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REFLECTION OF CULTURAL CONFLICT AND QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN  
CONTEMPORARY NOVELS INDIAN WOMEN WRITING IN ENGLISH

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**ABSTRACT:**

*The history of Indian English Literature needs to be focused with details up to the recent contributions of the contemporary writers, from its imitative infancy to an intermediary phase of assimilation finally reaches to authentic self-expression. Cultural conflict and quest for identity have become crucial issues of discussion in Indian Writing in English after Independence. The country's process of reconstruction and rebuilding with positive domestic and international affairs during the 1950s and 1960s was productive period for the literature. Keeping with the newly emerging sensibility and concerns the novel took new theme of East-West encounter causing struggle to the protagonist, who is trying to find place between two cultures; one inherited and the other acquired through education or different influences.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Diaspora, migration, Cultural conflict, identity, feminism, quest for identity, voiceless and self-expression.*

**INTRODUCTION:**

During the freedom struggle the cultural conflict was on the social level, but in the novels of 1960s and 1970s it has come to very personal level, leading to the crisis of identity. This inter-cultural theme was handled earlier in 1909 by Sarat Kumar Ghose in his novel *Prince of Destiny*, in which the protagonist was thrown in a predicament to choose between an English girl and a native Indian princess. The quest for identity constitutes a satisfactory attitude towards the West, and at the same time an emotional towards the East. Nayanatara Sahgal in *A Time to be Happy* (1958) presents Shivpal's predicament due to his feeling of alienation caused by his social background, to which he finds solved by marrying the unsophisticated, non-westernized daughter of a college lecturer. Attai Hossain in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) projects the orphaned protagonist's quest for her personal identity as a result of the impact of the Western ideas on her, to which she satisfies through marriage against the wish of her distinguished Muslim family.



The themes of East-west conflict, the search for identity and renunciation continued in the novel of 1970s, but it lacked the great spurt of literary activity. Some significant novels published were Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), Anita Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), Chaman Nahal's *The Apprentice* (1974); *Azadi* (1975) and *The English Queens* (1979); Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* (1977). Desai's *Bye-Bye Blackbird* is an authentic study of man-woman

relationships bedeviled by cultural encounters. Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* displays the helplessness of the woman protagonist caught in the complexity of dilemma of traditions and modernity, who struggles much to carve out her own identity in the male dominated world. With inevitable overlapping of themes these novels present that retreat is a possible solution to the dilemmas of human life. Anita Desai's aspects of loneliness, alienation and vain attempts of understanding; Nayantara Saghil's socio-political incongruities and realities, female quest for sexual freedom and self-realization; and Arun Joshi's exploration of problems of detachment and involvement, indifference and commitment, all together attempt to focus on an individual's relation to the society.

Kamala Markandaya's concern is with the encounter between the diametrically opposite East and West in the context of human relationships and cultural values. Ruth Praver Jhabwala's early works in India dwell on social idealism and chaos of the early decades of independent India and the themes of romantic love and arranged marriages in India's Westernizing middle class preoccupied with marriage.

The quest for identity continued but, now, against the larger cosmopolitan world in which an individual is belonging to everywhere, a cultural traveler with ability to merge into all cultures while broadening horizons of modern experience. The writers of Diaspora, particularly, faced many problems themselves and presented these issues through their writing. One of the prominent immigrant writers Ashis Gupta observes,

*I was trying to expiate a nagging sense of guilt, but new in my heart that I didn't really deserve forgiveness. This is the guilt of the expatriate Indian, the cornerstone of the immigrant personality. Of course, I realize that I should not speak for others. I know just as many Indians who share my sense of guilt and nostalgia as I know others who present a public persona which appears perfectly content and at ease in Western society. I suspect that all of us somehow paper over the 'cornerstone' of guilt, but that some of us, like me, end up doing a lousy job. (Gupta; 1998, 40-41)*

The novel broke away from the norms set by the earlier writers with the experimental, confessional, interrogational and polemical narrative techniques. In search of identity the protagonist moves through suffering a crisis of identity which involves a process of correction.

An important novel of 1980s is Kamala Markandaya's *Pleasure City* (1982) which focuses on the cultural confrontation between, not the usual East verses West, but tradition and modernity as Multinational Corporation comes to a village and the struggling villagers cannot resist the regular income offered by jobs because of it. Indira Mahindra's *The Club* (1984) is centred round Lucy and her stepsister Mabel who have stayed on in India after the other English people left. Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988) through the story of an I.A.S. officer presents the contemporary youth's search for identity whose cosmopolitan upbringing functions as alienating force, leads to a disturbing sense of rootlessness, disillusionment and disaffection, but finally finds his own solution through a positive involvement in the compelling realities of life in this county. Ruth Praver Jhabwala's early novels and short stories are set entirely in India, but *In Search of Love and Beauty* (1983) continuing her preoccupation with India uses her European Jewish heritage and American experience and explores the background of the Western characters and examines the roots of their fascination with India. Jhabwala satirizes overwhelming sexual attraction of the Indian men, and the charisma of often a fraud guru in *Three Continents* (1987). Set entirely in New York, her *Poet and Dancer* (1993) is the story of intelligent and hardworking, but not good looking, Angelica's fatal infatuation for cousin Lara, and her wandering to ashrams in India in search of higher consciousness. Jhabwala's *Shards of Memory* (1995) is set in America, England and Europe.

In Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), the German Jew protagonist's series of flashbacks show us his early prosperous life, Nazis killing his father, his timber business in Calcutta and peaceful life is interrupted by the Second World War and the persecution of his Muslim business partner in the communal riots in Calcutta in 1947 echoes the earlier persecution of his father. Anita Desai points out,

*The writer's interests should be purely literary, his one concern his writing. If he does it well, the book will belong neither to India nor to England but to everywhere in the world where books are read, appreciated*

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and valued. He should be able to say with Emily Dickinson: "My country is Truth; it is a free democracy." (Desai; 1982, 68)

Anita Desai reveals all the characteristics of diasporic fiction: a concern with the fate of immigrants, and a growing distance from the Indian reality, which is viewed from the outside in *Journey to Ithaca* (1995). Sensitive Matteo and his bride Sophie come to India in 1975 to a charismatic old woman as a Guru. Sophie wants to prove that the Mother is a sham, and Sophie's quest for the Mother's origins reveals that the holy woman, brought up in Paris, with an Egyptian mother, closely resembles the Mother of the Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry. The descriptions of life in India strike a false note as India is presented through an outsider's eyes. *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) presents the travails of Uma, a daughter with neither looks nor intellectual brilliance, who is treated as a domestic drudge by her absolute-monster parents, leaves school to look after her baby brother Arun. Arun comes to study in America. Desai convincingly presents the Indian obsession with a son, as Uma's lawyer father is not taking legal action against his bigamous son-in-law.

The master of Magic Realism Suniti Namjoshi uses fantasy and surrealism and expressed feminist concern through allegory and fables. Her *The Conversations of Cow* (1985) is tale in realm of fantasy of the protagonist lecturer Suniti and her Guru, a cow, moving around Canada. The leading practitioner of the political novel, Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985) exceptionally presents, Rose, a Cockney shop girl, who comes to India, not because of philosophical considerations, but because of passionate love for Ram, and as vibrantly receptive to life, with no feelings of race or colour, she establishes deep bonds with Ram's first wife Mona. Murder of great-grandmother, the rape of the village women by the police, or the murder of the defenseless Rose because her frank talk focus the fact that women have always been ill-treated in India. In Sahgal's *Plans for Departure* (1985) Anna Hanson, a Danish woman visits India, and her Indian experiences reach a kind of consummation when her son marries an Indian girl who is a political activist. In *Mistaken Identity* (1988) Bhushan Singh, prince of Vijaygarh, is arrested on a charge of sedition while his way back home from America in 1929, and spends almost three years in jail with idealistic Congress followers of Mahatma Gandhi, and militant trade union leaders, both trying to win freedom for India in their own ways.

Belinder Dhanoa's *Waiting for Winter* (1991) presents a bleak picture of a rich family girl Pratibha's best education up to university degree not equipping her to face life and meant to prepare her for a suitable arranged marriage. Married to an Indian settled in the U.S.A by giving a big dowry and her world falls apart as her only brother joins the Sikh terrorists, her father is killed in a terrorist attack, and her husband is already married to an American. In Zai Whitaker's *Up the Ghat* (1992) the abroad studied heroine, Azra, insists her sister for agreeing to an arranged marriage, herself marries Hussain, the dedicated IAS officer arranged for her, who is suddenly transferred a remote hill station in South India. Jai Nimbkar's *Come Rain* (1993) in simple and unpretentious language presents India true to life with new version of the East-West encounter where Ann leaves America for India when she marries the Indian research-student Ravi and finds it difficult to adjust to his Indian parents and home. Another successful Magic Realism is *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) by Chitra Banerjee-Divakaruni. The Indian born heroine Tilo, 'Mistress of Spices,' encounters an ancient woman who imparts instruction about the power of spice and sends Tilo disguised as an old woman to sell spices at Oakland, California. Uma Parameswaran appreciates Divakaruni with following words,

*Chitra Divakaruni, the most recent star in the Diaspora sky, delves into the darker dreams and nightmares of womanscape and has an appreciative readership among feminists, but since her women characters are mainly Indo-American, there is a tendency to see them not as individuals so much as representative of the Diaspora, and we are back on square one perception of negative stereotypes that the average north American reader has of Indian life and culture.* (Parameswaran, 1998, 34)

K.R. Usha's interesting first novel *Sojourn* (1998) reveals the sordidness of small town life and the smugness of the cosmopolitan urban woman Neerja, who is forced to move to a small town for a brief period. Meena Arora Nayak's *About Daddy* (2000) presents a young woman born in America, visits India in 1997-1998 to fulfill her father's last wishes: that his ashes should be scattered on the Indo-Pakistan border as a kind of expiation for his sin of killing innocent Muslims before Partition. The daughter's innocent

attempts to take a photograph at the border land her in jail; she is released only through the intercession of her American fiancé.

In Anuradha Marwah-Roy's first campus novel *The Higher Education of Geetika Mehendiratta* (1993) young Geetika moves to Jana University in Lutyenabad for higher education after her M.A. in English, so the novel contains satirical sketches of research in Jana University. Elsie Nora, an Anglo-Indian is the subject of Manorama Mathai's *Mulligatawny Soup* (1993), who belongs neither to India nor to England once the Raj ends. The narrator is a child of modern, multi-cultural Britain, with an English mother and an Indian father who deserted her even before the birth of the baby. Some women have written about life in upper class society. Achala Moulik attempts full-fledged historical novels. Her *The Conquerors* (1996) chronicles three generations of Ruthvens from 1857 to 1867, describing the expansion of British rule in India. *Earth is But a Star* (1997) with every element of popular fiction: romance, adventure, intrigue, exotic settings, and even rebirth deals with the Spanish empire in fifteenth century Granada, Lisbon and Goa. Achala Moulik is quite readable and satisfying as long as one does not look for any profundity.

Some university teachers of English like Shakuntala Bharvani have tried their hand at fiction. *The Walled City* (1997) by Esther David is about three generations of women in a Jewish family in Ahmadabad. The usual pressures and anxieties of a young girls growing up in India are presented through a young girl protagonist, who unlike her mother and aunts, freely mixes with Hindus, Muslims and Parsis, though they are very conscious that she is different. *Smell* (1999) by Radhika Jha, is account of Eighteen-year-old Leela suddenly uprooted from her comfortable life in Kenya, sent away to live with her paternal uncle and his wife in Paris when the natives murder her father by setting his store on fire and is drifting from one lover to another when she is thrown out of her uncle's home for revealing his extra-marital affairs. Obsessed with smells she is terrified to know that she herself gives off an unbearable smell, a metaphor for cultural differences. *The Gin Drinkers* (2000) by Sagarika Ghose is a comedy of manners about the rich and fashionable, English speaking section of society in Delhi. Uma Chatterjee is just back from Oxford; her civil servant father is clinging to anglicized ways, while her mother is an alcoholic. Another interesting first novel by Sunny Singh Nani's *Book of Suicides* (2000) explores the stream of consciousness of a young, educated, westernized Indian woman through her recurrent nightmares. Mini's maternal grandmother Nani has the magical power of entering other people's minds and reading their dreams. The protagonist tries to run away from this domination in Mexico and attempts to forget herself in alcohol, cocaine, and promiscuous sex, but she cannot get away from her grandmother. The Hindu concept of honour seems to entail suicide for women, so the title of the novel is not too far-fetched.

This survey of Indian English fiction indicates that it continues to evoke colonial legacies in the contemporary society and seeks to compete with English language fiction for international prizes. The most important feature of it is stricken realism. Bijay Kumar Das comments on the types of realism as,

*We come across five broad types of realism – social realism, psychological realism, historical realism, mythological realism and magic realism in Indian English fiction.* (Das; 2007, 169)

As society alters, so the novel reflects this change; a few of many works will fulfill this defining role; those which seem to do so now, may not speak to later generations in the same way. The contemporary diasporic Indian English writers have enormous force in their writing to shift the centre of English novel out of the Britain.

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