PURDUE UNIVERSITY

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture
ISSN 1481-4374
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

Volume 14 (2012) Issue 2 Article 11

The Indian Diaspora and Reading Desai, Mukherjee, Gupta, and Lahiri

Amit Shankar Saha
Institute of Advanced Studies (Kolkata)

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, and the Critical and Cultural Studies Commons

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, Purdue University Press selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Shankar Saha, Amit. "The Indian Diaspora and Reading Desai, Mukherjee, Gupta, and Lahiri." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.2 (2012): <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1964>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the CC BY-NC-ND license.

PURDUE UNIVERSITY PRESS <http://www.thepress.purdue.edu>

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series.* Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 14 Issue 2 (June 2012) Article 11
Amit Shankar Saha,
"The Indian Diaspora and Reading Desai, Mukherjee, Gupta, and Lahiri"
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/11>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.2 (2012)
Thematic Issue ***New Work in Comparative Indian Literatures and Cultures***
Ed. Mohan G. Ramanan and Tutun Mukherjee
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/>

Abstract: In his article "The Indian Diaspora and Reading Desai, Mukherjee, Gupta, and Lahiri" Amit Shankar Saha argues that displacement produces a point of encounter between the alien and authority. Saha analyses aspects of (im)migration in texts about the Indian diaspora: if the host society is intolerant then it is through reactionary self-fashioning that the (im)migrant asserts his/her ethnicity as a defensive mechanism to rescue self-respect. However, while the host society is welcoming, it does not guarantee ready assimilation because there is always the question of severing the (im)migrants ties with his/her home land. (Im)migrants start living in two worlds simultaneously by making adjustments. They become transnationals who attempt to define their identities in terms of their point of origin and their destination followed by a second phase where ethnicity is reasserted, although this time not as a reaction against a hostile society but as displeasure against themselves. Ultimately, in the third phase, there is an understanding of how cultures enrich and an acceptance of hybrid existence becomes possible.

Amit SHANKAR SAHA

The Indian Diaspora and Reading Desai, Mukherjee, Gupta, and Lahiri

In case of dislocation it is the contingency inherent in displaced existence that begets the notion of the creation of identity. This action of creating an identity, although guided by circumstances, stems from one's will in an attempt either to bring out the irreconcilability between or to make consistent native lives and dislocated lives. Stephen Greenblatt argues that there is the overwhelming need to sustain the illusion that a person is the principal maker of his/her own identity: "Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This threatening Other … must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked or destroyed" (9). The context of displacement provides a point of encounter between an authority and an alien. Self-fashioning is at once the mental adjustment to combat the pangs of physical dislocation and at the same time is the physical adjustment to allay the sense of alienation and rootlessness. Under such conditions self-fashioning becomes essentially an act of volition.

The recurrent use of the first person personal pronoun "I" by the narrator of Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "The Third and Final Continent" — "I have remained in this new world," "I have traveled," "I have eaten," "I have known," "I have slept," "I am bewildered" (*Interpreter* 198) — confirms his act of volition in fashioning himself. It also confirms that self-fashioning is an ongoing process because displacement introduces dynamism in the relation between past and present and identities have to be defined continuously. As argued by Greenblatt, the fashioning of the self as an artifact becomes a process of manipulation performed like art. Displacement places the choice before the dislocated population either to adapt within the host society or to withstand the forces of assimilation. The choice is an ethical conundrum for it puts the people in dilemma between their debt to the country of origin and their obligation to the country of migration. The option not chosen — debt not repaid or obligation not fulfilled — becomes the millstone of guilty conscience. Hence, self-fashioning — because of its voluntary, ever-changing, and somewhat artificial nature — is an efficient process of constructing and reshaping human identities over time not just to suit circumstances but to rescue one's self-respect from the mire of guilt-ridden mental landscape.

In an unwelcoming and intolerant host society damage to the (im)migrants' self-respect is evident. Here the construction of identity becomes a willful but reactionary self-fashioning as a defense against hostility. The obligations towards a discriminatory host society seem minimal and so does the identification. Dev and Adit, two diasporic Indian characters from Anita Desai's novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird*, find themselves in the midst of a discriminatory English society of the late 1960s and as a defensive strategy they assert their Indian-ness. Adit and Dev define their selves by belonging to diasporic Indian communities. It is not that they do not have Western acquaintances but they like to be in the company of their own ilk; their circle of friends, except for a few Westerners like Sarah, Bella, and Emma, is made up of Indian immigrants like them. By belonging to such communities they find an anchorage to allay their sense of non-belonging and at the same time they define themselves explicitly as Indians in the West. The Indian diasporic communities, especially those that are made up of first generation immigrants, are often hegemonic in their attitudes. They are isolated pockets of Indian culture within Western society and they are exclusively made up of immigrant Indians who constantly stoke the embers of longing for their left-behind motherland and they negate any thought of assimilation. This creates problems for first-generation diasporic Indians, especially in relation to their own progeny who, being born and bred in the West, define themselves as Westerners of Indian origin and cannot identify with their parents' ethnic self-fashioning. Defensive self-fashioning is thus an obstacle to integration into the host society but it is the natural and defiant reaction against hostility, and even more so when a colonial perspective is taken. Fawzia Afzal-Khan writes about the colonial encounter as a "fundamental imbalance" (89). It is perhaps this imbalance that hinders immigrant Indians, even after the Racial Equality Act (1976) and globalization, to define themselves as British, and instead use diluted terminology of having British citizenship.

Dev and Adit present two contrasting pictures of self-assessment and self-acceptance in a discriminatory host society. Dev is angry at being insulted but Adit is indifferent to all such insults meted out by the host society. They criticize each other's attitude, they argue to justify their positions,

but ultimately it becomes clear that they were trying more to convince themselves than anyone else. In the end Adit realizes that he can no longer hide his injured self-respect behind a façade of nonchalance and decides to return to India with his English wife Sarah. Dev remains in England for he realizes that those who call him "wog" do it because they fear the loss of their own self-respect by the intrusion of an alien culture. If Mrs. Roscommon-James, Adit's mother-in-law, is unwelcoming towards him, it is because she is threatened by the intrusion of Indian culture. Adit's self-respect is battered more by Mrs. Roscommon-James' snobbishness than by any direct insult from unrelated individuals. Dev notices this rift and goes on to discover in the vestige of the romantic English countryside the England of the future.

In Anita Desai's short story "The Man Who Saw Himself Drown" from her *Diamond Dust*, the "drowned" man cannot bring himself in front of his family because by losing his identity he has lost his self-respect as well. The "drowned" man's self is now nothing more than a fictitious entity — a kind of Greenblatt's Renaissance representation of the self as an individual, expressive subject that requires explanation. The explanation comes through self-fashioning. The loss of identity damages self-respect and to repair the damage there is the need for self-fashioning. Self-fashioning is the process, the need for self-respect the impulse, and the construction of identity the result. Belonging to an immigrant community does affect the individuals' self-assessment and self-acceptance, but social discrimination does not always cause as much damage to one's self-respect as does personal betrayal. In the former case one can always fall back on the refuge of one's ethnicity by asserting it even strongly in defiance. Like Dev and Adit, Moni in Sunetra Gupta's novel *Memories of Rain*, also has romantic notions of Englishness. Before she falls in love with Anthony, she is already in love with an England as depicted in its literature but the England to which Anthony brings her does not match the England of her imagination formed by the study of English literature. She takes her disappointment like any of her disappointed literary heroines. Even in the aberration in her relationship with Anthony, caused by Anthony's ongoing affair with Anna, she hopes for love mixed with pain from a divided heart. It is not necessarily by infidelity but by indifference to Moni's situation that Anthony betrays her and denies her self-respect. Shorn of the adornment of anguished passion, Moni, the eternal romantic, makes her escape back to India with her daughter. Moni's diasporic status avails her the moral choice to return to her homeland. The return is not a mark of any failure but the maintenance of self-respect by Moni through her romantic longing, albeit not for her homeland but for her love. Her defensive reaction of going back to India causes estrangement that seems to cure the blight in her love.

Estrangement is equally important in another Gupta novel called *A Sin of Colour*. Here Debendranath uses estrangement to save himself from stooping to his forbidden love for his elder brother's wife, Reba. Debendranath leaves India, goes to Oxford, and marries Jennifer, without being able to diminish his longing in any way. He has displaced himself physically from his forbidden love but is wracked by the sin of his longing. To redeem himself he has to make his displacement more complete by escape into anonymity. Years later his niece Niharika does precisely the same thing. Niharika and the married Englishman, Daniel Faraday, love each other and to allay their scandalous affair they first seek estrangement and ultimately they also enter a punt on the Cherwell River in Oxford never to return. They have escaped into new identities where not even the shadow of their old identities will pursue them. Niharika has left Mandalay, the ancestral house in Kolkata, because it stands for stasis and hence is in ruins. Assisted by Daniel, she has made her choice for the flow of the waters, an indication of the tendency of the world — the world of migration, movement, change, and the perpetual process of self-definition. If Adit and Moni took decisions to self-fashion themselves towards their roots, Debendranath and Niharika took decisions to self-fashion themselves, not necessarily away from their roots but away from their previous identities. This reactionary self-fashioning by self-negation is best displayed in the pygmy whose life and death was the topic of research for Niharika. Niharika had come to Oxford to "research the life of a pygmy who had been kept in the same cage as an orang utan in the Bronx Zoo in 1905, who had eventually been released but then had committed suicide in Virginia" (Gupta, *Colour* 71), in a house where he was finally living as a human. The pygmy in the zoo was devoid of volition but the pygmy who killed himself did an act of volition. The pygmy takes his life and this willful act proves his human identity.

Reactionary self-fashioning can push an individual into a cocoon existence, or force to return back to one's native place, or negate one's existence. But the case of Dev shows that one can subtly seep

into the host society without hindrance if one can find the right channel to do so. Often such channels are blocked and in such cases it requires intrusive self-assertion to open them. In Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*, it is self-assertiveness that forms the root of self-fashioning in a host society that is not very accepting of immigrants. Jyoti Vijh, seeking refuge in the U.S., is raped on her arrival in the land of opportunity. This does not deter her from chasing her "American dream" despite being an illegal immigrant. She kills her ravisher and wipes out her ignominy by continuously refashioning herself as Jasmine, Jase, and Jane Ripplemeyer. She rescues her self-respect by asserting her new identities at a time when the U.S. is rapidly changing into a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. Jasmine's changes of identities become a continuous process of self-definition just like breathing, and the sooner she stops counting her breaths, the easier becomes the process: "Jasmine's every movement is a calculated step into her Americanization and with each development a vital change is marked in her personality. Jasmine's flight to Iowa and her renaming as Jane is indicative of a slow but a steady immersion into the mainstream American culture. Here we encounter a changed Jasmine — one who has murdered Half-Face for violating her chastity, now not only willingly embraces the company of an American without marriage but also is carrying his child in her womb" (Kumar 115). Jasmine starts to fashion herself as a US-American and it does not involve a limited number of changes at a particular time. It is not a reaction of an instant but an ever-changing and continuous process. Jasmine herself acknowledges as much: "Once we start letting go — let go just one thing, like not wearing our normal clothes, or a turban or not wearing a tika on the forehead — the rest goes on its own down a sinkhole" (Mukherjee, *Jasmine* 29). But Jasmine is trying to integrate herself into a society that is not very tolerant, where even a beggar can abuse her and call her a "foreign bitch" (139), and so she maintains her doubts and keeps a vital part of her Indian self intact in her identity. She dresses like a US-American, puts on an English name, but she can trust only Asians: "I trust only Asian doctors, Asian professionals. What we've gone through must count for something" (32). She is loved by all for her Indianness, which has made her a lovable and caring wife, an affectionate mother. (Kumar 120).

Nagendra Kumar points towards a sweeping possibility that "had she been purely guided by the American values, she should have abandoned Bud at the time of his disability" (121). Jasmine's urge is to belong to US-American society but that society has still not traversed the full distance to meet her at a middle ground for assimilation. In such a situation she finds herself getting accepted in US-American society to some extent partly owing to her adopted US-Americanness and partly owing to her retained Indianness. So despite Jasmine being unlike Dev and Adit, who at different points in time do not want to belong to England, she finds herself in more or less a similar hybrid existence. Although Jasmine has changed much, much still remains to be changed in her. Jasmine's self-fashioning of self-assertion often produces cosmetic changes in her personality while retaining her native self. Even though she starts to think like a US-American it is only to overcome the part of her Indianness that oppresses, like the thought of committing *sati* (the woman's self-immolation after the death of the husband) otherwise it is her Indian identity which sustains her.

The idea of having to make merely cosmetic changes to adjust into a society that is not exactly hostile is an inviting proposition because it seems easy. But a non-discriminatory host society paradoxically produces a greater problem of the loss of self-respect, for it brings the migrants into the multi-ethnic melting pot of hybrid existence. Resisting integration into hybridity brings out a sense of duty not done towards a welcoming host country. Not resisting such integration implies severing ties with the country of origin. In both the cases there is loss of self-respect. Self-fashioning becomes all the more complex: "Take the case of the Indian immigrant. Her naturalization into American citizenship simultaneously minoritizes her identity. She is now reborn as an ethnic minority American citizen. Is this empowerment or marginalization? This new American citizen must think of her Indian self as an ethnic self that defers to her nationalized American status. The culturally and politically hegemonic Indian identity is now a mere qualifier: 'ethnic'" (Radhakrishnan 121). Rajakopalan Radhakrishnan sees immigrants' integration into the host society taking place in three phases: "During the initial phase, immigrants suppress their ethnicity in the name of pragmatism and opportunism. To be successful in the New World, they must actively assimilate and, therefore, hide their distinct ethnicity" (121). The adjustments made by Ashoke and Ashima, in Lahiri's *The Namesake*, after arriving in the U.S. showcase this phase: "And yet to a casual observer, the Gangulis … appear no

different from their neighbors … They purchase a barbecue for tandoori on the porch in summer … For the sake of Gogol and Sonia they celebrate, with progressively increasing fanfare, the birth of Christ, an event the children look forward to far more than the worship of Durga and Saraswati" (64).

It is in this phase that cosmetic changes like one's name and the way one walks and talks, are made by immigrants to enter into the host society and to comply with its norms. Such immigrants "manage to live at some level in two worlds at once, their homeland and their immigrant destination" (Kivisto 37-38). At an exclusive level they are faithful to both the societies. They are regarded by sociologists as "transnationals" because they "increasingly attempt to define their identities in terms of both their point of origin and their destination. They are prepared to participate in social, political, and cultural life in both the host society and the sending state" (Kivisto 39). But this type of assimilation is superficial and does not give immunity against the conflicts arising in non-exclusive activities. Hence this phase becomes temporary and has to give way to the second phase that "refuses to subsume political, civil, and moral revolutions under mere strategies of economic betterment. In a call for total revolution immigrants reassert ethnicity in all its autonomy" (Radhakrishnan 121). It is a curious phenomenon because it is not a reaction to an overtly hostile host society that discriminates and excludes at will. This reassertion by ethnic groups grows on itself since, unlike races, it "involves the groups themselves attempting to stake out boundaries that are designed to promote a sense of distinctiveness" (Kivisto 15). It comes out as a reaction to the migrants' own earlier phase of living, despite being willingly adhered to. It is a kind of displeasure against oneself meted out against the host society.

In Lahiri's *The Namesake* Gogol and Sonia go through the second phase. After Ashoke's death Gogol becomes reserved and distances himself from Maxine, as well as from his US-American lifestyle. The shock that Gogol receives at the sudden death of his father tilts him towards his family, leaving his US-American friends. Sonia in one of her growing-up year "had refused her gifts after taking a Hinduism class, in college, coming home and protesting that they weren't Christian" (285). But it is just a temporary phase for one cannot go on living by walking a tightrope and tilting from side to side. Moreover, it is the closed diaspora communities, especially populated by first generation diaspora Indians, which pander to this phase of immigrant existence. It is a phase of insecure life in exile as has been pointed out by Edward W. Said: "Because nothing is secure. Exile is a jealous state. What you achieve is precisely what you have no wish to share, and it is in the drawing of lines around you and your compatriots that the least attractive aspects of being in exile emerge: an exaggerated sense of group solidarity, and a passionate hostility to outsiders, even those who may in fact be in the same predicament as you" (178; on the problematics of diaspora identity formation see also McClennen; Tötösy de Zepetnek, Wang, Sun). Often, in a militant form this phase gives birth to terrorists like Sukkhi in *Jasmine* or Abbas Sattar Hai in Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*. It is this militant phase that causes greater alienation and distancing even among immigrant communities themselves. Post 9/11, some Hindus living in the Unite Kingdom do not want to be described as Asians and "want to be known as British Indian, Hindu — or even *desi*" because of "a 'general assumption' that any brown-skinned Asian person was Muslim" (Gledhill 20). But despite its drawbacks, this phase is crucial because it produces the realization of the third phase: "The third phase seeks the hyphenated integration of ethnic identity with national identity under conditions that do not privilege the 'national' at the expense of the 'ethnic'" (Radhakrishnan 121).

It is in the third phase that self-fashioning assumes its most dynamic form as it becomes an ongoing process of identity formation for the immigrants who now understand that to avoid the clash of cultures one has to acculturate with the host society: "The diaspora has created rich possibilities of understanding different histories. And these histories have taught us that identities, selves, traditions, and natures do change with travel (and there is nothing decadent or deplorable about mutability) and that we can achieve such changes in identity intentionally. In other words, we need to make substantive distinctions between 'change as default or path of least resistance' and 'change as conscious and directed self-fashioning'" (Radhakrishnan 126). In the third phase individuals realize the real definition of hybrid existence and realize that cultures enrich through intermingling and not through isolation. Cultural plurality becomes allied with globalization and multiculturalism flourishes. Lisa Lowe points out in reference to the US that "Once arriving in the United States, very few Asian immigrant cultures remain discrete, impenetrable communities; the more recent groups mix in varying

degrees, with segments of the existing groups. The boundaries and definitions of Asian-American culture are continually shifting and being contested from pressures both "inside" and "outside" the Asian-origin community" (138; on the problematics of multiculturalism in Canada and the U.S., see, e.g., Eriksen and Stjernfelt).

In a globalized world, one does not see Gogol in *The Namesake* as an intruder. Gogol does not have to assert himself to be a US-American: he is acknowledged by virtue of his birth and by virtue of his upbringing despite his ethnic roots. He finds himself more at ease with his US-American identity than with his Indianness. Gogol, Moushumi, and Sonia belong to a multicultural society and therefore their circle of friends is wide and diverse. They have integrated within Western society although their inherited ethnicity often clashes with their Western lifestyle and brings out their sense of rootlessness. To prevent conflict Gogol lies to his parents about his US-American girlfriends Ruth and Maxine because their hybrid existence prevents them from defining themselves in exclusive terms. Gogol finds it desirable to add his Indian roots to his self-definition but in doing so he does not eschew his US-American identity. Gogol in defining his self through his nationality cannot feel anything but US-American in the U.S. and even as US-American in India. Gogol has been accepted by a multicultural US-American society in such a way that he cannot assert any other identity and thus nationality. Yet at different times in his life he feels that his self-respect lies in being Gogol or being Nikhil or being Nick. This indeterminacy arises because he has inherited one identity from his parents and has grown up acknowledging another identity. To overcome this indeterminacy Gogol has to fashion himself continuously through acculturation and redefining human relationships.

Human relationships in family and community formations are primary definitions of selves because they are both acultural and anational. When Gogol is born, Ashoke and Ashima define themselves newly as parents in the U.S. Gogol's indulgence in a number of relationships (with Kim, Ruth, Maxine, etc.) is his attempt to define himself suitably outside familial ties. But diaspora and immigrant life is so demanding that even basic human relationships are not adequate to define oneself sufficiently. It often takes a shock to remove the pluralities in immigrant living and define oneself singularly. When Moushumi betrays Gogol, Gogol isolates himself discretely and is seen, towards the end of *The Namesake*, preparing to reassess his priorities and come to a solid ground of reconciliation.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "A Temporary Matter," the diasporic Indian couple, Shoba and Shukumar, go through the shock of their child being born dead. They isolate themselves from all acquaintances and eventually from each other, too. Whether isolation can provide one with a reconciliatory definition is contingent because it depends on the individual. But at least the detachment involved with isolation does provide a method for an individual to review any situation with a new perspective. Shoba's and Shukumar's confessions to each other cause pain, arouse hatred, and still act as therapeutic. Shoba does not want to know the gender of her unborn child after the ultrasound test to keep it as a surprise (note that that in India, where gender testing of the foetus is unlawful, many people, unlike Shoba, are eager to know the gender of their unborn child and this practice occurs to increasing levels in Canada and the U.S., where there are no laws to prevent the finding out of the child's gender prior to birth). After Shoba gives birth to a dead child, she finds the fact that she does not know whether the child was a boy or a girl as consoling. But when she reveals to Shukumar that she wants to live away separately from him, Shukumar tells her the gender of their stillborn child as an act of revenge. The tragedy of their stillborn child causes them pain and they find it difficult to come out of this pain because they think that somehow the root of the tragedy lay in the lives they have been living. Through confessions they enforce their alter-identities: the misfortune and guilt of their former selves getting obliterated in the painful birth of new selves. Defining new selves is no doubt painful because the birth pangs are always there but the pain is curiously made bearable since it is self-inflicted. It is a triumph of will over adversity — the joy of triumph lessening the pain.

Sometimes, as in the case of Mrs. Das from Lahiri's short story "Interpreter of Maladies," the limits of conventional human relationships are crossed. Mrs. Das is a totally US-Americanized Indian. The secret sin of adultery that Mrs. Das committed in the U.S. is revealed by her to Mr. Kapasi, the Indian guide, while she is on tour of India with her family. The burden of her guilt has weighed on Mrs. Das's self-respect and by revealing the secret she has unburdened her self-respect, that too without any adverse consequence. Mrs. Das, by having a secret extra-marital affair, defines herself as an adulterer. It wracks her with a guilty conscience but saves her from a nondescript self. In Mrs. Das's

case a fusion of identities had taken place and yet it left scope for differentiation of the two selves that made Mrs. Das confess and relieve her pain. Mrs. Das fashions herself for self-respect by the differentiation of identities. Mrs. Sen, from Lahiri's short story "Mrs. Sen's," faces, on the other hand, the problem of self-fashioning by integration of identities. Mrs. Sen is an Indian in the U.S. who juxtaposes her loneliness with Eliot's, the US-American boy whom she babysits, and discovers the inherent nature of human loneliness. Her physical displacement only adds matters of geography and culture to define her as an exile. Mrs. Sen lives by that definition because her attachments are too strong to be ignored. But to belong totally to her country of adoption she has to be a US-American, otherwise she will forever be wracked by a sense of exile. The greatest handicap she faces in acknowledging herself as a US-American is her fear of driving. It is this fear that gnaws at her self-respect. Her attempt to drive a car to go and buy a whole fish to cook is symbolic of her attempt to integrate her Indian identity with her American identity. It is not self-fashioning in totality but a necessary part of an ongoing process.

The crisis of hyphenated existence — being Indian and US-American at the same time — needs to be reconciled with so as to define oneself, although not conclusively, but at least with self-respect. Even when the reconciliation has taken place, self-fashioning does not stop because it entails not only constructing new identities but also searching for old ones. Tara, in Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*, has built her self-respect on the twin pillars of her Indian heritage and her US-American life. Her Indian heritage is of being born in the respectable Chatterjee family of Kolkata. In San Francisco, a stranger confronts her with a scandalous secret of her family, until then unknown to her. The stranger claims to be Tara's elder sister Padma's illegitimate son. Her search for this stranger's identity is her attempt to test her conviction about her family's respect. She discovers that nothing is what it seems, that behind self-fashioned identities people hide numerous secret identities. The stranger Abbas and Tara's elder sister Padma keep their secrets by taking up new identities and the only difference is that Padma does not have any sinister motive like Abbas.

In a globalized world acceptance is taken for granted and self-fashioning becomes more a matter of recognition. Recognition generally comes from an issuing authority, in this case the host society. But whatever be the economic or religious or political disparity between two societies, since societies are formed by families, which are basically same all over the world, it dilutes the sense of repressive notion of authority. Hence, self-fashioning becomes a question of self-recognition and it is realized on being reconciled with the idea of displacement. Radhakrishnan asserts the fruits of distancing thus: "It is quite customary for citizens who have emigrated to experience distance as a form of critical enlightenment or a healthy 'estrangement' from their birth land, and to experience another culture or location as a reprieve from the orthodoxies of their own 'given' cultures. It is also quite normal for the same people, who now have lived a number of years in their adopted country, to return through critical negotiation to aspects of their culture that they had not really studied before and to develop criticisms of their chosen world" (128). In this sense displacement does not exactly distances but bridges cultures, societies, nations, and even families and individuals. By going through this process a migrant is able to understand the significance of hyphenated existence.

Arun, in Desai's novel *Fasting, Feasting*, is a student in Massachusetts and spends his summer with the Patton family in the suburbs. Arun is a loner because he is disillusioned with his smothering and overbearing family in India, but he is equally dissatisfied on seeing the US-American family system with its unwarranted license and freedom. Arun's disillusionment and dissatisfaction help him to detach himself from both situations and he discovers the inherent dysfunction in families across cultures and continents when he sees in the "feasting" bulimic Melanie a resemblance of his "fasting" sister in India, Uma. Arun observes in Melanie the signs of frustration and helplessness just like that of his sister, although they are located in different cultures. This is not a reconciliation of the differences between East and West but an acknowledgement of the superficiality of all such differences. Arun has opened a door to define himself without any attachment and hopefully to live by it. He does not take any affront from the demeaning attitude of his host's daughter Melanie. Melanie makes "offensive remarks" (*Fasting* 194) about Arun's food ("lentil soup"). She monopolizes the family television set and when Arun trespasses on her space, he can read the expression on her face that says, "Get out" (188). Melanie sits on the landing of the staircase "as if to intercept" Arun and he has to maneuver to step past her legs, as well as her "accusing glare" (195). But Melanie is a person whose condition Arun

pities and she cannot harm his self-respect. Melanie is a victim of "the sugar-sticky web of family conflict" (195). Although Mrs. Patton welcomes Arun and indulges in all sort of activities to make him feel at home, Arun remains detached from the Patton family and it is this self-fashioning of detachment that makes him immune to any assault on his self-respect. This gives him opportunity to understand his hybrid existence and create his identity not as a nondescript self, an alien or a rootless person, but one with "many roots and many pasts" and thus identity becomes "a matter of rich and complex negotiation and not a result of some blind and official decree" (Radhakrishnan 129).

In conclusion, the hybridities narrated in the texts of Desai, Mukherjee, Gupta, and Lahiri represent examples of interculturality personified. Once such mélange-s are taken into account, self-fashioning becomes relatively easy and hybrid existence less painful. Defining selves in dislocated existence is an ever-changing process. The process leads from one's initial definition of self to an adopted definition, one that ultimately gives way to a definition of hybridity. Only by going through the pain of living in hybridity can one hope to reconcile with one's dislocation and arrive at a new definition of self. This condition of increasing hybridity of the Indian diaspora is brought about by individual self-fashioning and the relationships between the protagonists of the texts discussed are part of this phenomenon. The textual exploration of such human relationships adds to the canon of the study of the modern Indian diaspora.

Note: The above article is a revised excerpt from Amit Shanka Saha, *The Indian Diaspora in Transition: Reading Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri*. Ph.D. diss. Kolkata: U of Calcutta, 2010.

Works Cited

Afzal-Khan, Fawzia. *Cultural Imperialism and the Indo-English Novel*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1993.
Desai, Anita. *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2001.
Desai, Anita. *Diamond Dust*. London: Vintage, 2001.
Desai, Anita. *Fasting, Feasting*. London: Vintage, 2000.
Eriksen, Jens-Martin, and Frederik Stjernfelt. *The Democratic Contradictions of Multiculturalism*. New York: Telos P, 2012.
Gledhill, Ruth. "Hindus in Britain Want *desi* Identity." *The Telegraph* (12 July 2006): 20.
Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980.
Gupta, Sunetra. *Memories of Rain*. London: Orion, 1992.
Gupta, Sunetra. *A Sin of Colour*. Delhi: Penguin, 1999.
Kivisto, Peter. *Multiculturalism in a Global Society*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.
Kumar, Nagendra. *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee: A Cultural Perspective*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2001.
Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2000.
Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. London: Flamingo, 2003.
Lowe, Lisa. "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian-American Differences." *Theorizing Diaspora*. Ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. 132-60.
McClennen, Sophia A. *The Dialectics of Exile: Nation, Time, Language, and Space in Hispanic Literatures*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2004.
Mukherjee, Bharati. *Desirable Daughters*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2004.
Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. London: Virago, 1998.
Radhakrishnan, Rajakopalan. "Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora." *Theorizing Diaspora*. Ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. 119-31.
Said, Edward W. "Reflections on Exile." *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*. By Edward W. Said. London: Granta, 2001. 173-86.
Tötösy de Zepetnek, Steven, and I-Chun Wang, and Hsiao-Yu Sun, eds. *Perspectives on Identity*, *Migration, and Displacement*. Kaohsiung: National Sun Yat-sen UP, 2009.

Author's profile: Amit Shankar Saha teaches literature at the Institute of Advanced Studies (Kolkata). Saha's recent publications include "The Spiritual Sense of Alienation in Diasporic Life: Reading Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri," *The Criterion: An International Journal in English* (2010), "Defining Selves through Nomenclature: Reading Select Diasporic Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri," *Research and Criticism* (2010), and "Two Forms: Exploration of Diaspora in Jhumpa Lahiri," *Pegasus: An English Critical Journal* (2010). E-mail: <saha.amitshankar@gmail.com>