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Can Caged Birds Fly? Exploring the Themes of Freedom and Repression in Contemporary British Asian Literature

Soumi Sinha Ray
Department of English, Ethiraj College for Women
Ethiraj Salai, Chennai – 600008. India
soumi_1232@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The British Asian label in its present avatar started emerging in the 1990s with the success of books, films, plays, music albums and TV shows by and about the British Asians. From Hanif Kureishi's 1990 novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* it's been an exciting journey to see the South Asian immigrants or descendants of the immigrants find a foothold in mainstream literature. For the first crop of writers and artists it was a heady feeling of freedom that their own life experiences could be acceptable and marketable. However, every time a new British Asian book or film appears, the narrative brings with it a strong sense of déjà vu. Stories of overbearing traditional parents, the cultural and racial conflicts, arranged marriages, grand weddings, Indian feasts, funerals and rich fabrics provide a clichéd backdrop in novel. Individuality and freedom of choice do not exist as there is a strong pressure to conform to the outdated values of the 'homeland'. Our paper aims to map out a few of these journeys undertaken by young women in Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hi Hi*, Neetika Lalwani's *Gifed* and Preethi Nair's *Beyond Indigo* to see how restrictive and stifling parental expectations can be for the second-generation women. How these women finally manage to carve out a more freeing space for themselves and the steep price they have to pay for it.

Keywords: British Asian Literature, diasporic literature, women's literature

Introduction

The word 'diaspora', derived from the Greek word *diaspeiro*, literally means scattering or dispersion of people from their homeland. It was first used by the Greeks to refer to the movement of the Jews away from their homeland. In the words of N. Sharada Iyer, 'the greatest single fact of our age has been the vast human migration caused by war, colonization, decolonization, ethnic cleansing, political and economic revolutions and devastating natural occurrences'. Today the term 'diaspora' is applied to the numerous ethnic and racial groups living in an alien land. Immigrants feel, on the one hand, a haunting loss of their homeland as they are forced to sever their umbilical cords, and on the other, a sense of alienation and rootlessness in the culture that they have adopted as their new 'home'. While most people are principally rooted in one culture, an expatriate is aware of at least two cultures. The process of acculturation and acclimatization is inevitable when one is exposed to more than one cultures. The transplanted writers explore the immigrants' experience - their awareness of geographical dislocation, cultural ambivalence, social and political alienation, an absence of centrality and nostalgia. Acculturation and assimilation often take generations to achieve and diasporic writers caught in the intense and painful process of assimilation churn out their experiences in writings as a means of coming to terms with the process themselves.

The ongoing process of migration has led to an outpouring of creativity in diasporic writers which in turn has led to a growing awareness of the concept of multiculturalism. This shift of geographical homeland has produced generations of immigrants who have to survive the burden of two cultures often so different from each other. The immigrants are always searching, often in darkness, to get back a sense of wholeness. In the words of Beena Agarwal, 'The apathy born out of cultural encounters becomes more intense and pungent in case of women who are forced to resist the forces of patriarchal and national cultural identity simultaneously. The women writers of South Asian diaspora have tried to search out a middle ground for sympathetic amalgamation to avoid the discontent born out of crossing the boundaries.' These women writers give voice to their pasts – bequeathed memories, oral testimonies, remembered histories and stories. They also give voice to their reaction to the alien lands where they have come as immigrants. The paper proposes to study the various problems faced by second-generation, young, talented British Indian women in their quest for individual identities as depicted in Neetika Lalwani's *Gifted*, Preethi Nair's *Beyond Indigo* and Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hi Hi*. The double lives the protagonists are forced to live pulled in one direction by their parental ambitions and traditions of their home country and in another direction by their individual desires. The paper also touches upon how insensitive and restrictive immigrant parents become to enforce the continuity of the outdated values of the 'homeland' because they know no other way to keep their children and family honour safe.

The literature of the 'British Asian' label in its present avatar started emerging in the 1990s with the success of books, films, plays, music albums and TV shows by and about the British Asians. From Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* published in 1990 it has been an exciting journey to see the South Asian immigrants and their descendants find a foothold in mainstream literature. While for the first crop of writers it was a heady feeling of freedom that their own life experiences could be acceptable and marketable, the genre is not without its share of problems. Every time a new British Asian book or film appears, the narrative brings with it a strong sense of *deja vue*. Overbearing traditional parents, cultural and racial conflicts, arranged marriages, grand weddings, Indian feasts, funerals, journeys to India and rich Indian fabrics often provide clichéd backdrops as immigrant after immigrant pour their soul-altering experiences as they struggle to find their identities and wholeness. Often masked by irreverent, inward-directed humour these novels are invaluable for understanding the pluralism of today's world.

First-generation immigrants often go through indescribable hardships in their battle to fit into a hostile land. Being a minority in the host country most of the immigrants have to face racism and discrimination in their adopted homeland. What makes most of these hardships bearable is the dream that their children would have all the opportunities they are denied, the children would have access to the doors that remains shut for themselves. Not surprisingly, education in premier institutions is deemed to be the key to these doors representing white collar jobs, social acceptance and a better standard of living. In the imagination of the first-generation immigrants' minds, especially visible among the Indian diaspora, thus education becomes the only means to attain freedom from the indignity of their immigrant life. The second-generation immigrants on the other hand born and raised in a Western culture have very different notions of happiness and freedom. Education to the parents is a facilitator for white-collar jobs. So only serious subjects like law, medicine, engineering and Mathematics from premier universities are encouraged. Other subjects are deemed frivolous and dismissed as 'hobbies'. The burden of parental expectations, though all for the sake of love for the children, is often stifling for the children and have disastrous consequences. The tension between opposing versions of freedom is explored with great depth and subtlety in Nikita Lalwani's *Gifted*. The novel is

broadly inspired by the real-life story of Sufiah Yusof. Born in 1984 to a Pakistani father and a Malaysian mother Sufiah got accepted to read Mathematics at Saint Hilda's College, Oxford at the age of 12. She joined Oxford at 13 after completing her A levels. At 15 she ran away from Oxford. After a two-week long widely publicized massive police hunt she was discovered waitressing in an obscure Internet Café. She refused to come home citing parental abuse and chose to remain in foster care. She later worked in various non-mathematical roles including office administration, prostitution and social work.

Rumi has known that she is gifted since the age of five. Her Indian father Mahesh, a professor of Mathematics himself, has big dreams for his daughter. Mahesh is not a stereotypical Asian-origin father. He does not dream of his daughter having an arranged marriage within the Asian Punjabi community. Mahesh dreams instead of his daughter being the youngest Mathematician reading in Oxford. Someone who will fulfill his thwarted dreams:

‘He’d tell her he’d got into all their universities – all the bloody jewels that they treasured so exclusively in this country: that he had been offered a place at their Cambridge and their UCL. He had ended up in Cardiff because they had offered the cash ... They had wanted him here, a foreigner with no more than five pounds in his pocket.’

Mahesh's ambitions led him to organize a rigorous training program for his daughter to develop her remarkable talents. And this is where everything started falling apart. While Rumi loved applying her brains and juggling numbers as a young girl, the grueling routine her father set for her of studying Mathematics to the exclusion of everything else soon killed her joy for the subject. Mahesh failed to ascertain whether his dreams were also his daughter Rumi's. Or consider the fact that even though she could complete a Rubik's Cube in 34.63 seconds and was clearly gifted in Mathematics, she was a typical 10 year old British girl too. She longed to fit in with the girls of her class, wear fashionable clothes instead of cheap India-made synthetic frocks and thick NHS glasses that made her laughing stock of the class, make friends, have crushes, be able to buy sweets, read novels, play with her friends – everything that any other girl in her class took for granted. In the library, where she is sent for two hours daily after school to practice Mathematics, she develops a taste for fiction and starts stealing sweets from the nearby stores to satisfy her hunger. Her guilt is tremendous:

‘She often stood outside the library door watching litter being hurled about by the wind, feeling her gut do a similar dance. They make me lie all the time, she thought. She felt anger at the lack of cash, the single ten-pence coin smouldering like an insult in the pocket of her chest. And she was angry about the hunger she often felt, churning its way through her thoughts.’

Her mind is filled with loneliness of a girl totally isolated from her peers and knows that the probability of her securing a date with her crush is zero. Lalwani's portrait of Rumi's pre-teen and teenage dislocation is brutal in its honesty as she forces us to confront the issues of parental abuse and tyranny in the name of love and guidance. Her gift further isolates her from her mother Shreene and adds to the generational gap leading to an almost complete lack of understanding between the two women. Rumi is driven to hate her gift as she only craves to be like everyone else her age and fit in:

‘In the cut-and-thrust of playground survival, these things mattered. They all want to be identical, she thought. Identikit identi ident denters irritating girls. Identical dentiski. Skident. It hurt.’

Mahesh short-sighted by his obsessive ambition for his daughter deludes himself that by taking over her daughter’s life and strictly regimenting every waking second to the pursuit of Mathematics he can cocoon her away from the myriad temptations of the outside world. Rumi’s precocious talent enables her to begin an Oxford degree when only 15 years, and it is here away at last from the stifling atmosphere of home that she finally begins to emerge from her parents’ shadow. Once she tastes the freedom to be her own self, finds friendship and experiences love she is further alienated from her parents as predictably they are crushing in their disapproval of Rumi’s actions. She runs away from Oxford unable to enjoy Mathematics anymore and too caught up in her double-life to give the subject the effort it needs. After a nation-wide search spanning weeks she is discovered by the police but refuses to come back to her parents preferring foster parents. The novel ends with Shreene making a tentative attempt to reach out to her daughter. However, Shreene is also sadly aware that their mother-daughter relationship might take a lifetime to build again:

‘She (Shreene) did not believe she had the ability to persuade her (Rumi) to come home. But she believed she could make Rumi remember who she was – touch her child again, be close to her in some way. She believed that Rumi would remember love.’

Gifted re-visits a familiar subject-matter of diasporic fiction. Education, a great emancipator and gift, can so easily become a curse alienating children from their parents and forcing them to live a double life full of lies which leads to a lot of stress and heartache. The bitter tragedy of pushing Sufiahs and Rumis towards education only results in them rebelling against education and getting pushed away from their natural gifts. Preethi Nair’s novel *The Colour of Love* also published as *Beyond Indigo* draws from her own experience as a British Indian woman. She worked as a Management Consultant but always dreamt of being an author. Gathering all her courage she gave up her well-paying and respectable job to follow her dream of becoming a published author. Her first novel *Gypsy Masala* got rejected by many publishers. Refusing to give up on her dream she set up her own publishing company and PR firm to promote her book. Working tirelessly under the alias of Pru Menon she not only managed to get substantial coverage for her book but also managed to win a three-book deal with Harper Collins. In *The Colour of Love*, the protagonist Nina too is forced to live a life of lies in order to fulfill her dream of finding acceptance as an artist:

‘I knew deep down that life was too short to be doing anything other than what I really wanted to do ... But that wasn’t the problem – there were the occupants living in the semi to consider. I had a duty to make sure that they were happy, and keeping my job as a lawyer was fundamental ...’

Nina knew from age six that she wanted to be an artist but that was never an option. Her father wanted her to be a lawyer:

‘His career choice for me was not based on any long-standing family tradition. He was a bus driver and I think he just wanted to give me the best possible start, and make sure I would not have to face the instability that he had suffered ... At sixteen,

when I expressed a desire to go to art college he went ballistic and didn't speak to me for weeks. When he did it was to say, "Nina, I have not sacrificed the life so you can do the hobby, the lawyer is a good profession. Not that I am pressurizing you".

In this novel too education and white-collar jobs are synonymous to the parents with happiness and finding a great match for their daughter through the list system of traditional arranged marriages. Forced to study law by the ingrained sense of duty that Asian children have towards their parents, Nina works hard and finds herself a place in one of the prestigious law firms in London. However, her heart is not into it and when Nina loses her job in a prestigious law firm, finds out her boyfriend had been cheating on her, and loses faith in her guru all in the space of a day that too on the first death anniversary of her best friend Ki she takes them as a sign to start afresh and live the life she wanted rather than the life she was expected to live by her parents and the Asian community. She hires a studio and starts painting as much to express her grief at the loss of her best friend and boyfriend as to pursue her dream of finding acceptance as an artist. Confiding in her parents about her loss of job as a lawyer is never a possibility, so every morning Nina puts on a suit and pretends to go to work while she spends the day in her studio painting frantically. Her work is spotted by a top gallery owner through a stroke of good luck. Still not used to thinking of herself as an artist and a complete no-body in the world of art she ends up pretending to be the agent instead for a mysterious painter who wants to remain away from the limelight. As happens in the Art world so often, the secrecy surrounding the mysterious painter made the paintings famous overnight. To her amazement, Nina finds her paintings entered for the prestigious Turner awards. She invents a fictitious Japanese painter Foruki to claim ownership of her paintings. Foruki's winning the Turner and then eventually getting exposed to be Nina mirrors the author's own experience of self-publishing her first novel. Nair had invented Pru Menon, her bossy publicist avatar and was shortlisted for the PPC Publicist of the Year Award before her cover got exposed. In order to establish herself as an artist Nina has to weave a web of deceit and is forced to lie continuously to her parents creating much heartache and guilt. To keep peace at home and avoid close scrutiny she finds herself agreeing to an arranged marriage to a guy who though perfect on paper is a pompous bore who has nothing in common with Nina. Shrouded in the layers of pretense she finally manages to find her way out to honesty and have her parents' reluctant blessings about making her own choices:

"I only ever wanted you to be proud of me," I began to cry.

"Don't cry, Nina. You made us very proud. Who can say they have been on the news at six?"

Written in a humorous style and with a 'happy' ending the novel falls short of providing a genuine understanding in Nina's parents as to what makes their daughter happy. Perhaps for Nina acceptance of her choices by her parents is a good enough start for the rest of her life.

Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* takes the story of Rumi and Nina forward. At once heart-warming and heartbreaking, Syal narrates in an interview that her novel was inspired by the juxtaposition of two news stories running in the same newspaper on the same day. One was headlined 'Asian Women Top the Graduate League' and on the opposite page there was another headlined 'Asian Women Top the Suicide and Self-harm League'. It deeply distressed Syal to see the vulnerability of Asian women towards depression and self-harm despite their possessing so much talent. It made Syal closely re-examine her life and that of her peers who were juggling between the two cultures and

belief systems in their quest for identity and wholeness. In this coming-of-age novel, beautiful and talented childhood friends Tania, Sunita and Chila fight their inner dualities and fears to emerge as strong, independent women.

The three friends, 'an odd-threesome' grew up together in one of the Indian community ghettos of London, East End. Tania 'broke loose from her traditional moorings and drifted into an uncharted ocean with her English man and snappy Soho job' as an upcoming documentary maker. Sunita the one they had labelled 'Most Likely to Succeed' among them had settled to mid-30s plump, matronly domesticity with her college sweetheart Akash. Mother of two young children and trapped in a job with no prospect because caught in the throes of her first full-blooded romance she had failed her law exams and gotten married instead. Her marriage, like the rest of her life, seemed to be disintegrating into a rut. Chila the girl they had once dismissed as the 'Dark Dumbo was funnier, sweeter and kinder than anyone else knew.' Much to the surprise of the community Chila manages to hook the most eligible bachelor of the Punjabi community, Deepak.

Caught between the conflicting values of the two cultures, these three childhood friends are expected to become their mothers and settle comfortably into matrimony and motherhood. The limbo is shattered when Tania is pressured to make a documentary by her English boss on the 'real' story of contemporary urban Asian women in Britain. Roped into being a part of the documentary, Chila and Sunita reveal their deepest pains and insecurities in a most intimate outpouring of their innermost souls. Tania ever the mediawallah, continues filming even when she is not supposed to. Public screening of the film tears apart the three women. Sunita and Chila see it as a betrayal of their trust and friendship by their best friend. Tania defends her decision to herself as the objective eye of the camera forcing Sunita and Chila to take a reality check on their lives. Their friendship collapses and through a period on inner turmoil and lots of soul-searching the women are forced to grow up, rely on their own strengths and re-evaluate their lives and choices. The novel, much like Tania's documentary holds a mirror to the difficult choices British Asian women face trying to straddle two cultures. Chila confronts the truth that she doesn't really love Deepak, her husband, he is part of an image of the perfect husband she had in mind since childhood. Sweet, kind, docile Chila finds the strength in herself to let Deepak go and plans her maiden trip to India with her newborn son in search of her identity. Sunita determinedly gets out of the rut her life had descended into and focuses on losing weight, completing her education and rewriting her marriage with Akash, the man she has always loved. Ironically however, Tania, determinedly single, remains torn between the pull of her roots and the desire to move away from the roots and embrace the British culture in totality. Chila serenely sums up their lives as only she can:

'Like my mum's always said, Life isn't all ha ha hee hee, so if you know there's going to be a few tears, you might as well try and enjoy them.'

In a diasporic writer's journey there are three regions they travel to: homeland, alien land and then the new homeland. These correspond to the home culture, alien culture and multi-culture. The process of assimilation often takes generations to complete. The women in these novels Rumi, Nina, Tania, Chila and Sunita are still in the process of assimilating the duality of their existence. They are at different phases of their search for their identities. However, what unites them is their bravery to chase their own dreams, to carve out their own paths. Overbearing parents cling to what they have always known. In an alien land it is the only safety net they can offer their children. The children, though, born in a different country and in a different time have different dreams and aspirations.

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Thus, the word 'freedom' often becomes a metaphor of the conflict between the two generations. Nikita Lalwani, Preethi Nair and Meera Syal have created in their novels indelible portraits of the brave, young Indian women living in Britain and their unique struggle to find freedom and wholeness in their multi-faceted world.

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