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A Room of their Own: Women Novelists

There is a clear distinction between the fiction of the old masters and the new novel, with Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* providing a convenient watershed. When it comes to women novelists, the distinction is not so clear cut. The older generation of women writers (they are a generation younger than the "Big Three") have produced significant work in the nineteen-eighties: Anita Desai's and Nayantara Sahgal's best work appeared in this period. We also have the phenomenon of the "late bloomers": Shashi Deshpande (b. 1937) and Nisha da Cunha (b. 1940) have published their first novel and first collection of short stories in the eighties and nineties respectively. But the men and women writers also have much in common. Women too have written novels of Magic Realism, social realism and regional fiction, and benefited from the increasing attention (and money) that this fiction has received, there being an Arundhati Roy to compare with Vikram Seth in terms of royalties and media attention. In terms of numbers, less women writers have been published abroad; some of the best work has come from stay-at-home novelists like Shashi Deshpande.

Older Novelists

Kamala Markandaya has published just one novel after 1980. *Pleasure City* (1982) marks a new direction in her work. The cultural confrontation here is not the usual East versus West, it is tradition and modernity. An efficient multinational corporation comes to a sleepy fishing village on the Coromandal coast to build a holiday resort, Shalimar, the pleasure city; and the villagers, struggling at subsistence level, cannot resist the regular income offered by jobs in it. Markandaya gives a vivid picture of a fisherman's family: the old father, his elder son who scorns education, and Rikki, his adopted son, the hero of the novel, who has been educated by missionaries. Toby Tully, the manager, is descended from the Copelands and Tullys,

administrators under the Raj (Copeland was the sympathetic British official in *The Golden Honeycomb*, 1977). The minor characters too, such as Ranji, the young army officer proud of independent India, are vividly sketched, though Kamala Markandaya's infelicitous choice of names persists.

The novel is distinguished by humour, a quality absent in her earlier work. The novelist pokes fun at Ranji's fervour, and at Adeline Lovat, a novelist who is visiting India to write about it. Ranji points out that the tourist does not get to see the seamy side of life in India, but Mrs Lovat is not put out: "It would not stop her writing her book on these seamy aspects, however, aided by Dodwell and the good Abbé Dubois, and perhaps an anecdote or two from Sleeman, brought up to date." The humour takes the darker shade of satire when Markandaya writes about Mr and Mrs Tremlett, the typical imperialists, who look down on all things Indian after spending thirty years in India. *Pleasure City* is one of Markandaya's best novels, as she has shed her undue concern with explaining India (*Nectar in a Sieve*, 1955) or sex (*Two Virgins*, 1973).

Jai Nimbkar (b. 1932) published her first novel, *Temporary Answers* in 1974. Her second novel, *Come Rain* (1993) presents a new version of the "East-West Encounter," a stock situation in Indian English fiction. Ann leaves America and makes her home in India when she marries the Indian Ravi. After spending seven years abroad as a student and researcher, Ravi finds it as difficult as Ann to adjust to his Indian parents and home. Nimbkar's language is simple and unpretentious, and her picture of India true to life.

Ruth Praver Jhabvala left India for good in 1975, and moved to the U.S.A. The four novels and the short stories, and the many filmscripts she has written in the last two decades have a larger canvas than her earlier work. All her novels and short stories till the nineteeneighties (including the Booker Prize-winning *Heat and Dust*, (1975) were set entirely in India. The recent work makes use of her European Jewish heritage and American experience, though her preoccupation with India continues. As she herself pointed out, ten years after she moved to the U.S., "I cannot claim that India has disappeared out of - synonymously - myself and my work; even when not overtly figuring there, its influence is always present" (*Contemporary Novelists*, 1986: 489).

In Search of Love and Beauty (1983) focuses on a group of German and Austrian refugees in New York. For the first time, Jhabvala explores the background of the Western characters and

examines the roots of their fascination with India. Unfortunately, India is often represented through stereotypes: its most important features seem to be the overwhelming sexual attraction of the men, and the charisma of the guru (of either sex), who is often a fraud. This is especially true of Jhabvala's tenth novel, *Three Continents* (1987); the narrator is Harriet, a young American about to inherit a fortune. She goes to London, where she meets an Indian holy man, and later marries his son Crishi. Of the three continents, only Asia is distinct. Harriet is completely subservient to Crishi though she knows that he has married her for her money; her degradation is complete when she allows the murder of her twin Michael to be passed off as suicide. She even forges Michael's signature so that Crishi can acquire his wealth.

Poet and Dancer (1993) is Jhabvala's first novel to be set entirely in New York. It is the story of Angelica Manarr, intelligent, and hardworking, but not good looking, and her fatal infatuation for her mentally deranged cousin Lara, who has driven her mother to suicide. The mother is not a balanced character to begin with, "her goal was a higher consciousness" in search of which she wanders to ashrams in India, "usually situated in some dust bowl; and the devotees, even those radiant with an inner light, all suffered from amoebic dysentery. Plagued by mosquitoes, they lived in cement huts grouped around a brand-new palace built of coloured bathroom tiles with a throne at its centre, where some fat holy man oozed a honeyed mixture of religiosity and sexuality." Another Indian connection comes in the form of Mrs Arora, Angel's mother Helena's business partner in an export-import business. Mrs Arora's infatuation for her elder son, a petty criminal who kills to get money for his fast cars and girls, parallels Helena's love for her daughter Angel.

Shards of Memory (1995) is set in America, England and Europe. It centres on a movement led by a mysterious "Master" who has great personal magnetism. The only loveable character in this complicated story of avarice and love, spanning four generations, is Baby, born of a Jewish American mother and a Parsi father. Elsa, her mother, is drawn to the Master, and has a long-standing lesbian relationship with Cynthia, another rich devotee; her father, who calls himself Kavi ("Poet") is quite happy to stay on in New York with his parents-in-law and baby daughter. One never knows whether the "master" is a complete charlatan; there are conflicting stories about his origins, only the poor Russian refugee Mme Richter in New York knows that he was originally a carpet-seller who took refuge in the Richter's stately home in St Petersburg. There is no diminution in Jhabvala's wit and verbal

felicity, but the last two novels are not as well structured as her earlier novels like *Heat and Dust*.

Anita Desai has published six of her eleven novels in the last two decades. *Clear Light of Day* (1980), perhaps her best novel, deals with two sisters from a loveless home - Bimla, the elder, stays on in their dusty old house in Delhi and looks after their mentally retarded younger brother after the death of the parents. Tara, the younger sister, marries a man in the Indian Foreign Service and visits the house every three or four years when her husband comes to India. Moving back and forth in time, Anita Desai beautifully presents the complex web of childhood love and guilt. The parents appear in an unsympathetic light - the rich father and diabetic mother are always away at the club, playing cards. When both the parents die, it is Bim, hardly out of her teens, who has to take charge of the household. Raja, the elder son, has always admired Hyder Ali, their landlord and follows him to Hyderabad; he later marries Hyder Ali's daughter and inherits his considerable property. Bim subconsciously resents his easy escape from responsibility, and the rift is complete when he sends her a letter in the capacity of a landlord assuring her that she can stay on in their old house as long she wants to. Bim is a completely new heroine in Anita Desai's fiction, hard-headed and facing life's challenges bravely. At the end of the novel, when she is on her way to attend Raja's daughter's wedding, Bim realises that the only way to happiness is to acknowledge and accept all. This is the only novel of Desai's with an unequivocally happy ending.

The Village by the Sea: An Indian Family Story (1982) won the 1982 *Guardian* award for children's fiction; not only older children (younger children might be put off by the long descriptions), adults too can read this novel with profit. It is a story based entirely on fact, dealing with the construction of the Thul-Vaishet fertiliser complex in a sleepy village on India's west coast near Bombay. Lila, a young girl, and her teenage brother Hari are the central characters; they have to bear the burden of the family and look after two little sisters as their father is always drunk and their mother is prostrate with anaemia. When Hari learns that industrialisation would mean the end of their traditional life, he joins the demonstrators going to protest against it. No other novel of Desai's presents external reality with such clarity - whether it is the little fishing village and the grinding poverty of Lila and Hari, or Bombay, with its squalid slums and compassionate slumdweller.

Desai switches from a woman-centred to a male-centred narrative

in *In Custody* (1984), which presents the world of Deven Sharma, a poorly paid lecturer in a provincial town. A teacher of Hindi, he loves its sister language Urdu which has been neglected in India after the Partition made it the national language of Pakistan. Mirpore comes alive in Anita Desai's descriptions; all the desperate boredom of the limited life of Deven is faithfully captured. His rich but undependable friend Murad suggests that he interview the great poet Nur Shahjahanabadi for the Urdu magazine Murad edits; the visit to Delhi, a few hours by bus, provides a break in the tenor of Deven's life. The meeting provides a lot of humour, a quality not usually found in Desai's fiction. Yet the humour borders on pathos; Deven realises that the poetry of the gifted Nur cannot be separated from the prosaic facts of his life - his first wife fighting with his younger wife and the innumerable hangers-on who sponge on him. Deven's own wife Sarla and her miserable life and the two wives of Nur are sensitively presented, but always from Deven's point of view.

All of Anita Desai's earlier novels had Indians as central characters. Her ninth novel, *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), has a German Jew as the protagonist. In keeping with the epigraph, T. S. Eliot's "In my beginning is my end . . .," the novel has a circular structure. It begins in the present with Lotte tearfully reading the stack of old letters written to Hugo Baumgartner by his mother from Germany. In a series of flashbacks, Anita Desai shows us Baumgartner's early life as the son of a prosperous furniture dealer, till the Nazis took away his father. He comes to India and runs a timber business in Calcutta, but this peaceful life is interrupted by the Second World War, and he has to spend six years in an internment camp for aliens. His efforts to pick up the threads of his former life are thwarted by the communal riots in Calcutta in 1947: the persecution of his Muslim business partner echoes the earlier persecution of his father. He moves to Bombay, where he gradually drifts into a life whose only highlight is the daily quest of scraps for the homeless cats he has picked up. His only friend is Lotte, another German, who was once a cabaret dancer in Calcutta.

The pre-war Calcutta and the contemporary Bombay of the novel come to life admirably. Anita Desai captures the feel of life in the back alleys of Bombay, with the cheap restaurants and the hippies haunting them. The language put into the mouth of Farrokh Cama, the owner of "Cafe de Paris," effectively recreates both his humanity and the ambience of this seedy cafe. *Baumgartner's Bombay* is a serious study of a lone human being at the mercy of impersonal forces too

large for him to comprehend. Yet the picture is not completely sombre, it is lit by flashes of humanity. At the end, Hugo Baumgartner is mourned, even if it is only by the café owner Farrokh, and the ageing Lotte.

Anita Desai moved to America early in the nineties (at present, she is a member of the faculty at M.I.T., Cambridge, Massachusetts). Her work since then reveals all the characteristics of diasporic fiction: a concern with the fate of immigrants, and a growing distance from the Indian reality, which is viewed from the outside. Desai's ninth novel *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) has a charismatic old woman as a Guru. Matteo, a sensitive young man, and his bride Sophie come to India in 1975. Sophie is overcome by the heat and dust, and goes back to Italy with their two children. She comes again to reclaim Matteo, who is under the spell of the Mother in an ashram. Sophie wants to prove that the Mother is a sham, and the fourth part of the book deals with Sophie's quest for the Mother's origins. The holy woman, brought up in Paris, with an Egyptian mother, closely resembles the Mother of the Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry. Anita Desai is completely out of touch with India here. Unlike her earlier novels, *Journey to Ithaca* looks at India through an outsider's eyes, and sees only melodramatic horrors. Almost all the descriptions of day-to-day life in India strike a false note. One suspects that it is currently fashionable to write about alternative sexual behaviour. Jhabvala presents a lesbian relationship at the centre of *Shards of Memory*. Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* has a gratuitous description of childhood sexuality, with incest also included, when Sophie's little daughter Isabel, not old enough to go to school, and her brother Giacomo, three years older than her, fondle each other.

Fasting, Feasting (1999), takes up a stock theme of postcolonial fiction: the encounter with the west. The book is in two parts. The first deals with the travails of Uma, a daughter with neither looks nor intellectual brilliance, who is treated as a domestic drudge by her parents, satirically presented as a single entity, "MamaPapa". She has to leave school to look after her baby brother Arun. The second part deals with Arun, who comes to study in America. Desai convincingly presents the Indian obsession with a son, but other details about life in India are all wrong: to mention just one instance, no explanation is given for Uma's father (a lawyer) not taking legal action against his bigamous son-in-law. The depiction of the discrimination against daughters loses much of its force because the parents are shown as absolute monsters. Desai's language is exaggerated, and the similes sound forced, as in this description of the insects in America, in the

second part of the novel, dealing with Arun:

The blue oblong of electric light that hangs from a branch of the spruce tree over the barbecue is being bombarded by the insects that evening summons up from the surrounding green. They hurl themselves at it like heathens in a frenzy of their false religion, and die with small, piercing detonations. The evening is punctuated by their unredeemed deaths.

Phrases like "heathens" and "unredeemed deaths" in the omniscient author's narrative reveal how far Anita Desai has travelled from the Indian part of her heritage.

Nayantara Sahgal is the leading practitioner of the political novel in India. Each of the five novels published earlier had some political event as the background; this pattern continues in the three novels she has published after 1980.

Rich Like Us (1985) is Sahgal's best novel. It presents a picture of India in 1975-1976, the time her cousin Indira Gandhi declared a state of National Emergency and assumed absolute power for about twenty months. Hardly any Indian English writer has dealt with it in fiction. The only significant representation is in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, where the whole episode has an air of nightmare fantasy: Indira Gandhi "the Widow" is like the wicked witch of fairytales. Nayantara Sahgal shows that the Emergency was not something that happened overnight, it was the consequence of the slow erosion of moral values which had set in, among the civil servants and the people at large, after Independence. The narrative technique is interesting; the narrator is Sonali, an idealistic officer of the Indian Administrative Service, but alternate chapters deal (in the third person) with her father Keshav's friend Ram who married an Englishwoman, Rose. The result is a double perspective on past events.

Rich Like Us is peopled by a number of live characters. Here the woman who makes a passage to India is Rose, a Cockney shop girl, and she comes not because of philosophical considerations but because she is passionately in love with Ram. Nayantara Sahgal manages to capture something of the almost magical quality of Rose's love. She is vibrantly receptive to life, with no feelings of race or colour, and establishes deep bonds with Ram's first wife Mona. Another original character in *Rich Like Us* is Kishori Lal, the middle-class shopkeeper struggling to make ends meet. Sahgal's earlier fiction is confined to the affluent section of society, but the struggling shopkeeper (and even

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the beggar) finds a place here. Kishori Lal is a very real character, but he is also a symbol of the honest common man who was harassed during the Emergency by the power-drunk police. The satirical pictures of India are quite sharp - the minister at the inauguration with his interminable speech and quotations from the Vedas; the I.A.S. officer who is always busy (because he is on jaunts abroad); the women with their stress on a fair complexion as the chief requisite in a bride; the only son spoiled rotten; and the rich wives doing their bit to propagate vasectomy among the poor.

Sonali is quite different from the stereotypes of women found in Indian English fiction. She is an intellectual, educated at Oxford, who tops the list in the civil service examination. Through her, the novelist shows the many restraints faced by a woman, however rich, beautiful, educated or powerful she is. As a conscientious bureaucrat, she denies a licence to Mr Neuman, the representative of an American soft drinks company. She feels that India can do without a factory for the fizzy drink "Happyola." Mr Neuman is not interested in the problems faced by this country, his briefing has made him believe that if underdeveloped countries "do like we do, they'd be rich like us." He succeeds in setting up the factory by bribing the minister; overruled by him, Sonali resigns even as the Emergency is declared. Sahgal takes a dispassionate look at India, and finds that democracy and spirituality are only skin deep. There is no touch of nostalgia in her vision, and no glorious past to hark back to - the fact is that women have always been ill-treated in India. The murder of her great-grandmother in the name of *suttee*, the rape of the village women by the police because their menfolk ask the landlord for their wages, or the murder of the defenceless Rose because her frank talk is an embarrassment to her corrupt stepson are all described in a credible manner.

Sahgal's latest novels go back to the nineteen-twenties. *Plans for Departure* (1985) covers familiar ground in terms of the Indo-British relationship. The usual Raj characters are present in the imaginary hill station of Himapur - the sympathetic British administrator, the missionary, the racist white woman out to uphold imperialistic glory, the nationalist Indian leader etc. The heroine is Anna Hanson, a Danish woman on a visit to India who makes her plans for departure when the shadows of the First World War fall over Europe. She goes back to marry Nicolas Wyatt, scion of an old English family. Anna's Indian experiences reach a kind of consummation when their son marries an Indian girl who is a political activist.

Mistaken Identity (1988), her eighth novel, has a male narrator

like her first novel, *A Time to Be Happy* (1958). Bhushan Singh is the only son of the Raja of Vijaygarh. Something of a playboy, he is unable to settle down to a college education, and is on his way back home from America when he is arrested on a charge of sedition. The year is 1929, and the British government is all out to crush the Indian freedom movement. Bhushan disclaims all knowledge of anything outside his cosseted life, but that does not save him. He has to spend almost three years in jail, where his companions are idealistic Congress workers, followers of Mahatma Gandhi, and militant trade union leaders, both trying to win freedom for India in their own ways. His interaction with them makes hilarious reading. The first person narrative goes back and forth in time to tell us about his childhood, his mother's loneliness, his Parsi girl friend in Bombay and his American girl friend, and his adolescent affair with a young Muslim girl which is brutally broken up by his father's henchmen. Sahgal's continued preoccupation with Indian history and nationalism is evident, but both *Mistaken Identity* and *Plans for Departure* lack the social commitment and contemporary relevance of *Rich Like Us*.

There are a few other women novelists who use public events as a backdrop, but their work is not comparable to Sahgal's as political novels. Mahatma Gandhi's mercy mission to Noakhali has an important place in Dina Mehta's novel, *And Some Take a Lover* (1992). The novel is about the growing up of a young Parsi girl. She loves Sudhir, a dedicated follower of Mahatma Gandhi, so political events in Bombay of the early 1940's figure prominently in the novel. The last pages are devoted to Sudhir's diary, describing his days in Noakhali as part of the Congress effort to restore communal harmony. Sikh history, especially the political ferment of the nineteen-twenties in the Punjab, is an important aspect of *Yatra* (1987) by Nina Sibal (b. 1948). (These two novels will be discussed in greater detail in the sections on "Regional Fiction" and "Magic Realism" below.) Another novel in which political events are important is Uma Vasudev's *Shreya of Sonagarh* (1993). Vasudev's first novel, *The Song of Anasuya* (1978), attracted a lot of attention for its frank treatment of sex. *Shreya of Sonagarh*, her second novel, describes the rise to political power of the heroine Shreya, a selfish middle class girl married into a princely family. The writing lacks distinction - Shreya's sexual attraction towards her neighbour Anand is always described in terms of "a cloud of incense" rising from her body. However, Vasudev, a political commentator, presents a realistic picture of the horse-trading that enables the heroine to be elected a Member of Parliament.

Very few women novelists have written about the Partition of 1947. It is mentioned in Nina Sibal's *Yatra*, Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999) and Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998). Meena Arora Nayak's second novel, *About Daddy* (2000) presents the topic in an original way. The protagonist, a young woman born in America, visits India in 1997-1998 to fulfil her father's last wishes: that his ashes should be scattered on the Indo-Pakistan border as a kind of expiation for his sin of killing innocent Muslims before Partition. The first person narrative reveals the father's life in a series of flashbacks. The daughter's innocent attempts to take a photograph at the border land her in jail; she is released only through the intercession of her American fiancé. Nayak presents a vivid picture of Hindu-Muslim relations in modern India.

The Domestic Novel

Many novels, such as Nayantara Sahgal's, are concerned primarily with public events. *Midnight's Children*, for instance, deals with the first thirty years of independent India. Historical events; such as the war with Pakistan, the birth of Bangladesh, the rise of Sanjay Gandhi, and the national Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi, have a very important place in the hero's life. In contrast, there are novels which steer clear of historical events. The lives of the protagonists, and they are invariably female, are dominated by events in the domestic sphere. Anjana Appachana, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan and Bulbul Sharma present authentic pictures of life in India without mentioning events like the Partition or the Emergency, because the focus is inward. It is not necessary to be a woman to write a domestic novel: Bhabani Bhattacharya, for instance, wrote fine women-centred novels.

The novelist with the most sustained achievement is Shashi Deshpande (b. 1938). She has written eight novels, six collections of short stories, and four children's books. Her writing is clearly part of Indian literature, and emerges from her rootedness in middle class Indian society. Understatement is the hallmark of her work; she never indulges in verbal pyrotechnics, her lucid prose never attracts attention to itself by using Indian words. Nor is she interested in the exotic aspects of India; there are no Maharajahs, tiger hunts and holy men in her work. The heroine of her first novel, *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) is the mother of a son and a daughter, but finds no happiness with her husband and children. Hindu tradition plays a big part in Sarita's unhappiness. Hindus value a son over a daughter, who is considered a burden, to be married off at great expense - even now

many parents start saving up money for their daughter's marriage from the time she is born. Sarita's mother can never come to terms with the fact that she lost her son by drowning, while her daughter was spared. Sarita feels guilty for the death of her brother; her mother holds her responsible for the accident, though the poor girl was hardly eight years old at the time. Sarita defies her mother by joining medical college, and flouts caste restrictions by marrying the man she loves. She becomes a successful doctor, but her success in her profession contributes to the disintegration of her marriage, because her husband resents the fact that she is the breadwinner. Deshpande is too accomplished a novelist to present Sarita as the innocent victim - by the end of the novel, she realizes that she cannot simply run away from her husband, she has to take the initiative to re-establish a proper relationship with him.

Deshpande's second and third novels have elements of detective fiction, they are not significant as domestic novels. *If I Die Today* (1982) is set in the campus of a big medical college and hospital; the entrance of Guru, a terminal cancer patient, disturbs the placid life of the doctors and their families; old secrets are revealed and two persons murdered. *Come Up and Be Dead* (1983) is set in a girls' school; the complicated plot deals with many mysterious deaths there. The protagonist of *Roots and Shadows* (1983) is a young woman who has rebelled against her authoritarian and traditional joint family. Indu left home as a teenager to study in the big city, and is now a journalist; she has married the man of her choice. But she realizes that her freedom is illusory; she has exchanged the orthodoxy of the village home for the conventions of the "smart young set" of the city, where material well-being has to be assured by sacrificing principles, if necessary. Indu returns to the family home after an absence of twelve years when her great-aunt, a childless widow dies, leaving her money to Indu. As the heroine takes charge of her legacy, she comes to realize the resilience of the village women she had dismissed as weak.

Shashi Deshpande's fifth novel, *That Long Silence* (1988), marks her emergence as a major novelist. The narrator Jaya, an upper middle class housewife in Bombay, with two teenage children, is forced to take stock of her life when her husband is suspected of fraud, and they move into a small flat in a poorer locality. Deshpande shows up the hollowness of much of modern Indian life - the convenient, arranged marriage, with the upwardly mobile husband and the children studying in "good" schools. The repetitiveness and boredom of a woman's life come through forcefully. She shows how the silence imposed on

women is partly of their own making, though society and tradition have a hand. There is no reference to anything outside Jaya's narrow ambit. India's tradition and philosophy (so dear to novelists like Raja Rao) have no place here. The only reference to the past is in Jaya's realization that in Sanskrit drama, women did not speak Sanskrit - they were confined to Prakrit, a less polished language, imposing a variety of silence on them. The heroine Jaya, like the other women in the novel, whether the half-crazed Kusum or the poor maid servant, is incapable of breaking away from the supportive yet stifling extended family. The narrow focus results in an intensity which is almost painful. All the characters including Mohan, Jaya's husband, are fully realized, though none of them are likeable.

Shashi Deshpande's next two novels are not as good as her Sahitya Akademi Award winner, *That Long Silence*. In *The Binding Vine* (1993) the story of Urmi, the narrator, grieving over the death of her baby daughter, runs parallel with the stories of her long-dead mother-in-law, and of Kalpana, a teenage victim of rape, fighting for life in hospital. Neither the setting nor the characters are typical of small town India. All the women drive themselves around in cars (rather unusual even now), Urmi addresses her mother by name, and her widowed mother has "pink-tinted nails," inconceivable in a society where a widow is not supposed to wear bright clothes, let alone makeup or nail polish. *A Matter of Time* (1996), attempts to depict the complex web of human relationships in an extended family over three generations. Sumi, the mother of three young daughters, goes back to her parental home, the "Old House," when her husband Gopal walks away from the marriage. The "Old House" has its own dark secrets which are unravelled in the course of the narrative. However, this novel tends to be diffuse, and some of the characters are not quite credible.

Deshpande's latest novel, *Small Remedies* (2000), however, shows that there is no falling off in her talent. The narrator, Madhu, is trying to come to terms with the death of her eighteen-year-old son, killed in a bus that is burnt down in Bombay in the riots which followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid. But she had really lost him even before that, because of her possessive attitude; the novel can be read as a study of motherhood, and the consequences of a woman centring her life on a child. Madhu goes to a small town to write a biography of a famous musician, Savitribai, who had sacrificed her family in her single-minded pursuit of music. Born of rich parents, married into an orthodox family, the beautiful Savitri is allowed music

lessons as a special favour by a doting husband. At that time, women from respectable families were not supposed to study music, it was the preserve of the courtesan. Savitribai elopes with her tabla-player, a Muslim, takes the name of "Savitribai Indorekar" and realises her ambition; but there is no place for her daughter Munni in her new life. Munni, in her turn, rejects her and the tabla player, and manages to forge a new identity for herself as a conventional Hindu woman. Savitribai's true heiress is Hasina, a grand-daughter of the tabla player, who devotes herself to looking after the singer in her declining years. In terms of narrative technique, *Small Remedies* is the most successful of Shashi Deshpande's novels so far. The main narrative concerns Madhu's efforts to write a book, but her childhood and adolescence, and her present circumstances as a guest in a small town, come to life vividly; the novel reveals the development of the protagonist, who gains strength from remembering and re-creating the lives of Savitribai and her own aunt Leela, another woman who broke out of the shackles of caste and orthodoxy, married a Christian and devoted herself to trade union activities. Two recent novels with a background of music, Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and Seth's *An Equal Music* have failed to bring the music to life; Deshpande's evocative style enables the reader to share Savitribai's and Hasina's love of music. The trope of music dominates the account of the singer's life: the relationship between melody and rhythm, between the singer and the tabla-player is an image for human bonds.

Deshpande generally has the heroine as the narrator, and employs a kind of stream-of-consciousness technique. Almost all her novels deal with a crisis in the heroine's life. The narrative goes back and forth in time, so the narrator can describe events with the benefit of hindsight. Her work is woman-oriented, but it would not be correct to term her a feminist, because there is nothing doctrinaire about her fiction; she simply portrays, in depth, the meaning of being a woman in modern India.

It is possible that Raji Narasimhan (b. 1937) may be remembered for her literary criticism (she is the author of *Sensibility Under Stress*, 1976, one of the earliest studies of Indian English writing), book reviews, and translations, rather than her fiction. She has published five novels, two of them before the nineteen-eighties. Her third novel, *Drifting to a Dawn* (1983) is not as good as her second novel *Forever Free* (1979). *Forever Free* revolves around the central character Shree, but this novel just drifts from Raman and Jana, to their son Surya. Narasimhan can handle the language with sensitivity – some

scenes in the novel are well written, such as the account of Loma's unhappy home life, or the discomfiture of the South Indian Raman and Jana when they are faced with their son's Bengali girl friend. But the novel as a whole is unsatisfactory. *The Sky Changes* (1992) is Narasimhan's fourth novel; the protagonists of her earlier novels too were girls unhappy in marriage, and Krishna, her latest heroine, suffers from a superfine sensitivity. She tries to get away from her insensitive husband Jagat, but her mother Susheela pressurizes her to return to him, though she herself has affairs with many lovers. The novel is steeped in an atmosphere of inexorable pain and melancholy. Krishna considers herself doomed to suffering, and her favourite poet (naturally) is Shelley, who is quoted frequently in the novel. *Atonement* (2000), her fifth novel, also has unhappy filial relationships; the mother believes that her daughter can make a success of life just by acquiring a college education, while the father is very conscious of being a failure.

Some common themes run through most of the novels: the discrimination against the daughter, the silence of women, and the lack of communication between the sexes. These themes are treated in depth in Anjana Appachana's first novel, *Listening Now* (1998). The book is an entirely credible recreation of Indian life, we feel that we are personally acquainted with the women we read about, we can almost identify them, or identify with them. Indian culture transcends regional variation in discriminating against the daughter; whether it is Delhi (the central character Padma's friends), Lucknow (Karan's wife Prema) or Bangalore (Padma's elder sister Shanta), the son invariably gets first preference in all things, whether it is food, pocket money or education.

Anjana Appachana's first book, *Incantations and Other Stories* (1991) was distinguished by understatement. *Listening Now* is entirely different; it is marked by drama and emotional intensity. The 500-page book has six different narrative voices, all female, and covers a span of about 16 years in the life of Padma, a teacher in a university, bringing up her fatherless daughter with the help of her sister and her supportive neighbours, Anu and Madhu. The book begins with Mallika, the twelve-year-old daughter of Padma, who loves inventing stories about her parents: "Alas, no stories in the lives of our mothers. So much more juice in the stories we invented." Her autobiographical narrative is followed by the matter-of-fact "stories" of two average middle-class Delhi housewives, Madhu and Anu - Padma's neighbours and friends. The fourth part is centred around Shanta, Padma's sister,

"the mother who had done all but given birth to me" (to use Mallika's words). The fifth and sixth sections present events through the eyes of Padma and Rukmini, her mother. All except the first section are written in the third person; Appachana, using a variety of styles, stretches the resources of English to present diverse characters. The simple language she uses in the section "Rukmini" expresses the strength of this little-educated woman, her belief in the Hindu tradition of husband worship, and the deviousness and silence which are her only weapons to wield some power: "The problem with Shanta was that she spoke ... whatever she felt, whenever she felt it - it came out of her mouth. That was all very well with her parental family, but she, foolish girl, also did it with her husband. For someone so intelligent she has no sense about these things." Shanta's mother manages to gain the affection of her parents-in-law, and the "reverence" of her husband, who turns to her for support when his parents die, "He had said nothing to her, but she hadn't needed Him to. The knowledge of His complete dependence on her was enough." Even in her thoughts, Padma's mother does not take her husband's name, but uses "He" instead. Appachana gives a realistic account of the lives of middle class women in an Indian city, and their painful negotiations between personal aspirations and societal expectations. The novelist presents a searing picture of the exploitation the daughter-in-law suffers in a traditional Indian family, with a carping mother-in-law. Anu has come to terms with this life and says, "Happiness was the absence of unhappiness, not its opposite." Men exist only at the periphery of the novel. The powerful portrayal of the price women have to pay, even if they conform, leaves the reader depressed.

Daughter's Daughter (1993) also focuses on gender bias. This is the first English novel by Mrinal Pande (b. 1946), who is the author of novels, short stories and plays in Hindi; for many years, she also edited *Saptahik Hindustan*, a popular Hindi weekly, before moving over to television, where she has become one of the leading news anchors in Hindi. *Daughter's Daughter* is a loosely connected series of episodes, seen through the eyes of Tinu, a little girl growing up in north India, shortly after Indian independence. At her maternal grandmother's home, her cousin Kukki, her uncle's son, is given preference in all things over Tinu, a daughter's daughter. Her mother's disappointment at the birth of another daughter, and the ceremonies performed in praise of her younger sister, "because she has brought a brother on her back," are described in a perfectly neutral tone. This graphic picture of discrimination against the girl child is based on fact,

as demonstrated in Ranjana Harish's scholarly work, *Indian Women's Autobiographies* (1993). Harish examines 23 autobiographies of the period 1921-1971 available in English, and we find these diverse authors describing the same discrimination. Mrinal Pande's English style reminds one of R.K. Narayan's; it is lucid and straightforward, and never calls attention to itself. As a study of Indian childhood, *Daughter's Daughter* deserves to stand beside R.K. Narayan's *Swami and Friends*.

Mrinal Pande's second novel is not equally engrossing: *My Own Witness* (2000) is a roman-à-clef based on Pande's own experiences in television and journalism. It reveals the bias in favour of English, though politicians of all hues pay lip service to Hindi. The protagonist, a sensitive journalist, is clearly the novelist's alter ego. The novel reveals the way women journalists, even now, are expected to deal only with "women's issues" (meaning cooking, interior decoration etc), leaving serious issues to their male colleagues.

Githa Hariharan (b. 1954) is another significant writer who made her debut in the nineteen-nineties. *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Novel in the Eurasian region. It presents three women belonging to different generations, with nothing to relieve the drabness of their lives. Devi, the protagonist, cannot cope with life in India. Modern education, including a degree from an American university, only exacerbates the problem. When Devi returns to her widowed mother in Madras, leaving behind her black American friend Dan, her extended family pressurizes her to get married. Mahesh, the husband her mother arranges for her, is somewhat insensitive, and the marriage loses all meaning when Devi fails to have a child. Devi is not the only unhappy woman in the book: her mother, and the old maidservant Mayamma share her misery. Mayamma is ill-treated because she is barren, but Devi's mother Sita is largely responsible for her own fate. She is the most powerful character in the novel. An expert veena player, she broke her veena after marriage and moulded herself into a superefficient household machine who worked for her husband's advancement. However, by killing her talent, she also develops into a person who stifles all creativity, whether in her husband or her only child. The novel is interspersed with the legends and folktales Devi heard in her childhood, and there are many narratives; Devi's in the first person, Mayamma's, and the third-person author's narration about Devi or Sita. Sita's stifling, snobbish love is responsible for the psyche of a tiresome heroine; Devi's emotions are always at fever-

pitch, and it is difficult to feel sympathy for her.

Hariharan's fascination with tales assumes more importance in her successive novels. Her second novel, *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* (1994), is entirely different from her woman-centred first novel or her short stories *The Art of Dying* (1993). The protagonist is a retired schoolteacher ("Master"). Vasu has no company but his memories; of his dead wife, his two sons who live in another town, his father who was an Ayurvedic, his dead grandmother who gave food and cooking supreme importance, and Veera Naidu, the principle of the school. The only physical presence in his life is Mani, a mentally handicapped young boy, whom no one can control or teach. Vasu Master's reminiscences are interspersed with his "classes" with Mani, whom he tries to reach through drawings and stories. Vasu's concern with sickness and health is as important as his fascination with the power of stories: can a tale change anything, what is "real" and what is fiction? That there is nothing specifically feminine about these questions is shown by Sujit Saraf's *Limbo*, a first novel which appeared the same year. Much of the "action" consists of the tales the local priest's son tells the protagonist, a young boy. Saraf is as much concerned as Hariharan is, with the validity and effects of stories.

This novelist's third novel is very different from her earlier work, which was primarily in the social realist mode, though storytelling was an important trope. *When Dreams Travel* (1999) is a kind of feminist retelling of the *Arabian Nights*. It is the story of not only Shahrazad (Scheherezade), but of her sister Duniyazad (to whom the stories were ostensibly addressed) and their husbands. All kinds of fantastic stories are woven into the narrative, but it is a dark, thought provoking book, not an entertainer.

A number of women novelists have made their debut in the 'nineties. Their first novels are quite effective in revealing the true state of Indian society when it comes to the treatment of women. All these writers were born after Indian Independence, and English does not have any colonial associations for them. Their work is marked by an impressive feel for the language, and a completely authentic presentation of contemporary India, with all its regional variations. They generally write about the urban middle class, the stratum of society they know best.

Indu K. Mallah's *Shadows in Dream-Time* (1990) is about the social "sati" a widow is subjected to in modern India. She is considered inauspicious, and cut off from all social intercourse; she has to give up her colourful silk saris, the kumkum on her forehead, and the sweet-

smelling flowers she loved to wear in her glossy hair. When her husband dies, she and her teenage son and daughter have to vacate their flat because it belongs to the firm which employed her husband. In her parental home, her stepmother considers her an unpaid servant, and things are no better in her father-in-law's house. When she tries to take up a job, her colleague considers her fair game because she is a widow, and she feels that the only way to happiness is by joining her dead husband.

Belinder Dhanoa's *Waiting for Winter* (1991) presents a bleak picture of a girl's growing up in India. Pratibha belongs to a rich family in Chandigarh. She is given the "best" education - a boarding school in Simla, followed by a university degree. But it does not equip her to face life. Her upbringing is meant to prepare her for a suitable arranged marriage, the only goal her mother, and even Pratibha herself, can envisage. She is married to an Indian settled in the U.S.A, after paying a lot of money as dowry to the man's parents. As she waits for her visa, her world falls apart - her only brother joins the Sikh terrorists, her father is killed in a terrorist attack, and her mother retreats from reality, and she finds that her husband is already married to an American. Dhanoa experiments with technique; there are many flashbacks, and some scenes are presented in the format of a filmscript, with stage directions.

Zai Whitaker (b. 1954) is the author of *Snukeman* (1990), a biography of her husband, the naturalist Romulus Whitaker; *Up the Ghat* (1992), her first novel, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize in the Best First Book category of the Eurasian region in 1993. The heroine, Azra has studied abroad, and looks down on her sister for agreeing to an arranged marriage; "I'd kept up a steady battle with Amma, insisting that I would find my own husband if I wanted to marry. But I was fighting shadows: no one was going to stop me. Three years later, at thirty, I was still single, a floundering rebel among friends whose children were always having birthday parties." She marries the man arranged for her by her parents. Hussain is a dedicated officer in the Indian Administrative Service, whose idealism gets him into trouble: he is suddenly transferred out of Ooty (a prized posting) for trying to help slum dwellers. They are now in Denkal, a remote hill station in South India, where he takes up the cause of labourers in a nearby plantation, Tamils who have been repatriated from Sri Lanka. Azra knows it is a lost cause; she is worried that they will be transferred to some school-less town, just when their six-year-old son Asad has adjusted to the local school. Reminiscences of her childhood,

as the daughter of a rich, cultured Muslim family, and the values upheld by her grandparents, help the narrator to cope with the situation. By the end of the novel, she has acquired a rare generosity and a kind of robust common sense which enable her to reach out to her husband. The novel is distinguished by its humour: Zai Whitaker can see the comic side of the frustrations of the Indian woman. Unlike the work of Anjana Appachana, which has no reference to current events, *Up the Ghat* takes cognizance of public events which impinge on the life of the protagonist, such as the repatriation of Tamils. But the focus is always on the private, not public, sphere.

Tara Lane (1993) by Shama Futehally (b. 1952), Zai's sister, is an impressive first novel. The heroine, Tahera, like Azra of *Up the Ghat*, has a protected, aristocratic childhood. When she grows up and gets married, she has to face the outside world of crass commercialism and compromise. In simple, graceful prose, Futehally examines the question of principles in the modern world, and the choices confronting a wife and mother. Another interesting first novel is *Sojourn* (1998) by K.R. Usha. Neerja, the protagonist, is forced to move to a small town for a brief period; the novel reveals the sordidness of small town life and the smugness of the cosmopolitan urban woman.

Magic Realism

Most of the women writers employ the mode of social realism, but the fiction of Suniti Namjoshi (b. 1941) stands out for its use of fantasy and surrealism. After working for some years as an officer in the Indian Administrative Service, she moved to Canada in 1972, where she taught at the Department of English of the University of Toronto. She now lives with Gillian Hanscombe in a small village in East Devon, England. Author of seven volumes of poetry, Namjoshi is the master of fabulistic fiction, her work is not dependent on a specific social context. She is above all a feminist, and this concern is expressed through allegory and fables. In her first novel, *The Conversations of Cow* (1985), the protagonist Suniti is a lecturer of Indian origin (like the author herself); her Guru appears in the form of a cow, and the tale slips into the realm of fantasy with the Cow and Suniti moving around Canada.

In *The Mothers of Maya. Diip* (1989), Jyanvi and the Blue Donkey (who appeared in her earlier book, *The Blue Donkey Fables*, 1988) are invited to the Indian kingdom of Maya Diip ("The Island of Illusion"). Here they find a rigid matriarchy. Permission to become a biological mother is a useful weapon in the hands of the ruling

matriarch. All boys are drowned in the sea when they attain puberty, after being milked for sperm. Maya Diip escapes many of the evils of male dominated conventional society, but is plagued by other ills born of common human failings like jealousy and love of power.

St. Suniti and the Dragon (1994) is an extended fable about love and sainthood. Ironic and fantastic, the imagery ranges from talking flowers to instructive angels, from Grendel's mother (from *Beowulf*) to St. Sebastian. Songs, dialogues, dramatic monologues, postcards, prayers and diary entries are worked into the narrative. Her latest work of fiction is *Building Babel* (1997) an ongoing novel with interactive hypertext links, on the website of the Spinifex Press. The book is about the building of culture under the aegis of Crone Kronos (Time), and is filled with characters from fairy tales and myth, such as Snow White, Kronos and Queen Alice. Reader have been invited to send their contributions ("memes") for this ongoing work by email to women@spinifexpress.com.au or by snail mail to PO Box 212 North Melbourne, Victoria 3051, Australia. Such a collaborative venture is typical of the experimental techniques favoured by Namjoshi.

Maya Diip's is not the only futuristic society in Indian English fiction. *Idol Love* (1999) by Anuradha Marwah-Roy (b. 1962) presents a chilling picture of an Indian dystopia in the twenty-first century. The Hindutva agenda has been carried to its logical end. Society in "Raminland" is ordered on the precepts of Manu, and women are honoured as "Arhanginis" (better halves). Careers are open to women if they are willing to give up family life and become "Sadhvis" (female hermits). The capital Rajdhani (Delhi) has been sanitised, and the lower classes ("Dasas" slaves and religious minorities called "Drohis," traitors) have to get special passes when they enter it for doing all the menial work. The novelist's attention to detail in recreating day-to-day life in India makes this dystopia utterly credible.

Nina Sibal's first novel, *Yatra* is reminiscent of Rushdie's work in its use of Magic Realism. Rushdie's hero Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* was endowed with the mysterious gift of entering into the minds of others; finally, his body starts developing cracks when India shows signs of breaking up. Krishna Chahal, the heroine of *Yatra* is endowed with a magical skin that changes colour in response to India, she is born very fair skinned, but grows darker and darker; like Sinai, her paternity is mysterious - her Greek mother Sonia does not know whether she is the daughter of Paramjit, her Punjabi Sikh husband, or Stavros, her Greek lover. She is conceived in August 1947 - Sinai was born on 15 August. *Yatra* also invites comparison with Partap Sharma's

novel, *Days of the Turban* as a regional novel, for it is about a family in the Punjab, and ends in 1984, with rising terrorism and the demands for Khalistan. But *Days of the Turban* is starkly realistic, and confined to contemporary life, while *Yatra* goes back to 1849 and the journey undertaken by Swaranjit Kaur, an ancestress of Krishna, to escape from the British.

Another novel which successfully employs Magic Realism is *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (b. 1956), a poet with three volumes of poetry to her credit. The heroine, Tilo (short for Tilottama), is the "Mistress of Spices". Born in India, she is shipwrecked on a remote island inhabited by women. Here she encounters an ancient woman who imparts instruction about the power of spice. Ordained after trial by fire, each new spice mistress is sent to a far-off land. Tilo heads for Oakland, California, disguised as an old woman, and sets up a shop where she sells spices. The chapters are named after spices like cinnamon, turmeric, and fenugreek, quite common in Indian kitchens. But here they have special powers, and Tilo can practice her magical powers of healing only while keeping a cool distance from ordinary mortals. Divakaruni's second novel and her short stories are realistic, and will be discussed in the section on "Diasporic Writing."

Campus Novel

The campus novel is not a favoured form with Indian novelists. Prema Nandakumar is better known as a literary critic and translator. Her first (and so far only) novel, *Atom and the Serpent* (1982) presents an Indian university where little true research goes on, the academic staff being too busy with internal wrangles and the scramble for funds and foreign assignments. As in Ranga Rao's *The Drunk Tantra*, promotion depends on contacts, not merit. Another campus novel, Rita Joshi's *The Awakening: A Novella in Rhyme* (1992) is written in rhymed couplets, inspired by Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*. She deals with the experiences of an idealistic lecturer in Delhi ("From Cambridge cheerfully she came/ to seek at home fortune and fame"). She satirizes various aspects of college life, with every teacher trying to get into the good books of the principal, and the popularity of "guide books" and young girls taking up the study of literature for wrong reasons: "An Eng. Lit. type is thought smart/ and so good for the marriage mart." Many novels include some chapters dealing with campus life, though it is not the main theme. The opening sections of *The Truth (Almost) about Bharat* (1991) by Kavery Bhatt present a vivid picture

of the life of a young medical college student. The language throughout the novel is that of the protagonist Bharat, full of Indian campus slang. Meena Alexander (b. 1951) has a young college lecturer as the protagonist of her first novel *Nampally House* (1991), based on a real-life incident of police repression in the town of Hyderabad.

Anuradha Marwah-Roy's first novel *The Higher Education of Geetika Mehendiratta* (1993) is set in the provincial town of "Desertvadi" where "there was nothing to do except cry, make a phone call or masturbate." Young Geetika, the narrator, moves to Jana University in Lutyenabad (Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi) for higher education after her M.A. in English, so the novel contains satirical sketches of research in Jana university. Rani Dharker's *The Virgin Syndrome* (1997) contains some enjoyable satire on college life and the seminar circuit.

Regional Fiction

Regional fiction seems to be very popular with women writers. In the last decade, the southern state of Kerala has been put on the fictional map by three women writers: Arundhati Roy (b. 1961), Anita Nair (b. 1966), and Susan Viswanathan (*Something Barely Remembered: Stories*, 2000). The life of various regions of India, such as the Punjab or Coorg, or communities like the Sikhs or Parsis, are also well represented in fiction by women writers.

The God of Small Things (1997) received even more publicity (and a bigger advance from the publishers) than Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*. Some elements of personal life are present in the novel: like the novelist herself, the narrator has a Bengali father and a mother who belongs to the Syrian Christian community of Kerala. However, most of the characters are entirely imaginary, with no factual correspondence to real life characters. Arundhati Roy mentions the veteran Marxist leader E.M.S. Namboodiripad by name, but proceeds to invent fictions about him, which led to widespread protests in Kerala, the state where he headed the first elected Communist government in world history. The critical response to this Booker Prize winner, with its complex linguistic style, has been overwhelmingly favourable. C.D. Narasimhaiah is one of the few to condemn the "non-stop flow of words and similes" and the "unrelieved, unredeemed smartness" of "this self-hypnotized word retailer." Arundhati Roy's narrative powers are impressive: the reader can experience the clamminess, and the lushness of the vegetation, in her word picture of the Kerala landscape, and the oppressive atmosphere

of the village of Ayemenem. The protagonist, a young woman, has the power of sharing her twin-brother Estha's experiences. The detailed descriptions of paedophilia and incest could have been dispensed with, though perhaps they are mandatory in modern fiction. The relentless injection of local colour by using Malayalam words (incorrectly transcribed at places) can be tiring, but there is no disputing the power of the book, which shows the cruelty of women who discriminate against their own daughters in favour of sons, and the empathy between twin children who find the world of grownups quite incomprehensible. It is also a comprehensive protest novel, which describes atrocities against the powerless: children, women and untouchables.

Anita Nair's first novel, *The Better Man* (1999), is a welcome change from the hackneyed East-West encounter theme. It is perhaps the only novel written by a woman which is not about an Indian woman; nor is it freely peppered with incest and/or same sex relationships. It is a straightforward tale set in a village in Kerala. Nair's Kaikurussi is very different from Arundhati Roy's Ayemenem; it is a realistic description of the violence and conflict lying underneath the deceptively calm surface of village life. Nair resembles R.K. Narayan rather than Rushdie or Roy. *The Better Man* is the kind of novel that could be (and is) written in India's regional languages, where the exploration of the postcolonial ramifications of using English is not an issue. Mukundan Nair, the protagonist, has been traumatised by the tyranny of his brutal father, Achuthan Nair, who has done everything to destroy his son's self-esteem. After retirement, at the age of fifty-eight, he comes back to the small village, but his ancestral home is haunted by the spirit of his unhappy mother.

Kavery Nambisan (b. 1947) belongs to Coorg (Kodagu), a hilly district of Mysore, with its own language. For the first time, the small ethnic minority, the Coorgis, enter Indian English fiction in her second novel, *The Scent of Pepper* (1996). The distinctive culture and religion of the people of Coorg is faithfully presented by tracing the fortunes of Nanji, who enters the Kaleyanda clan as a young bride. *The Scent of Pepper*, spanning three generations, is the most substantial of Kavery Nambisan's three novels. Life in an estate in Kodagu, the changing relationship with the British when India gains independence, and life in post-independence India are described very vividly. Nanji shows that "A Kodavathi (a woman of Coorg) is born tough." It is she who gives her husband Baliyanna the strength to cope with the suicide of his father. Two brothers studying in England are lost to the

Kaleyanda clan - Machu (lies in a swimming accident, while Appachu is disowned for marrying an Englishwoman. Nanji has to do everything single-handed, whether it is coping with a son born crippled or managing the estate. By the end of the novel, she is an old woman, powerless to stop her greedy grandson from cutting the trees on the estate.

Kavery Nambisan's first novel, *The Truth (Almost) about Bharat* (1991) is quite different; it was published under the name Kavery Bhatt, before she married the poet Vijay Nambisan. The narrator is a young medical student, Bharat. He runs away from Delhi because he thinks that he has killed a watchman whom he hit with a stone. Bharat goes southwards on his motorcycle, to Central India, then to Mysore, and still further south to Kerala. The book is distinguished by its comedy, but it can also be read as a *bildungsroman*; at the end of the book, Bharat realizes that escape is not a valid option, and comes back home quite chastened by his picaresque adventures. The most serious part of the book deals with the home life of Bharat, and the way he is troubled by the rift between his parents - his father is a South Indian army officer from a poor family, while his mother comes from a family of big businessmen of Lucknow. The novelist shows that the tension in their marriage does not spring only from the disparity in their native regions; class is a bigger source of friction, for the mother is always making unfavourable comparisons with the lavish lifestyle of her parental home.

In *Mango-Coloured Fish* (1998) the central character is a young urban girl, Shari, whose over-bearing mother has arranged her marriage to Gautam, a computer professional; Shari is in love with a blind man. The novel deals with Shari's visit to her idealistic brother Krishna. The value system of contemporary India is revealed: Krishna and his wife Teji are considered fools to work in rural India, when the doctor couple could have made lakhs by practising in a metropolis. Whether it is the mindless party circuit, or travel in a crowded train, or medical practice in an Indian village, the authenticity of Nambisan's picture of India is remarkable.

Dina Mehta's only novel, *And Some Take a Lover* (1992) gives us insight into Parsi mores. Other recent novels of Parsi life are by women; *And Some Take a Lover* is written from the point of view of Roshni, a young college girl. The only daughter of a well-to-do Parsi family, she has no shortage of admirers in her highly Westernized circle; her friend Mithu's debonair husband, the rich Rustom, falls for her, and wants to go away to England with her until his divorce comes.

through. But she loves Sudhir, a dedicated follower of Mahatma Gandhi. The novel is a sensitive study of a young woman's growing up, in the politically conscious Bombay of the early 1940's.

An Anglo-Indian is the subject of *Mulligatawny Soup* (1993), Manorama Mathai's second book, which lacks the feminist fervour of her first book, *Lilies that Fester* (1989), a collection of stories. ElsieNora, a Eurasian, can belong neither to India nor to England once the Raj ends. (The massive *Trotter-Nama* by Allan Sealy has dealt with the same theme with great success.) The narrator, her neighbour in Camden, is a child of modern, multi-cultural Britain, with an English mother and an Indian father who deserted her even before the birth of the baby.

The foothills of Maharashtra form the setting for *The Madwoman of Jogare* (1998) by Sohaila Abdulali. The focus is not on family relationships but on ecology. It has an unusual protagonist, twentyfive-year-old Ifrat, who is privileged to lead a free life; she paints, moves around the countryside alone, interacts with the dedicated workers at the TUCS (the Tribal Upliftment and Cultural Studies Centre), and goes to Bombay whenever she feels like it, to sleep with her boyfriend Paul. The exploitation of the tribals, and the rapid deforestation by greedy property developers are all seen through her vigilant eyes.

Life in the Punjab in the decades before Partition is the subject of *Difficult Daughters* (1998) by Manju Kapur (b. 1948). The novel has a sophisticated plot, with the third generation daughter, Ida, going on a journey to understand her mother Virmati and her grandmother. The protagonist Virmati rejects an arranged marriage because she is in love with her professor, a married man. The circumscribed life of women, Virmati's successful efforts to obtain a Master's degree, and the prejudice she had to face even after legally marrying the professor are recreated in a very credible manner.

Yatra by Nina Sibal (discussed earlier) covers 150 years of life in the Punjab, but it has many other themes also, such as the birth of Bangla Desh in 1971, the *chipko* movement in the 'eighties, the heroine's search for a father-figure, and her uncle's terrorist activities in the nineteen-twenties. Her second novel *The Dogs of Justice* (1998) is about the Kashmir problem: it covers three decades in the life of Shahnaz, a rich and beautiful Kashmiri girl. The language lacks distinction, and the characterization is poor.

Some women have written about life in upper class society. Indira Mahindra's *The Club* (1984) is set in the early 'sixties, and

centres round Lucy and her stepsister Mabel who have stayed on in India after the other English people left. Her second novel, *The End Play* (1994) with a young woman as narrator, is more absorbing: like Mahesh Dattani's drama, it exposes personal relationships in modern India, revealing the power struggle in an Indian joint family.

Gita Mehta's *Raj* (1989) paints an evocative picture of life in an Indian royal family, but too much of untransmuted history finds its way into this autobiography of a young girl whose marriage is arranged with a prince. The novel deals with the coming of Indian independence as well as the emancipation of the heroine. The descriptions of princely splendour are vivid, and the novel is very readable.

Mehta's second novel, *A River Sutra* (1993), presents a kaleidoscopic view of Indian life, with an emphasis on the exotic aspects. The river in question is the Narmada. The novelist makes good use of a narrative device very popular in Indian storytelling, that of a frame story containing many tales. A civil servant retires to a rest house on the banks of the Narmada, where he listens to stories about a variety of people, such as the young Jain who renounced the world, a singer with a voice so sweet that his patron kills him in a fit of jealousy, or a musician's daughter who tries to make up for her physical ugliness by her music. There is even a touch of mystery as we puzzle out the relationship between a naked sadhu and Professor Shankar, the archaeologist.

Namita Gokhale (b. 1956) is a novelist who has grown and developed in the course of the four novels she has written in the last fifteen years. Her first novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984) deals with the upper crust of contemporary Indian society in metropolitan towns, and the characters change sexual partners quicker than their clothes. Her second novel, *Gods, Graves and Grandmothers* (1994) is notable for its social realism; the beginning of the book provides a fine satirical sketch of the way religious leaders proliferate in India. The protagonist, the young daughter of a prostitute, dreams of a glamorous future. The characters, especially the wily grandmother, are well drawn. *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996), which traces the lives of two star-crossed lovers who grew up in Nainital, bears testimony to the novelist's love for her native region. Gokhale's fourth novel, *The Book of Shadows* (1999) marks her coming of age. The protagonist, Rachita, was a supercilious teacher of English at a Delhi college; her life changes dramatically when her lover Anand commits suicide, and his sister throws acid on Rachita to punish her for her brother's death. The disfigured protagonist goes away to her ancestral home in the

Himalayas, abandoned but for an old caretaker, Lohaniju, who is a great storyteller. The old house has its own stories, recounted in the second part of the novel through the journal of a missionary who built it, flouting the superstitious beliefs of the local people. The third part is the most interesting - the narrator is a ghost who is tempted to partake of human emotions.

The first section in *The Book of Shadows* recreates the days of the Raj through the journal of a missionary. Gita Mehta's *Raj* too contains sections about the past. but Achala Moulik is the only woman who attempts full-fledged historical novels. She chronicles three generations of Ruthvens, from 1857 to 1867, in *The Conquerors* (1996), describing the expansion of British rule in India. *Earth is But a Star* (1997) deals with the Spanish empire. Set in fifteenth century Granada, Lisbon and Goa, it has every element of popular fiction: romance, adventure, intrigue, exotic settings, and even rebirth (to add an Indian touch). Achala Moulik can claim to be India's M.M. Kaye. Her work is quite readable, and satisfying as long as one does not look for any profundity. Moulik already has experience of writing popular fiction: she wrote a Mills and Boon romance in 1985 under a pseudonym.

Other Novelists

Circumferences (1994) is the first novel by Suma Josson (b. 1951), who has also produced feature films (*Janmadinam* in Malayalam), documentaries, poems (*A Harvest of Light*, 1993) and plays. Sarala, a painter, is the only daughter in a conventional family in Kerala; her parents arrange her marriage at nineteen, and do not approve of her artistic inclinations, or her attraction towards K, her art critic. In a blend of autobiographical and third person narration, Josson articulates the problems of writing. There are also long disquisitions on painting. The dialogue is unrealistic, and there is far too much of statement.

A Seasoned Couple (1994) by Kamalini Sengupta is an account, from marriage to death, of the life of Aditi and her husband Ashok Prasad, a civil servant. Like Upamanyu Chatterjee, Sengupta has worked as an officer in the Indian Administrative Service, but her book has none of the humour or intensity of Chatterjee's *English, August* (1988).

Nirmala Aravind's storytelling in *A Video, a Fridge and a Bride* (1995) reminds one of R. K. Narayan or Vikram Seth. The narration is linear, and the style is lucid and unselfconscious. She presents a clear

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picture of middle-class life in Kerala. Elizabeth Cherian, a young Syrian Christian, has completed her college education. Parental efforts to find a husband for her do not succeed, as they cannot pay the high dowry the grooms' parents demand.

Some women have turned to the longer form after publishing collections of short stories. Neelum Sharan Gour's first novel *Speaking of '62* (1995) recounts the fantasies of children whose outlook was changed by the Indo-Chinese war of 1962. The six children, their idealistic (if eccentric) parents and their neighbours are sketched vividly. Like the short stories in *Grey Pigeon* (1993), Gour's novel offers a sensitive picture of small town India.

Deepa Shah's first novel, *The Solitude of Surabhi* (1997), published seven years after her book of short stories, *Rebirth* (1990), is distinguished by its narrative technique. Every chapter focuses on one of the characters inhabiting a small Himalayan hill station; the next chapter is a first-person narration by that very character. Surabhi is young and vulnerable, and exploited by all with whom she comes into contact. Her own father, a petty shopkeeper, is the first, and turns her into an unpaid drudge after her mother dies. She works hard to help her younger brother get an education. As we piece together the life of Surabhi from the various narratives, we find that all the people in the town are uniformly nasty. The only exception is Nimish, a young child she gives tuition to, and his parents, who try to help her. Deepa Shah has perfect control over language, and her descriptions have a lyrical beauty. Yet her prose, unlike Arundhati Roy's never draws attention to itself. Her depiction of life in India is so authentic that it is difficult to believe that English is not her native language. *The Solitude of Surabhi* is the kind of novel that could be written in any Indian language. In its unrelenting pessimism, and its depiction of the fate of the underdog, this powerful novel reminds one of the work of Premchand, the noted Hindi writer.

Bulbul Sharma, author of three good volumes of short stories, concentrates on the victimisation of woman in her first novel, *Banana Flower Dreams* (1999), an ambitious attempt to present seven generations of women. Eating cooked banana flowers is a folk recipe for producing sons, rather than the unwanted daughters. As the hundred-year-old Monimala lies dying, the spirits of her malicious widowed aunts, and her mother Shamilidevi, hover around her; her mother tells her stories from Indian mythology as well as about her own life. We get a good cameo of her grandson Mihir and his wife Tilottama in America ("Mike" and "Tina") who "hated blacks even

more than they hated Muslims, gays, alcoholics and the Chinese." Their daughter Pia is carrying her black lover's child, and comes to India to get an abortion. Giving the unborn foetus a narrative voice is an interesting twist, but detracts from the seriousness of the story.

Some university teachers of English have tried their hand at fiction. Shakuntala Bharvani's first novel, *Lost Directions* (1996), uses a variety of narrative techniques, including letters, folk tales and short stories to present the predicament of her narrator, a college teacher trying to come to terms with her need for companionship.

The Walled City (1997) by Esther David is about three generations of women in a Jewish family in the walled city of Ahmedabad. The protagonist, a young girl, lives in the circumscribed old city, watching the new one rising up across the river. The usual pressures and anxieties of a young girls growing up in India are compounded by her Jewishness. Unlike her mother and aunts, who shun the culture around them, the protagonist freely mixes with Hindus, Muslims and Parsis, though they are very conscious that she is different. Very little fiction has been written about Indian Jews; *The Moor's Last Sigh* by Rushdie features an Indian Jew, but it reveals nothing about the problems of this shrinking community.

Rani Dharker teaches English literature at the M.S. University, Baroda. The first person narrative in her first novel, *The Virgin Syndrome* (1997) is interspersed with parodies of fables, and paragraphs with the caption "Memory of Siddharth" (Siddharth being the young man with whom the forty-plus heroine finally finds love and fulfilment). Dharker's concern with female sexuality prevents her from giving a complete picture of any character other than the heroine. The style has a great deal of vitality, but the vigorous social satire drifts into a kind of vague Magic Realism at the end. The protagonist's mother living in a fortress-like house with her six sisters, the family producing only daughters because of a Curse, and the "Tapestry-of-the-World" which her grandmother is always embroidering, seem to owe a lot to Rushdie.

Maya (1997) by Nirmala Moorthy deals with life in an ultraorthodox South Indian Brahmin household. Traditional concepts of marriage and the place of women ruins the lives of the first two daughters. The protagonist is the youngest daughter, and successfully breaks away. The way she finds marital happiness with a man of her choice is strongly reminiscent of Mills and Boon romances, complete with young heroine and older hero. Her second novel, *The Coiled Serpent* (2000) investigates the psyche of the protagonist in greater

depth; brought up in a rich matrilineal Nair household in Kerala, young Meena is encouraged to confine her interest to domestic matters. There is a dark secret in her mother's past, and the father, who loves her dearly, is always travelling and seldom at home. The coiled serpent refers to the antique armlet she loves to wear, a symbol of the *kundalini shakti*, psychic power.

Smell (1999) by Radhika Jha, is a well written account of a young girl suddenly uprooted from her comfortable life in Kenya. Eighteen-year-old Leela, studying in college, is sent away to live with her paternal uncle and his wife in Paris when the natives murder her father by setting his store on fire. Young Leela has such a keen sense of smell that she becomes a wonderful cook, but her life consists of drifting from one lover to another when she is thrown out of her uncle's home for revealing his extra-marital affairs. She is obsessed with smells, and is terrified that she herself gives off an unbearable smell; smell becomes a metaphor for cultural differences.

Ancient Promises (2000) by Jaishree Misra (b. 1961) is the moving story of a young mother trying to cope with a mentally handicapped baby. Young Janaki, the daughter of an air force officer in Delhi, is hustled into an arranged marriage because her Nair parents are shocked at her friendship with her classmate Arjun Mehta. Her mother-in-law and other relatives miss no opportunity for belittling the protagonist because she has been brought up in Delhi. The novelist gives a vivid description of life in Kerala, and the pitiable status of widows even in a matrilineal society.

Lakshmi Kannan (b. 1947) is a bilingual writer; she has published poetry and literary criticism in English, and writes novels and short stories in Tamil under the pen-name Kaaveri. She has translated some of her fiction into English. *Going Home* (1999) is her first novel (based on her Tamil novel *Aathukku Poganam*, first published in 1986). The immediate concern of the novel is the tradition which denies women a fair share of ancestral property. It starts with the protagonist Gayatri's longing for her maternal grandfather's house, on which her mother has no claim, and develops into a brilliant exploration of the themes of home, exile and home-making at various levels. There are touches of metafiction; Gayatri tries to write, and realises the difficulties that her friend Rama has faced (and overcome) as a woman writer. Kannan never falls into the trap of considering all men bad and all women angels. She reveals the various stratagems employed by society to keep woman in her place. The book certainly holds a mirror to life in modern India.

The Gin Drinkers (2000) by Sagarika Ghose (b. 1965) a promising first novel, is a comedy of manners. As the title suggests, she writes about the rich and fashionable, English speaking set in Delhi, the section of society presented in Nayantara Sahgal's novels. The heroine, Uma Chatterjee, is just back from Oxford; her father is a civil servant, clinging to anglicized ways, while her mother is an alcoholic. The characters are all recognizable types - Pamela Sen, heading a prestigious research institute in Delhi; Dhruv, the highflying academic; Madhavi, a professor at an American university who wants to come back to India with her baby daughter; Sam O'Toole, Uma's boyfriend from Oxford; and Jai Prakash, the hero of the novel, from a poor rural family, educated in a Hindi medium school. Ghose presents a vivid picture of life in contemporary Delhi.

Another interesting first novel *Nani's Book of Suicides* (2000) by Sunny Singh (b. 1969), explores the stream of consciousness of a young, educated, westernized Indian woman through her recurrent nightmares. Mini is brought up by her Nani (maternal grandmother) who is something of a witch, for she has the magical power of entering other people's minds and reading their dreams. The protagonist tries to run away from this domination - she calls herself Sammie, goes to study at an American university, works as a journalist in Mexico, and attempts to forget herself in alcohol, cocaine, and promiscuous sex, but she cannot get away from her grandmother. She always hears her Nani's voice, tormenting her with "stories of times gone by," emphasizing the Rajput sense of honour. Women from mythology and legend - Kunti, the mother of the Pandavas, Draupadi, Suneeti (the mother of the heroic Dhruv), Savitri, the poet-saint Meera, the beautiful Padmini, and their modern day counterparts - act out their stories in the narrator's consciousness. The Hindu concept of honour seems to entail suicide for women, so the title of the novel is not too far-fetched.

Diasporic Writing

There are many women writers, both novelists and poets, based in the U.S.A. and Britain. Some, like Jhabvala and Anita Desai, are late immigrants, while others, like Jhumpa Lahiri, belong to the second generation of Indians abroad. Most expatriate writers have a weak grasp of actual conditions in contemporary India, and tend to recreate it through the lens of nostalgia, writing about "imaginary homelands" (to use Rushdie's phrase). Their best work deals with Indian immigrants, the section of society they know at first hand. Suniti Namjoshi (already discussed in the section on "Magic Realism") and

Bharati Mukherjee are the oldest, and naturally, the most prolific.

Bharati Mukherjee (b. 1940) moved to the United States after obtaining an M.A. in 1962, and has never looked back. Her first two novels, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) and *Wife* (1975) were followed by two collections of short stories. Her third novel, *Jasmine* (1989) is about an illegal immigrant. Born Jyoti in a village in the Punjab, her name is modernized to Jasmine when a progressive young man marries her. He has finalized his plans of going to America when he is killed by Sikh terrorists; Jasmine goes instead, with a plan of immolating herself on the campus where her husband was to study. Entering America illegally entails being "raped and raped and raped." Once she reaches there, she kills the man who raped her. Events move at such a fast pace, and there are so many violent incidents that there is no time to think of emotion or characterization. The heroine finally becomes Jane Ripplemayer, carrying the baby of a rich Midwestern banker who becomes a cripple when an irate customer shoots him; but on the last page she breaks the bonds of duty to leave him for a university don. The predictions of an astrologer in her childhood, warning her of widowhood, prevent her from marrying Ripplemayer. The style is completely American: "I am out the door and in the potholed and rutted driveway, scrambling ahead of Taylor, greedy with wants and reckless from hope." Jasmine may express Mukherjee's concept of the archetypal American pioneer, but it fails to convince as a picture of a young Indian village girl. The way the novelist gets minor details wrong in her picture of the Punjab is a constant irritant to Indian readers.

The Raj has bequeathed an unlimited legacy to generations of writers to indulge their literary fantasies to the full. In *The Holder of the World* (1993) the protagonist Beigh Masters hunts through museums and auction houses and layers of history for a wonderful diamond called the "Emperor's Tear." In her search, she becomes fascinated by the life of Hannah Easton, who leaves her Puritan New England upbringing to become the mistress of Raja Jadav Singh, a seventeenth-century Indian prince who opposes Aurangzeb, the great Mughal emperor. 'this east-west liaison has parallels: Hannah's mother had run away with an Amerindian, while twentieth-century Beigh Masters has an Indian boyfriend, Venn Iyer, a brilliant computer scientist. Beigh Masters' quest of her ancestress reminds one of Jhabvala's *Heal and Dust*. Mukherjee attempts to integrate contemporary travelogue and ancient history, but never reaches the artistic levels of Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* (1992). The

whole framework of *The Holder of the World* is utterly contrived, and the choice of names for Indian characters is quite inept. The passages about India would not be out of place in tourist brochures trying to sell the exotic east.

Mukherjee's fifth novel, *Leave it to Me* (1997), is completely American. The only Indian touch is the prologue, which retells (very badly) the mythological story of Mahishasuramardini, the Devi (Goddess) who killed the Buffalo Demon. The protagonist, twentythree-year-old Debby DiMartino, leaves her comfortable home and Italian-American foster parents, heads for California in search of her genetic parents, and renames herself "Devi". After sleeping with a variety of men, including the detective whom she has hired, she learns that her mother was one of the "flower children" who had come to India in search of meaning in life, and her father is a serial killer who specialised in strangling his victims. The book, soaked in blood and reeking of violence, is written in the kind of American English the average Indian would have trouble understanding:

I glanced up, but his sad eyes were on Jess and Hain on the dance floor.
Remake of the Frankie/ Ovidia/ Debby Triangle, starring middle-aged white-bread. Debby'd burned Frankie's house down, and possibly killed a rival.
Devi was more mature, but you couldn't dis her and get away with it.

Bharati Mukherjee declares: "I am an American writer, in the American mainstream, trying to extend it. This is a vitally important statement from me - I am not an Indian writer, not an exile, not an expatriate. I am an immigrant; my investment is in the American reality, not the Indian." With *Leave it to Me*, her ambition is realized: she is no longer an Indian writer. But whether she has extended the American mainstream is a debatable point.

Shona Ramaya's first novel, *Flute* (1989) is set in the days of the Raj. India is an exotic, mysterious place, which upsets the psyche of her hero, Julian, sixth Earl of Ravinspur. Julian plays the Indian bamboo flute so well that villagers identify him with God Krishna who could enchant all with his flute. Descriptions of India go wrong in small details, and we never know whether Julian has mystic insight or is simply suffering from some kind of mental aberration.

The first novel by Indira Ganesan (b. 1960). *The Journey* (1990), proves that fictional India is still a saleable commodity in the West. The setting is an amalgam of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry,

named Pi, an abbreviation for "Prospero's Island," which the novelist describes as "a chunk of India that is not quite India left to float in the Bay of Bengal," but the Shakespearean trope is not developed further. The Krishnans, settled in the U.S.A., come back to the island to attend the funeral of Rajesh, Rukmini's sister's son. Rukmini's two daughters react in entirely different ways; Renu, the elder, born on the same day as Rajesh, has always considered herself his twin, and somehow feels guilty for his death; the younger daughter, fifteen-year-old Meenakshi, is completely Americanized. Ganesan's descriptions of India often ring false:

On the cool floor of the storeroom, next to sacks of rice and flour, bins of dried lemons and peppers, Renu and Rajesh spread their comics and read as lizards darted noiselessly across the walls .. Renu's hair was thick and nothing she did, rubbing bitter roots onto the scalp or merely tugging at it, made it any thinner.

The setting is South India, but the details do not conform to real life there: rice is not stored in sacks in homes, because of the humidity and insects and rats. Flour is hardly used in South Indian Brahmin cooking; in a whole month, a family would not consume more than a pound or two of flour, so no one stores "sacks of flour." The storeroom has "bins of dried lemons and peppers" - lemon is pickled in salt and stored in glass or ceramic jars, and peppers (in India we call them "red chillies") are not the only spice used in Indian cooking. As for Renu's hair, throughout the length and breadth of India, every little girl's dream is to have thick hair, and women spend hours tending their hair to make it thick, black and glossy. And where would a little girl of ten get "bitter roots" to rub into her hair, in a culture where children are supervised round the clock?

Indira Ganesan's second novel, *Inheritance* (1997), is no better than her first. The young protagonist is the youngest of three sisters, all with different fathers. Her father is an American, and the girl keeps fantasising about him. The rest of the book is taken up with Richard, a visitor from America. The delineation of her mother lacks all credibility: she leads an independent life, consorting with a variety of men, giving up her daughters to be brought up by their aunts. The abiding problem with Ganesan's fiction is the locale. The island of Pi is supposed to be midway between India and Sri Lanka, but we are always presented with a slightly warped version of Indian life.

Sunetra Gupta (b. 1965) is an epidemiologist by profession,

working at the Imperial College, London; she lives in Oxford. Her first novel, *Memories of Rain* (1992), which won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1996, is perhaps her best, because her style has not yet grown involuted. The heroine, a young Bengali girl, is swept off her feet by an Englishman visiting Calcutta. Once they are in England after marriage, she realizes that he is unfaithful. She refuses to live as a cosy threesome with his new girl friend, and comes back to India with her child. The novel has some memorable scenes of life in Calcutta. Her second novel, *The Glassblower's Breath* (1993), is set in the cities of London, New York and Calcutta. The protagonist is a young Indian woman in search of ideal love and companionship. The narrative technique is original - first person narratives in fiction are common, but here we have the equivalent of second person narration:

That night, you dreamt, that instead of dying fresh as a blade of grass, last year, one winter afternoon, your sister had lingered, until her flesh had blackened so that the moonstone on her finger stood a monstrous white against her charred skin, and the whitewashed walls beside her bed, where, in your dream, she fought grimly with death, the whitewashed walls, in your dream, spread with stains of old blood at the touch of her fingers, as death sliced into her gums like the sharp thread with which the two of you would floss your teeth after a meal of rubbery mutton. Yet, in truth, she had left you, ... You dragged the tendrils of your dreams across the mirrored hallway, a mirage of plaster icing, ghostly dim ...

Gupta never uses direct speech for dialogues in any of her novels. Her densely textured language, piling words upon words, make her second and third novels almost unreadable. *Moonlight into Marzipan* (1995), her third novel, has large portions written in the present tense, in addition to many passages using the second person. It is difficult to follow the thread of narrative, because we are often left wondering who the narrator is. The protagonist Promothesh (suggesting Prometheus) makes an important scientific discovery in Calcutta. He goes to England with his wife; other characters include a young woman Anya, Yuri Sen, and Robin Underhill, an Oxford don. *A Sin of Colour* (1999) is her fourth novel. The hero, Debendranath Roy, falls desperately in love with the highly accomplished wife of his elder brother. He comes away to England, and marries Jennifer, but simply disappears from a punt in Cambridge. He surfaces twenty years later in Calcutta because he is losing his eyesight. The devoted Jennifer comes here to look after him - she

seems to be modelled on the self-sacrificing Indian wife, a stock character of Hindi films. This book has the same peculiar attenuated style as her earlier novels.

Atima Srivastava and Meera Syal both work in Britain, and are also playwrights. The clash between the older and younger generations of immigrants is one of the central themes of their work. Atima Srivastava's first novel, *Transmission* (1992) is about young people who have adapted to their new land. Ungellie (she calls herself Angie) and her brother Rakesh (Rax) are the children of an Indian civil servant who has settled in England. Angie is a young and beautiful television researcher in Soho, working on a TV film about an HIV positive couple. The theme is continued in *Looking for Maya* (1999), where it is investigated in terms of a young, brilliant student falling in love with an older man, an Indian professor. There are some amusing sequences, such as the one describing visiting relatives from India, otherwise the book is little more than a post-colonial Mills and Boon, with a pretentious title.

Meera Syal's screenplays *Bhaji on the Beach* and *My Sister Wife* were favourably received. Her first novel *Anita and Me* (1996) is narrated by a child in an Indian family in Britain. Though we get a clear picture of nine-year-old Meena's interaction with her British neighbours, Syal cannot sustain the child's point of view, and the adult novelist frequently intrudes. *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999) deals with the youth and middle age of three school friends: Sunita, a former law student and activist, has married her university sweetheart Akash; Tania has rejected tradition, family and marriage in favour of a career in television, while child-like and unalluring Chila has managed to bag the seemingly perfect Deepak. As in her other works, Syal reveals the plight of British-Asian men and women, caught between the traditions of their families and the social mores around them.

Meena Alexander's first novel, *Nampally House* (1991), was set in Hyderabad. Her second, *Manhattan Music* (1997), deals with the lives and problems of Indian immigrants living in America. The two major characters here are women: Sandhya, a Syrian Christian, and Draupadi, a Hindu. She uses a complex narrative technique: Sandhya's doings are reported by the omniscient narrator, while Draupadi speaks for herself. Alexander uses a variety of epigraphs for chapters; sources range from Kafka to Kalidas (the Sanskrit poet) and Akkamahadevi (a medieval Kannada mystic woman poet). Unlike her first novel, *The Mistress of Spices*, which was set in the United States and employed Magic Realism, Chitra Banerjee

Divakaruni's second novel *Sister of My Heart* (1999) is in the realistic mode, describing the complicated relationships in a family in Bengal. The wealthy Anju and the beautiful Sudha are distant cousins, but very close to each other because they were born on the same day, and are brought up together. The Chatterjee family fortunes are at a low ebb, as there are only widows at home - the girls' mothers, and their aunt. Alternate chapters are narrated by Anju and Sudha. Slowly the dark secrets of the past are unveiled. The Indian discrimination against women stands exposed: the girls consider themselves inferior beings because they are female. But there is too much of the soap opera about the predictable story line.

Some other immigrants have published first novels. *Love, Stars and all That* (1994) by Kirin Narayan has a graduate student at Berkeley, Gita Das, as the protagonist. She implicitly believes an astrologer in India who told her that she would meet her Prince Charming in March 1984. The novel, describing her growth into a self-assured academic, after various relationships, is funny at places, but cannot compare with Anurag Mathur's *The Inscrutable Americans*. One wonders why Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak provokes such extreme reactions; Rukun Advani's *Beethoven Among the Cows* (1994) has Professor Lavatri Alltheori, "the Moby Dick of the American Academy, once a medium-sized Bengali gent ... now a lady" while Kirin Narayan has a character named Kamashree Ratnabhushitalingaln-Hernandez (Kamashree = "Goddess of sexual love," Ratnabhushitalingaln = "one whose phallus is ornamented with gems") whose sexual escapades are given as much importance as her activities as a high profile, unintelligible, post-modern literary critic.

Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Mem* (1996) describes the life of Saroja, married to a railway officer who, because of her sharp tongue, is referred to as "Tamarind Mem" by her servants. The novel is in two parts. The first presents Kamini, her elder daughter, reminiscing about her childhood; the second part, "Saroja," is narrated by the mother. Badami is very successful in depicting Tamarind Mem's unhappiness, and the tensions within the family, but is not equally good at showing the external reality of life in India. Ameena Meer's *Bombay Talkie* (1995) describes the Indian sojourn of a young born-in-the-U.S.A. heroine, but the novelist presents only the usual stock response to India.

Kiran Desai's *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) fails to live up to the expectations raised by Salman Rushdie's comments (in *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997*). Kiran's style and

sensibility have little in common with her mother Anita Desai's. The novel is a superficial treatment of a common theme of Indian fiction: the holy man and the gullibility of the public. The theme has been handled in a more profound way by two novels published forty years ago: Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger* (1954) and R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958).

Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999) was adjudged the best book in the Canada and Caribbean region of the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Set in a village in the Punjab, it is the story of sixteen-year-old Roop, the beautiful daughter of a poor man, whom the forty-plus Sardarji marries secretly so that she can give him a son. His first wife Satya, rich, intelligent and proud, but defined by her barrenness alone, does not give up her place without a struggle. The Partition of 1947, and the atrocities on women that accompanied it, are seen through a woman's eyes. A lack of particulars in the depiction of contemporary India is perhaps inevitable when the novelist is physically out of touch with the country and has to depend on memory or news reports, and Baldwin's work too suffers from this drawback.

Avoiding an Indian setting, like Meera Syal, is one way of circumventing this problem. Shreelata Rao-Seshadri has written a fastpaced detective story set entirely in the USA: *Matrimonials are Deadly* (1995). Her heroine Viji investigates crime in the intervals of her postgraduate literature courses at a mid-West University. There is very little crime fiction by women; the only other book is *The Turning* by Armin Wandrewala (1996).

Children's Fiction

Before the nineteen-eighties, Indian English children's literature consisted primarily of retellings of mythological stories from the *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*, and English versions of fables from the *Panchatantra* and the *Jatakamala*. Now there is a variety of books for children. Many established women novelists and poets have written children's books. These include Shashi Deshpande's *A Summer Adventure* (1978), *The Hidden Treasure* (1980), *The Only Witness* (1980) and *The Narayanpur Incident* (1982, about India's struggle for independence); Suniti Namjoshi's *Aditi and the One-eyed Monkey* (1986); Subhadra Sengupta's *Good Times at Islamgunj* (1982), *The Mussourie Mystery* (1986), and *Bishnu, The Dhobi Singer* (1996) and its sequel *Bishnu Sings Again* (1998) set in the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar; Poile Sengupta's (b. 1948) *The Exquisite Balance*

(1987); Monika Verina's *The Crow and the Peacock: A Tale for Children of all Ages* (1988); Chandramoni Narayanaswamy's *Adventures of 'Fun'* (1994), Kavery Bhatt's *Once Upon a Forest* (1986), *The Cuckoo Clock* (1986), *The School Upon a Hill* (1992), *A Ticket to Home and Other Stories* (1996) and *Danger in Dead City* (1998); Vera Sharma's *Anita* (1997); Kalpana Swaminathan's *Ordinary Mr Pai: Two Urban Fairytales* (1999) and Zai Whitaker's *Andaman Boy* (1999). There are also women who write specifically for children, such as Neelima Sinha (*The Chandipur Jewels*, 1981, and *The Yellow Butterfly*, 1986); Geeta Dharmarajan (*Super Brat and Other Stories*, 1989, and *Tegu and Stolen Crackers*, 1990); and Deepa Agarwal (*Adventure in the Hills*, 1996, and *Traveller's Ghost*, 1997).

Some women have written just one novel each in the last decade; however, the variety of themes is impressive. In *First Light* (the British edition has the title *Amritvela*, 1988) by Leena Dhingra (b. 1942), the heroine Meera is settled in Britain, but feels dissatisfied with her life there, and wants to come back to India; *Love in the Throes of Tradition* (1990) by Basanti Karmakar is a realistic description of three generations of a Bengali family, and would no doubt make a successful soap opera for Indian television; there is nothing Indian about Brinda Mukerjee's *The Fourth Profile* (1990), a fast-paced thriller set in a country bordering South Africa; *Fire Blossoms* by Christine Gomez examines the status of women in India and the dowry problem; Priya Sarukkai-Chabria's *The Other Garden* (1995) is completely taken up with multiple perspectives and alternative modes of storytelling; *A Partial Woman* (1997) by Mina Singh describes the pain of a childless woman, who is attracted to her husband's friend; Ruchira Mukerjee's *Toad in My Garden* (1998) is distinguished by the beautiful language, but the story of a young girl finding true love is trite.

Most women writers seem to favour serious work, rather than entertaining popular fiction: the major exception is Shobha De, well known to Indian magazine readers as the queen of gossip; she was the founder-editor of *Stardust* which specialized in stories about filmstars. Her first novel, *Socialite Evenings* (1989) is a *roman à clef* about a young middle-class girl who is attracted to the world of films and modelling. It was expected to outdo Jackie Collins's *Hollywood Wives*, but the plot is thin and the narration banal. The narratives of Shobha Dé (*Starry Nights*, 1991; *Sisters*, 1992; *Strange Obsession*, 1992; *Sultry Days*, 1994; *Snapshots*, 1995; and *Second Thoughts*, 1996) would seem to belong less to serious fiction than to pulp

writing. They are "entertainments" rather than novels proper:

Sagas of bed-hopping, chronicles of high society and low ethicality, drawing room manners and barn-door morals, "Spare-Rib-aldry" or "fuction" (to use Farrukh Dhondy's expressive term) would perhaps be an apt description of them. Empress of the Middle, Dé seems to tell her female readers, "women of the world, unite; you have nothing to lose except your virginity"; while her message to men appears to be: "remember your member and forget the rest; for the penis is mightier than the sword, or the head or the heart". Dé's works do offer glimpses of what she could have achieved, had she set herself higher literary standards; but low aim is apparently a far better fame-winner, social gainer and money-spinner, whatever the musty old proverb may say. (M. K. N.).

Note

Contemporary Novelists. Fifth Edition. Ed. Lesley Henderson. Chicago and London: St. James Press, 1991.