

## Oh Calcutta !<sup>1</sup>

### The New Bengal Movement in Diasporic Indian English Fiction

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Let me begin with a subjective statement. A couple of years' back I accidentally picked up a debut novel published by Phoenix House in London and reprinted by Penguin India. The novel was titled *Across the Lakes* and the short biographical introduction of Amal Chatterjee, the author, stated that he was born in Colombo, grew up in England and now lives and works in Glasgow. Mentally prepared to read a novel set in the beautiful Lake District of England, made so popular by Wordsworth and his fellow Romantic poets, it came as a great surprise to me when I found the first chapter beginning thus: "The Dhakuria Lakes are the lungs of South Calcutta. Once upon a time they marked the boundary of the city, beyond them lay the railway lines and beyond those the fields and villages" (Chatterjee, 1998). The rest of the story talked about incidents that were firmly rooted in Calcutta and captured its sights and sounds as authentically as possible. This set me thinking about the possible reason for the author's choice of locale. Was it just his Bengali lineage or a kind of search for his roots, something that is so endemic to expatriate writers?

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. 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 *Probashi 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 Bandopadhyay, Adib Khan, 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. As Sudeep Sen (2001) justifiably argues, apart from using their Bengaliness as a tool to exoticise the East in its new avatar, some of these writers 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.

This paper highlights some of these issues as represented in the fiction of several writers who fall under this category. Their works 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<sup>2</sup>, 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*' (genteel) 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.

#### I

The first name that comes to our mind is that of Amit Chaudhuri, who though spending more and more time in Calcutta nowadays, started his fictional debut in England, away from home. A *Strange and Sublime Address* (1971), his first

work of fiction is a very short novel (that can be termed as a novella), with nine stories added to it. It is an impressionistic account of a Bombay-bred Bengali boy's visit to Calcutta during a vacation and 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. In *Afternoon Raag* (1994), the boy is now a student at Oxford. His sojourn at the university, and his childhood memories of Bombay and Calcutta form the staple of the book. The entire action of *Freedom Song* which deals with middle class life in Calcutta has perhaps been neatly summed up in these words of the narrator: "They woke, slept, talked. They eked out the days with inconsequential chatter" (Chatterjee, 1998). Cast in the same mould, *A New World* (2000) presents middle-aged Jayojit, a failed husband, who has come home to Calcutta with his school-going son, to spend a summer vacation with his aged parents. He whiles away his time in his South Calcutta apartment doing nothing in particular; his mother overfeeds him and his son with Bengali delicacies.

Chaudhuri's passion for the notation of life lived from moment to moment has made critics often compare it with that of the stream-of-consciousness writers like Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf but he certainly differs from them in the manner in which he describes realistic details of Calcutta. When questioned by Fernando Galvan as to how *A Strange and Sublime Address* gave the impression that Calcutta was a city of the mind, [like Dublin was for Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *Ulysses*], Chaudhuri categorically stated:

*Calcutta is identified in my mind with my family on my mother's side, because my father is an only child, like me. My father worked in a corporate firm, so I grew up in corporate Bombay, with high buildings; it was a kind of existence outside of any community. To go back and visit Calcutta was to visit houses which were nearer the street level. Streets in South Calcutta had their own particular noises; with me was my maternal uncle's family and my cousins....I identified Calcutta as a place that was home. Home was interwoven with the Bengali language, my mother tongue...which was hardly spoken out of my immediate home. In school I spoke only English, so to go back to Calcutta was to re-enter the Bengali language...(Nasta, 2004: 217)*

When further interrogated about his three novels being different steps in the construction of a *Bildungsroman*, portraying the experience of a young boy who grows up either in his own country or abroad but who is always fighting against the dilemma of belonging or not belonging, Chaudhuri replies:

*In the first novel I was really writing about a boy's discovery of Calcutta and of an extended family. In the second I was writing about the narrator's estrangement from both cultures, and in the third, I was writing about the family afflicted, or changed, by old age. The younger people in the family were either absent or gone to some other part of the world, or other parts of India; the young people who had stayed on are doing all kinds of things that were perceived as idiosyncratic. Calcutta, and India, were on the brink of change. (Nasta, 2004: 218-19)*

Chaudhuri also goes on to add that Bengali culture is a profoundly middle-class culture. So you have a society of mainly old people and children, the people who have stayed on are like Bhaskar in *Freedom Song*, who has joined the Communist Party because he is no good for anything else. So the Bengal he grew up with, with its own language and its own culture, and which he considers psychologically to be his home, no longer exists.

## II

Amitav Ghosh, who straddles both the eastern and western worlds regularly, is another writer who often takes recourse to his Bengali roots. Though he sets most of his novels in different cities and countries around the world, the 'old country' sometimes serves as a ready referral at any point of creativity. In *The Shadow Lines* (1988), the insubstantial shadow-like lines dividing people and nations create a lot of misery and even death. The motif of the lines that divide begins with the partitioning of the family house in Bengal and is repeated with variations as the narrative ranges over four countries including India, East Pakistan, Sri Lanka and England. Perhaps the picture of family life in Bengal, seen through the eyes of the narrator when he was a child is far more evocative than the larger concerns to which he turns later. The new life that Thamma begins in Calcutta after her husband's death ultimately makes her become a foreigner to her own land in Dhaka and her real

life existence in a one-room tenement at Bhowanipore is juxtaposed imaginatively to her old house there.

As the title of his book suggests, Calcutta is much more significantly present in his novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996). Designed in the form of a thriller, the novel is an ironic take-off on the way in which stories of medical and scientific discoveries and inventions are popularized in science-fiction tales. Mingling fact and fiction, hammering its narrative intensity out of journalistic materials and documentary data and setting its action in a wide arena that encompasses East and West, Ghosh carefully and realistically etches out the background with local colour and colloquial dialogue to establish immediate credibility. The novel begins sometime in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The verbal velocity of novel moves with a rapid pace and often makes one forgetful of the vacillation of time and place that separates and yet cements the major characters of the novel: Ronald Ross, a British scientist in Calcutta (1895-99); Murugan, a Calcutta-born researcher working in New York and Calcutta (1990-95) and Antar, the Egyptian computer clerk in New York (1970- early 21<sup>st</sup> century). With a willing suspension of disbelief dissolving and resolving the differences between perception and imagination, Ghosh presents the city both in reality and in imagination.

Using his anthropologist's training in dredging up lost stories, Ghosh catapults us into the tidal landscape of the Sunderbans in his latest novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004). Between the sea and the plains of Bengal lies an immense archipelago of islands. Some are vast and some no longer than sandbars; some have lasted through recorded history while others have just washed into being. The Sunderbans is a place where for hundreds of years, only the truly dispossessed braved the man-eating tigers and the crocodiles that rule there, to eke a precarious existence from the mud. Here in the utopian settlement of a visionary Scotsman, people of all races, classes and religions could live together. Juxtaposing the imaginative adventures of a young American girl of Bengali parentage who has come all the way to study river dolphins, Ghosh brings in factual historical details of the refugees from erstwhile East Bengal who had settled in some of these islands and were ignominiously tortured by the government administration, an incident known in the local

Bengali parlance as the Morichjhapi incident of 1978. As a master storyteller, Ghosh also includes local folklores and myths, especially the famous one of the goddess Bon-Bibi, who is worshipped by all the fisherfolk of the Sunderbans. This further establishes his ability to collate huge amounts of historical material from Bengal and make all this a part of his story.

### III

The sight and smell of Calcutta also recurs in Canada-based writer Nalinaksha

Bhattacharya's novels. *Hem and Football* (1995) takes us into the world of women's football in the city and in *Hem and Maxine* (1996), the novel's heroine, Hem, is a comic character who takes a plunge into the murky depths of Calcutta high society, swept away by the Anglo-Saxon charms of Maxine Basak, the wife of a corrupt and lecherous Indian MP.

### IV

In an interview given to Nicholas A Basbanes 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" (Basbanes, 1997). Yet, 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* (1972). 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.

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 the 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 rather than the Calcutta of documentary films—the hellhole where beggars fought off dying cattle for still warm garbage. 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 “the deep and persistent undercurrent of nostalgia almost sensual in character for the sights, smells, tastes, sounds of the country of our childhood” (Kakar, 1978).

Commenting on her first novel, Mukherjee observes in an article entitled “American Dreamer”:

*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 (Mukherjee, 1997a).*

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* (1997), 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 as an exile.” (Mukherjee, 1977b: 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, *Wife* (1975).

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. She 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. 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” (Spivak, 1985). Mukherjee has this to say to 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. (Connell et al., 1990: 20)*

Mukherjee's fifth novel, *Leave It to Me* (1997) 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 different interviews 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 novel *Desirable Daughters* which opens thus:

*In the mind's eye, a one-way procession of flickering oil lamps sways along the muddy shank 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. (Mukherjee, 2002: 3)*

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. 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. (Mukherjee, 2002: 4)*

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"(Mukherjee, 2002: 16). 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"(Mukherjee, 2002: 289). 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 naphtha lamps held by the children of fruit and vegetable vendors" (Mukherjee, 2002: 310). The experience promises the redemption of self-knowledge.

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 Tushi 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. (Mukherjee, 2002: 5)*

In *The Tree Bride: A Novel* (2004) Mukherjee has continued with the earlier characters and has fused history, mysticism, treachery and enduring love in a suspenseful story about the lingering effects of past secrets. Tara Chatterjee, the protagonist of the earlier novel, again narrates. The tale begins as her San Francisco house is firebombed by a man obsessed with killing her, and trails back to her legendary great-great aunt and namesake, Tara Lata, who was born in 1874 and, at five, married to a tree because her fiancé died. Later, Tara Lata bravely conspires to win Bengal's independence from England.

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 that she was not an Indian writer, nor exile, nor an expatriate. And that she was an immigrant and her investment was 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* and its sequel *The Tree Bride* make her not only an Indian writer, but very much a Bengali writer at heart. Probably, these novels are her discovery or realisation that she stated in *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, "while changing citizenships is easy, swapping cultures is not" (Mukherjee, 1977: 169). 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.

## V

Chitra Banerjee was born in Calcutta and spent the first nineteen years of her life in India. At the age of nineteen, she moved to the United States to continue her studies, getting a Master's degree and a Ph.D, 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. 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.

Her first volume of short stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1997), explores the cross-cultural experiences of womanhood through a feminist perspective, a theme that continued to inform her work. 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. 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. 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" for example, 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. 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 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* (1997) 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." 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. As she admits in an online article entitled "Dissolving Boundaries," that the speaking serpents are a different kind of magic that she only partially understands. They represent the grace of the universe, and by that, she means 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* (1999) 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 explanative, topography that is trans-cultural, tone that is adjectival and highly lyrical, and style that is italicized and romantic. Though *Sister of My Heart* is set in Calcutta, Chitra believes that the rest of the story is far from autobiographical.

The female protagonists of eight of the nine stories in Divakaruni's sensuously evocative collection *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001) 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.

*The Vine of Desire* (2002) 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. 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 back to her home in Bengal, 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.

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. 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 later 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 illich fish", the "narus," "the ghugni," or "bhate-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 (Bhattacharjee, 2003: 3).*

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.

## VI

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. In all the four novels that she has written up to now, she has used Calcutta and Bengali characters as protagonists. In her debut novel *Memories of Rain* (1992), 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.

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 an 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 (Gupta, 1997).

Unlike the binaries of Calcutta and London where the first novel was set, the characters in Sunetra's second novel, *The Glassblower's Breath* (1993) 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. 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 quint-essential 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.

*Moonlight into Marzipan* (1993) is a very complex and arduous novel. 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. 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 unnamed *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" (Gupta, 1997). 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.

Sunetra's fourth novel, *A Sin of Colour* (1999) 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. Through the seven sections named after different colours, Sunetra tells the story of three generations and of a house in Calcutta called Mandalay.

In concluding Sunetra's oeuvre as a diasporic woman writer, it has to be mentioned that though she confided to an interviewer, "I know I'm here to stay in Oxford" (Banerjee, 2000: 3) 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. 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. Sunetra has of course clearly expressed her desire to sever her roots:

*I've no interest in writing for a particular audience, especially now. Maybe at first I was a little bit interested in conveying my ideas and thoughts, about Calcutta to a Western audience. There must have been some of that in there. But now it's completely irrelevant to the process of writing* (Ghosh and Schotte, 2004:118).

## VII

The sense of Bengaliness also pervades the writings of a second-generation writer such as Jhumpa Lahiri. 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. Most of her characters play out a simultaneous existence in two cultures; how being as American as a WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant), 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 connect 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* (1999) in Calcutta because of a necessary combination of distance and intimacy. 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 America 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. Communicating the fact that exile and exclusion are not the privilege of any one group in society alone, Lahiri portrays the specific situations of individuals as symptomatic of the ubiquity of loneliness and alienation. 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 involve-

ment, 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" (Lahiri, 1999: 70) 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." (Lahiri, 1999: 71). 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," (Lahiri, 1999: 10) 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. 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." (Lahiri, 1999: 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. (Lahiri, 1999: 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" (Lahiri, 1999: 85). The story which illustrates Bengali culture to 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" (Lahiri, 1999: 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.

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") in an interview 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 (Patel, 1999: 80)*

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"(Patel, 1999). 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 (Shankar, 1999).*

In several other interviews she states her inability to define 'where she is from' and mentions 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 her 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." 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." 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 (Lahiri, 2000).*

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 vermilion 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. She says:

*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 (Shankar, 1999).*

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. 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. 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.

In her novel *The Namesake* (2003) also, Jhumpa takes recourse to a lot of Bengalinness. Ashima Ganguli, the mother of the protagonist is not only a Bengali by birth, her Calcutta lineage constantly haunts her and makes her a sojourner in America. Her home is a meta-American home from the outside but typically Bengali from the inside where we are told right at the beginning of the novel how she mixes Rice Krispies and Planters Peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl to make "a humble approximation of the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks ...spilling from newspaper cones" (Lahiri, 2004: 1). Dressed up in the "cavalcade of matrimonial bracelets on both arms: iron, gold, coral, conch," (4) she remains the typical Bengali lady in spite of her physical location in Cambridge, Massachusetts for so many years. At

the beginning of the novel, when she is in labour and her water breaks, Ashima calls out to Asoke, her husband. However, she does not use his name because this would not be proper. According to her, "It's not the type of thing Bengali wives do... a husband's name is something intimate and therefore unspoken... cleverly patched over" (2). From this statement we are shown how important privacy is to Bengali families. Bengali children are given two names: one that is a pet name, used by the family and close friends, and one that is used by the rest of society. Throughout his life Gogol suffers from the uniqueness of his name. In Bengali families "... individual names are inviolable. They are not meant to be inherited or shared" (Lahiri, 2004: 28). We are even told how even Gogol Ganguli, by the time he is ten, has been to Calcutta several times, sometimes in summer and once during the Durga Pujo and "from the most recent trip he still remembers the sight of it [his last name Ganguli] etched respectably into the white-washed exterior of his paternal grandparents' house" (Lahiri, 2004: 67). Calcutta thus becomes a marker in many ways in the lives of this expatriate Bengali family.

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. 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 thought that it was probably only fitting that Jhumpa's marriage should become a narrative event for her readers (Sinha, 2001). Jhumpa's 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.

It is interesting to note that despite their "mainstream acceptance," all the diasporic writers mentioned in this article are still marketed as "ethnic writers" in the west. 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. From the writings of the diasporic 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."

Browsing through the e-journal *Jouvert* (6.1) 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 (Bharadwaj, 2001: 2).*

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." Before concluding we have to keep in mind that there are many other writers also of Bengali origin

who do not suffer from this 'Calcutta syndrome', if we may term it so. Bidisha Bandopadhyay (who incidentally never writes her surname) is a second-generation Bengali writer born and brought up in England. Her debut novel *Seahorses* (1997) is an urban pageant about three young British men and is in no way even remotely connected to India. Rana Bose, who has settled in Canada, writes plays without exuding any particular Bengaliness. Ruchira Mukherjee's *Toad in the Garden* (1998) is a powerful story of two women, one young, one middle-aged, whose frustrated lives in the town of Allahabad are changed forever by a bold and impulsive visitor. Joydeep Roy-Bhattacharya was born in India and has travelled extensively in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East and now divides his time between New York City and Central Europe. His first novel, *The Gabriel Club* (1998), is an enormously ambitious meditation on Communism and its fall. With an unresolved mystery as its central pivot, it is also a compelling puzzle to be pieced together with chilling results. With these exceptions proving the rule, Calcutta and Bengal probably will still feature in many more novels of expatriate Bengali novelists of the future.

### NOTES

- i Like many Indian cities and states that have reverted back to the original pronunciation of names in the regional local lingo, a few years back Calcutta too has been officially changed to Kolkata-the way it is pronounced in the Bengali language. However, till date none of the novels mentioned here have used the revised name. So the name of Calcutta has been retained.
- ii Most of the authors try very hard to give the appearance of being true or real, though they often fictionalize many characters and incidents. Thus all things about Calcutta seem to be described with an air of apparent truth which might not be so in reality.

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**ABSTRACT** This paper is about the Bengali writers who have settled overseas and have taken up writing in English either as a hobby or as a profession. It is intended to divulge the particularistic styles in which Bengalis in such situations write and often demonstrate their affinity to their homeland i.e. India and specifically Bengal. In many ways their work is a reflection of a new Bengali movement that is re-articulating itself through the medium of English and expressing a nostalgia for Bengal. The discussion here illustrates that despite their work enjoying acceptance in mainstream societies such as in the USA, they are still regarded as 'ethnic writers'. The discussion will illustrate that since their focus still rests upon close affinities to their motherland, they could very well be responsible for reproducing such an image in a globalised world in which trans-national flows of people still carries with it differences and distinctions that perpetuates specific images of diasporic population groups.

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