Writing Imagined Diasporas
I dedicate this book
to the memory of my father
Taisto Kuortti (1936–2007)
for always encouraging me to write
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... ix

**Part I: Imagined Diasporic Identities in North America**

Chapter One ......................................................................................................................... 3  
Introduction: Writing Imagined Diasporas: South Asian Women Reshaping North American Identity

Chapter Two ......................................................................................................................... 21  
Problematic Diasporic Identity in the Writings of Jhumpa Lahiri

Chapter Three ....................................................................................................................... 37  
Embodied Evidence: Rei Shimura as a Gendered Cross-cultural Detective

Chapter Four ......................................................................................................................... 55  
Over the Black Water: Silenced Stories of Diaspora in Ramabai Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge*

Chapter Five ......................................................................................................................... 75  
Shuffling the Cultural Matrices: Cultural Contacts in Kirin Narayan’s Novel *Love, Stars and All That*

**Part II: Different Diasporas, Transnational Connections**

Chapter Six ......................................................................................................................... 97  
Challenging Gendered Violence in South Asian Diasporic Fiction

Chapter Seven ....................................................................................................................... 113  
Surviving America: Robbie Clipper Sethi’s *The Bride Wore Red* and Shauna Singh Baldwin’s *English Lessons*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Eight</th>
<th>127</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of Return to India in Anita Rau Badami’s <em>The Hero’s Walk</em>, Amulya Malladi’s <em>The Mango Season</em> and Vineeta Vijayaraghavan’s <em>Motherland: The Other Side of My Heart</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Nine</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of “Multiculturalism” in Salman Rushdie’s and Bharati Mukherjee’s Diasporic Narratives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index of Names</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The history of this book is longer than is represented in the actual text. It began with my research on the “Rushdie affair” in the late 1980s. For this link, I am indebted especially to my MA tutor Dr. Nicholas Royle and my late Ph.D. supervisor Professor Ralph Normman, as well as to my colleague Dr. David Robertson, who all encouraged me to pursue with my interest, against all the odds. I would also like to thank Professor Uma Parameswaran from the University of Winnipeg for her contribution in examining my Ph.D. thesis.

More recently, I have worked on this book under the auspices of the Academy of Finland in our project “Reconstructing ‘America’: Racial, Gendered and Diasporic Identities” (project number 205780). I would like to thank especially Professor Jopi Nyman, who as the head of the project—in a full-headed manner—has both materially, critically, socially, and mentally enabled me to bring this book into completion. Additional funding has been provided by the Ella and Georg Ehrnroot Foundation, for which I am duly grateful.

Several other people have been helpful in completing this work. Particular thanks go to Jenni Valjento for a very thoughtful reading of the whole manuscript in its final stages, and for her many resourceful insights. My further collegial compliments go to John A. Stotesbury, Roy Goldblatt, Jasbir Jain, Tabish Khair, Lotta Strandberg, Rajeshwar Mittapalli, T. Vinoda, Antonia Navarro-Tejero, Hanna Reinikainen, Kaisa Ilmonen, Tuomas Huttunen, Saara Jääntti, and Anu Hirsiaho, who have all in their various capacities helped me in many ways. Special thanks go also to Ramabai Espinet, Kirin Narayan, Saumya Balsari, Shashi Deshpande, and Manjula Padmanabhan, who have given their comments in one way or another, and who have made the work so much more fun for me to do. Finally, to my wife Dr. Anne Mäntynen, I extend my deepest gratitude for sustaining my motivation. The responsibility of the work, alas, rests, as always, with the author. Dhanyiavad. Tamara krutagntha. Valarey nanhi. Vandanegalu. Romba Nandri. Shukria. Gracias. Thank you. Kiitos.

The chapters of the book have grown from various contexts. I would like to acknowledge the following earlier versions, with warm thanks to the respective editors and organizers of the given sources:


Chapter 4: In Finnish in *Avain* 2.2 (2005).


Chapter 6: A paper at the FINSE3 Conference, University of Jyväskylä, Finland, 18–20 August, 2005.


PART I:

IMAGINED DIASPORIC IDENTITIES
IN NORTH AMERICA
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:
WRITING IMAGINED DIASPORAS:
SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN RESHAPING
NORTH AMERICAN IDENTITY

Imagined Diasporas

It seems right that I should have been here always, that I should understand without words their longing for the ways they chose to leave behind when they chose America. Their shame for that longing, like the bitter-slight aftertaste in the mouth when one has chewed amlaki to freshen the breath. […] I Tilo architect of the immigrant dream.

Diaspora is a loaded term that brings to mind various contested ideas and images. It can be a positive site for the affirmation of an identity, or, conversely, a negative site of fears of losing that identity. Diaspora is also a popular term in current research as it captures various phenomena that are prevalent in the numerous discourses devoted to current transnational globalization: borders, migration, “illegal” immigration, repatriation, exile, refugees, assimilation, multiculturalism, hybridity. Whether the term succeeds efficiently in this capturing is still under debate, but for the purposes of my analyses it remains a very constructive tool and a fitting metaphor for these discourses.

Diaspora signals an engagement with a matrix of diversity: of cultures, languages, histories, people, places, times. In this book I look into the ways in which diasporic Indian literature handles these issues. The discussion here is, therefore, explicitly a literary one, although my analyses are informed by a variety of sociological, statistical and historical analyses of diaspora. In its transformational quality, diaspora is typically a site of hybridity which questions fixed identities based on essentialisms.

1 Bannerjee Divakaruni, Mistress, 4–5 and 28.
Being an amalgamation of diverse cultural materials, backgrounds, and identities, it nevertheless differs from other types of heterogeneity, implying at the same time a markedly asymmetrical relationship between the different elements of a given fusion.2

In my particular analyses I employ the idea of “imagined diasporas.” This, in turn, is an application of Benedict Anderson’s term “imagined communities,”3 which he developed in the early 1980s to describe the way in which nations come into existence through imaginative efforts. I argue that in the context of diaspora there is a parallel imaginative construction of collective identity in the making, for “identity, instead of being seen as fixed, becomes a dynamic construction that adjusts continually to the changes experienced within and surrounding the self.”4 Specifically in the context of Caribbean diaspora, Stuart Hall talks about “imaginative rediscovery” of “Caribbeanness.”5 Furthermore, Hall explicitly connects this imaginative effort with the concept of hybridity:

The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.6

While in their transnational formation diasporic communities extend particular nationally confined boundaries, in their actual life they are deeply embedded in particular contexts. From this ambiguous situatedness arise both the strengths and weaknesses of the theory and everyday practice of diaspora.

The usefulness of the term “imagined diasporas” has been demonstrated previously by Pnina Werbner in her book Imagined Diasporas among Manchester Muslims, in which she studies the public performance of Pakistani transnational identity politics. In her articles, written over many years, she approaches the issue from the points of view of “diasporic public sphere,” polarization of culture in the Rushdie affair, and migrants’ expressions of creativity in popular culture.7 Whereas

---

2 See Kuortti and Nyman, Reconstructing, 2.
4 Singh et al., “Introduction,” 17.
5 Hall, “Cultural,” 393.
7 Werbner, Imagined, 17–23.
Werbner’s approach is sociological and focused on a particular diasporic community, that of Manchester Muslims (although some of the articles deal with larger issues), my starting point is literary and I analyze a wider network of overlapping communities, not one particular group of people. In my analysis, the two concepts—of the process of imagining and of the formation of diasporic communities—are analogous. As Anderson reminds us, the imaginary dimension of community should not, however, be confused with imaginary or fallacious, for there is no community that is not “imagined.”

That a given diaspora comes to be seen as a community is the result of such a process of imagining, at the same time creating new marginalities, hybridities and dependencies. Thus, the characters in the books I analyze, experience multiple marginalizations, hyphenizations and demands for allegiance.

As I argue in this book, this constructive imagining also occurs in fiction. Taking notice of Avtar Brah’s cautionary note against uncritically conflating theory with writing, I construe literature as an influential element in the construction of theory and the world. For example, in conferences on post-colonial literatures, it has always been most rewarding to hear and talk with writers of those literatures. The same goes for diaspora. Diaspora does not emerge as a mere sociological fact but it becomes what it is because it is said to be what it is. It is on such expressions of diasporic identity in the North American context, then, that this study focuses. The central issue is the post-colonial discourse in relation to the positions of South Asian women as they emerge in writings by mainly women writers. The discourses about North American identity will be examined textually and theoretically from the perspectives of gender and ethnicity, and my readings are informed by an awareness of feminist and post-colonial theories. International diaspora studies have developed significantly in recent times and, together with post-colonial theory, they have become a major new theoretical and methodological approach in the study of culture and literature. Of major interest in the field are questions pertaining to the interconnectedness of gender, class and race as well as the problematization of subjectivity and identity in (trans)nationalist frameworks. The colonial project was never, however, a one-way traffic even though it was and continues to be heavily unbalanced—whether we consider such groups as indigenous peoples, descendants of slaves and indentured labourers, refugees, or immigrants. There has always been, to

---

8 Anderson, Imagined, 6.
9 Brah, Cartographies, 204.
10 See Wong, “Ethnicizing.”
use a much-used phrase of Salman Rushdie’s, an empire writing back, meaning that the colonised have adopted, and are increasingly adopting subject positions to articulate their own agendas.11

This is the same kind of assertiveness that is present in Brah’s use of the term “homing desire,” simultaneously expressing a desire to construct a home in the new diasporic location and leaving the whole concept of “home” open to criticism.12 This process of a “homing diaspora” does not imply a nostalgic desire for “roots,” nor “is it the same as the desire for a ‘homeland’”; it is realized instead as a construction of “multi-locationality within and across territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries.”13 Similarly, Rosemary Marangoly George differentiates “home” from “home-country” and comments: “Fictionality is an intrinsic attribute of home.”14

In my study I begin with this idea of multi-locational diasporic identity. The title of this book reveals the main dimensions of the study: Writing Imagined Diasporas: South Asian Women Reshaping North American Identity. The following claims can be made. First and foremost, I argue that the diasporic South Asians are not merely assimilating to their host cultures but they are also actively reshaping them through their own, new voices bringing new definitions of identity. Secondly, to concentrate on women writers reflects the far-reaching social changes in the status of women that have taken place from the 1980s to 2000 in the South Asian context, and the study concentrates on diasporic South Asian women writers from the United States and Canada. The diasporic writers and their texts tackle with problems such as violence, adaptation and racism, and they are in constant dialogue—even if they did not want to be—with the culture(s) of both their “origin” and subsequent “adoption.” It follows, thus, that contextual aspects are central formative elements in the narratives of identity. What is more, as Brah observes, there has been a notable feminization of diaspora.15 This calls for an analysis of diasporic

---

12 Brah, Cartographies, 193. Brah’s extensive use of quotation marks with words such as “home,” “nation,” or “minority” draws attention to their constructed nature, instead of any essential qualities.
13 Brah, Cartographies, 197.
14 R. George, Politics, 11; for an astute discussion of literary expressions of South Asian diasporic experiences in the British context, see Susheila Nasta’s Home Truths, which she concludes by commenting on “the vital role that the diasporic imagination has played in extending our readings of the narrative of modernity and in making visible the home truths of history” (Nasta, Home, 245; emphases original).
15 Brah, Cartographies, 179.
literature in order to enable us to take into account the changes in diasporic identity.

Thirdly, the concept of nation is constantly challenged in a diasporic context where people and identities are moving and mixing. Therefore it is essential to study the challenges that the writings of imagined diasporas pose to the “national” discourses in North America. Fourthly, the designation South Asian implies an imagined community, for there is no such political or social entity as such. Geographically South Asia comprises seven countries—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka—but broader definitions also include Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Tibet. Largely due to statistical reasons and popular imagination, this extended term is regularly conflated with “India”: “Because Indian-Americans are the largest immigrant group from the region, ‘South Asian’ often risks becoming synonymous with ‘India.’” The diasporic texts that I am analyzing are, broadly speaking, Indian in their historical, cultural, and linguistic underpinnings. Indian diaspora is one of the major contemporary diasporas which also has a long history. It refers to the people who have migrated from territories that are currently within the borders of the Republic of India, and the descendants of these people. The estimated size of this diaspora is over twenty million people, including NRIs (non-resident Indians) and PIOs (Persons of Indian Origin with citizenship of some other country).

Generally, however, in my analyses of the texts, I use the term “South Asian” on the one hand to indicate their status as diasporic texts—as separate from Indian Indian texts—and on the other to distinguish them from the American Indian (Amer-Indian) context. Furthermore, the designations South Asia and North America capture effectively the major asymmetrical discrepancy between the “Third” and “First” Worlds within the framework of post-colonial and transnational globalization.

From Scattering to Gathering

“Well, who asked you to go? […] Did somebody tie your hands behind your back and say ‘Go-go to that Calgary North Pole place?’”

—Anita Rau Badami, The Tamarind Mem (1996)

The English word “diaspora” is derived directly from the Greek word διασπορά /diaspora/, meaning “a scattering.” It is composed of the

17 Rau Badami, Tamarind, 2.
Chapter One

Preposition δια (dia/ “through” or “between”) and the verb σπειρω (speirō/ “to sow” or “to scatter”). From the original particular reference to the scattering of (above all) Greek, Jewish, and Armenian people, diaspora has become to signify more metaphorical journeys of people from their initial homes to other places of dwelling and working. Here I do not attempt an overview of diaspora in its multiple forms but rather aim for a discussion of literature concerning the emergence of the Indian diaspora in Canada and the United States.18

As the term diaspora implies, it concerns people who are “scattered” away from their original homes.19 However, as Brah claims, while essential for “the notion of diaspora is the image of journey [...] not every journey can be understood as diaspora.”20 What distinguishes diaspora from some other types of travel is its centripetal dimension. It does not only mean that people are dispersed in different places but that they congregate (again) in other places, forming new communities. Scattering, as Homi K. Bhabha notes, becomes a gathering:

I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gathering of exiles and émigrés and refugees [...]. Also the gathering of the people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned; the gathering of incriminatory statistics, educational performance, legal statutes, immigration status—the genealogy of that lonely figure that John Berger named the seventh man.21

In such gatherings, new allegiances are forged that supplant earlier commitments. New imagined communities arise that not simply substitute old ones but form a space in-between various identifications, a hybrid space accommodating often uneasily joining parts. In the words of Nikos Papastergiadis,

18 For a history and typology (i.e. “victim, labour, trade, imperial and cultural diasporas”) of diaspora, see Cohen, Global, x.
19 In effect, these are not necessarily singular journeys, as the movements of people may be secondary, tertiary, or even further removed from that alleged home.
20 Brah, Cartographies, 182.
21 Bhabha, “DissemiNation,” 291. The reference is to John Berger’s and Jean Mohr’s collaborative work A Seventh Man (1975). The title of the book alludes to the fact that at the time in Germany and Great Britain one out of seven manual workers was an immigrant.
identity is defined as hybrid, not only to suggest that origins, influences and interests are multiple, complex and contradictory, but also to stress that our sense of self in this world is always incomplete. Self-image is formed in, not prior to, the process of interaction with others.22

In order to see how “the process of interaction with others” in the South Asian diaspora in North America has taken place, it is relevant to look at how that diaspora came into being. It is not an arbitrary process but dependent on several factors that have created and helped to shape this particular imagined diaspora. In the following, I discuss a range of these formative issues, first in the context of the South Asian diaspora in general and finally in the specific context of South Asian diasporic writing.

South Asian Arrival in North America

He went to the U.S.A. (that was what his father learnt to call it and taught the whole family to say—not America, which was what the ignorant neighbours called it, but, with a grand familiarity, ‘the U.S.A.’) […].
—Anita Desai, “A Devoted Son” (1978)23

For South Asians, the desirability of North America, especially the United States, as a destination for (temporary or permanent) emigration derives to a great extent from the illusory idea of it as a place where wealth is available to everybody. This aspect of the “American Dream” is persistent, and it was evoked in the title of a recent article in The Hindustan Times as “USA: Land of Opportunities” (30 May 2007).24 The idealized prospects have drawn increasing numbers of South Asians to the United States and Canada to study, to work, and to live. All in all, since the mid-1960s the structure of immigration into North America has changed, and the emphasis has shifted from Europe to Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean.25

From the US and Canadian census data it is noticeable that the increase in the number of South Asians in North America has been extremely rapid and recent. In the overall history of the South Asian diaspora in North America we can distinguish three specific periods, or immigration waves, during which there was a more substantial number of immigrants coming in. Two of these took place prior to the 1960s and produced early

22 Papastergiadis, Turbulence, 14; emphasis added.
diasporic communities. According to Ryan Minato, South Asian immigration to the United States began in the 1790s, but in 1898 there were only “523 South Asians” living in the country; the first immigration wave in 1899–1913, then, “brought nearly 7,000 South Asians” to the United States.26 In Canada the development was similar, and by 1908 the number of South Asians was around 5,000.27 In both countries these early immigrants were mostly men, “Sikh farmers from the Punjab region.”28 In the United States, as a result of hostility toward immigrants in the interwar period many left, and by 1940 the number of South Asians decreased radically, with approximately 2,400 remaining. Attitudes to the Sikhs were also harsh in Canada, where racists “made their lives hell” and “succeeded in halting immigration from Asia by deploying popular prejudices and mobilizing white opinion against the newcomers.”29 After 1909 the immigration rules were tightened in Canada and it followed that “[b]etween 1909 and 1943 only 878 Asian Indians were allowed to enter.”30 The second immigration wave in the United States was after the World War II, when restrictions were reduced, and by “1965, approximately 12,000 South Asians lived in the U.S.”31 Canada, then, had 67,295 South Asian residents in 1971.32

Major demographic changes have been taking place as a result of the third and largest immigration wave. In the United States this wave came after the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act. There is a marked difference between this and the earlier immigration, to the extent that Gurleen Grewal comments that “those who came after 1965 do not have much connection to the early history of Indian immigration.”33 In Canada a similar wave occurred after the legislative reforms in 1962 and 1967. By 1990, the South Asian population in the United States had risen to 919,626, showing an astonishing 7,600 % increase.34 More recently, a

28 Minato, “South,” 1. A particularly interesting section of these Sikhs were those (inappropriately named) “Mexican Hindus” who moved to California and married Mexicans because the immigration laws made such marriages profitable (see Leonard, “California’s,” 612–23).
large number of Indians have taken up the opportunity to study and work in US academia after the changes in the immigration laws in 1965 and the later demand for “highly specialized workers deemed to be in short supply among Americans.” Consequently, according to census data of 2000, approximately two million people of South Asian origin live in the United States—a growth rate of 106% over the last decade. In Canada, there were 670,600 South Asians in 1996, and the 2001 census enumerated about 920,000 (917,100) South Asians. What these crude numbers represent, then, is a far-reaching process of transformation. The sheer numbers are outstanding. From small and relatively homogenous communities of Punjabi Sikhs, the South Asian population in North America has grown rapidly—practically in three decades—into a truly significant heterogeneous multicultural minority.

South Asian Diasporic Literature

The settling of migrants just described has not been unproblematic. They have experienced prejudices, overt and covert racism, segregation, and discrimination. One example of the problems is the outburst of violence in New Jersey in 1987, when a group that named itself “Dotbusters” violated South Asian women who were wearing the traditional decorative bindi.

In her poem “Indian Movie, New Jersey” Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni takes up these incidents and shows the disillusionment of the immigrants in face of such blatant racial violence:

We do not speak
of motel raids, canceled permits, stones
thrown through glass windows, daughters and sons
raped by Dotbusters. […]
Here while the film-songs still echo
in the corridors and restrooms, we can trust
in movie truths: sacrifice, success, love and luck,
the America that was supposed to be.

It is exactly the polarity between such an “America that was supposed to be” and the factual, experienced America that South Asian diasporic

---

35 Kalita, *Suburban*, 16.
39 Banerjee Divakaruni, “Indian,” 1277; emphasis added.
writing often portrays. This is its post-colonial predicament which carries residues of colonial mimicry and decolonizing resistance. This convergence has been defined by Rosemary Marangoly George as an “immigrant genre” which, “like the social phenomenon from which it takes its name, is born of a history of global colonialism and is therefore an undeniable part of postcolonialism and of decolonizing discourses.” While this engagement with the history of colonialism and post-colonialism does not enclose all diasporic writing, it is a very strong feature of it.

In Samina Ali’s novel Madras on Rainy Days (2004), the main character Layla listens to her husband Sameer compare the US twin cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis to the Indian cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad:

“Twin cities […]. You go from one city to another. Twins, like you.”

“Like me?”

“Yes, like you. You, the American, you, the Indian. Same face, two people. So where is your home?” […]

“I was supposed to inhabit America without being inhabited by it—that was what my parents wanted.”

Here the duality is expressed on the one hand as a feature of individual identity—“Same face, two people”—and on the other as a social contestation—“that was what my parents wanted.”

In the field of literature, diasporic writing comes from the margins, entering the arenas that it is allowed to occupy. The liminal and marginal status of diasporic writers comes through, for example, in the terms that are used to describe this extremely heterogeneous group: expatriate, exile, diasporic, immigrant, migrant, hyphenated, dislocated, NRI.

Until recently, the South Asian, and more specifically the Indian, constituency in North America has been relatively small, and they have remained marginalized both in America and within the Asian American diaspora. The obstacles are manifold, and Uma Parameswaran comments on them in the Canadian context by saying that,

---

40 R. George, “Traveling,” 278.
41 Ali, Madras, 117–8; emphases added.
42 See Jain, “Introduction,” 11–4. The liminality of Indian diasporic writing should be differentiated from that of the “Babu” writers, i.e. Indian English writing, that has adopted alienation as a mental state (see Khair, Babu, 72–7).
Introduction

supported by neither the ethno-centric community nor the larger community, literary efforts of the Diaspora are stifled at birth while the publishers, of course, prefer the marketability of negative stereotypes.44

Despite all these difficulties, there have been some indications that South Asians are beginning to carve out a space of their own within the Asian America. This has been happening even in the literary field, where it is manifest in the inclusion of Indian authors in several anthologies of Asian American writing such as The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology (1991), edited by Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Mayumi Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnelly, as well as Yellow Light: The Flowering of Asian American Arts (1999), edited by Amy Ling. Even here, the title of Yellow Light alludes synecdochally to the characteristic of East Asia, the yellow skin colour, thus marking an exclusion. The underlying approach of questioning the preconditions of migration, assimilation, and homing is, however, shared, as can be seen in the following poem by the editor of Yellow Light, Amy Ling:

What is Asian America?
a place?
a race?
a frame of reference?
a government-imposed expedient?
a box to check on a form?
It’s a dream in the heart
Like Bulosan’s claim,
a tug in the gut,
a gleam of recognition:
Asian ancestry
American struggle.45

Yet the situation has changed during the past decade for South Asian diasporic writing. According to Ketu H. Katrak, “South Asian American writers in English are among the newest voices in a multiethnic Asian America.”46 To witness this emergence, there are now several anthologies of specifically South Asian American writing, such as Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora (1993), edited by the Women of South Asian Descent Collective, Contours of the Heart: South Asians Map

North America (1996), edited by Sunaina Maira and Rajini Srikanth, and A Patchwork Shawl: Chronicles of South Asian Women in America (1998), edited by Shamita Das Dasgupta. Amidst all these changes and developments, the question of identification has been and remains a major issue in the debates about cultural identity among South Asian and Indian academics, intellectuals, and especially creative writers.

Diasporic Indian writing in English is a genre that is constructed in various ways. While on the one hand it can be said to be a distinctive genre within the wider scene of post-colonial (transnational, cosmopolitan) discourse, it nevertheless needs to be remembered that it is not a monolithic, homogeneous genre but a complex, multifaceted field with a marked emphasis on intercultural connections.

A few general questions arise every time that works of diasporic Indian English literature, or rather literatures, are discussed. First, there is the question of language itself. The status of Indian English literature is much debated and different positions can be adopted to it—from extreme over-estimation to utter denigration as unauthentic. Here I will only acknowledge this debate and say that

1) Indian English literature has, nevertheless, become an influential part of Indian literature;47 and
2) one has to take into account its limitations; in all its variety, it is still not representative of all Indian literature, nor—more importantly—is it representative of all of India.48

Secondly, similar conditions apply in the case of diasporic writing, with an even more critical emphasis on the influence of its audience: to whom does a particular text seems to be addressed to? By the sheer accident of language, Indian English writing is easily taken as leaning to the “West.” This criticism is even more present in view of diasporic writing. As Jasbir Jain has commented, we need a contextualized understanding of diasporic writing, not only of diasporic discourse itself:

Diasporic writing has a wide range and a fairly noticeable difference does exist between the writing being done in different parts of the world depending on the differences in the host culture.49

---

48 Kuortti, Indian, x–xi.
With these qualifications in mind, diasporic Indian English writing constitutes a fascinating and multifaceted field to read and to study. Such a contextualization is required even if we generalize between different Indian diasporas and also, as Ramabai Espinet has commented, "between parallel communities also doing the same kind of investigation."\(^{50}\)

**The Structure of Writing Imagined Diasporas**

In the present book, diaspora is studied in specific contexts, instead of being applied universally. This is done by detailed textual analyses of contemporary works of fiction that address particularly significant themes of diaspora. Particular focus is on the Indian diaspora. Through its contextual focus, the present book provides insights into the specificities of the Indian diaspora in North America.

The study concentrates on eleven contemporary women writers from the United States and Canada who write on (and mainly from) South Asian diasporic experiences. They are Ramabai Espinet, Jhumpa Lahiri, Amulya Malladi, Sujata Massey, Bharati Mukherjee, Uma Parameswaran, Kirin Narayan, Anita Rau Badami, Robbie Clipper Sethi, Shauna Singh Baldwin, and Vineeta Vijayaraghavan. Furthermore, the last chapter provides also a comparative reading of Bharati Mukherjee and Salman Rushdie. The inclusion of a discussion of Rushdie’s work in a book on women’s writing is based on his position as one of the most notable Indian writers but even more on his way of taking up similar issues than the women writers. Thus, his works provide intriguing dimensions for comparison. All in all, there are dozens of writers to choose from, but the ones selected here are clearly ones who have taken up complex issues in their works, and their work has been critically assessed both in academic and non-academic contexts; similarly, as the field of Indian writing in North America is by definition transnational, the authors to be discussed range from India to the USA and Canada.

The book is divided in two main parts. In the first part, “Imagined Diasporic Identities in North America,” I analyse specific contexts of the Indian diasporic writing. In the first, introductory chapter, I look at the more general questions pertaining to the status of Indian women writers in a diasporic framework. This topic has invited much interest in recent years through the problematization in post-colonial theory of singular identities. The analysis of the changes in the status of women in India, and the repercussions of these in the diasporic writing that my research

\(^{50}\) Espinet, “Ramabai,” 106.
Chapter One

establishes, requires that special attention be paid to questions of gender in
the history and theory of feminism from the post-colonial perspective. Although the main attention is on works of fiction and their reception, questions of diaspora are addressed also theoretically. Literature on this field has grown considerably during the past decade. Literary research of the diaspora is most often characterized by interdisciplinarity and unlike traditional literary studies it regularly verges on cultural studies. Thus the selection of theoretical sources is multidimensional.

Chapter two discusses the problematics of diasporic identity in the
writing of Jhumpa Lahiri. She describes fiction writing as an act of
cultural translation, and in this chapter I look at the ways in which Lahiri
engages with the issue of translation—if not non-translation—of identity
in her writings. My main attention is on one of her stories, namely “This
Blessed House” from her book Interpreter of Maladies (1999). It can be
read as an interpretation of the meaning of hybridity in a post-colonial
context. It underlines the centrality of cultural translation in the process of
possessing and re-possessing the past and the present, both chronological
and spatial, in a meaningful way. It also outlines a strategy of diasporic as
well as gendered resistance towards existing colonial and patriarchal
hierarchies in the post-colony through the effort of imagination.

In Chapter three, I look at diasporic detective fiction by Sujata Massey,
a multiethnic writer of detective novels. She was born in the United
Kingdom as a child of a German mother and Indian father, lives in the
United States and writes predominantly about Japan. The main character
in Massey’s seven detective novels is Rei Shimura who is herself similarly
multiculturally conditioned although Rei has Japanese-American roots.
The fluctuation between identities—social, transcultural, and personal—is
also passionately engaged with gender aspects. All these affect the
detective activities of this young amateur female sleuth. I look at the ways
in which Massey’s novel The Salaryman’s Wife (1997) represents the
(Japanese) “other” and reflect on Rei’s self, or multiple selves, in a post-
colonial world, how far they go in explicating and exhausting the “other,”
and what repercussions this may have. The questions of identity in a cross-
cultural context are examined from the perspectives of nationality and
language, as well as of gender and sexuality. Special attention is paid to
the embodied gendered cross-cultural identity that Rei’s character
represents. I argue that in her contested diasporic space between cultures,
Rei struggles with the problem of overcoming the restraints of singular
identities.

The focus of Chapter four is on the Caribbean experiences of diaspora.
I discuss central questions of diaspora in Caribbean literature by a detailed
analysis of a novel by a Trinidadian-Canadian of Indian background, namely Ramabai Espinet’s *The Swinging Bridge* (2003). In her novel, Espinet writes about diasporic experiences, the travels of immigrants from India to Trinidad, from there to Canada, and back to Trinidad. On these travels, or from the stories about them, the main character of the novel, Mona Singh, learns about things that have always been silenced in her family. Espinet both as a writer and a scholar is a part of the recent post-colonial women’s writing and research in the sense that she attempts at bringing forth themes, especially on women’s status, that have previously been muted. In this way, the novel rewrites history, constructing a model that aims at being more respectful of differences, hybridity, heterogeneity and at avoiding simplistic binarisms and juxtapositions, challenging established categories and power structures.

Chapter five is an analysis of Kirin Narayan’s *Novel Love, Stars and All That* (1994). I look at the representation of Eastern (Indian) and Western (US) cultures in a text by a diasporic Indian-American writer. In post-colonial criticism, it is often the cultural artefacts of the centre and their representation of the “other” that are analysed in view of critical theory to expose underlying hegemonic ideological presuppositions. It is interesting to know also what happens when the direction of articulation is reversed and texts from the margins and their representational strategies become the topic of analysis. By choosing a diasporic story about cultural contact and cultural difference I want to highlight the rhetorical strategies that are used to represent other cultures. The writer of the novel is also an established anthropologist and the novel plays—explicitly as well as implicitly—with cultural and intercultural representations. The questions analysed in the chapter are: How are these representations related to the multicultural, multiethnic realities of the United States? How do immigrant people negotiate their cultural space? I argue that South Asian American authors and scholars are carving out a space for representing previously largely invisible immigrant women. In Narayan’s novel, then, this is done also with an awareness of the risks concerning claims for cultural purity and authenticity.

In the second part, “Different Diasporas, Transnational Connections,” I make comparisons between different settings of diaspora. By comparing two or three works that take up parallel issues, I bring out possible differences and similarities in discussions of various topics in diverse contexts. I begin these comparisons in Chapter six with an analysis of gendered violence in Uma Parameswaran’s novella *The Sweet Smell of Mother’s Milk-Wet Bodice* (2001) and Ramabai Espinet’s novel *The Swinging Bridge* (2003). Both of these texts evoke a diasporic Hindu
setting where women are oppressed and suffer from domestic violence, but they also display differences that can be seen in the analysis of the representation of gendered violence in the texts. In this chapter, I look at the ways in which the two diasporic Indo-Canadian texts offer approaches which may act as antidotes and challenge prevailing attitudes, values and practices that generate and enforce gendered violence. I argue that in this, the stories of silenced and abused immigrant women may have an important role in the imagining of new possibilities.

Chapter seven looks at the problematization of subjectivity and identity in a (trans)nationalist framework. The focus will be on Robbie Clipper Sethi’s novel *The Bride Wore Red* (1996) and Shauna Singh Baldwin’s short story collection *English Lessons* (1996). Both of the writers write about identity from a particular cultural context, that of Punjabi Sikh community in contact with another culture, thus projecting another Indian identity against the predominant Hindu (or even Muslim) identity. Sethi does this as an outsider through portraying a relationship between an American woman and a Punjabi Sikh, reflecting on her own experiences. Baldwin, then, writes from within the Sikh community in Canada. What can be seen in the stories in the book is that previously silent and silenced women are beginning to come forward. They are increasingly taking subject positions from which they can articulate issues and agendas of their own choice.

In Chapter eight, I discuss three novels—Anita Rau Badami’s *The Hero’s Walk* (2000), Amulya Malladi’s *The Mango Season* (2003), and Vineeta Vijayaraghavan’s *Motherland: The Other Side of My Heart* (2001)—which in different ways discuss the experiences of NRIs in India. A recurring theme in diasporic Indian literature is representation of the experiences of the NRIs, Non-Resident Indians (and the PIOs—People of Indian Origin), in India. The diasporic travels of these people are by no means always final, and many of them travel and move back and forth. The starting point of my analysis is Avtar Brah’s concept diasporic space in which “the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native.” If immigrants are often under suspicion in their new locales, there is a parallel attitude towards them in the place of their “origin” as well. If the concept of “home” is problematic, or even haunting, in the diasporic situation, such sentiments are often strengthened during a stay “back home.” On the surface level the novels seem to be very similar. The most striking similarity is in depicting an extended South Indian high-caste family setting with multiple relations and difficulties especially in

---

31 Brah, *Cartographies*, 209; emphasis original.
inter-generational communication. I analyse each of the novels separately and in conclusion, contemplate their general position. These three recent examples show how seemingly parallel diasporic situations can bring forth different imaginings of identification.

The final Chapter nine is a discussion of the concept of “multiculturalism” in the Indian diasporic context. It has been used as a catch-phrase in popular and populist political and social management of cultural diversity. It is also a contested site of confrontation between liberal notions of cultural difference. In its political and social applications, multiculturalism has acquired meanings that render it susceptible for asymmetrical, unequal usage. Compartmentalizing recognition of cultural differences makes for example their aestheticization and commercial exploitation easier. In this chapter, I analyse the ways in which the discourse of plurality and equality has been misappropriated in neo-colonial contexts of Britain and the United States by considering Bharati Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* (1989) and Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988). In these books, the values of multiculturalist politics are questioned in view of underlying social tensions, contradictions and conflicts. While both novels clearly vouch for pluralistic values and the necessity for intercultural equality, they also challenge the simplistic, condescending ways British and US societies have appropriated the “other” for their own purposes in the name of ‘multiculturalism’ or diversity. The novels imply a more sensitive understanding of the themes of plurality and equality.

Finally, there is no telling what role the South Asian diasporic migrants may play in the continuing process of reshaping North American identity. What ever it may be, it is certain that the authors of South Asian diaspora are actively taking part in imagining new diasporic identities.