

South Asian Diaspora literature in Britain
By Alastair Niven

Introduction

The Indian sub-continent has fed the Western literary imagination since ancient times. It was usually seen in the one of three ways – exotic (Andrew Marvell, in his most famous poem: ‘Thou by the Indian Ganges’ side/Shouldst rubies find’) or primitive (Othello’s ‘f one whose hand,/like the base Indian, threw a pearl away’) or innocent. It was not until the start of the nineteenth-century that a new view of India took root with translations made available of the *Upanishads* and other ancient semiscriptura texts. As the century proceeded British readers had the opportunity first to read the foundation writing of the sub-continent’s culture and then to hear for the first time the voice of contemporary India through the lyrical poems of the briefly fashionable Toru Dutt.

In any history of Indo-Anglian writing Bankim Chander Chatterjee’s *Rajmohan’s Wife* (1864) is taken as the starting point, but diasporically we cannot refer to any writing from the sub-continent before the twentieth-century. Even then it is stretching a point to include Rabindranath Tagore (who sometimes wrote in English, though usually in Bengali), Sarojini Naidu, Jogendra Singh or Romesh Chander Dutt. Like great political leaders Gandhi and Nehru, authors of autobiographies, these people interconnected with Britain, and some of them visited it, but they never lived here for substantial period.

The 1930s and 1940s

In the 1930s Mulk Raj Anand was based in London or in Buckinghamshire. Married to Kathleen van Gelder, he looked set to remain in England, feted by literary society. He returned to India in 1948 as much because of his marriage ending as because of the lure of the newly independent India. The works for which he is still best-known were written in England: *Untouchable*, *Coolie*, the ‘Lalu’ trilogy of *The Village*, *Across the Black Waters* and *The Sword and the Sickle*. This is not reflected either in the subject matter or the setting of these novels. The major exception is *Across the Black Waters*, with its depiction of the slaughter of sepoys in the Flemish trenches of the Great War. This story, still less well known than it deserves to be, was partly provoked by Anand’s encounter with pacifist thinking in the London of the mid 1930s.

Anand was for two decades so immersed in the society of London’s *literati*, working alongside Virginia and Leonard Wolf at the Hogarth Press and alongside George Orwell at the BBC, that he was virtually adopted by it. Only after his return to India did he begin *The Seven Ages of Man*, a *bildungsroman* sequence, large section of which recall his years in Britain. In 1953 he published what is arguably his masterpiece *Private Life of an Indian Prince*, a key part of which takes place in London. Apart from a short book of reminiscences, *Conversations in Bloomsbury*, this was to be his last new work published in the United Kingdom.

Among those who worked with Anand at the BBC was Tambimuttu. Elegant and usually impoverished, Tambimuttu arrived in London in the 1930s from Colombo. He was an editor, critic and conversationalist of wit and brilliance, remembered now as much for being a catalyst to other people’s talent as for anything he wrote himself.

It became customary in the 1990s to talk of the ‘grand old men’ of Indian literature, many of whom had emerged in the 1930s and 1940s and who were still actively engaged in new

literary undertakings well into their eighties and nineties. Several of these knew Britain well. G.V. Desani's influential novel *All about H. Hatter* came out in 1948 and was enthusiastically received for its linguistic experimentation and almost surrealistic imagination. In his famous metaphysical fiction *The Serpent and the Rope* Raja Rao evoked the England of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation in 1953. Neither of these writers, however, integrated as fully with Britain as Anand had done at the outset of his career or as Nirad C. Chaudhuri was to do at the end of his career.

The works of Nirad Chaudhuri which we know best were written in English, but in the final decades of his life he increasingly returned to his mother tongue Bengali. In 1951 he aptly entitled his first book *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*. This remains to this day one of the best autobiographies ever written and also a key work in understanding the impact of the Raj on ordinary lives. He followed it with *A Passage to England*, a commissioned book of reflections based on his first sojourn here in 1955. In 1972 Chaudhuri came to live permanently in Oxford, writing several more books, including a second volume of autobiography. He died in 1999 at the age of 101, feted now by a sub-continent he had so often offended and by an England he continued to castigate on account of what he saw as its remorseless decline.

The successor generation in the 1950s and 1960s

The writers thus mentioned would all have regarded themselves as Indian. They used Indian material and were profoundly affected by partition. Younger subcontinent writers based in Britain did not assume the mantles of these literary elder statesmen. They regarded themselves as art of the new multi-cultured Britain that emerged in the 1960s, though of course its roots were ancient. Two prose writers, Balraj Khanna and Prafulla Mohanti, are also front-ranking visual artists, regularly exhibiting in inner city galleries and accepting public commissions as part of the New Britain. Mohanti's *Through Brown Eyes* is an autobiographical account of what it is like to live among a suspicious white majority.

The superb novelist Kamala Markandaya, author of *Nectar in a Sieve* and *The Golden Honeycomb*, settled in Britain, but like Anand found it increasingly difficult to find outlets for her writing in this county. Markandaya straddles the divide between the two generations, almost always writing about India but doing so with a detachment perhaps bred of distance. Attia Hosain, slightly older than any of these, is remembered for only one novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, but it has a slowburning reputation that is likely in the end to ensure it the status of a minor classic.

Imaginary Homelands in the 1980s

A breakthrough for literature from the sub-continent obviously came with the publication in 1981 of Salman Rushdie's second novel *Midnight's Children*. The book was massively influential, winning not only the Booker Prize for Fiction but also the 'Booker of Bookers' when the prize celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. At a stroke the British novel joined up with what had been happening in European and American fiction, particularly in terms of magic realism. A panoramic and almost Dickensian *panache* returned to English fiction. In an essay entitled 'Imaginary Homelands' Rushdie examined the position of the diasporic post-colonial writer. In *The Satanic Verses*, the capacious novel that led to the notorious *fatwa*, he fictionalised the issues that engaged him in the essay. In later novels, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and *Fury*, he continued to survey the migratory cross-cultural complexity of modern society, increasingly seeing America rather than Britain as the true cauldron of globalisation.

One of the reasons why Rushdie is so pivotal to an understanding of modern literature is that he challenges the conventional national labelling of writers. Is someone from Mumbai, whose secondary education was in Britain and who has recently moved to New York, Indian or British? His literary pedigree does not lie in any one part of the world, as much influenced by ancient story-telling as by postmodernism, by the *Mahabharata* as by Günter Grass.

The fashion for prose works from the sub-continent has lasted to this day, though few of the authors who have caught the public imagination – Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Arundhati Roy – have lived in Britain sufficiently long periods to be part of our diasporic story. The exceptions, apart from Rushdie, are Vikram Seth who lives part of each year in Britain and who in *An Equal Music* began to engage with it in his writing, and Romesh Gunesequera, author of *Reef*, whose evocation of modern Sri Lanka requires the detachment of distance.

The master of cold-eyed detachment is the Nobel Prize-winning V.S. Naipaul, a Trinidadian of Indian origin. (Here perhaps it is important to note that the South Asian diasporas in some Caribbean and African countries parallel the one in Britain, and the routes between these diasporas provide a very rich and poignant layering to writers of such complex backgrounds.). Only a few books by this hugely controversial and often reluctantly admired novelist and essayist seriously engage with Britain. *The Engima of Arrival* is the only one to do so throughout. It is, however, impossible to ignore Naipaul in any kind of post-colonial discourse. Increasingly his fellow Trinidadian Samuel Selvon is recognised as a key figure in the same conversation. Though apparently slight and even whimsical *The Lonely Londoners* may become the defining work of diasporic Caribbean life in Britain. Although Selvon subsumes all his character's identities in the term "black", he is in fact playing with different racial stereotypes. In *The Housing Lark* Selvon draws on the Asian origin of his characters and portrays a society divided between the majority and the rest, between 'white' and 'black' – if you are not the one then you are the other, or the Other. Younger writers such as Meera Syal, whether consciously or not, draw from Selvon's vein of comic self-mockery and participate with him in the same post-colonial debate.

The achievements at this time of the Asian Women Writers Collective must not be overlooked. Syal was one writer who was nurtured in this stable, though hers was a twin-track trajectory since she also established herself as a successful actress. The two streams converge in her emergence as one of the best screenwriters in the country. Ravinder Randhawa, Leena Dhingra (also an actress), Tanika Gupta and others produced work in various genres that spoke of life in a swiftly changing culturally diverse new Britain. The collective explored questions of identity, racism and feminism, and the very fact that they could confidently project themselves as 'Asian women writers' was itself significant in a culture that was sometimes perceived to deny black and Asian women adequate opportunities for self-expression.

This new assertiveness was not restricted to female authors. As early as the late 1960s Tariq Ali, originally from Pakistan, was firmly labelled in the public mind as a radical student agitator. He turned to writing socially realistic plays and historical novels in which he investigated aspects of the Islamic inheritance in Europe. Hanif Kureishi made the same journey from theatre to fiction and also drew from a Pakistani inheritance. *The Buddha of Suburbia* and his film-script for *My Beautiful Launderette* made his reputation as a chronicler of displaced city-dwelling Asian youth. Through later works such as *Intimacy* he developed into one of the keenest analysts of sexual mores, thus implicitly challenging the culture of his upbringing. Faroukh Dhondy, who was born in Bombay, wrote for young people as well as for adults and took on influential responsibilities in the world of television education.

The 1990s and Beyond

The critic William Walsh once claimed that the achievements of sub-continental writing in English had to date been in the field of prose fiction, but that the future lay in poetry. Sadly drama came nowhere in his estimation, but in the 1990s it began to emerge as an effective voice of young Asian *angst* and aspirations (see [South Asian Diaspora Theatre in Britain](#)).

Ayub Khan Din startled London theatre (and later the cinema) with *East is East*. Plays with Asian characters but British settings are now being staged with regularity – Shan Khan's *Office* for example. The commercial success of the musical *Bombay Dreams*, with music by A.R. Rahman and book by Meera Syal, may help Indian playwriting to move out of the theatrical margins. The Royal National Theatre has staged two plays by Tanika Gupta, *The Waiting Room* and *Sanctuary*, and the Young Vic Company commissioned an Asian version of Harold Brighouse's northern comedy *Hobson's Choice* from her. This follows in a tradition begun by Jatinder Verma at Tara Arts with his Production of an 'Indianised' *Tartuffe*. Firadus Kanaga, essayist and commentator à la Chaudhuri; Amer Hussain, short story writer, Sunetra Gupta, novelist and scientist, Rukhsana Ahmad, translator and playwright Ranjit Bolt, poet and translator; Debjani Chatterjee, poet and editor: the 'middle generation' is vibrant and innovative. Since none of these has yet won the public reputation of a Rushdie or a Kureshi, the jury is out on whether they are to be regarded as minor figures, interesting for what they tell us about the transitional nature of modern Britain. They speak for a diaspora which is apparently still in an early phase of its literary development. Their canvas tends to be far smaller than Rushdie's and their focus more realistic. They eschew fantastical elaborations of language or narrative. An exception, at least in scare, is A. Sivanandan, but though he was only published in the 1990s he comes from an earlier generation. There is still an equivocation of belonging in some of the younger writers. Amit Chaudhuri, the most fastidious of them in terms of style and technique, belongs more to Calcutta than to England. Kamila Shamsie spends time in London, but her roots remain firmly in Pakistan. Inevitably this shows in what they write about.

As regards poetry, Walsh's prediction is a long way from being fulfilled. There are nevertheless some impressive British-based Asian Poets. Debjani Chatterjee's work with the Bengali Women's association links back to the Asian Women Writers' Collective. Her bi-lingual anthologies have done a lot to raise awareness of women's writing in this country and of the inter-dependence of languages. In any description of contemporary British poetry Moniza Alvi would feature, just as Suniti Namjoshi is a poet and fabulist creating her own wry rhetoric as a lesbian, deeply steeped in a tradition of orature. Shanta Acharya, Ketaki Kushari Dyson and Sudeep Sen have failed to gain much attention from the critics, but their work fertilises the soil in which other talents will flower.

The most promising of the newer poets of Asian derivation is Sujata Bhatt, who resides in Germany.

The multicultural poem does not expect
the reader to 'understand' anything.
After all, it is used to being misunderstood.

It speaks of refraction.
it wants more dialogue
Between the retina and the light.
It says 'get rid of that squint'

It lives the chapter in history
They can't teach you in school.

These lines from Bhatt's collection *Augatora* sum up some of the predicament of the diasporic author whose antecedents are in the Indian sub-continent. It is a though they are in perpetual dialogue with two lands. This is even more so among the increasing number of authors who are choosing to live in Britain but to write in a mother tongue other than English. Their choice of language is the opening bid of any writer. This short essay selects from many a few whose choice was English, but whose sentiments span two continents – or, in Naipaul's and Selvon's cases, at least three. It is no longer possible to describe English Literature without reference to the wealth of material which the sub-continent has bestowed upon it.