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# Dialectics of Diaspora Space: a Study of Contemporary, Diasporic, South Asian Fiction

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**The Dialectics of Diaspora Space:  
A Study of Contemporary, Diasporic,  
South Asian Fiction**

**Chris Zajchowski  
Anindyo Roy  
International Literature and Music  
May 17, 2007**

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## **An Anecdotal Preface**

The tension in the room was palpable. The veins on Vivek's neck bulged in tandem with the volume of his voice, both pleading for audience. "...When I got to the US, I was in shock! I was depressed, and a *complete* mess. I had to leave after two years just to regain my sanity. How can we expect these kids, not knowing for what they are enlisting themselves, to just sign up to completely, irrevocably, change their lives?" For a moment, the room drew silent. A few students shuffled their feet. "I think what Ratul is doing is admirable, and we have no right attacking him," Logan countered. "And, it is *certainly* not our place to tell the students here what they can and cannot do," added Jordan. "They need all the help they can get, and just because some of us hated our private school experiences doesn't mean we can prevent them the same opportunity." A faint murmur of agreement ensued, and our Professors intervened to prevent further volatility.

Huddled in a dimly lit classroom in the Himalayan foothills, this conversation felt surreal. A group of thirty students and professors from a small, liberal arts college in Maine, we had arrived in Kalimpong, at the Gandhi Ashram School, merely four days ago. We were still overcoming jet lag, getting used to eating rice on a daily basis, and learning our students' names. Any conversation about the 'destiny' of our students, or what they did or did not 'need' seemed somewhat hasty and ill advised. Yet, just days into our classes at the Gandhi Ashram, we were already in turmoil.

\* \* \*

Founded by Jesuit priest and visionary, Father McGuire, The Gandhi Ashram School opened in 1994. Through rallying the support of international NGOs and philanthropists, Father McGuire developed a school designed to provide free education and a welcoming and warm school environment for some of Kalimpong's poorest families. With a largely ineffective and under-funded public education system in Kalimpong, Gandhi Ashram is one of the only options for economically disadvantaged families to allow their children a substantive and nurturing education. A testament to the school's popularity, the fathers and brothers participate in yearly rounds to neighboring villages to determine which families are in most need the Ashram's insistence. In a conversation with Gandhi Ashram's newest father, Father Paul, he mentioned during his recent round he had to turn away countless families who simply weren't poor enough. He admitted: "it is one of the hardest part of my job."

From Father McGuire's opening of the school twenty-three years ago to Father Paul's continuation of the mission, The Gandhi Ashram has experienced a slew of outside interest. Apart for the Gandhi Ashram's promise of free education, the school's main draw and interest for outsiders its mission to teach each of its students classical violin. During our time at the Gandhi Ashram, the school's orchestra, comprised mostly of older students, traveled to multiple cities within West Bengal, and was even invited to play in the neighboring province, Bihar. Gandhi Ashram students have become so adept at playing violin that one alumnus is now studying and playing in the Munich conservatory. Due to her

success and international coverage of Gandhi Ashram and her stories, over the past few years there have been a slew of foreign visitors, arriving to teach music, and ‘discover’ the next virtuoso.

It was within this tradition that we both ‘discovered’ and arrived at the Gandhi Ashram. Yet, while the Gandhi Ashram is no stranger to visitors, I would have to argue that our presence was a bit different. First, we were a group of thirty. For a small school like Gandhi Ashram, and arguably any elementary school, that’s a lot of new people; for comparison, our presence was equivalent to thirty Indian college students suddenly appearing at any rural boarding school in Tennessee, intent on teaching Hindi. In addition to our strength in numbers, we were also living in the dormitories, eating with the staff and students and teaching on a daily basis. More than simply visitors, we were quickly absorbed into the fabric of the Gandhi Ashram community. We visited student’s homes, engaged in nightly sing-alongs to Green Day and Nepali rock, and played some monster games of knockout. For the duration of the two-week, winter program we were a fixture on the school’s landscape.

\* \* \*

While many factors enabled our exchange with the school, our presence and easy acclimation to Gandhi Ashram was largely the result of one Colby student, Ratul, and his intimate connection with both the school and town of Kalimpong. A second-year Colby student and self-proclaimed native of both suburban New Jersey and Kalimpong, Ratul had spent the summers of his youth at his grandmother’s house in Kalimpong. Following high school, he became intensely involved with the Gandhi Ashram, visiting and teaching during the

summers. Thus, through his established connection with the school, and the interest in expressed in the school by two professors at Colby the teaching exchange was developed.

Due to his history with Gandhi Ashram, Ratul was seen by some of the Colby students as an Indian Moses: he helped organize excursions, introduced us to students, and gave many the lay of the land. Yet, a few days into the program a slew of students began to question his actions, and how they related with our presence at the school.

\* \* \*

While most of us spent our mornings signing “Row, Row, Row your boat,” and teaching parts of speech, Ratul, had chosen a slightly different project. From his knowledge of the adversity faced by its students, Ratul decided the best way he could be of service to our students was to search for schools in the US receptive to the Ashram’s mission. By locating scholarships for high school attendance in the US, Ratul felt he could truly make a tangible difference in the lives of some of the children he had grown to love. After months of emails, phone calls, and meetings he made considerable headway, and had intrigued a fair number of private high schools throughout the Northeast. Thus, while many of us arrived in Kalimpong with dinosaur erasers, frisbees, and colorful story books, Ratul came armed with view books from Hodgekiss, essay questions from Deerfield, and the hopes of matriculation.

Response to Ratul’s project was immediate. Some Colby students were thrilled at Ratul’s very practical initiative, and elated with his interest in providing an alternative higher education for kids who didn’t have many avenues



of upward mobility. Yet, while many were at least content with the project, so much so that they volunteered their time to read and correct application essays, others weren't as convinced. While older students were shown promotional videos and view books for Deerfield and Hodgekiss, the dissenters felt there was a lack of perspective being given to the impact of such a monumental change in these young students lives. Additionally, some students, disenchanted with their own private high school education, did not want to wish what they conceived as the "pop-collared, shallow 'preppyness'" upon the students whom they perceived as innocent and unscathed by the evils of upper-crust, prep. school society. It was quite a debate, and, within a few days of arriving at the school, we found ourselves in the middle of a group meeting to discuss the polemic.

\* \* \*

Though not entirely convinced, I sided with the skeptics. I wasn't opposed to the Ratul's project - but I was concerned with how it was being presented. First and foremost, I feared our presence would be perceived as linked with some sort of recruitment effort. Just four days into our stay at The Gandhi Ashram it was evident that many of the students were in awe of us, and that we were beginning to assume "role-model" status. Thus, when Ratul interrupted our classes to show promotional videos, I worried that it would seem we were all not only validating his initiative, but also encouraging our students' participation. Knowing the lasting impression my young camp counselors and teachers made on my life, both positive and negative, I didn't want these kids to feel like we were selling them anything. Perhaps selfishly, I wanted an experience with them and the school unfettered by any imposition of values. I realize now that, aside from this

issue, in any forum of cultural exchange discussion of values is inevitable, but at the time drove my opposition.

While my own worries of cultural imposition muddied my opinion of the project, I could also emphasize with Vivek's brand of opposition. While Ratul had passed out view books and shown videos, it seemed he neglected to show international relocation as anything but positive. And, even though he wasn't constantly over-selling or singing the praises of these schools, I felt a danger of promoting Northeast private school education not as *an* option but *the* option. Furthermore, I wasn't so much worried that we would be setting these kids up for failure, but rather that they would be accepted and leave without a balanced view of the change they were about to undertake. I was worried they'd "succeed," and that they'd find, like Vivek had, that their new life in the US wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

\* \* \*

During the time of the private school polemic at the Gandhi Ashram School, Ratul's grandmother, Mrs. Bhattacharyya, visited the our group. A resident of Kalimpong and a local doctor, Mrs. B had come to the school both out of a personal curiosity regarding our own projects and on business. Various students were battling a slew of different ailments, and since our arrival Mrs. B had been our go-to doctor. Having previously fallen ill and been a recipient of her care, I found Mrs. B's presence both calming and comforting. Additionally, wise with age, Mrs. B was not only an excellent physician, but also incredibly well read and excellent conversationalist.

After her rounds, a group of students and I sat in the dormitory chatting with Mrs. B. about the school, our projects, and the adjustment to Kalimpong. I forget who actually addressed the issue, but somewhere in our conversation about the school we suddenly veered into the private school debate. Not sharing her grandson's enthusiasm, Mrs. B was skeptical about the outcome of the project: "Well what is the sense of sending them there," she mused. "They're just going to turn into little *Bijus*."

\* \* \*

By invoking Biju, Mrs. B was referring to a character from transnational author Kiran Desai's latest novel The Inheritance of Loss. Biju, the son of a poor cook from Kalimpong, India – the same Kalimpong in which the Gandhi Ashram is based – and the focus of my fourth chapter, emigrates to the US in search of better opportunity and a more prosperous life. Yet, following a variety of jobs, Biju realizes he isn't really happy in the US, and his growing alienation from his father makes him question his migration.

\* \* \*

From her comment it was evident that Mrs. B had read Desai's novel, but it's an understatement to say that Mrs. B was merely familiar with its characters and work. Mrs. B's sister, the world-renowned, transnational author, Anita Desai, gave birth to the architect of The Inheritance of Loss on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1971. Just as Ratul had grown up spending his vacations at Mrs. B's, his aunt, Kiran, had spent her small chunks of her own life, up to age fourteen, in Kalimpong. As Mrs. B conveyed, while curing me of one of my many colds, Kiran's connection with Kalimpong provided the lens through which she developed her novel. Many of

Desai's characters, such as Father Booty, the Afghan Princesses, and Lola and Noni are exact replicas of real life residents of Kalimpong, presented often without even a change in names.

Since the novel's release and subsequent success, Mrs. B, being the closest relative to Kiran living in Kalimpong, has received the brunt of local criticism for representation and depiction of the Gorkha movement. While her position on the front line of Kalimpong response has caused Mrs. B to abstain from interpretation, simply recommend the many critics "write Kiran," it seemed, from her "Biju" comment, Kiran's novel and its historical accuracy had made a strong impression.

\* \* \*

While the private school fizzled out with lackluster support from the school, Mrs. B's words stuck with me throughout the remainder of my time in Kalimpong. To me, our few debates regarding transnational relocation for access to 'better' and more 'empowering' higher education fit well with our debates on multinational corporations, micro-financing, identity politics, and the IMF and WTO. Though some of our group members viewed our conversation as an isolated event, I felt we had all participated in an incredibly charged discourse on the many implications of globalization, in both our projects and the lives of our students. In other words, Mrs. B's comparison of our student's potential relocation with Biju's seemed not at all far-fetched, but a fitting, real life connection of our often reified academic concepts. We became implicated in a debate, larger than just our own reactions to a potential scholarship program.

To be fair, the comparison isn't necessarily perfect. The Gandhi Ashram students' arrival in the US would be somewhat unlike Biju's, as they would be linked to academic institutions. They would have a narrower purpose than "a better life," through the new requirements and purposes ascribed to their schools and education. And there is nothing to say that they wouldn't benefit from the generosity of their benefactors, and the goodwill of the new friends they met abroad. Yet, at the same time, I can't help but believe they would experience similar difficulty acclimating. While in my thesis I phrase these issues academically as "negotiating belonging," or dealing with various forms of "racism and exoticization" – I feel, at a very fundamental level, moving would simply be *hard*. Thus, when I returned to school and to my thesis, which I had planned to focus on South Asian Diasporic Literature, I couldn't help reading my notes with our own little Bijus from The Gandhi Ashram School in mind.

## Introduction

### “I Read the News Today”:

On January 25, 2007, *The Economist* covered the climax of racist drama on Britain’s popular, reality television show, *Big Brother*. Jade Goody, a long-time member of *Big Brother’s* cast, had been eliminated from the show by an 82% vote; viewers were reportedly disenchanted with Goody’s repeatedly racist comments directed at Bollywood actress, Shilpa Sheety, and voted with their consciences to oust the long-standing, admittedly ignorant, queen from her throne<sup>1</sup>. Running adjacent to the column on Goody’s fall from the grace was an article reporting a shift in British citizens’ conception of their national identity and national culture. Though the article focused largely on the rising popularity of an “English” versus “British” national identity, it also broached the question of what it *means* to be “English”; and, while tea consumption and the “stiff upper lip” did enter into *The Economist’s* findings, Englishness was reportedly seen by many surveyed as an “ethnic, rather than a civic, identity.”<sup>2</sup>

Across the pond, in a ‘post 9/11’ United States, the flow of immigrants, illegal or otherwise, into the country is an ongoing topic of national debate. From *The New York Times’* coverage of Minutemen phenomenon on the U.S.-Mexico border<sup>3</sup>, to *The Boston Globes’* report of anti-Muslim sentiment from some

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<sup>1</sup> “Jaded: Reality TV and Racism.” *The Economist*. Vol. 382, Number 8514. New York, NY. January 25, 2007

<sup>2</sup> “Waning: British Identity.” *The Economist*. Vol. 382, Number 8514. New York, NY. January 25, 2007

<sup>3</sup> Chamberlain, Lisa. “2 Cities and 4 Bridges Where Commerce Flows.” *The New York Times*. March 28, 2007

House Legislatures<sup>4</sup>, the immigrant question has caused many citizens and lawmakers to rethink their ideas of what it means to be 'American.' It seems, as in England, despite the multiple ethnicities, religions, cultures, and 'races' of the citizenry, the question of who belongs to the American national fabric remains.

### **Diaspora Space:**

In light of these continuing debates concerning immigration, national identity and belonging, re-examinations of immigrant and ethnic communities, often referred to as 'diaspora,' have become increasingly popular and prudent. Khachig Tololian, editor of *Diaspora* magazine, calls diaspora "exemplary communities of the transnational moment."<sup>5</sup> In an increasingly globalized world, where labor, capital, and resources are passed fluidly from continent to continent, diaspora are created by relocation or displacement of immigrant workers and their descendents.<sup>6</sup> For these unskilled, immigrant laborers, middle class immigrants, and the children of both groups, adaptation to the culture, society, and life in a new 'host' country can be difficult, to say the least. So, in response to a new cultural landscape and a tenuous sense belonging, as well as to maintain a connection with a shared past, citizens of the world's numerous diaspora replicate linguistic, cultural, and social norms, creating their own "cultural

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<sup>4</sup> Frommer, Frederic J. "GOP lawmaker fears election of Muslims." *The Boston Globe*. December 21, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Tololian, Khachig (1991) 'The Nation State and its Others: In lieu of a Preface', *Diaspora*, 1(1): 3-7

<sup>6</sup> Watts, Michael J. "Mapping Meaning, Denoting Difference, Imagining Identity. Dialectical Images and Postmodern Geographies." *Geografiska Annaler. Series B. Human Geography*, Vol. 73. No. 1. (1997), 7-16.

space[s]” that mirror and often replace a past relationship to their land of origin, or ‘home’.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, while diaspora are often treated in an essentialist light, as stable immigrant communities, constituted by a certain social or cultural experience, for sociologist Avtar Brah, the diaspora is also a dialectical tool to explain its own emergence. For Brah, the diaspora carries: “explanatory power in dealing with the specific problematics associated with transnational movements of people, capital, commodities and cultural iconographies.”<sup>8</sup> Rather than simply used to denote a static community whose linguistic, social, and cultural patterns mirror those of ‘home,’ Brah uses the diaspora as an illustrative lens to the underlying social, historical, and economic conditions predicating contemporary migration and diasporic identity formation (and reformation). For Brah the social issues of undocumented workers, the violence originating from racial binaries, and the globalization of capital, all fit into diaspora discourse, a dialogue she believes goes beyond the common tropes of burkhas and arranged marriages.

To broaden the range of diaspora discourse, outside of the usual ‘minority focused’ dialogue, Brah forwards the concept of “diaspora space.”<sup>9</sup> Working from Clifford’s idea of “the global condition of ‘culture as a site of travel,’” Brah refutes the idea of an inherent ‘nativeness’ in any diaspora discourse. In doing so, she champions the diaspora space as a location where “boundaries of inclusion and

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<sup>7</sup> Nash, June. “Defying Deterritorialization: Autonomy Movements against Globalization.” *Social Movements: An Anthropology Reader*. Blackwell: Malden, MA. 2005

<sup>8</sup> Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge: London and New York. 1996. 196

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 208



exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are contested.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, in a diaspora space that includes both immigrants and those perceived to be ‘native’ inhabitants of the host society, Brah creates room for a discussion on both how the diaspora space develops, implicating, not only immigrants, but the host society, in its formation. Rather than simply focusing on the ‘majority’s’ effect on ‘minority’ groups, she highlights the reciprocity in exchanges that occur between groups, showing each side’s effects as double-edged. As Brah attests: “the diaspora space is the site where *the native is as much the diasporian as the diasporian is the native.*”<sup>11</sup> In her analysis of English diaspora space, Brah shows the confluence of African-Caribbean, Irish, Asian, Jewish, and ‘English’ diasporas, how their interpenetrations affect ‘native’ members of English society, and how these interactions form what is present day English culture and identity.<sup>12</sup> Thus, it seems, as Brah would argue, the negotiation of ‘Englishness’, and by extension ‘Americanness’ in the daily news, arise from these very same dialectical exchanges and conversations played out in diaspora space.

### **Writing About ‘Home’**

Recent years have seen a rise in the number of young and talented writers from various diaspora. In tandem with the ‘transnational moment,’ writers like Jamaica Kincaid, Michelle Cliff, Salman Rushdie, and Helon Habila have become household names, denoting new wave of writers from postcolonial nations who have seized the English language as their own. And, with an ever-growing, global

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 208

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 209

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 209

population who share migration, relocation, and displacement, as well as a new, academic focus on issues of the ‘transnational moment,’ diasporic literature<sup>13</sup> has boomed to encompass a large slice of the fiction market.

Yet, while a plethora of diasporic literature floods publishers and bookstores from all corners of the globe, no group has been more successful in marketing their experiences than the Indian diaspora. From the first wave of diasporic Desi lit, featuring titans such as Salman Rushdie and Anita Desai, to the most recent boom in South Asian literature, including Booker and Pulitzer winners Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri respectively, the “ethnicity of the moment” in diasporic fiction is truly Indian.<sup>14</sup> Roxanna Kassam Kara from *Nirali Magazine* argues Desi success has stemmed partially from a Western readership’s need for more than their “meat-and-potatoes” narratives. Yet, Kassam Kara also readily acknowledges the interest in diasporic Indian narratives has part of its origins in the demographic shifts in Western readership. As Kassam Kara attests: “[Desi] writing also fills a need from second and third generation desis who are demanding books that they can relate to.”<sup>15</sup> With growing populations of Indian Americans, Englishwomen from Pakistan, and Bengalis living in Great Britain, themes that address and tackle the every day

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<sup>13</sup> I wish to preface the remainder of what I will term ‘diasporic literature’ under the understanding that it is merely one of the many conceptual ‘boxes’ used to describe the work of the following authors. As transnational poet and writer Sudeep Sen admitted in a conversation in Delhi, he is often described as a ‘postcolonial, modern Indian, and/or transnational writer’ and hates each categorization of his work. So, by no means do I want to pigeon-hole the following authors and their work into merely one canon, the ‘diaspora canon,’ excluding them from the broader categories of contemporary American or English fiction; but, rather, I seek to differentiate them from their peers through focusing on the common, diaspora space themes they address.

<sup>14</sup> Kassam Kara, Roxanna. “Such a Long Journey.” *Nirali Magazine*. December 4, 2006

<sup>15</sup> Kassam Kara, December 4, 2006

realities of racism and identity politics present in diaspora space are in high demand.

### **Linking Fiction with Everyday Life**

In the following pages, I aim to show how a small pool of contemporary, diaspora space authors writing from England and the United States, use the South Asian narratives to provide commentary, or a window to ongoing identity negotiation in diaspora space. Though some postcolonial scholars, such as Graham Huggan, to whom I will refer in chapter 3, argue fictional works should not be confused with anthropological texts, I feel the diaspora space issues raised in much of South Asian fiction closely mirror and are modeled on the actual experiences of living in diaspora space. From the headlines in the daily news to assimilationist ideology in present in 'native' English and American society, contemporary South Asian fiction tackles themes of that involve all diasporians – 'native' and immigrant.

Through pairing recent novels by a handful of diasporic South Asian fiction writers – principally Monica Ali, Hanif Kureishi<sup>16</sup> and Kiran Desai, as well as with Jamaican-British author Zadie Smith<sup>17</sup> - with sociological, anthropological and journalistic text, I hope to illuminate role diasporic South

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia* is a bit of an outlier in terms of the time of publication. Kureishi wrote his witty and in-depth look at race, class, and culture in Britain in 1990, roughly 10 years prior to the works of the other 3 writers. Yet, Kureishi's coverage of commodity-function for both immigrants and 'native' suburbanites provides a crucial lens through which to analyze the complexities behind assimilationist ideology. In this way, his text is an important piece in this grouping.

<sup>17</sup> Smith's ethnicity obviously makes her distinct in a group of diasporic South Asian fiction writers; yet, her ability to capture issues of identity negotiation and belonging for South Asian, Jamaican, and 'native' characters in the diaspora space of London, makes her a fitting addition to this study. Furthermore, her presence is a dialectical tool within itself, showing us that ethnicity need not be the determinant for what makes a poignant and timely South Asian narrative in diaspora space

Asian diaspora narratives plays in addressing the real and tangible diaspora space discourse. Additionally, by showing how each writer uses dialectical models, putting two seemingly fixed or stable ideas in tension, such as 'native' and immigrant, I seek to illustrate the way their texts break down fixed binaries and not only incorporate, but further, Brah's fundamental concept of the all-encompassing diaspora space.

An analysis of Zadie Smith's first novel White Teeth begins the study, with a focus on the paradox of biological purity and the helping-hand in contemporary England. Then, moving away from often-taboo biological or racial politics, Monica Ali's Brick Lane is used to show how cultural assimilation is often viewed as the new determinant for national belonging. Following Brick Lane, Huggan's analysis of "staged marginality" in Hanif Kuresihi's The Buddha of Suburbia provides a fitting lens to show how assimilation doesn't necessarily lead to acceptance and also illuminates the commodity-functions of all diasporians. And, finally, through Kiran Desai's focus on migrancy in The Inheritance of Loss, diaspora space is seen to encompass not only identity negotiation in Western economic center, but also in 'homes' from which migrants originate.

Each narrative provides a myriad of different themes relevant for study; yet, in focusing on these specific works and sections that address identity formation and a search for a sense of belonging to the national fabric, I believe we as readers can see how diaspora space writers use their skills to both address and comment on contemporary racial, cultural, and immigration ideology in England and the US. Furthermore, though I have chosen to focus on specific books for specific issues, each theme – 'race,' assimilation, commodification, and migrancy

- can be seen as occurring throughout diasporic South Asian narratives, potentially providing a unifier to describe a broader, pan-South Asian experience in and response to diaspora space. Finally, by viewing how authors of diasporic South Asian fiction rework the standard notion of the diaspora, and “involve,” to borrow a term from Zadie Smith, ‘native’ members of host society in diaspora space, Brah’s thesis is not only upheld but strengthened.

## Chapter 1: Belonging Through Purity

*“European perceptions of the colonized were always contradictory, seeing the latter simultaneously like themselves and inescapably [as the] ‘other.’”*

*– Alice L. Conklin and Ian Christopher Fletcher, European Imperialism*

### Constructing The Paradox

To sociologist Paul Gilroy, in the modern, English consciousness, constructions of racial difference and purity are inherent in the formation of a national identity. As Gilroy suggests, evocations of the “Island Race” and “Bulldog Breed” that run central to British vernacular point to the perceived link between a “cultural” and “biological” purity in national identity<sup>18</sup>. Postcolonial theorist Etienne Balibar describes this propagation of the nationalist purity paradigm as “internal racism,” constructed from the “external racism” of colonialism.<sup>19</sup> As Balibar argues, during the European colonial period, the ‘whiteness’ of in internal European center was seen to denote superiority or purity, contrasting with the ‘darkness’ in the colonies, or external space. Applying this external racism to the modern milieu, Balibar, and in turn Gilroy, argue that former colonial powers, such as Britain, striving to reclaim their sense of national greatness, have increasingly advocated a stemming of racial dilution on the home front.<sup>20</sup> From England the racist policies by Parliamentary members, such as Enoch Powell, to the resulting Immigration Acts of the late 60’s and 70’s, Gilroy points to the adoption of an internally focused discourse on race in post-Imperial England.<sup>21 22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Gilroy, Paul. *‘There ain’t no Black in the Union Jack.’* University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL. 1987. 44

<sup>19</sup> Balibar, Etienne and Immanuel Wallerstein. *Racism and Nationalism.* Verso: London, 1988. 38

<sup>20</sup> Gilroy, 46

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 47

Yet, running concurrently with the formation of this internal racism and purity discourse in contemporary British thought has been the rhetoric of 'help' offered to those caught on the minority side of the binary. As Roger and Catherine Ballard comment in their study on the formation and development of Sikh community in Leeds, the children of South Asian immigrants to Britain are often seen by their pre-dominantly 'native' teachers, community leaders and parents as entrenched in a state of "culture conflict."<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, youth action resulting from this perceived conflict is painted by majority culture as rebellion against the oppressive culture of the parent generation.<sup>24</sup><sup>25</sup> And, while Brah argues that adolescent rebellion is constituted from a myriad of different sources, not simply along the East vs. West lines<sup>26</sup>, in cases that do play to this common trope, the Ballards show that many 'native' counselors, responding to these conflicts, intervene in an attempt to provide a counterbalance to parents.<sup>27</sup><sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> And, in the US, though less prevalent, intolerant edicts like those coming from anti-Muslim congressman Virgil Goode show internal racism is alive and well, even in a supposedly, tolerant and multi-ethnic government.

<sup>23</sup> Ballard, Roger and Catherine. "The Sikhs: The Development of South Asian Settlements in Britain." Between Two Cultures: Migrants and Minorities in Britain. Baisel Blackwell: Oxford. 1977.

<sup>24</sup> Brah, 42

<sup>25</sup> Hanif Kureishi's provides an interesting rebuttal to this common trope film My Son the Fanatic. Flipping the typical 'rebellious and westernized son' paradigm, Kureishi provides a narrative where it is the son, Farid, who is traditionalist, religious, and fanatical about his 'home' culture. Farid stands in stark contrast to his father Parvez, who not only enjoys liquor and jazz, but also develops an affair with a prostitute-friend. In short, it this reversal of roles creates a fitting space to analyze the common trope of the recalcitrant parents and culturally 'confused' children.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 42

<sup>27</sup> Ballard, 45

<sup>28</sup> This presence of 'native' allies to the children of 'oppressive,' immigrant parents is not exclusive to English diasporic space narratives; in Jhumpa Lahiri's Namesake, on Gogol's first day of school his parent's attempt to give him a 'good name,' Nikhil, are thwarted by Gogol's teacher Mrs. Lapidus. Following her own concept of what is necessary for individualistic growth, Mrs. Lapidus allows five year-old Gogol to object to his parents wishes and a Bengali tradition by using his pet name 'Gogol' as is school name.

It would seem through their actions aimed at promoting and enabling individualistic growth, Ballards' 'helpers' seek to aid in the assimilation of second-generation children of immigrants into the national fabric. Yet, by pairing these two seemingly incongruous activities, the propagation of internal racism and the offer of a helping hand, a confusing paradox develops. Like their ancestors in the colonies, immigrants and minorities in modern Britain become byproducts of duplicitous actions that attempt to 'civilize' or 'culture' them, yet simultaneously keep them outside of any sense of national belonging. Furthermore, either as a result of these imposed binaries, or through the minority communities' own negotiation of identity, 'othering' is also adopted by immigrants to differentiate themselves from what are perceived as 'native' peoples and culture.

### **Loving Contradictions**

Using this paradox of 'help' and exclusion, in her first novel, White Teeth, Zadie Smith shows how both ideologies can exist simultaneously. Smith's 'helper' who illustrates this duplicitous rhetoric is self-righteous, white, middle-class mother, Joyce Chalfen. Throughout White Teeth Joyce is framed as intent on 'saving' Millat and Irie, who she perceives as rebellious miscreants from South Asian and Jamaican families.<sup>29</sup> Following a drug raid that catches Millat and Irie on the wrong side of the law, Joyce is recruited by the school headmaster to help provide a "constructive" and "stable" environment for the pair.<sup>30</sup> Through her

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<sup>29</sup> Smith, Zadie. White Teeth. Vintage International: New York, NY. 2000. 269

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 252



new role as a sort of foster mother, Joyce takes it upon herself to help both Millat and Irie recover from the “damage” caused by their upbringing<sup>31</sup>.

Yet, while it seems Joyce truly does care, her sense of ‘help’ is defined in scientific terms, resulting from both her career as a gardener and her husband’s as geneticist. In searching for the root of Millat and Irie’s “pain,” Joyce diagnoses both as if they were, in fact, species: “There was a quiet pain in the first one (*Irieanthus negressium marcusilia*), a lack of a father figure perhaps, an intellect untapped, a low self-esteem; and in the second (*Millaturea brandolidia joyculatus*)....”<sup>32</sup> And, as Joyce becomes increasingly attached to Millat, she goes even further, by ascribing his own anger and confusion to: “[a] slave mentality, or maybe a color complex centered around his mother, or wish of his own annihilation by means of dilution in a white gene pool.”<sup>33</sup> While Joyce’s career as a published gardener prepares her to make diagnoses on flora, her speciation of Millat and Irie shows an increasingly active biological discourse underlying her attempts to aid both of the troubled teens.

Outside of mere semantics, Joyce’s duplicity becomes fully evident during a conversation following a celebratory barbeque for Millat and Irie. While speaking on the genealogy of her “grand old family,” Joyce tells Clara, Irie’s mother, that she thinks of Irie as part of her own family.<sup>34</sup> Yet, following this ‘compliment,’ she returns to listing the famous intellectuals in the Chalfen lineage, and announces an epiphany: “I mean after a while, you’ve got to suspect it’s in the genes, haven’t you? All these brains. I mean, nurture just won’t explain

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 270

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 270

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 311

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 293

it.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, it seems even while Joyce increasingly claims both Irie and Millat as members of Chalfen family, she simultaneously casts them outside any real belonging; while Millat and Irie are part of her family “in a way,” they can never truly penetrate ‘Chalfenism.’

### **Nationalizing the Purity Discourse**

The true subtext of Joyce’s two-faced statements is illuminated by Irie’s description of the Chalfens as denoting “Englishness.” By equating her encounters with the Chalfens, specifically entering their house as “crossing borders, sneaking into England,”<sup>36</sup> through Irie, Smith constructs her exclusion from the Chalfen family and as a metaphorical exclusion from the ‘English family.’ Thus, it seems through Irie and Joyce’s relationship, Smith speaks to Balibar’s internal racism; by creating a scene where of national belonging is constituted genetically, based in the “purity” of the Chalfen experience, Smith shows that these two often contradictory ideologies of help and exclusion often co-exist side by side, framing a paradox that situates minorities in contemporary Britain outside of any true belonging to the national identity.

Yet, while Smith, Balibar and Gilroy ground this purity discourse in a contemporary milieu, its roots lie far deeper in colonial philosophy. As postcolonial scholar Ania Loomba comments: “one of the most striking contradictions about colonialism is that it both needs to ‘civilize’ its ‘others,’ and

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 293

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 273

fix them in a perpetual state of ‘otherness.’”<sup>37</sup> Following Loomba’s thesis, the so called ‘White Man’s Burden,’ a relic of colonialism’s ‘external racism,’ can be seen in colonial writing spanning the globe; as an Earl Grey eloquently stated in 1851: “[the] British crown best way to maintain peace and spread ‘blessings’ of Christianity and Civilization.”<sup>38</sup> Like Grey’s philosophy, it seems Joyce’s ‘othering’ of Irie and Millat is also predicated largely through this ‘striking contradiction’ or historical lens: through their time in the Chalfen house, Joyce would like to believe Irie and Millat are becoming more ‘civilized’; yet, while their higher test scores and adaptation to Chalfenist life put them peripherally in the family, Joyce is reluctant to include them in the true, Chalfenist genealogy<sup>39</sup>. Thus, while Joyce’s actions speak more to the internal racism of the contemporary moment than to the external racism of colonialism, the fundamental paradox of the helping hand and exclusive coupling remains the same.

### **Equal Access to the Binary**

By showing the timelessness of Loomba’s ‘striking contradiction’ we can see that the ‘othering’ of members caught on the minority side of the binary is quite common in South Asian diaspora space narratives. The discourse of purity invoked in White Teeth can also be seen in The Buddha of Suburbia, My Son the

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<sup>37</sup> Loomba, Ania. Colonialism/Postcolonialism. Routledge: London and NY. 1998. 173

<sup>38</sup> Hastings, Adrian. “Christianity, Civilization, and Commerce.” European Imperialism:1830 – 1930. Houghton Mifflin Co: Boston, MA. 1999.

<sup>39</sup> Smith emphasizes this point, and it’s historical roots, through the narrative of Irie’s great-grandmother, Ambrosia. Tutored, civilized and impregnated with the child of British Captain Durham, Ambrosia is held both outside her Jamaican roots and the White, church-going community to which Durham belongs. Through addressing Ambrosia’s classical, colonial story, Smith provides historical continuity to this seemingly timeless process of ‘othering.’

Fanatic, The Inheritance of Loss, just to name a few. Yet, it would be unfair to claim that the purity discourse occurs with a singular trajectory – through imposition by ‘natives’ on immigrants.

According to Loomba, outcasts from the ‘pure’ native community often adopt this same binary as tool to distinguish themselves from Europeans. As Loomba’s argues, those exiled from the national identity often seek a “liberation [...that] hinges upon the discovery or rehabilitation of their [own] cultural identity.”<sup>40</sup> In White Teeth, through her use of Samad, the father of Millat, Smith shows this stride towards liberation in Samad’s development of the binary of Immigrants vs. ‘the West’: when Samad rants and raves to Irie about corrupting forces of British society – forces he believes have ruined his hope, his children, and, above all his sense of belonging – Smith shows he is reaching out to Irie for understanding. As Smith states, while Samad speaks with Irie: “what he really [wants to say to Irie is]: do we speak the same language? Are we from the same place? Are we the same.”<sup>41</sup> Given Samad’s failure with his sons, principally Millat, the womanizing, pot-smoking gangster, Samad has lost hope in the importance of cultural or genetic purity, and has switched his focus to that of a purity composed of Us/Corrupting West. Thus, in speaking with Irie, Samad is searching for ‘liberating’ similarity in experience, developing a binary with ‘the West,’ as the alien and corrupting ‘other’.

In addition to Samad’s cultural schism, through the nightmares of the usually culturally sensitive Alsana, mother of Millat, Smith shows that liberation,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 181

<sup>41</sup> Smith, 337

or defiance, is also often viewed as maintenance of genetic purity. Responding to her son's attraction to white women Smith shows Alsana's silent fear of genetic "dissolution [and] *disappearance*."<sup>1</sup> As Smith writes:

Alsana Iqbal would regularly wake up in a puddle of her own sweat after a night visited by visions of Millat (genetically *BB*; where *B* stands for Bengaliness) marrying someone called Sarah (*aa*, where *a* stands for Aryan), resulting in a child called Michael (*Ba*), who in turn marries somebody called Lucy (*aa*), leaving Alsana with a legacy of unrecognizable great-grandchildren (*Aaaaaaa!*)<sup>42</sup>

Thus, whether as a response to a national binary discourse that excludes her, or as an organic fear of dissolution of family and lineage, provided by Loomba as a potential metaphor for "resistance" and opposition to the exclusive nation<sup>43</sup>, Alsana has created her own binary of purity.

## **Conclusion**

Through both Gilroy's analysis of the coupling of biological purity with contemporary British national identity we can view Joyce and Alsana's actions as illuminating this age-old process of 'othering.' Furthermore, through Joyce's paradoxical efforts to 'help' Millat and Irie and her simultaneous exclusion of the pair from Chalfenism, analogized as 'Englishness,' the timelessness of Loomba's 'striking contradiction' is clear. Finally, as a result of this exclusivity Samad's

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 272

<sup>43</sup> Loomba, 217

binary constructions of 'West vs. East,' points to the adoption of the binary in an attempt of liberation from the purity paradox.

From Loomba's analysis of colonial 'othering' to Brah's discourse on the landscape of contemporary diaspora space, it seems the constructing binaries of purity spans the centuries. The language of 'us and them,' couched in racial, ethnic, and cultural difference, is continuously built and deconstructed as the national fabric shifts and changes with immigrant influx and ideological transformation. And, though the passage of time has altered the content and formation of the binary, it seems Balibar would argue that racial binaries, constructed from biological conceptions of purity, have merely shifted to deal with an increasing immediacy of difference; the distance between rulers and subjects that was a feature of the colonial landscape has dissolved, and the immigration of citizenry from post-colonial nations has brought those who once were seen as physically outside the empire into the streets, supermarkets, and living rooms of the post-imperial state.

## Chapter 2: Belonging Through Assimilation

*“The redefinition of racism...is understood no longer as merely ‘disliking individuals because of the colour of their skin’ [but as] ‘preference for accepting people with strong inclination to be assimilated into the British community.’”*

- Ronald Butt, *Ain't No Black...*

### **‘Culture’ as the New Black**

The timeless purity paradigm, illuminated by Paul Gilroy, Etienne Balibar, and Zadie Smith, often dominates the discussion of national belonging in diaspora space and diaspora space literature. From Kiran Desai’s commentary on the “half ‘n half crowd,” second-generation Indians in the US who have absorbed ‘American culture’ yet simultaneously cling to their Desi ethnic identity<sup>44</sup>, to Great Britain’s Immigration Act of 1968, stipulating that immigrants needed at least one British grandparent for citizenship,<sup>45</sup> phenotype is an important ‘includer’ and excluder in diaspora space, identity politics. Yet, while Gilroy and others point to ‘race’ as one method for defining national identity in post-colonial center, culture and cultural assimilation have increasingly entered the fray as determinants of one’s inclusion or exclusion from the national community.

Moving from a national identity based from phenotypically grounded internal racism, Gilroy forwards the theory of journalist, Ronald Butt. As Butt argues, a perceived disjunction between immigrant and ‘native’ cultures in Britain fuels a new internal racism based not on the color of one’s skin, but,

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<sup>44</sup> Desai, Kiran. The Inheritance of Loss. Atlantic Monthly: New York, NY. 2006. 148

<sup>45</sup> Gilroy, 44

rather, on her ability to assimilate to British culture and society<sup>46</sup>: use of the English language, consumption of alcohol and meat, and adoption of rugged individualist and capitalist philosophies are seen as new determinates of belonging. And, with this reformatted rubric for identity negotiation, resistance or adherence to 'traditional' British culture, beliefs, and livelihood become make or break determinants to one's ability to be included in the national fabric. <sup>47</sup>

### **Belonging in Brick Lane**

Moving away from a perceived, biological dichotomy, towards a cultural distinction – Butt's thesis provides a fitting lens through which to view Monica Ali's first novel Brick Lane.<sup>48</sup> Set within the confines of a Bangladeshi family's experience living in London during the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ali constructs her narrative to show the emotional and philosophical ambiguities, as well as anguish, arising from living between two distinct cultural and psychological milieu. Ali chooses Nanzeen as her protagonist and anxious hero, whose liberation from a fate-driven complex is shown through decades of transformation and self-realization. Yet, while Nanzeen's story plays to a familiar (and popular) feminist narrative, the "subjugated Muslim woman"<sup>49</sup> who rises above the oppressive cultural and social rules controlling her life, her story, oscillated against that of her husband, Chanu, speaks more to the differentiation

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 64

<sup>47</sup> This is not to say that Gilroy believes in culture as exclusive or hermetically sealed authenticity: Gilroy readily objects to such a classification, attesting that it is not "...an intrinsic property of ethnic particularity, but a mediating space..." Thus, in speaking of national belonging as defined the cultural assimilation of the Other, we are working from what Gilroy would hail as the false notion of static culture.

<sup>48</sup> Ali, Monica. Brick Lane. Scribner: NY. 2003.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, 110



felt through resistance to or participation in assimilation. Through focusing on Chanu's failure to adapt to British society and his resulting hardships, rather than Nanzeen's liberation and success, the assimilationist ideology underlying contemporary identity politics in Britain is illuminated.

Ali paints Chanu as the verbose, unsuccessful, aging husband of Nanzeen. Chanu seems chronically incapable of keeping a job, and, until the novel's end when he packs up and flies back to Dhaka, he is hopelessly unable to follow through on the majority of his numerous plans. Yet, regardless of what is constructed as his ineptitude, Chanu's nose for social commentary makes him an essential character in Ali's narrative. Attuned to the academic discourse on immigrant condition, class issues, and contemporary racism, Chanu comes to believe in a subtle racism "built into the [British] system."<sup>50</sup> Chanu links his inability to win his council promotion, better his vocation, and attain success in England with this subtle racism that couples him with every other Bengali "just off the boat."<sup>51</sup> However, while he sees racism as the driving force preventing his 'success' in London, if Butt's thesis is correct, it would seem Chanu misdiagnoses which kind of racism he his up against.

Though Chanu is aware of the sociological discourses of racial politics in contemporary Britain, he blinded by his own inner-Bangladeshi classism and regionalism. Chanu's stratification between his upper-class Bengali heritage and that of the Sylhetis, with whom he feels he is unjustly grouped, distorts his

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<sup>50</sup> Ali, 47

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 18

perception of his exclusion from British society<sup>52</sup>; believing it is their shared skin color, language, or assumed, collective “Bengaliness” that dooms them to the racial backlash of white, English, racial hegemony, Ali allows Chanu to make a critical misstep that blinds him to a new racism couched in “*culture*”<sup>53</sup>.

### **Assimilation or Defiance**

In speaking of a shift from the racial politics of London towards a cultural dichotomy, Gilroy cites Butt’s article discussing the Pereira affair. The Pereira’s, an Asian family slated to be kicked-out of England due to immigration laws, were hailed by their white, suburban neighbors as textbook British citizens. At the suggestion of their relocation, their neighbors, friends, and supporters campaigned heavily to The Home Office, the *Daily Mail*, and *The Times* to attest to their fundamental “Britishness.” After a flurry of press, the Pereiras were allowed to remain in England, inciting Butt’s commentary on a new form of racism. Through his analysis of the Pereira incident, Butt revealed that no longer was ethnicity, or classical conceptions of ‘race’, the cornerstone of British racism, but rather the new litmus test was the willingness, or lack thereof, to be assimilated into British society and ‘culture.’ Thus, according to Butt, for non-white immigrants, one’s membership or belonging in British society hinges upon

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<sup>52</sup> In her book, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, sociologist Avtar Brah provides background for the origins of anti-Sylheti sentiment. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, The Sylhetis, poor farmers and laborers from Bangladesh, were recruited by the British East India Company to work about ships as cooks and galley-hands. They then became the first to settle in England, and shed their past lower-caste identities to become successful restaurant and shop owners in 20<sup>th</sup> century England. In feeling apart from the Sylhetis, Chanu is playing upon traditional caste structure.

<sup>53</sup> This is not to say that his ethnicity or ‘race’ are absent from the prejudice he received, but, rather, to show that his lack of success and belonging partially stem from a cultural disjunction. It is the amalgamation of many racisms that form Chanu’s situation – this is simply one racism that is often overlooked in favor of its more base relatives.

her readiness to subscribe to contemporary British social norms and adoption of cultural tradition<sup>54</sup>.

If the Pereira's are the hallmark of assimilated Britishness, Chanu is the poster-child of resistance. Representing the early wave of post-WWII Bangladeshi and Indian immigrants to England, most with aspirations to make their fortunes and then resettle in the sub-continent, Chanu has little investment in making a permanent residence in Britain<sup>55</sup>. Chanu attests that his two goals upon coming to Britain were to become a success and to then return home.<sup>56</sup> As a result of his lack of connection to Britain, rather than adopting certain cultural norms and acquiescing to the realities of living and raising a family in a foreign land, Chanu seems in constant ideological conflict with British culture and society. Chanu's decisions to avoid trips to the pub with his boss, to enforce the use of only Bangladeshi language in his house, and his treatment of London, his home for over three decades, as a foreign tourist site, are all deliberate attempts to assert his lack of implication in British diaspora space.

Yet, despite his attempts to separate himself from the British landscape of which he is a part, until finally packs up and flies back, alone, to Bangladesh, Chanu and his family are very much a part of English diasporic space. His many arguments with Shanana over her use of English, body piercing, and her disinterest in Bangladeshi traditions and writers point the contested space Chanu inhabits. More importantly, with his lack of connection to Nanzeen, who has been not only claimed by Karim, her lover, but also by an individualistic ideology that

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<sup>54</sup> Gilroy, 63

<sup>55</sup> Ballard, 34

<sup>56</sup> Ali, 18

places her outside of her previous subservient, fate-driven complex, Chanu fills a critical role as Nanzeen's foil: stuck in notions of return to home, and in defiance of the a contemporary British culture he abhors, Chanu fills the 'other' side of a binary where 'assimilation' and 'rejection' are the determinants.

## **Conclusion**

Though Nanzeen's narrative provides the reader with a "you-go-girl" story, showing the triumph of feminist, individualistic, ideology over her often-oppressive husband, her success oscillated against Chanu's failure provides space for a discourse on belonging. Attempting to maintain the social and cultural norms of his homeland Chanu is unable to survive in London. In contrast, Nanzeen's success is very much couched in her liberation from family, duty, and all of the social and cultural rules she disavows. Through Nanzeen's affair with Karim, her decision to leave Chanu, and her new bread-winning role, she leaves the tradition of a resigned, village-wife role and subscribes to a new cultural landscape. In doing so, Nanzeen's feminist narrative secures her a place, albeit a tentative one, in what Butt's new British cultural landscape.

As both Ronald Butt and Monica Ali show, the binary of cultural assimilation and resistance is seen as one new barometer to measure acceptance into the national community. Moving away from a binary centered in genetic or 'racial' purity, this new formation of belonging, along the lines of culture, adds to the list of exclusionary practices that constitute national identity. Yet, as Chapter three shows, not only is assimilationist ideology another divider, but like its duplicitous predecessor, it comes imbued with its own paradoxes.

## Chapter 3: Commodity-Function in Diaspora Space

*“In all of Kureishi’s works to date, minority cultures appear to exist in an antagonistic relationship with a white, mostly middle-class, mainstream even as they are invited to provide it with a steady supply of self-indulgent ‘ethnic’ entertainment. Minorities are encouraged, in some cases obliged, to stage their racial/ethnic identities in keeping with white stereotypical perceptions of an exotic cultural order.” – Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic**

### A ReButtal

Though Butt argues that the reformation of exclusion from the national community has deviated from the previous rubric, along racial or genetic lines to a new cultural assimilation/resistance dichotomy<sup>57</sup>, cultural integration doesn’t necessarily equate ‘liberation’ into collective identity; while the Pereira family were readily absorbed into their rural Hampshire community, not every immigrant or second-generation family is so lucky. In Ali’s novel, the riots between “native” gangs and immigrant “fundamentalists” color the novel’s ending, showing that while Nanzeen is committed to become a part of the Britain her husband continuously rejects, she will still be subjected to the ongoing ethnic, racial, and immigrant debates of diaspora space<sup>58</sup>. Outside of the fictional milieu, as evidenced by the newspaper clippings referenced in the introduction, it seems even those willing to integrate or already absorbed into national culture weather the exclusionary binaries developed and propagated by the fellow citizens, Congressmen, and members of Parliament.

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<sup>57</sup> Gilroy, 63

<sup>58</sup> Ali, 363

Further confounding Butt's thesis on assimilation as the new barometer for inclusion are the narratives of second-generation children of immigrants, many of whom identify more with their host country than their parents land(s) of origin<sup>59</sup>. And, as Jhumpa Lahiri and Hanif Kureishi show, the second-generation children of immigrants, born and raised in diaspora space, often bear what becomes the baggage of their racial or ethnic identities<sup>60</sup>. From the cosmopolitan, Nikhil of Jhumpa Lahiri's Namesake, who is asked at dinner parties to speak on the India that is his 'homeland'<sup>61</sup>, to Karim Amir, the young British actor of Hanif Kureishi's Buddha of Suburbia whose half-Indian ethnicity is commodified by playwrights and directors<sup>62</sup>, it seems assimilation doesn't necessarily lead to equal footing in the national community. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, both characters show that while they belong to the national fabric they do so from a tokenized or exoticized position.

Postcolonial scholar Graham Huggan refers to this exoticization and commodification, as well as similar 'performative' narrative techniques used by diaspora space authors to create an intentional and ironic exoticism, as "staged marginality."<sup>63</sup> As Huggan argues, by developing characters and who display a performative marginalization, such as Karim who assumes the role of as a black-

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<sup>59</sup> I'm British But... Dir. Gurinda Chadra. 1989. *British Film Institute* in association with *Channel Four Television*. New York, NY. "Third World Newsreel," 1990.

<sup>60</sup> Though Huggan, who I will reference throughout the remainder of this chapter, draws attention to the misuse of fictional narratives as anthropological texts, I see this jump form social phenomena into the diaspora space narratives appropriate. Huggan's discourse on "staged marginalities," would not be available without racial and ethnic marginalization to fuel diaspora space literature. And, with the American history of blackface, minstrel shows, as well as an ongoing space provided for the tokenization of ethnicity and 'race' in the acting and television industry, the commodification of racial or ethnic narratives is highly plausible.

<sup>61</sup> Lahiri, 157

<sup>62</sup> Kureishi, Hanif. The Buddha of Suburbia. Penguin Books: New York, NY. 1990

<sup>63</sup> Graham, Huggan. "Staged Marginalities." The Postcolonial Exotic. Routledge: New York, NY. 2001. 99

faced Mowgli and Haroon, Karim's father - who markets a contrived Indianness in meditation sessions to suburban socialites - authors like Kureishi expose the residual exoticism and racism present in diaspora space<sup>64</sup>. But Huggan further elaborates on the role of Karim and Haroon, contending:

By simulating the conditions in which the dominant culture perceives them, marginalized people or groups may reveal the underlying structures of their oppression; they may also demonstrate dominant culture's need for subaltern others, who function as foils or counterweights to its own fragile self-identity<sup>65</sup>.

Through using this deliberate, hyperbolic exoticism, Huggan argues that authors such as Kureishi develop the discourse on the politics of national identity and belonging. Furthermore, as Huggan alludes, this conversation illuminates not only the minority's shaky sense of belonging, resulting from his role as a "commodity-function," but also the tenuous sense of identity and belonging for members of suburban, 'native' culture.<sup>66</sup> By developing Buddha...'s 'native,' white characters, whose narratives turn diaspora space discourse around to focus on the fluid notions of British identity, Kureishi shows us an underlying, equal-opportunity commodification present in contemporary Britain. In doing so, he shows that while exoticization is one form of commodification affecting diaspora space narrative, notions of identity and belonging are just as instable for 'native' Brits as their minority counterparts.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 88

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 88

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 99

## **Ted and Eva**

Through using Huggan's staged marginality as a lens, the hyperbolic narratives of Haroon and Karim provide a window to the underlying commodity-function of the identities constructed by Kureishi's 'native' characters. From Karim's Uncle Ted, to Haroon's lover, Eva, all of the secondary, 'native' characters of Buddha... are pictured as searching just as much for their own sense of identity and belonging as the Karim and Haroon.

With a successful business, and a seemingly steadfast sense of self, Ted, the well heeled, middle-class uncle of Karim, seems an unlikely convert to Haroon's pseudo-Buddhist philosophy. As Karim accounts, it was Ted who took him to football games, and who attempted to provide him the British childhood, full with "fishing and air rifles," that his father could not.<sup>67</sup> Yet, Ted, very much a symbol of the British, working middle-class, is the first of Kureishi's 'native' characters to fall from a sense of stable British identity. With the loss of his wife, Jean's, affection, following an affair apparently driven by the materialism that consumes her, Ted finds his life meaningless and completely devoted to work. After speaking with Haroon, Ted is convinced to leave his life, "measured by money," and is "released" into his new existence, in which he eloquently declares he will no longer follow money, but "[his] fucking feelings."<sup>68</sup>

In this new released state, where material gain is traded for 'feelings', Ted finds financial support and casual occupation on Eva's renovation team. Following the death of her estranged husband, Eva, the cultured, suburban,

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<sup>67</sup> Kureshi, 33

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 49



socialite, seeks to remake her life, starting with her suburban house. But Eva's renovations soon become a metaphor of her own remodeling. When she and Haroon relocate from the Suburbs to London, Karim comments that Eva's rejection of her past suburban life is indicative of an attempt at reinvention. At Eva's carefully engineered, London housewarming party, Karim declares: "Now, as the party fodder turned up in their glittering clothes, I began to see that Eva was using the evening not as a celebration but as her launch into London [...] I saw she wanted to scour that suburban stigma right off her body."<sup>69</sup> It seems mirroring her renovated houses and apartments, Eva herself becomes a locus for a reinvention focused on her image of wealth and class. Like the Jean and Ted of old, whose lives were consumed with materiality, Eva's new rebirth focuses not on her intensifying relationship with Haroon or simply a change of locality, but how she was viewed by as part of a wealth/class grouping.

### **Busting Belonging**

Both and Ted and Eva's transformations throughout Buddha... point to what Huggan refers to as a "queering of identity in Kureishi's novel [that] punctuates the illusions and undercuts the false assertiveness of those who see their positions in society [...] and their worldviews as more or less fixed."<sup>70</sup> <sup>71</sup> Ted's

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 134

<sup>70</sup> Huggan, 99

<sup>71</sup> Due to space constraints the narrative of Terry, Karim's friend and fellow actor, doesn't fit in this discussion, yet his story is equally emblematic of the shifting identities and an underlying commodity-function 'native' Brits also play. A staunch communist, Terry continually strives to educate Karim on the coming 'revolution,' yet at the end of the novel he appears in role of a policeman, a symbol of the law enforcement in the bourgeoisie state. While Terry's final role is brilliantly ironic, it also hints at his commodity-function as an actor. Like Karim he has little leverage to protest the nature of the roles that pay his bills; so, as a result, his own marginality,

metamorphosis from an archetypical, work-driven, middle-class Brit, to a carefree life defined by a nihilistic “Ted Buddhism”<sup>72</sup> symbolizes the deconstruction of the notion of static and stable ‘Britishness.’ Though Karim’s director, Shadwell, describes the immigrant as “the everyman of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,”<sup>73</sup> the pre-breakdown Ted would truly seem to have been the everyman of ‘native’ British culture; as a result, his polar shift in self character hints to a destruction of any sense of a fixed and hermetically sealed British identity.

In addition to Ted’s transformation, Eva’s shirking of her suburban position and culture for a cosmopolitan reinvention hints at the ephemeral sense of identity in suburban intellectual circles. But, more than simply exhibiting a shift in self, Eva’s constant transformations mirror what Huggan calls her own “commodity-function.” Eva’s attempts to better her class situation by latching onto the latest trends and fads points what Huggan refers to as: “oppositional [...] identitary categories, in which style and image become inseparable from the social identity of their consumers, and fashionable possessions become a paradoxical marker of enlightenment.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, through Eva’s constant pursuit of the fashionable, interesting, and exotic – highlighted by her infatuation with Haroon – Eva’s own identity becomes defined by the fame she covets; thus, Eva’s own sense of belonging becomes fluid and centered in the new, hip and fashionable, which, as she shows with her constant reinventions, can change on a dime.

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addressed through the “queering” of his identity, shows his similar dependence on his own commodification.

<sup>72</sup> Kureishi, 102

<sup>73</sup> Kureishi, 141

<sup>74</sup> Huggan, 99

## **Conclusion**

Through pairing Eva and Ted's transformations and commodity-functions with those of Haroon and Karim, a tenuous sense of belonging and identity is revealed as a feature on both sides of the purity binary. Haroon's staged marginality, viewed through his manipulation of his presence as a guru-like commodity, provides room for both Eva and Ted to enter Kureishi's narrative, and exhibit their own transformations. Furthermore, like Karim's commodification, Eva's commodity-function shows her own tenuous sense of belonging in an ever-changing national fabric.

Liking each narrative is the reality of a commodification. As Loomba comments, the Marxist theory on commodification argues that the spread of capitalism would lead to the same blurring of identity with commodity-function that we see in Kureishi's narrative. Using Loomba's own words it seems Buddha... exhibits this Marxist prediction beautifully: "Marx emphasized that under capitalism money and commodities began to stand in for human relations and human beings, objectifying them and robbing them of their human essence."<sup>75</sup> Thus, in the case of Haroon and Karim, both subject themselves to exoticization to capitalize on the wants and needs of a white suburban middle-class. And, Ted forsakes his own commodification as a worker, whose life and happiness are measured by dollar signs, for and a mindless subservience to Eva, who becomes a metaphor for the blurring of a style and image with identity.

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<sup>75</sup> Loomba, 22

It seems in each of his characters Kureishi moves to make a statement, not simply on race and ethnicity in the nation, but rather on how all function as commodities in a larger capitalist narrative. Even Jamilia and Changez, Karim's friends who attempt to situate themselves outside a commodifying England by joining a commune, are implicated in the broader discourse of late capitalism. And, through this commodity discourse Kureishi moves the dialogue of 'belonging' in diaspora space away from binaries of purity and assimilation, towards an understanding of the interconnectedness of each diasporian through commodity function. So, as the novel ends, it appears Haroon is intrinsically linked to Eva through more than merely their wedding vows; both Eva and Haroon, as well as Ted and Karim, constitute their own sense of belonging in British diaspora space through their commodity-functions.

## Chapter 4: Widening the Scope of Diaspora Space

*“We inhabit a world of diasporic communities linked together by a transnational public culture and global commodities; not only has the old international division of labor disappeared but so has the old identity between people and places.” - Michael J. Watts<sup>76</sup>*

### Globalizing the Commodity-Function

By showing the underlying commodification presiding over the lives of his ‘native’ middle-class characters, in Buddha... Kureishi deconstructs a static exoticizing binary present in London’s diaspora space. Yet, while Kureishi’s narrative appropriately addresses commodification in the suburbs and cosmopolitan London, in the age of global migrancy, commodity-function cannot be seen as solely confined to the urban or even national landscape.

As mentioned above, from headlines in *The New York Times* concerning Thai Guest Workers in North Carolina, to the *BBC’s* exposé on South Asian “cleaners and builders” in Doha, an ever increasing transnational migrancy has become a daily fixture in news media<sup>7778</sup>. As Anthropologist June Nash argues, this reported boom in migrant labor reflects a worldwide restructuring of the global economy with a focus on flexible, human capital<sup>79</sup>; through reformatting the global economy to be based in cheap and flexible labor, actors such as transnational corporations and sovereign states have helped transnational

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<sup>76</sup> Watts, 7-16

<sup>77</sup> Greenhouse, Steven. “Low Pay and Broken Promises Greet Guest Workers in U.S.” *The New York Times*. February 28, 2007.

<sup>78</sup> Loyn, David. “Migrants ‘shape the globalized world.’” *BBC News*. December 18, 2006.

<sup>79</sup> Nash, 177

relocation become a common and accepted component to today's globalized world. In doing so, these agents have legitimized a separation of work from place, and created a worker who is now just as movable and expendable, if not more so, as machinery.<sup>80</sup>

This growth of a global flexible workforce, fulfilling a commodity-function as flexible capital, is important for this study as it highlights an expansion of diaspora space. Rather than simply focus on London or New York as the locus for diaspora space dialogue, an emphasis on narratives of migration allows us to view both the global economic center *and* the periphery as part of the discourse. As workers bounce between 'home' and their site of work they bring conversions of belonging and identity formation, as well as expectations of national identity, into both localities. And, perhaps more importantly, the presence of global migrants within fictional narratives helps to move discussion of commodity-function outside of the performative milieu into a less hyperbolic and more tangible and real exposé of global migrancy.

### **Crossing the Seas**

One of the most recent and concrete examples of fiction that addresses this widening of diaspora space and migrant commodity-function is Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss. Located in both New York City and Kalimpong, India, Desai's second novel tackles a wide array of contemporary diaspora space themes, such as racial politics, issues of belonging, and transnational migration. Through the coming of age narrative of Biju, a native of Kalimpong seeking greater

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<sup>80</sup> Watts, 10

opportunity in the US, Desai uses migration to illuminate the under-lying commodity-function of migrants in diaspora space. Additionally, by connecting Biju's experiences of migration and returning 'home,' Desai breaks what it is commonly shown as a "home vs. diaspora" binary, showing the all-encompassing nature of diaspora space.

Biju is at first presented by Desai as a naïve and impressionable, illegal immigrant. Having attained a limited travel visa to the US, Biju lands in New York City and quickly falls in with the New York's illegal immigrant community. After a few weeks, Biju's visa's expires, and he starts his new life as an undocumented, restaurant employee, bouncing from hot dog stands, to steak joints and generic Indian restaurants<sup>81</sup>. This new identity as an undocumented restaurant worker - living in tenement housing, working long hours, and barely getting by - helps to underscore Biju's commodity-function in Desai's novel. To his employers, he is merely one more expendable worker, simply a form of human capital. Furthermore, his commodity-function is also highlighted by his implication in consumer cycle; as his fellow illegal-immigrant friends show, the profits of their work are not seen in greater friendship, familial or national connection, but new sneakers, big satellite dishes, and a thirst for bigger and better commodities.

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<sup>81</sup> One of the best examples of the ubiquitous nature of Biju's commodity-function occurs as he begins working for the Harish-Harry at the *Gandhi Café*. Biju happens on the café as he searches to find employment more inline with his morals; however, while the Gandhi Café doesn't serve beef and Harish-Harry claims Biju is part of his family, Biju's exploitation and identity as a worker continues. Harry overworks Biju and provides meager salary and rat-infested living conditions. Furthermore, from Harry, Biju imbibes the "penny-saved, penny earned" mentality and finds himself working towards Harry's mantra of capital accumulation as life's purpose.

Outside of Biju's implication in the cycle of commodity production and consumption, his sporadic employment – ever changing, due to immigration raids, the racism of his employers, and his own moral convictions about serving beef - shows Biju's difficulty finding a home or community outside of work. Furthermore, his lack of friendship or connection with his fellow workers points to a greater irony Biju encounters in his pursuit of the American dream; with sole goal of monetary gain and a increasing lack of connection to the migrant community in New York, as well as his father back in Kalimpong, Biju, begins to wonder if his migration to the US is really paying-off. As Desai shows Biju's capacity to think critically about his situation and respond accordingly crystallizes when he finally evaluates his presence in New York: "What was he doing and *why*? It hadn't even been a question before he left. Of course, if you could *go*, you *went*. And if you *went*, of course, you *stayed*...[but] Year by year, his life wasn't amounting to anything at all [...].<sup>82</sup>" Through Biju's own realization of a growing separation from his father, his sole remaining family member, and an absence of a greater purpose in his life, he comes to question his relationship with 'American dream.' As a result, when he hears of trouble at home, in the form of the 1980's Gorkha Autonomy Movement, he decides his father is more important than his 'freedom' and 'prosperity' offered in New York and returns to Kalimpong.

## **Coming Home**

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, 268



Unlike many of the South Asian diaspora space works previously discussed, Desai's discourse takes place not only in the urban economic centers of London and New York, but also in the remote Indian village of Kalimpong. And, while Biju's narrative is central to the novel, the story of his return is predicated by a plethora of narratives from Kalimpong's residents. Showing both the area's history and the social and political culture that led up to the ethnic conflicts, a focus on Kalimpong dominates the later half of Desai's text, and illuminates many of the diaspora space features – exclusion, assimilation, and colonial residue - previously discussed.

A staging ground for the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), a separatist ethnic movement that violently engulfed the Himalayan foothills in the late 1980's, Kalimpong is painted by Desai as a small Himalayan hill town with a tumultuous history. As Desai writes, Kalimpong and its sister city, Darjeeling, have been connected to the 'outside' world for quite sometime, passing hands "between Nepal, England, Tibet, India, Sikkim and Bhutan."<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, Kalimpong's ethnic fabric, comprised largely of the descendants of relocated Nepali workers and soldiers, points to a transnational migration from Nepal, which occurred under British colonial rule<sup>84</sup>. As Desai shows, this relocated ethnic population and their own integration and simultaneous exclusion from Indian identity fueled the fire that became the Gorkha Movement.<sup>85</sup> Thus, like many of the "culture conflicts" addressed by writers in British and American

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<sup>83</sup> Desai, 9

<sup>84</sup> Dasgupta, Atis. "Ethnic Problems and Movements for Autonomy in Darjeeling." *Social Scientist*, Vol. 27, No. 11/12. (Nov. Dec., 1999), pp. 47-68. 57

<sup>85</sup> Desai, 128

diaspora space, we can see the historical roots of migration, and notion of who does and does not belong, as predicating Kalimpong's own ethnic conflicts<sup>86</sup>.

By devoting a large chunk of her text to Kalimpong's own narrative, particularly the story of the rise of the Gorkha movement, Desai shows us that negotiation of national identity, belonging, and commodification are not only a features of diasporic formation in the capitalist centers of London or New York, but also in countries often considered on the periphery. Additionally, by bringing Biju back to Kalimpong, Desai heightens this connection. Biju returns to Kalimpong, laden with the fruits of his labor, literally, as the bearer of the commodity. As Desai writes, before leaving the US, Biju loads up on:

“[...] a TV and VCR, a camera, sunglasses, baseball caps, that said “NYC” and “Yankees” and “I Like My Beer Cold and My Women Hot,” a digital two-time clock and radio and cassette player, waterproof watches, calculators, an electric razor, a toaster oven, a winter coat, nylon sweaters, polyester-cotton blend shirts, a polyurethane quilt, a rain jacket, a folding umbrella [...]”<sup>87</sup>

In doing so, Biju represents a larger pattern seen in both anthropological studies and in narratives of migrant labor, such as in Amitav Ghosh's In An Antique Land. Like Ghosh's encounters with Egyptian migrants who set off to work in

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<sup>86</sup> This is best illuminated through the conversation between the aunty characters of Lola and Noni on page 128. As their dialogue shows, some of the upper-class Bengali residents of Kalimpong see the region's disintegration as a result of “illegal immigration” – placing the blame of the Nepali speaking population who was recruited to work in the tea plantations and army of the British East India Company. Thus, like in England and the US, racism and an “us and them” binary helps to fuel the fire of what became the Gorkha Movement's essentialist push for ethnic legitimacy and a degree of autonomy within India.

<sup>87</sup> Desai, 270

Iraq and Saudi Arabia<sup>88</sup>, through Biju, Desai shows how migrants, who “work outside” of their home countries, represent the liaisons to global capitalism. By bringing back wealth earned abroad to their families and loved ones, migrants are often seen as quintessential providers; yet, their ability to offer commodities, such as refrigerators and TVs, as well as greater spending power, point to an increasing implication in a consumer culture, driven by commodity proliferation and consumption.

### **Conclusion**

Through his drive to leave Kalimpong for ‘greater opportunity’, his experience in each of his work situations, as well as his return home, Biju provides a window the seldom-viewed world of the undocumented worker. A symbol of the emigration fervor that inundates Kalimpong, Biju is but one of scores of poor, young men desperately trying to acquire green cards to join the ranks of guest and illegal immigrant workers in the US. Yet, while Biju’s succeeds in attaining a ticket to New York, as Desai shows, his concept of the American dream and the prosperity he seeks, are both eclipsed by his commodity-function. As the producer and bearer of the commodity Biju’s narrative is emblematic of a growing trend under globalization; as Nash, Watts, and Desai shows, with work, as well as commodity production and consumption, replacing ‘home’ or family in importance, commodification seems not merely a performative tool used by authors, but rather a reality for migrant laborers.

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<sup>88</sup> Ghosh, Amitav. In An Antique Land. 322

Additionally, through viewing Biju as the bearer of the commodity, in his return home to Kalimpong, as well as the through the narrative of Kalimpong's ethnic conflicts, we see that diaspora space is not limited to the nation state. With global migrancy the new status quo, issues of belonging, national identity, racism and commodification transcend national boundaries. Like the TV's and foldout umbrellas brought in Biju's suitcase, concepts of prosperity and identity are transported across borders by migrants, widening the scope of diaspora space. Thus, in an increasingly globalized world, we can no longer view merely London, or New York, as sites where identity is contested and formed – what it means to be American, or English, is a conversation formed not only on 8<sup>th</sup> Ave. or the in Brick Lane, but also in Gleanary's in Darjeeling.

## Conclusion

For transnational author, Salman Rushdie, the contemporary canon of diasporic South Asian fiction is largely populated with “Indias of the mind.”<sup>89</sup> In Rushdie’s preface to Imaginary Homelands - a collection of essays, poems and theory by transnational authors - the father of diasporic South Asian fiction argues that relocated writers, writing on their lands of origin, often reinvent and recreate a tentative representation of ‘home’; as Rushdie clarifies, for Indian writers in England, writing about India, facts, details, and images of their narratives of ‘home’ are warped, due distance between their authors’ pens and the subject upon which they write. Rushdie furthers the point, arguing that this distance can create an image of ‘home’ that is fantastical, hyperbolic and unique – a representation of an imaginary homeland to which only the writer “belongs.”

Yet, while Rushdie seems to feel that distance for first generation transnational writers heightens the fictitious nature of their work, he highlights a benefit they reap from relocation: while diasporic South Asian authors, arguably, lose an authority on ‘home,’ Rushdie argues the space between writer and sense of place can provide valuable insight into the a current transnationality. As Rushdie comments: “Indians in Briton [or in other diasporic communities] have migration, displacement and life in a minority group at their disposal.”<sup>90</sup> Thus, these transnational writers gain legitimacy in the increasingly pertinent discourse of globalization, transnational migration, and life in diaspora space, because it is

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<sup>89</sup> Rushdie, Salman. Imaginary Homelands. Granta Books: London. 1991.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 20

the geography in which they live, the most tangible experience that can inform their work<sup>91</sup>.

In tandem with Rushdie's hypothesis, I feel the works of diaspora space authors writing on the South Asian narratives referenced above provide one of the most accessible and complex views of life in diaspora space. All authors of diasporic literature used in this study were either born in Great Britain or the US, or emigrated later in life, so their real life experiences and observations seem to be a fitting background and foundation for their diaspora space narratives. They are *involved*, willingly or unwillingly, in the larger negotiation of the diasporic identity. And, through their involvement their intimate connection with transnationality these writers can most skillfully place both the conceptual frames of 'home' and the 'world' in dialectal tension to help us rethink our own ideas of nationhood and belonging. It is their own peculiar position, bridging the divide between 'home' and 'world', that allows us to see the ever-increasing relativity of hermetically sealed or static ideas of culture, society, and identity. Finally through their position as witnesses and testaments to the fluidity and relativity of cultural, resulting from interaction between what is considered 'the diaspora' and the matrix of peoples, cultures, and prejudices of the 'host' nation, authors of diasporic South Asian narratives can, and do, serve as a fitting liaisons or messengers to the complexities of identity negotiation in diaspora space.

Thus, though some, like Huggan, argue that works of fiction cannot be taken as Anthropological texts, diaspora space narratives provide an access point

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<sup>91</sup> And, again, I would argue this holds true for Zadie Smith. As she weaves South Asian identity negotiation with British-Jamaican, Smith shows us that diasporic authors, whatever their origin or ethnicity, share the similar experience of attempting to locate belonging in the nation.

to an increasingly relevant discourse on global migrancy, immigration, and national identity. And while diaspora space narratives report an ever-intensifying numbers of migrants passing the world's borders, so too do they indicate the arrival of 'home' cultures and identities. As both diaspora space authors and the news headlines show, as these home cultures or traditions come into contact with a new culture of labor and goods, the continuous process of reformation of a national belonging or exclusion occurs.

Diasporic South Asian fiction doesn't merely report on social and cultural changes and transformations, but provides a space for elaboration and editorializing on the issues of the "transnational moment." Through the ability of the fictional narrative to develop a relationship with its reader, resulting from character sympathies, and shared sense of space, the potential for diasporic fiction to influence its readership is great. Thus, it seems writers such as Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, Hanif Kureishi, and Kiran Desai, prove that fiction is a vital window to understanding our own diaspora space – a space in which both the immigrant and even the Caucasian, polish kid, writing this paper, are irrevocably *involved*.

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