THE CITY OF THE MIND OR RETURN TO THE ROOTS?

REPRESENTATIONS OF CALCUTTA IN THE FICTION OF DIASPORIC BENGALI WOMEN WRITERS

Somdatta Mandal

Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan

Readers of contemporary post-colonial fiction are now thoroughly conversant with the themes of migration, homelessness, exile, loss of identity and rootlessness, which form the staple diet of much Third World, post-colonial and commonwealth writing. So much so that most fiction that deals with the trials and tribulations of displaced people struggling to make sense in an unfamiliar world ironically seems all too familiar to us today; a terrain traversed once too often to interest, provoke, or engage critically. Amid the wider phenomenon that encompasses the extraordinary success of diasporic fiction writers of Indian descent in the last two decades of the twentieth century—there has emerged a discernible sub-set within this movement, that of writing in English from the Indian state of Bengal, the country of Bangladesh, and by Probasí Bangalis (diasporic Bengalis) outside the two Bengals. This group, to name only some obvious relatively recent names in fiction, would include – Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Sunetra Gupta, Nalinaksha Bhattacharya, Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya, Bidisha Bandopadhyaya, Adib Khan, Syed Manzurul Islam, Amit Chaudhuri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and three more debutantes, Amal Chatterjee, Ruchira Mukherjee, and Jhumpa Lahiri. While reading some of these writers one cannot escape the pleasures of acute Bengaliness in their writings, and in fact, some of them are writing back with a vengeance so to say. Apart from using their Bengaliness as a tool to exoticise the East in its new avatar, they employ language, themes, moods, which are very culture-specific. This of course includes many Bengali obsessions: indigenous food ( “luchi, tarkari, ilish, parotas, narus, phuchkas”, or jilepi and shingara), politics, sports, endless “adda” (discussions) that meanderingly embrace reminiscing, human warmth, paro-ninda paro-charcha (genial back-biting) with all its over-inquisitiveness – as well as, impassioned debates on philosophy, music, cinema, literature, and the passion of writing itself.¹

This paper highlights some of these issues as represented in the fiction of four diasporic women writers who fall under this category, namely – Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri. In their writings, they offer precise charting of Calcutta moorings, often minutely recorded with documentary accuracy to such an extent that it might lead one to believe that the primary agenda of the novelists is verisimilitude, their basic mode of representation, realism. Also, the city of Calcutta is constantly used by these writers to act as a tool, a buffer and in several instances, referred to with a sense of nostalgia. Catering to a specific cultural milieu – the middle class Bengali ‘bhadralok’ culture – these writers differ from the general bandwagon of Indian writers in English who tend to essentialize India through evocation of local colour or standard signifiers. Like the novelists writing in the Indian languages, they generally do not constantly address the question of Indianness. As female writers who are more conscious of the meaning of home as an exclusive space, (either fluid or held solidly within the
concrete scaffolding of a house), the detailed descriptions of Calcutta houses in their writings give them a cultural identity apart from their material reality. Thus each house is encased in different sets of vividly evoked specificities -- the verandahs, the terraces, the courtyards – all essentially female spaces in the Indian culture – that contribute to the upbringing of the characters inhabiting them.

I

Bharati Mukherjee

In an interview given to Nicholas A Basbanes in 1997, Bharati Mukherjee defined her status as a writer thus: “I have chosen and achieved the right to be an American, and the concept of ‘America’ is what fuels all of my writing. That is what makes me an American writer.” Interestingly, she also included her Indian heritage while describing her niche in contemporary American literature:

I maintain that I am an American writer of Indian origin, not because I’m ashamed of my past, not because I’m betraying or distorting my past, but because my whole adult life has been lived here, and I write about the people who are immigrants going through the process of making a home here….I write in the tradition of immigration experience rather than nostalgia and expatriation.²

As a young girl brought up in an upper-middle class Bengali family in Calcutta, it is not surprising that Mukherjee would use autobiographical stuff in writing her first novel, The Tiger’s Daughter.³ It has as its central character Tara Banerjee Cartwright, an Indian woman who has married an American and settled in New York, but the novel is set entirely in Calcutta and is concerned almost exclusively with Tara’s attempt to come to terms with the fact that she can no longer connect to the city of her birth or find in it her home. Tara is a Bengali Brahmin of Calcutta and daughter of an industrialist known popularly as Bengal Tiger. Belonging to a western-educated Indian family which no longer believes that girls should only be taught to keep house, cook, and pray, she is sent to a convent school for a proper education in the “English medium.” Prompted by pain and suspicion about Calcutta which was fast becoming a restive city, the father puts his only child, a girl of fifteen, on a jet for Poughkeepsie and the consequences prove rather terrifying. The decision completely ignores the limits of Tara’s courage and commonsense. Vassar proves an “unsalvageable mistake”(10) and every atom of newness intensifies her longing for Camac Street in Calcutta where she had grown up. Remembering the comforting array of little gods and goddesses her mother used to worship at home, she prays to Kali, the Hindu goddess of power, to help her tide over many awkward moments with the polite and inscrutable Americans.

When Tara returns to Calcutta after marrying an American, she faces a different Calcutta than the one she remembers leaving. The young expatriate is not yet accustomed to American culture and at the same time finds herself estranged from the morals and values of her native land. Arriving in Calcutta, she witnesses the fracturing of her city. She had expected to see:

Not the Calcutta of documentary films – not a hell where beggars fought off dying cattle for still warm garbage – but a gracious green subtropical city where Irish nuns instructed girls from better families on how to hold their heads high and how to drop
their voices to a whisper and still be heard and obeyed above the screams of the city.\(^4\)

For years Tara had dreamed of this return believing that all hesitations, all doubts, all fears of the time abroad will be erased quite magically if she returns to Calcutta “but the return brings only wounds.”\(^{(25)}\) This trip is therefore nostalgically planned in search for a dream Calcutta. What Tara expected to see was the Bengal of Satyajit Ray, children running through cool green spaces, aristocrats despairing in music rooms of empty palaces. Even the language of this novel resembles the British English because of the British models she had been taught at the British convent in Calcutta. At the end of the novel Tara realizes that by settling in America and marrying there she has cut herself adrift from Calcutta and from the people she had grown up with. Thus, in this novel, Mukherjee models very well what Sudhir Kakar describes as “the deep and persistent undercurrent of nostalgia almost sensual in character for the sights, smells, tastes, sounds of the country of our childhood.”\(^{(15)}\)

Commenting on her first novel, Mukherjee observes:

The first ten years into marriage, years spent mostly in my husband’s native Canada, I thought of myself as an expatriate Bengali permanently stranded in North America….My first novel, *The Tiger’s Daughter* embodies the loneliness I felt but could not acknowledge, even to myself, as I negotiated the no man’s land between the country of my past and the continent of my present.\(^{6}\)

Mukherjee was especially interested in analyzing how Asian women adjust to cultural dislocation. In their quest to readjust life in the west, women display a variety of emotions ranging from loneliness, worthlessness, neuroticism and assimilation. Their sufferings struck a personal chord with her for they were sisters in pain. She concentrated mostly on the lives of the upper middle-class women of Calcutta with whom she had gone to school. On the surface, these women seemed very comfortable and secure in their luxurious homes playing the roles society demanded of them. But beneath the surface, she noticed a simmering discontent and resentment at the straight-jacket in which they were forced to lead their lives. Something was ‘terribly, terribly wrong’ with their world and what was unforgivable was they had been “sacrificed to notions of propriety and obedience.”\(^{7}\) In 1974, a Columbian professor, on a visit to Calcutta, asked Bharati Mukherjee: “What do Bengali girls do between the age of eighteen and twenty-five?”\(^{8}\) Mukherjee was aghast to discover that except for marriage, women in Calcutta had very few options.

That the protagonist of her first novel is the alter ego of the author is clear from the autobiographical details of *Days and Nights in Calcutta*,\(^{9}\) a collaborative work where she and her husband, the Canadian novelist Clark Blaise, record separately their impressions of a year’s stay in Calcutta in 1973. In this book, as in her first novel, Mukherjee shows herself more concerned with examining her homeland from an exile’s perspective than with the problems experienced by South Asian settlers in the North American continent or by the prospects ahead of them. But the year spent in Calcutta marks a turning point in Mukherjee’s life in the sense that at the end of it she realizes that henceforth she would have to view herself “more as an immigrant than an exile.”\(^{(284)}\) This changing of her status as a writer who moves from expatriation to immigration and the notion that she has uprooted herself from Calcutta, the city of her birth provide a decisive
alteration in her angle of vision. This shift in perspective is clearly noticed in her second novel in the her second novel, *Wife*.

Geographically located in Calcutta and New York, *Wife* is a psychological study of Dimple Dasgupta, a young woman from Calcutta’s middle class -- that values docility and submissiveness in women-- who settles down in New York with her newly acquired Bengali husband Amit Basu, but is so frustrated that she gives vent to her anger by murdering him. Raised to be passive and dependent according to traditional Indian standards of femininity, Dimple lacks the inner strength and resources it takes to cope with the fear and alienation in New York City as the young wife in an arranged marriage. She tries to reconcile the Bengali ideal of the perfect, passive wife with the demands of her new American life, but fails to make the transition from one world to another. At her parental home in Calcutta, waiting anxiously to be married off, her mind is completely dominated by the colourful romance projected in the advertisements and stories of magazines. Her life with Amit does not fulfil her dreams of living in “an apartment in Chowringhee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris.” Instead, Calcutta provides her with a dystopia and her days with Amit in the choking milieu of the narrow flat propel her to hysterical ruminations with her dreamy self. When Amit takes her to Kwality she feels:

…..he should have taken her to Trinca’s on Park Street, where she could have listened to a Goan band play American music to prepare her for the trip to New York or Toronto or to the discotheque in the Park Hotel, to teach her to dance and wriggle. (21)

Through Dimple, Mukherjee seems to portray the hollowness of Bengali institutionalized marriage. Dimple’s mental aberrations cannot bridge the hiatus between the dream world of imagination and the drab world of reality. The choice of Amit as a husband was her parents’ decision governed by the social determinants of the Bengali community. When she married him, she thought it was a proper choice but did not realize it was not her choice. The realization is felt only in New York. It may be interesting in this context to consider Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak’s suggestion that the regulative psychobiography for Indian Women was “sanctioned suicide.” Mukherjee has this to say on the idea:

…Dimple, if she had remained in Calcutta, would have gone into depression, and she would have found a very convenient way out for unhappy Bengali wives – suicide. (12)

Dimple, in fact, enacts many metaphorical murders upon her own senses. Caught in a whirlwind of traumatic emotions, her tradition questioning her outrageous adultery, her present confused self wishing to become American by any means, Dimple finally kills her husband Amit to suppress her guilty conscience and also to feel very American about it. In the end, unable to come to terms with her own culture or the American culture, she finds herself at cross-roads and visualizes her life as “a dying bonfire.” (119)

Bharati Mukherjee’s fifth novel, *Leave It to Me* is once again the transformation of Debby Di Martino to Devi (meaning goddess in Bengali). In the prologue, she retells (very badly) the mythological story of Mahisasuramardini. The celebration of the victory of Goddess Durga over the tyrant Mahisasura not only forms the glorification of female power, but is the most celebrated autumn ritual in the Bengali religious and cultural map. This shift from the references to the Goddess Kali in her earlier novels to that of Durga makes the novel more culture-specific.
In an interview given in 1998, Bharati had stated that she saw her books as stations in her own development as a writer as opposed to a mainstream person living in Calcutta. But with the current “Indi-frenzy” in the United States, she admitted that readers are more interested in romanticised pictures of India rather than immigrant fiction. It might be probably this opportunity that she seized in exoticising India, especially Calcutta and rural Bengal, in her latest novel, *Desirable Daughters*, which opens thus:

In the mind’s eye, a one-way procession of flickering oil lamps sways along the muddy shanko between rice paddies and flooded ponds and finally disappears into a distant wall of impenetrable jungle….

In a palanquin borne by four servants sit a rich man’s three daughters, the youngest dressed in her bridal sari, her little hands painted with red lac dye, her hair oiled and set. Her arms are heavy with dowry gold; bangles ring tiny arms from wrist to shoulder. Childish voices chant a song, hands clap, gold bracelets tinkle.

On the edge of this jungle, Mukherjee establishes the origins of her narrator, Tara Bhattacharjee, the youngest of the three titular ‘desirable daughters’ of prosperous, urbane and conservative Bengali parents, Calcutta girls raised according to the genteel social conventions and hallowed domestic traditions of India. [Is it a coincidence that in real life too Bharati’s family comprised of her three sisters?] She then uses the tale of another Tara, Tara Lata Gangooly, to evoke an India in which daughters were given away in rites of child marriage. The experiences of that Tara in a Bengali village of the past are juxtaposed with those of the modern-day Tara, a sophisticated Indian woman in a cosmopolitan America of the present. The contemporary Tara imagines the child bride:

A Bengali girl’s happiest night is about to become her lifetime imprisonment. It seems all the sorrow of history, all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her.

After Tara Lata’s husband-to-be dies of snake bite, she is united with a god who “come[s] down to earth as a tree to save her from a lifetime of disgrace and misery.” The girl becomes a heroine in rural Bengal as a spiritual healer and martyred freedom-fighter, and the narrator of *Desirable Daughters* evaluates herself and her sisters in terms of that heroism. “Each generation of women in my family has discovered something in her new. Even in far-flung California, the Tree-Bride speaks again.” After a lot of ramifications the story ends with Tara finally yielding to the most American of impulses—a search for her roots. As she ambles with her son along the jungle pathway in rural Bengal where the Tree-Bride once walked, she has a vision of what lies ahead, “lighted by kerosene and naptha lamps held by the children of fruit and vegetable vendors.” The experience promises the redemption of self-knowledge.

In a recent review of the novel, the reviewer compares the exoticism of the “roots gatherer” Bharati Mukherjee with the Chinese-American writer Amy Tan:

She could be Amy Tan’s Indian cousin, a transvestite of ethnic origins who trades on her duality. If Tan begins one of her Gothic tales in a village pig sty in ancient China, where the family would stash its unwanted baby girls, Bharati Mukherjee kick-starts her latest novel with an equally riveting fable about the Tree Bride and
the curse of the serpent goddess, Manasha. There is mist and mystery shivering in the air as she plots her way through the past, using the image of a raised white path, a “shanko” as she tells us at the very end, that brings us back to the beginning.

For readers who are unaware of the cultural specificity of the folk goddess Manasha, worshipped throughout rural Bengal, the narrow poles ['shankos'] that divide the wet paddy fields, or the “Tush Tulsi Brata,” the “large palki,” the “sharp-bladed daos” of the guards -- Bharati Mukherjee seems to be recreating all the childhood tales she had heard or read about. She even takes pains in describing the historical details of the city of Calcutta:

In those years, Bengal was the seat of British power, Calcutta its capital, its cultural and economic center. The city is endowed with the instruments of Western knowledge, the museums, the colleges, the newspapers, and the Asiatic Society. The old Bengal Presidency included all of today’s Bangladesh, the current Indian state of West Bengal, and parts of Assam, Bihar, and Orissa.

Incidentally, Mukherjee has been often on the lecture trail in India, warning aspirants to the New World about how a creative person has to cut off her roots to grow in a new environment. She has vociferously declared:

I am an American writer in the American mainstream, trying to extend it. This is a vitally important statement from me – I am not an Indian writer, not an exile, not an expatriate. I am an immigrant, my investment is in the American reality, not the Indian.

Whether she has extended the American mainstream is a debatable point, but from reading her latest novel it is obvious that it does not mean that she practices what she preaches. *Desirable Daughters* makes her not only an Indian writer, but very much a Bengali writer at heart. Probably, this novel is her discovery or realisation that “while changing citizenships is easy, swapping cultures is not.” Calcutta, the city where she grew up, and Bengal, the land of her forefathers, thus go on presenting their selves in various manifestations in Bharati Mukherjee’s fictional oeuvre.

II

**Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni**

Chitra Banerjee was born in Calcutta and spent the first nineteen years of her life in India. Attending a convent school run by Irish nuns during her childhood, she earned her bachelor’s degree in English from the University of Calcutta. At the age of nineteen, she moved to the United States to continue her studies, getting a Master's degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and a Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley, both in English. She did not begin to write fiction until after she graduated from Berkeley, when she came to realize that she loved teaching but didn’t want to do academic writing, and instead wanted to write something more immediate. Married to Murthy Divakaruni in 1979, she now lives in Sunnyvale, California. In an interview in *The Sunday Statesman*, February 2, 2003 when asked what she felt she was – an Indian, an American or an Indian living in the U.S, she confessed:
I have to live with a hybrid identity. In many ways I’m an Indian, but living in America for 19 years has taught me many things. It has helped me look at both cultures more clearly. It has taught me to observe, question, explore and evaluate.

As she began living in the United States, Chitra became more and more aware of the differences in culture and it was then that she wanted to write as a means of exploring these differences. Initially she started writing for herself. Once she enjoyed doing that, she joined a writer’s group in Berkeley University during the mid-eighties. Her first volume of short stories, Arranged Marriage, explores the cross-cultural experiences of womanhood through a feminist perspective, a theme that continued to inform her work. Talking about her forthcoming arranged marriage, the woman narrator in the short story “Meeting Mrinal” says to her dissenting woman friend, “Your mother got married this way and so did mine. And they’re perfectly happy.” The friend responds, “Yes, but our mothers didn’t even complete high school. Times have changed, and so have we.” How the changing times are affecting the cherished Indian institution of arranged marriage is the theme of all the eleven stories in this anthology. Most of the stories are about Indian immigrants to the United States from the author’s native region of Bengal and are told by female narrators in the first person singular point of view, often in the present tense, imparting a voice of intimacy and cinematic credibility. They capture the experience of the recent immigrants, mainly from the professional classes, electronic engineers and business people, and some from the lower working classes such as auto-mechanics and 7-eleven store clerks. There are several immigrant brides who “are both liberated and trapped by cultural changes” and who are struggling to carve out an identity of their own. Though references to local attractions, postgraduate education and her Bengali culture are sprinkled liberally throughout the tales, Chitra says the stories themselves – which deal with issues including domestic violence, crime, racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion and divorce – are inspired by her imagination and the experiences of others.

Some critics have accused Chitra of tarnishing the Indian community’s image and reinforcing stereotypes of the ‘oppressed’ Indian woman, but as Julie Mehta reports, the writer says her aim is to shatter stereotypes:

Some just write about different things, but my approach is to tackle these sensitive topics….I hope people who read my book will not think of the characters as Indians, but feel for them as people.

At once pessimistic and filled with hope, Divakaruni creates contradictory as well as connected fictional worlds through the stories. The story “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” juxtaposes the protagonist’s vision of America as an illusion and reality when as a student, arriving in the city of Chicago from the conservative middle-class upbringing in Calcutta, is brought face-to-face with the horrifying reality of its mean streets; “The Ultrasound”, which deals with the sensitive issue of female foeticide, was later enlarged into the novel Sister of My Heart. In “Affair,” two temperamentally ill-matched Indo-American couples, whose marriages had been arranged on the basis of their horoscopes having matched ‘perfectly,’ divorce after many years of affluent living in Silicon Valley. In one story, “Doors,” the character Preeti, after moving to the United States, has come to love the western idea of privacy. She faces a dilemma when her husband’s cousin wants to come to live with them. She expresses her discontent with the situation, which shows her newfound decisiveness and her fight against her husband’s view of a traditional Indian wife. In another story, “Clothes,” the husband of the narrator, Sumita, dies and she is faced with the decision of staying in America or going back to India to live with her in-laws, where obviously she will have to discard
all her colourful clothes and don white garbs. Sumita calls widows who are serving their in-laws “doves with cutoff wings.”

One common theme that runs through all the stories is that for those Indian-born women living new lives in America, independence is a mixed blessing. It means walking the tightrope between old treasured beliefs and surprising newfound desires, and understanding the emotions which that conflict brings. The possibility of change, of starting anew, seems at once terrifying and filled with promise. Though the characters vary, the themes of the short stories are essentially the same – exploration of the nature of arranged marriages as well as the experiences of affirmation and rebellion against social traditions. For several characters, the social environment in the new country exacts a poignant psychic cost by challenging their traditional self-concept as integral parts of an extended Indian family and pushing them instead into the American mould of autonomous individualism. The strong moral values imposed by her own middle-class Bengali upbringing often become the fixed loci against which she juxtaposes the situations of the New World.

Divakaruni’s first novel, *The Mistress of Spices* is unique in that it is written with a blend of prose and poetry, successfully employing Magic Realism. Set in the United States, the heroine, Tilo (short for Tilottama), is the “Mistress of Spices.” Born in India, she is shipwrecked on a remote island inhabited by women. Here she encounters an ancient woman who imparts instruction about the power of spice. Ordained after trial by fire, each new spice mistress is sent to a far-off land. Tilo heads for Oakland, California, disguised as an old woman, and sets up a shop where she sells spices. While she supplies the ingredients for curries and kormas, she also helps her customers to gain a more precious commodity: whatever they most desire. The novel has a very mystical quality to it, and, as Divakaruni puts it, “I wrote it in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable.” In fact, she writes so lyrically and weaves her tale so intricately, that one begins to believe in the spices and their healing properties. Chitra drew on the folk tales she had remembered from her childhood days in Bengal, such as the sleeping city under the ocean and the speaking serpents, but she changed them almost completely. “The speaking serpents are a different kind of magic that I only partially understand. They represent the grace of the universe, and by that, I mean they are not governed by logic but come to us mortals as a blessing we cannot understand.”

Unlike the magic realism of her first novel, *Sister of My Heart* is written in the realist mode and describes the complicated relationships of a family in Bengal. Born in the big old Calcutta house on the same tragic night that both their fathers were mysteriously lost, Sudha and Anju are distant cousins, and are brought up together. Closer even than sisters, they share clothes, worries, dreams. The Chatterjee family fortunes are at low ebb, as there are only widows at home – the girls’ mothers, and their aunt. The novel’s forty-two chapters are set as a sort of extended dialogue that is multi-tiered and over-layered. The chapters themselves are alternately titled, Anju and Sudha, and contain within their folds, techniques that are epistolary and explanatory, topography that is transcultural, tone that is adjectival and highly lyrical, and style that is italicized and romantic. Slowly the dark secrets of the past are unveiled and this tests their mutual loyalty. A family crisis forces their mothers to start the serious business of arranging the girls’ marriages, and the pair is torn apart. Sudha moves to her hew family’s home in rural Bengal, while Anju joins her immigrant husband in California. Although they have both been trained to be perfect wives, nothing has prepared them for the pain, as well as the joy, that each will have to face in her new life. In the
story, the Indian discrimination against women stands exposed: the girls consider themselves inferior beings because they are female. Though there are certain passages with feminist ideas, the story line becomes rather predictable. Anju saves Sudha from the machinations of her husband and in-laws who want to kill the girl child she has conceived, and brings her to America. The novel ends with a rather clichéd sentence, “A rain-dampened sun struggled from the clouds to frame us in its hesitant, holy light.”

Chitra identifies the novel as ultimately about storytelling. Influenced by her grandfather who told stories from South Asian epics, she has woven those childhood folk tales into her novel. She explains that the “aloneness” of the epic heroines seemed strange to her even as a child. She adds a disclaimer when asked if she has created a comprehensive picture of South Asian family life, “It is impossible to believe that all Indian families are like my characters. It is like saying that all American families are like the characters in Flannery O’Connor’s books,” she tells the reporter in an online article.

Though Sister of My Heart is set in Calcutta, Chitra candidly admits in the same interview that the rest of the story is far from autobiographical and is based on observation and imagination – “Story-writing is like transforming life into art.”

The female protagonists of eight of the nine stories in Divakaruni’s sensuously evocative collection The Unknown Error of Our Lives are caught between the beliefs and traditions of their Indian heritage and those of their, or their children’s, new homeland, America. The diverse range of stories in this volume attracts the readers’ attention and most of them depict life in East and West with touching perception and color. While the problem of acculturation is deftly dealt with in “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter,” where a Bengali widow discovers that her old fashioned ways are an embarrassment to her daughter-in-law and decides to go back to Calcutta; miscommunication and distancing in a brother-sister relationship in “The Intelligence of Wild Things”, to the protagonist Ruchira in “The Unknown Errors of Our Lives” who while packing up her flat in preparation for her forthcoming marriage, discovers her childhood ‘book of errors’, a teenage notebook in which she wrote down ways to improve her life—Divakaruni writes about the problems of life which she knows best. Her Bengali upbringing has contributed a lot to this knowledge. “The Names of Stars in Bengali” is the beautifully nuanced story of a San Francisco wife and mother who returns to her native village in Bengal to visit her mother, in which each understands afresh the emotional dislocation caused by stepping into “a time machine called immigration” that subjects them to “the alien habit of a world they had imagined imperfectly.” Along with the elaborate scents, sights and sounds of Bengali life, all of the stories are touching tales of lapsed communication, inarticulate love and redemptive memories. They illuminate the difficult adjustments of women in whom memory and duty must co-exist with a new, often painful and disorienting set of standards.

Chitra’s latest novel, The Vine of Desire is a story of extraordinary depth and sensitivity and is also considered as a sequel to her earlier novel, Sister of My Heart. With sequels one can trace the growth of that character. This one is the story of Anju and Sudha, two young women far from Calcutta, the city of their childhood, who after a year of living separate lives are rekindling their friendship in America. The deep-seated love they feel for each other provides the support they need: it gives Anju the strength to pick up the pieces after a personal tragedy, and Sudha the confidence to make life for herself and her baby daughter, Dayita – without her husband. The unlikely relationships they form with men and women in the world outside the immigrant Indian community as well as their families in India profoundly transform them, especially when they must confront the deep passionate feelings that Anju’s husband has for Sudha. Sudha, seeking a measure
of self-worth and trying to assuage loneliness, succumbs to Sunil’s need for her and then flees from home, cousin and cousin’s husband to be a nursemaid to an old and ailing man. Sunil also moves out and away. Anju does her writing coursework, and makes it to the dean’s list. The story ends with Anju’s metaphorical declaration, “I’ve learned to fly,” and makes Divakaruni deal with a new facet of immigrant experience in the sense that the movement is not necessarily a physical one or from east to west. By making Sudha decide that she’s not interested in America any more and would like to go home, the author wants to tread new ground. Through the eyes of people caught in the clash of cultures, and by constantly juxtaposing Calcutta with a Californian city, Divakaruni reveals the rewards and the perils of breaking free from the past and the complicated, often contradictory emotions that shape the passage to independence.

Speaking about women who read books with multicultural themes, she states in her interview to Esha Bhattacharjee:

Many of us articulate in our books the deepest fear and trauma faced by women in India and here—and show them emerge, at least in many cases, as stronger and self-reliant women. Some of our characters are good role models for women readers and women activists.27

Of course, she also admits that her position as a woman writer in America has been far more meaningful vis-à-vis that of those writers in her home country. “Had I lived in India, I would have been expected to get married, raise children and pursue a career— if at all—that was not very demanding.”28

Apart from her poems and fictional writing, Divakaruni has written different kinds of non-fictional articles as well. In a very interesting piece entitled, “My fictional children”29 Divakaruni mentions how everything she ever tried to write about her children has turned to hallmark mush but the fictional mothers in her stories have become much more complex and full. The concluding paragraph of this article is interesting:

My writing is made more complicated by the act that I’m exploring the experience of being Indian, of being brought up in a culture where many still consider motherhood a woman’s supreme destiny, and the inability to get pregnant her supreme failure. This is one of the major themes of the novel I’m working on right now. I think I’m not exaggerating when I say…that I wouldn’t be writing this book had I not had children myself.

Divakaruni’s journey from a young graduate student in Calcutta to a matured writer of repute in the United States seems to have come to a full circle. She believes that there are both pluses and minuses to belonging to the huge influx of Asian American writers. The interest in Asian American literature makes it easier to get published than maybe ten or fifteen years ago. She tells her niece:

The best part is that your writing is now available to so many people, both within and outside of the community. Young South Asians have come up to me and said, ‘I really relate to this story. This story has helped me understand my mother, helped me understand my culture.’ That’s a really good feeling.30
Along with the positive sides, Divakaruni admits in the same interview that the classification as an Asian American writer can have its drawbacks:

You are expected to be a spokesperson for the community, and that is just an unfair kind of burden. I always try to make it clear that I am presenting one vision about what is true about the Indian American community. It is a very diverse community, and mine is just one angle of looking at it.

Also noted is her change in her style of writing. For example, the first volume of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* included a detailed glossary of Bengali and Hindi words, which were italicized in the stories. In her latest novel, *The Vine of Desire*, she has not only done away with italics and glossaries, but has been using deliberate Bengali and Hindi words within the text with a vengeance, so to say. It seems a new tool by which she wants to exoticise the East in its newest avatar and break away from the “Footnote School” – a coinage by Ruchir Joshi to describe all the Indo-Anglian writers. Along with the culture specific “Lalmohan bird,” “the palash flowers,” “the sannyasis,” “the rakkhosh,” “the kalpurush,” the text is filled with Bengali culinary details -- “the crisp parotas,” “the khichuri made with rice and moong dal,” “the kurma,” “the chorchori,” “the illish fish,” “the narsus,” “the ghugni,” or “bhaete-bhat,” Chitra also deliberately used Bengali terms of endearment like “yes, shona.” It seems that since the land of princes, snake-charmers, elephants, and even poverty—objects and concepts that are associated with India in the popular imagination outside the country -- has become passé for the Western readers, invoking exoticism in its newer form is a deliberate attempt on the part of the writer to exoticise her own motherland. When asked by Esha Bhattacharjee as to how she has matured as a writer, Divakaruni’s candid reply was:

With each new book, there’s a new challenge. *Arranged Marriage* was a more contemporary exploration of women moving to the West. *Sister of My Heart* was set in traditional Kolkata, and there was this dual narrative I experimented with. … *Mistress of Spices* has been very different because I tried to weave some magic into it. My research included Bengali folk tales, Indian myths, oriental magic and also the immigrant experience. *The Vine of Desire* is more about the unknown error of our lives. Here I’ve experimented with an omniscient narrative voice. I’ve looked into things more deeply here, and I hope my book connects with its readers.

In her visit to Kolkata in January 2003, as part of her ‘research trip,’ she spoke to a cross-section of people, trying to note the changes in lifestyles and the way they think. Since the break in the traditional family structure interests her, since she has realized that women here have become a lot more confident, we might expect the next novel to deal with the many changes that the city of her birth and growing years have undergone. Since life to Divakaruni seems forever mysterious – always complicated by the conflict between destiny and desire, it is difficult to predict her next fictional venture, but one assumes that Calcutta or rural Bengal might find their place there too.

III

Sunetra Gupta

The ‘desh-pardesh’ syndrome, so typical of all diasporic writers, finds a different exposition in the works of Sunetra Gupta, who has managed to find a bridge between the two. Biographically
speaking, born in Calcutta in 1965, Sunetra is a true diasporic Bengali who spent much of her childhood in places like Ethiopia, Zambia, and Liberia. Then she came back with her parents to live for some time in Calcutta. Encouraged by her father who introduced her to the work of the Bengali Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, she began writing as a teenager. Graduating from Princeton University with a degree in biology in 1987, Sunetra earned a Ph.D. from the University of London. Married to an Irishman, and with two daughters, she now lives in London, and divides her time between her family, researching infectious diseases and writing.

Sunetra’s writing reveals her undeniable attachment to places she felt she belonged to, especially Calcutta and Oxford. It was while living in Calcutta in her teens that her creative writing really began. She started by writing science fiction and had Satyajit Ray, a friend of her father’s; take the time to read the budding novelist’s stories. She cherishes the fond memory of how while commenting among other things, Ray had stressed on her usage of correct grammar. This writing was of course in Bengali. After publishing some more stories in *Fantastic* and *Samatat*, the larger market for world fiction welcomed her more readily and she switched over from writing in her mother tongue to English.

In her debut novel *Memories of Rain*, Sunetra Gupta bring together Anthony and Moni, two characters from disparate worlds in a Calcutta rainstorm and from their fragile love weaves a provocative and utterly emphatic tale. Anthony is English – intelligent and artistic; assured and mysterious; Moni is a bright but sheltered young Bengali woman, seeped in cultural protocol and taboo, in Jane Austen and the songs of Rabindranath Tagore. 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, expecting an unconsummated passion and years of satisfying, sorrowful memories. Instead they marry and make their home in London, where Moni – intense but too silent – soon disappoints. Once in London, she encounters prejudices, sexism, and betrayal by the husband who had been so captivated by her beauty and virginal purity. The blatant disrespect for her being shocks her. Her emotions are heightened and accentuated by the grey of the British weather, the drab buildings, and the bewildering pace of life in a new country. Sunetra masterfully contrasts the fecund, languid beauty of faraway home with the bleak internal and external circumstances in which Moni now finds herself. When Anthony begins to stray – even when his mistress becomes practically a member of the household—Moni believes his divided heart will add an edge to their painful, eternal love, but she cannot bear it when his manner changes to kindness and indifference. The forward action of the novel takes place during a single weekend when Moni, despondent over Anthony’s infidelity, secretly plans to take their child and return to India on her sixth birthday. Tension builds as she weighs the consequences and finally makes her decision.

Writing *Memories of Rain* was quite an experience for Sunetra. “Suddenly you come to touch a part of yourself,” she said. Seeped in Bengali culture, especially the Calcutta of the 50’s and 60’s that she nostalgically recreates in her novel, her writing reveals that she cannot forget the city that she had left behind. Also, as a true Calcuttan, she had known the city in both good and bad times, and even at a distance has been loyal to it, unlike so many who leave and just remember the heat and dust, the pollution and noise. Thus inevitably, her writings are replete with this “Calcutta-touch.” One cannot avoid the pleasure of acute Bengaliness that this novel provides, especially the expression of Moni’s anguished passion, darkness and death through Tagore’s songs. In a *Rediff on the Net* interview Sunetra had admitted that her exposure to literature and writing and especially to
her appreciation of Rabindranath Tagore had been conditioned by her father, who, as a history professor at Calcutta University, is a major influence in her life.

Unlike the binaries of Calcutta and London where the first novel was set, the characters in Sunetra’s second novel, The Glassblower’s Breath live in transnational spaces that are “somewhat outside of being anywhere.” The protagonist is a young Indian woman in search of ideal love and companionship. Though the novel’s settings move among London, Calcutta, Paris, and New York, none of these cities could 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 the same time and yet are always detached from them. When her acquaintance replies that he hates London, the narrator’s response is simply, “When I get tied of London, I go to Paris” (107). The landscapes of these three great cities, teeming with 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 Glassblower’s Breath is caught between her own almost limitless capacity for experience – emotional, intellectual, sexual – and the desire of the men in her life to capture and define her. In spite of her un-subaltern-like education, freedom, social positioning and privileges, she is still condemned to repeat her gendered functions, i.e. her role as daughter or wife. It is significant that the narrative frequently shifts to Calcutta, a city of pain for the heroine, where she feels restricted and marginalized, and she becomes instantly mired in a woman’s marginalized subject position that eludes her class or education. Though educated, she becomes the typically quintessential Indian woman mired in her own emotional and intellectual deprivation. Her resistance to the authority imposed by a father-husband-lover is not so much a manifestation of her libidinous self but a form of protest against traditional norms and values that she encounters both in Calcutta and in London. She is unable to forget her sister’s death from cancer, and her frequent nightmares in which she sees the sister’s rotting body remind her how her own past is intruding upon her private space. Gupta’s poetic and figurative language springs abundantly from free association and is allied to continuous time-shifts that are reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s stream of consciousness narration. She never uses direct speech for dialogues in any of her novels.

Sunetra’s third venture -- Moonlight into Marzipan is a very complex and arduous novel, which does not follow a regular chronological order of event but shifts backward and forward in time and space, leaving the task of reassembling the puzzle of an open-ended story to the readers. Considering the linear thread of events, it 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 change after marriage. In keeping with the 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 when a chance experiment turns grass into gold. Proceeding to England for further scientific investigations, also brings in a crack in their relationship and ultimately leads to Promothesh’s infidelity and Esha’s suicide. Promothesh’s discovery promises to bring him fame and riches, instead it unleashes a chain of events which begins with his arrival in London accompanied by his wife Esha. Esha’s death leaves him marooned and confused, his astonishing discovery slipping from his grasp. Into this morass of ambition and self-pity slips love, in the human form of his biographer Alexandra Vorobyova, and “the devil’s own apprentice” in the very
human form of Yuri Sen. The backdrop of the story is the present day scientific world pivoting around London and Calcutta.

When she was asked to describe her ‘growth’ from the first novel to her third, Sunetra told the *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, ambition, wanting to present India or Bengal in her own work and to be included in a certain community of writers was now over, she said. “My work is more ‘free’ now.” Thus writing for Sunetra can be termed as a kind of spiritual exercise, where she is not involved in any political movement but tries to uncover human conditions.

Sunetra’s fourth novel, *A Sin of Colour* 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 their last youth. The narrative shuttles between Oxford and the U.S. and Calcutta and rural Bengal, with most of the action occurring in Oxford and Calcutta, the two places that Sunetra knows very well. Both the characters are the victims of unrequited love; this colours their lives profoundly, eventually leading them to their sins-- Debendranath Roy with Reba, married to his brother, famous, an artiste, musician and actress, and Niharika with Daniel Faraday, married, friend of Morgan, and the last man to have seen Debendranath alive. Through the seven sections named after different colours, Sunetra tells the story of three generations and of a house in Calcutta called Mandalay. Built by a British officer, it passes into the hands of the wealthy Roy family. It is to Mandalay that Debendranath’s father brings his clever but childlike bride after their wedding. Many years later, Debendranath’s brother brings his own wife, the woman with whom Debendranath is fated to fall in love, to the house. The family’s fortunes fluctuate, independence and partition rob them of much of their wealth, and Debendranath flees the house, his family and his hopeless love, to find a new life in England. The multiple sins of colour all revolve around the one sin which forms the basis of the book; Debendranath’s retirement from this world, his ultimate freedom from the clutches of relationships and demands that are foisted by society. His sin of wanting true freedom, away from all bindings makes the story takes a curious turn when a man in his late thirties is last seen entering a punt on the Cherwell in Oxford. When no further trace of him is found, Debendranath Roy is presumed drowned. He leaves behind a pale and languishing widow in Oxford, and a mystery that takes twenty years to unfold. By the time Debendranath returns from the dead, Mandalay is in ruins, all but abandoned by the next generation, a house full of ghosts.

Sunetra Gupta stands clear from the constant fears of stereo-typification that the onslaught of new novels from the Indian subcontinent has hit the Western literary world. Her work defies any categorization into the prevalent fictional modes adopted by other diasporic writers such as the widely used realist modem autobiographical fiction, the historical novel, or magic realism. The language of market forces has come to affect the body of contemporary literary in a great way and for the author, it is another disturbing phenomenon. “A readership is being created by offering them exotic tit-bits to titillate them. This is not obvious as something like pornography but the reader is fed a bit of China, bits of India, of this and that and everything is handed over to him on a platter. The reader does not have to work at all and this is something very dangerous,” she said to the *Rediff* interviewer. In her writing, Sunetra fuses different genres and languages, experimenting continuously with English and creating her own personal and unique literary space. She is also not concerned whether a foreigner understands the nuances of the reality that she presents in her books.
In concluding Sunetra’s oeuvre as a diasporic woman writer, it has to be mentioned that though she confided to Mithu C. Banerjee, “I know I’m here to stay in Oxford,” Gupta’s literary fans all eagerly await her next fluid, trans-national and trans-cultural novel – one that will definitely include Calcutta and Bengali culture within its fold. What Sunetra tells her interviewer Bronwyn T. Williams also reiterates her position as a true postcolonial, as well as diasporic writer:

I think one has to be comfortable with the notion that one has one’s cultural identity and that one doesn’t necessarily have to be at ‘home’, so to speak. But having had that cultural identity, or whatever else it is that is established for you, wherever you are rooted, whatever you are rooted in … I think we have to accept that we are going to be perpetually wandering. We are bound to, I think. That’s the kind of crisis that we’re in now, that we’re forced to be in a state of perpetual wandering. I mean we can’t be at home. Even if we sit at home, we are forced to travel, just because of what is going on around us.

That Sunetra is not as popular as the other women novelists of the Indian diaspora may be ascribed to the fact that her style of writing does not conform to the typical one that is practiced by the others. Most expatriate writers have a weak grasp of actual conditions in contemporary India, and tend to recreate it through the lens of nostalgia, writing about ‘imaginary homelands’ (to use Rushdie’s phrase). Concentrating primarily upon social realism, their best work deals with Indian immigrants, and the section of society they know first hand. Sunetra’s densely textured language, piling words upon words, trans-national characters; therefore can only draw serious readers towards her work. While the rest of the world vociferates around, Sunetra Gupta quietly carries on with her writing. But the unmistakable Bengal strain remains visible in all the writings of this ‘pardesi’ descendant of Virginian Woolf.

IV

Jhumpa Lahiri

In Jhumpa Lahiri’s case, though she lives in the United States, her work is imbued with Indian, and particularly Bengali culture and sensibilities. Wherever they are set, she explores “Bengaliness” in some of her stories, while others deal with immigrants at different stages on the road to assimilation. Her confession that it is still very hard to think of herself as an American makes her predicament unique as well as typical too. Lahiri believes what first drove her to write fiction was to escape the pitfalls of being viewed as one thing or the other. As an author she could embody any individual her imagination enabled her to, of any origin. A cyber search on Jhumpa Lahiri resulted in 463 sites, all of them carrying the same picture and broadly telling us the same story--her experiences at being initially rejected by publisher; how she is a writer of uncommon elegance and poise; how most of her characters play out a simultaneous existence in two cultures; how being as American as a WASP, she changes cultural perspective as easily as a bilingual writer shifts from language to language; how she has minutely observed Calcutta and the middle-class Bengali milieu; how she has deftly depicted cultural disorientation.

Unlike her three literary sisters, Jhumpa Lahiri is a class apart in the sense that her second generation diasporic status does not connected her to Calcutta by birth. Born in London, raised in
Rhode Island, Connecticut, and presently living in New York, Jhumpa, interestingly enough set some of the stories of *Interpreter of Maladies* in Calcutta because of a necessary combination of distance and intimacy. As a writer of uncommon elegance and poise and a wonderfully distinctive new voice, she chronicles dislocation and social unease in a fresh manner as did her predecessors like Bharati Mukherjee, Sunetra Gupta, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. Thus, Lahiri’s stories – dealing with the trials and tribulations of displaced people struggling to make sense in an unfamiliar world – initially seem to tread on a well traversed terrain. A closer look however reveals that even when she is immersed in the petty details of the disappointments and disenchantments of immigrant lives, the Bengali strain remains all but clear.

All the nine stories in *Interpreter of Maladies*, set in American and India, are united by the motifs of exclusion, loneliness and the search for fulfillment. They do not restrict themselves only to the experiences of migrant and displaced individuals. Themes that interest Lahiri—love, fidelity, tradition, and alienation—crop up in the lives of Indians and non-Indians alike. Communicating the fact that exile and exclusion are not the privilege of any one group of society alone, Lahiri portrays the specific situations of individuals as symptomatic of the ubiquity of loneliness and alienation. The common theme is an inability to communicate. The condition of exile and loneliness – which in “The Third and Final Continent” is expressed through an individual who ruminates on the distances he has travelled, both literally and metaphorically—is probably the ‘beyond’ that connects Bengal and Boston. While some of the characters are directly drawn from real life (cf. Bibi Haldar, a woman who lived in the same building as her aunt and uncle and with whom she “struck a friendship, not terribly deep and abiding, but a friendship nonetheless”: Mrs. Sen based on her own mother who baby-sat in their home—“I saw her one way but imagined that an American child may see her differently, reacting with curiosity, fascination or fear to the things I took for granted” ) Lahiri emphatically states that most of her characters are “semi real – most are composites—though the situations are invented.” Though she talks about universal appeal, most of Lahiri’s Indian characters are Bengalis and her prose is scattered with details of traditional Bengali names, food, cooking, and wardrobe, giving character and flavour to her stories. Also, as a Bengali, the idea of marriage loomed large in her life. She initially drew heavily on her experiences in Calcutta because it gave her a perspective of her heritage.

Of the two stories based in Calcutta, “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” is about a misfit, a young woman, living in a rundown building in Calcutta, and she’s in the care of her cousin and his wife, who run a shop. She’s epileptic, and she lives a very sheltered life; so she is rather naïve. The story is basically about the town’s involvement, to a greater and lesser degree, with her over her marriage and in the idea of finding her a husband. The holding of leather item near Bibi’s nose during her epileptic fit is too common a Bengali superstition to be explained in detail. In “A Real Durwan,” Boori Ma narrated “the details of her plight and losses suffered since her deportation to Calcutta after Partition” as she swept the stairwell of the house. In her case, the story of her homeland was doubly removed from reality. She loved to recall incidents from her past life, her third daughter’s wedding where “mustard prawns were steamed in banana leaves,” a place which had “a pond on the property, full of fish.” Juxtaposed to this is Boori Ma’s present condition in this very old building in Calcutta where she serves as a voluntary durwan and is forced to eat her dinner “from a rice pot.” As for the stories set abroad, Lahiri ensures, with exquisite attention to exotic details, that all of the cultural icons are significantly Bengali. In “A Temporary Matter,” Sobha and Shukumar is a typical Bengali couple settled in the New World. Though Shobha wore “a clean pair of sweatpants, a T-shirt, an old flannel robe,” Shukumar discovers her Bengali
penchant for cooking food in an elaborate way. When he tried to locate a candle among the scissors, the egg-beater and whisks in the kitchen drawer, he also discovers “the mortar and pestle she’d bought in a bazaar in Calcutta, and used to pound garlic cloves and cardamom pods, back when she used to cook.” (11) In “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine,” the little girl saw in wonder how Mr. Pirzada still lived mentally in Dacca, thinking about his seven daughters. In the title story, though Mr. and Mrs. Das “were both born in America” and their “parents live here now, in Asansol.” (45), the particular way the couple dress and move around reminds the reader of the annual visits of their Bengali NRI kith and kin – a category in which the author herself belonged to. In the story “Sexy,” a young Midwestern woman is drawn into a tantalizing affair with a married Bengali man, Devjit Mitra. Dev is portrayed as a Bengali (84), but like all expatriates, has to explain to people about his hometown by pointing to a map:

Dev was Bengali, too. At first Miranda thought it was a religion. But then he pointed it out to her, a place in India called Bengal, in a map printed in an issue of The Economist. ….He’d pointed to the city where he’d been born, and another city where his father had been born. One of the cities had a box around it, intended to attract the reader’s eye. When Miranda asked what the box indicated, Dev rolled up the magazine, and said, “Nothing you’ll ever need to worry about,” and he tapped her playfully on the head. (84)

This cartographic detail remains an enigma for Miranda and after Dev tossed the magazine in the garbage and left, Miranda retrieved it and “studied the borders of Bengal. There was a bay below and mountains above. ….She turned the page, hoping for a photograph of the city where Dev was born, but all she found were graphs and grids” (85). The story which illustrates Bengali culture in the minutest detail is of course “Mrs. Sen’s.” Everything about the protagonist of this story is Bengali – from the way she dresses, the songs she listens to, the way she intricately chops vegetables “seated on newspapers on the living room floor” and instead of a knife, uses the ubiquitous ‘bonti’ -- “a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas” (114), the way she reads out to her husband contents of letters received in Bengali, and the way she longs for fish. In “The Third and Final Continent,” the protagonist notes that when his wife arrives in Boston, he speaks Bengali in America for the first time. Yet there is no discernible change in the style of his dialogue, he speaks to his wife in the same manner that he speaks in English to Mrs. Croft. For the ancient Mrs. Croft, meanwhile, modern life has itself become a baffling foreign language, one she neither participates in nor understands. The protagonist in this story also fears that his son will no longer speak in Bengali after he and his wife die. This is displaced anxiety on Jhumpa’s part – her own fear of her parents’ death. For if she is to survive them, it is she who will suffer that linguistic loss.

What makes the collection of stories truly outstanding is Lahiri’s understanding of her subject as well as of the craft of writing itself. One important reason for the appeal of her stories is of course the freshness of her language. Like all her sisters in the trade, Jhumpa Lahiri reiterates her Indianness too:

My parents never consciously sat down and told me things about India, they sort of correctly assumed that I would learn things just by virtue of being their child. I think it has always been important to them to maintain strong social ties with Indians living abroad and visiting India.
Clearly admitting that her relationship to India changed as she grew older, (“As I grew older, going to India was frustrating, because growing up in America is different….in Calcutta, we had to respect the family’s concerns”\(^39\)) in an interview to *Newsweek* she emphasized the role that Calcutta plays in her imagination:

> I spent much time in Calcutta as a child – idle but rich time—often at home with my grandmother. It enabled me to experience solitude—ironically, because there were so many people, I could seal myself off psychologically. It was a place where I began to think imaginatively. Calcutta nourished my interest in seeing things from different points of view. There’s a tradition there that we just don’t have here. The ink hasn’t dried yet on our lives here.\(^40\)

Though Calcutta – the city that she “know[s] quite well” “is the place where my parents are from, a place I visited frequently for extended time and formed relationships with people and with my relatives and felt a tie over time”, “it was also “a sort of parenthesis in my life to be there.” Like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Bharati Mukherjee, who make repeated references to the cultural tradition of Calcutta and their cherished moments of nostalgia or moments of bewilderment in encounters with the real Calcutta, Jhumpa also tries to relocate her cultural space and identity mediated by significant cross-cultural influences. She confessed to Radhika S. Shankar,

> When I began writing fiction seriously, my first attempts, for some reason, were always set in Calcutta which is a city I know quite well from repeated visits with my family, sometimes for several months at a time.

> These trips to a vast, unruly, fascinating city so different from the small New England town where I was raised shaped my perceptions of the world and of people from a very early age. I learned there was another side, a very different version to everything.

> I went to Calcutta neither as a tourist nor a former resident—a valuable position, I think for a writer. I learned to observe things as an outsider, and yet I also knew that as different Calcutta is from Rhode Island, I belonged there in some fundamental way, in the ways I didn’t seem to belong in the United States. The reason my first stories were set in Calcutta is due partly because of that perspective, that necessary combination of distance and intimacy with a place.\(^41\)

In several other interviews she states her inability to define ‘where she is from’ and categorically states that “the problem for the children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin, is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. That has been my experience in any case.” As a second-generation immigrant in the United States, which is “home” to her, she still feels “a bit of an outsider too.”\(^42\) In her visit to Calcutta, the city tried to claim the famous “Bengali” as its own but Jhumpa insisted that she belonged to no one place in particular and that she inhabits a perplexing bicultural universe. “I’m very fond of Calcutta. I’ve been coming here since the age of two. I have been learning about the city where my parents were born and still have a vital connection with. It’s been a wonderful part of my life. But it’s not home.”\(^43\) In the online essay “To Heaven Without Dying,” she categorically states:
I have always lived under the pressure to be bilingual, bicultural, at ease on either side of the Lahiri family map. The first words I learned to utter and understand were in my parents’ native tongue, Bengali. …my ability to speak the language made me feel less foreign during visits to Calcutta every few years. It also made me feel less foreign in the expatriate Bengali community my parents socialize with in the United States and, on a more quotidian level, in my own home. While English was not technically my first language, it has become so….When it came to my own writing, English was, from the beginning, my only language.14

Looking at her stories as a whole, we feel that Jhumpa seems especially preoccupied with the presence in any given character’s life of two languages and sometimes more, in different sorts of equations. Almost all her characters are translators, in so far as they must make sense of the foreign in order to survive. The failed linguist in the title story literally makes his living off his knowledge of English and other languages. In “Sexy,” Miranda’s curiosity about Bengali is a way for her to gain access to her married and increasingly unavailable lover. "Mrs. Sen’s," the story of a young woman trying to adapt to the lonely life of a housewife married to an untenured and anxious math professor, who tries to expand her horizons by babysitting a neglected, young white boy in her apartment after school, will surely bring back memories of many Bengali women of the earlier generation. Their sincerity and anguish in coming to grips with the postscript of marriage to a stranger then moving to a strange new culture were captured precisely by Lahiri's sensitive portrayal of the title character. Also, the subplot of Mrs. Sen's determination to find fresh, whole fish might well be misinterpreted by critics who are not aware of the love of fish that the Bengalis profess. Apart from the ritual of putting on vermillion powder in the parting of her hair as a sign of her marital status, the whole fresh fish that young woman purchases almost daily from a seafood store is the only recognizable Bengali signpost left in her life – in fact one of the prime urges for her to learn driving.

Jhumpa admits that there is less of a divide between American culture and Indian because of the greater access and communication channels, “But I have observed a sense of emotional exile in my parents and in their friends that I feel can never go away.” On the other hand, “the problem for children of immigrants, those with strong ties to their country of origin, is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. To the interviewer she therefore confesses:

I’ve inherited my parent’s preoccupations. It’s hard to have parents who consider another place “home” – even after living abroad for thirty years, India is home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here. There’s nobody in this whole country that we’re related to. India was different—our extended family offered real connections. To see my parents as children, as siblings, was rare.45

In spite of such strong emotional nourishment, Lahiri at the same time also does not fail to mention the typical immigrant phenomenon of belonging nowhere and that even in India; she did not feel at home. “We visited often, but we didn’t have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never fully with us.” “The older I get,” she continues, “the more aware I am that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways – superficial ones, largely— I am so much more American than they are.” She also stresses the dichotomy of growing up in two cultures – how it bothered her when she grew up that there was no single place to which she fully
belonged. “Growing up in two countries, I see things in a way that not everyone around me can. I’d talk to my cousins about what life’s like in America and still know that they’ll never get it because they haven’t been here. Talking to Americans about India is the same—it’s always partial. As a story teller, I’m aware that there are limitations in communication.” But we have to admit that the most startling about Lahiri’s characters was the fact that to all appearances her Das–es and Sens are the happy contented Bengalis one meets at social functions. They are instantly recognizable, even likeable – the friendly polite people who have long leisurely meals and dip biscuits in their teas.

Critics were puzzled when Jhumpa, whose home is in the USA, and who categorically stated that Kolkata was not her home, decided to get married in Calcutta in traditional Bengali style. Could it be to renew public interest (to say nothing of the much-maligned Bengali curiosity about other people’s private lives) in a book published nearly two years back and sell a few hundred copies more? According to the writer of course, it did not really signify anything. The more cynical ones suggested that the ethnic flavour adds a particular exoticism that western readers are very fond of. The ceremony of her marriage to her Spanish-American boyfriend Alberto Vourvoulias on January 15, 2001 took the local media by storm, more so because they were officially barred from being present at the function. Tired, humiliated and having failed to get the story (except by piecing together information gleaned from bonafide invitees) the press shot back the next day, going into elaborate details of how papa Lahiri curtly told them to make way for the guests and the bride refused to admit the media because she was “too shy.” As a reporter sarcastically commented: “But except for the bridegroom and the bride’s accent, everything about the wedding will be Bengali with a vengeance.” Thus Jhumpa Lahiri who came to Kolkata with a lot of hope to regain her Bengali roots, returned with an overdose of hype, adulation and bad press. Hailing her “exoticity” Sarbari Sinha thinks that it is probably only fitting that Jhumpa’s marriage should become a narrative event for her readers. Jhumpa, who’s Interpreter of Maladies, is an exploration of the married state, or the longing for it. Lahiri has admitted that to play safe she will have to promise that she will never write about India or non-immigrant Indians again. But she says that her translation of India has evoked, for some readers and reviewers here and there, the illusion of cultural accuracy and resonance. She keeps on reiterating that her writing is less a response to her parents’ cultural nostalgia and more an attempt to forge her own amalgamated domain. But the question still remains whether Calcutta for Jhumpa Lahiri remains to a great extent a “city of the mind” as she had declared it to be.

**Conclusion**

It is interesting to note that despite their “mainstream acceptance,” all the four writers mentioned in this article are still marketed as “ethnic writers.” Though one never gets the sense that they set their stories in India in order to give white suburban American women (who apparently are the biggest purveyors of ethnic fiction) an easy armchair tour of India, (and particularly Bengal), that their India is replete with quaint customs and rich traditions, this label seems difficult to be erased permanently. Instead one feels that their stories shuttle back and forth between Bengal and the U.S. because those are the places and cultures they are most at home in and can write about with the greatest confidence.

In her essay “Divided by a Common Legacy,” Meenakshi Mukherjee states:
The novelist in the Indian language seems more involved with the local and the particular, compared to the national project in English which has a greater anxiety to appear ‘Indian’ because the target readership is diffuse and may include those who have no first-hand experience of India. This anxiety sometimes manifests in a pull towards homogenization, an inability to perceive those realities which are situated outside the cognitive limits imposed by English and which cannot be appropriated into the East-West or colonial-indigenous paradigms.

From the writings of the four diasporic women novelists under discussion, one begs to differ from the generalisation made by Mukherjee. In most of their writings, the macro-level Indianness has been replaced by micro-level Bengaliness; their jargon is not tailored to the elite pseudo-culture in India, so much so that Ruchir Joshi even calls their work to be filled up with “Calcuttese.”

Before concluding, I would like to mention that there are many other writers who suffer from this ‘Calcutta syndrome’, if we may term it so. Browsing through the e-journal *Jouvert* some time ago, I came across a poem called “Chicago 2001: The Woman Who Tries to See” composed by Tapati Bharadwaj which evocatively juxtaposes the past and present worlds she traverses in – that of Calcutta and Chicago. But what is more interesting is the ‘Author’s Note’ that is prefixed to the poem:

> I have lived most of my life in Calcutta, except for the last two years. Though I move across geographical spaces, wherever I go, Calcutta is home. Despite participating in the social and cultural lives of the ‘new’ spaces, I somehow remain firm on what I consider as ‘going home.’ The storehouse of images and memories that I carry within me enables me to create ‘home’ wherever I go.

Like Amit Chaudhuri, whose first novel *A Strange and Sublime Address*, can be described in one phrase as a typical Bengali “*mamabarir galpo*” (story of the maternal uncle’s house) embedded with all its cultural associations of love, indulgence, and nostalgia, the pull of the birthplace remains very strong in all the diasporic writers mentioned as well as discussed here. As the survey indicates, it will be really difficult for all these writers to sever roots with Calcutta and Bengal in future, as the old saying goes, “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

**Notes and References**


7 Days and Nights in Calcutta, 217.
8 Ibid: 212.
13 Mukherjee, Bharati. Leave It To Me, 1997.
16 Mukherjee, Bharati, Days and Nights in Calcutta, 169.
22 Ibid.
24 http://www.stirmag.com/chitra
28 Ibid.


See http://www.Rediff On The Net interview (‘An encounter with the award-winning novelist, Sunetra Gupta’)

Banerjee, Mithu C. “Never far from home,” The Sunday Statesman 13 August, 2000: 3


Lahiri, Jhumpa. The Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston, and Beyond. New Delhi: Harper Collins India, 1999. (Further quotations from the text will be in parenthesis)


Ibid.


Bhattacharya, Chandrima. “Interpreter’s baptism by Bengali”. The Telegraph (Metro Section) 11January, 2001


Newsweek interview by Vibhuti Patel.

A survey of the daily newspapers published from Calcutta both in English and Bengali after her Pulitzer Prize award and during this week of Jhumpa’s marriage shows the interest Calcuttans took in this desi girl’s affairs. A list of some of the titles of these news items will suffice to establish the point.

i) “Jhumpa Lahiri wins Pulitzer” The Statesman, 12 April, 2000


iii) “Calcutta raises a toast to Jhumpa” The Hindustan Times, 13 April, 2000

iv) “Surprise success story”, The Telegraph, 16 April, 2000

v) “Enigmas of distance” The Telegraph, 30 April, 2000

vi) “Interpreting Jhumpa Lahiri” The Statesman, 10 May, 2000


vii) “Interpreter’s baptism by Bengali,” The Telegraph, 11 January, 2001


