included in a certain community of writers was now over, she said. As she puts it, “My work is more ‘free’ now.” Writing for Gupta can be termed as a kind of spiritual exercise,
where she is not involved in any political movement but tries to uncover human conditions.

That romantic love and human understanding in the conventional sense cannot exist in the hard-headed post-colonial world of ours becomes the subject of Salman Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999). This novel stands apart from all his other narratives in that it is his first attempt to deal with the theme of love, where even the word has become devalued where the London barmaid calls you “luv”. Implying a symbolic parallel between a modern love story of Vina, a singer who is worshipped by her lover, Ormus Cama, and an ancient legend, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, Rushdie gives an interesting twist to the story where it is Eurydice who brings Orpheus back from the dead, and not the other way round. The lovers finally get separated for good, and Vina disappears, literally swallowed up by the “ground beneath her feet” in an earthquake in Mexico. The tissue of conventionalities becomes all the more unconvincing when one remembers that Vina continues to flirt with her friend Rai all the time, and on the night previous to her death, she has had a man warming her bed.

The plethora of relationships in the contemporary globalized society is also beautifully handled by Boman Desai in his comic extravaganza, *Asylum, USA* (2000). In this novel we find the protagonist, Noshir Daruvala portrayed as a young Parsi student in Chicago who must get a green card or be deported to Bombay. He give Barbara a thousand dollars to marry him, so that he becomes an American citizen, but discovers that she is a lesbian with a live-in woman lover. Later he meets Blythe, but she too has a boyfriend…and so he lurches on from one woman to another. As he himself tells us in one of his rare, serious moments: “The women…in this story…were less a tribute to my powers of attraction as I liked to think than to my troubledness ….they too were troubled…we were linked by our troubles.”

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

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

At the beginning of this article, I had mentioned that sometimes cross-cultural experiences of multilocality can be a positive sign also. Ghosh’s latest novel, *The Hungry Tide*, though firmly and intractably, rooted in the treacherously attractive mud-lands of the world’s largest delta in the south of Bengal, decapitates the barriers posed by the Queen’s language in one fell swoop. Apart from the social and political history of the Bengalis who settled down in the Sunderbans for the past one hundred years, the novel is an excellent example of the multifarious nature of human relationships and non-verbal communication. The three main characters in the novel, Kanai, Pia and Fokir, come from and reside in totally three different social setups. Kanai, the professional translator full of urban arrogance, is a man who steps into the mud banks of memory and into Piya’s life. The rustle of language, of which he is a connoisseur, achieves no harmony with the songs of the tide country. Piya, an American with a Bengali parentage who is a cetologist on a mission to study the rare Gangetic dolphins, is unable to connect with Kanai on the same wavelength. Fokir, the illiterate fisherman with an intuitive understanding of the elements, acts as Piya’s guide and relationship between the two of them form the heart of the novel. The river unites them; it reduces the cultural and linguistic gap between them. He can read the secrets she is searching for; he, the child of the river, can see them before her binoculars reach out to them. They have no words in common. Silence and gestures, movements of eyes and fingers, translate their emotions for each other and dramatize the tension, both elemental and erotic. Take for instance Ghosh’s manner of describing their communication or lack of it, on the boat:

She flipped over and lay on her stomach, turning her attention back to the dolphins…….She imagined the animals circling drowsily, listening to echoes pinging through the water, painting pictures in three dimensions – images that only they could decode. The thought of experiencing your surroundings, in that way never failed to fascinate her: the idea that to ‘see’ was also to ‘speak’ to others of your kind, where simply to exist was to communicate.

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

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

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