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Reading / Writing India Across Cultures:
Comparative Study of Receptions of Three Indian English
Texts Across Three Audiences and Two Languages

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Abstract

This thesis compares the near-simultaneous receptions of three recent Indian English works of fiction – Interpreter of Maladies by Jhumpa Lahiri, The Alchemy of Desire by Tarun Tejpal and The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai – by three distinct audiences: Indian, non-Indian Anglophone and French.

Within the framework of reception theory, where culture is bound to a geographical location, ‘Reading/ Writing India Across Cultures’ examines the receptions of Indian English literature in its three audiences to observe the effect of factors such as existing hierarchies between the culture represented by a literary text and culture(s) receiving that text, hegemonic reading approaches to Indian English literature such as postcolonial theory, and author identities inflected by distance from the culture of origin. It also examines the role of literary prizes in shaping the publication and reception of literary works.

In its focus on the French audience of Indian English literature, ‘Reading/ Writing India Across Cultures’ is an attempt to fill in a gap created by the anglocentricity of the field of Indian English literature. Tracing the history of French translations of Indian English literature, this thesis argues that the double-edged process of translation is both a reception in itself and a tool that shapes the reception of a literary text within a linguistic community. In view of the history of colonial relations between France and India and the place that both countries occupy within the present day global hierarchy, this thesis emphasises the need to examine French reception of Indian English literature within the framework of reception and postcolonial translation studies, and also the relevance of French translation practices vis-à-vis Indian English literature and French attitudes towards French postcolonial literatures to any such study.

More generally, this thesis seeks to question the prevalent perceptions about Indian English literature and the hegemony of the postcolonial perspective as the reading approach to this Literature in current literary scholarship, and to suggest the need for a more sophisticated application of reception theory in dealing with literary works by writers nominally from the same country but of different resident status, which circulate internationally with great rapidity in a globalised context.
To

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Foreword

As a student and researcher in the field of literary and cross-cultural reception studies, I am aware of the potentially subjective nature of supposedly objective academic choices such as a thesis topic. In my case the choices made regarding the area of research, of the thesis topic and of the questions to look at are highly subjective.

As someone of Indian origin who is a dual citizen of India and another country, I and many like me embody the changing relationship between India and English as well as the changing concept of Indian identity. We experience the conferral of native informancy or the status of authentic native informant on the basis of Indian origin, the inflection that the distance from the home country brings to a diasporian’s identity and to the perception about it at ‘home’. The various issues that my thesis deals with such as the reception of Indian English literature, the position it enjoys in the outer world, its status in India and vis-à-vis other Indian literatures, and the images of India that are represented or read in it are of personal interest to me.

The choice of French audience is shaped by my ability to read French. This allowed me direct access to French translations of the three selected texts, reviews, articles and scholarly material published in France and in French, in their entirety. All the translations from French in this thesis are mine unless specified differently.

I also personify reception theory’s claim that a reader’s socio-cultural context determines the way s/he reads a literary text. My own familiarity with French, francophone, Indian English and other Indian literatures as well as postcolonial theory have allowed me to see connections and actualise readings that might be unavailable to other readers who do not have the same background. At the same time my unfamiliarity with some other literatures, theories and social contexts limit my ability to actualise some readings that might be available to readers familiar with those areas.

The readings I offer of the three texts in this thesis are my readings. I do not assume existence of any normative reading against which to judge receptions in each of the selected audiences. However, since I share with each of these audiences a little of their cultural context I see the possibilities that they leave unexplored. Also from my privileged position of access to most of the epitextual material from each selected audience and in all three audiences, it is easier to notice patterns, gaps and omissions.
Although this thesis finds itself at the intersection of reception and postcolonial theories, it is essentially presented within the framework of reception theory where culture is bound to a geographical territory. It is in this limited sense that the term culture appears in this thesis and is questioned. If one was to look back at the chosen historical moment (1998 to 2008), the currency that postcolonial perspective enjoys as the predominant interpretive norm of the period will be unmistakable. The points raised about the hegemony of postcolonial perspective are to be considered in that light and keeping in mind the gramscian definition of hegemony as power through consent and persuasion.

The epitextual material analysed here in each reception analysis is quite comprehensive and includes all the reviews and articles that I could find. This is the reason for limiting the commentary on the non-Indian Anglophone audience mainly to the British/ American audience. The decision to remain within the boundaries of printed material was conscious. It was based on the desire for quality and uniformity of the epitext. It was also in a way inevitable since the global availability of the traditionally more location specific print media better demonstrates the goal of this thesis to emphasise the need to question the geographically defined notion of culture and audience from within the framework of reception theory.

Finally, although French translation of Indian English literature has a history and French marginalisation of Francophone literatures from former French colonies is an often discussed fact, the study of French reception in ‘Reading/ Writing India Across Cultures’ is a leap of faith, without any scholarly antecedent bringing the two together to draw strength from. As such, the observations and comments on the French reception remain more conjectural. Anything more concrete will only be possible after further research in the area.
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Introduction

Within the framework of reception theory where culture is bound to a geographical location, cross-cultural reception is generally presented in terms of cultural and temporal difference where cultures producing and receiving the texts are separated either by time or by geographical boundaries, and as such are unaware and independent of each other. However, in the contemporary world, global movement of people blurs the geographical boundaries between cultures. Literatures supposedly representing one culture are produced in multiple locations and almost immediately and simultaneously received in many cultures.

Within postcolonial theory, hierarchy between the colonising and colonised culture plays a significant role in shaping the way the colonised receive the texts from the colonising culture. Since increased interaction has not led to erasure of hierarchies between cultures, present-day cross-cultural receptions of literature need to be thought of in terms of hierarchical relations between cultures receiving and producing literary texts. Bringing the two together, this thesis seeks to examine the role that existing cultural hierarchies, within the historical moment of reception and as part of cultural difference between audiences, play in the reception of literary texts across cultures.

With its writers and audiences spread across the globe, Indian English literature is a classic example of literatures that travel almost instantaneously and contemporaneously across cultures of different hierarchical status and beyond their own linguistic boundaries. Owing to its institutionalisation as a postcolonial literature, the postcolonial perspective remains the predominant critical approach to Indian English literature and certain assumptions about its writers (diasporic), intended audience (Anglophone and metropolitan) and its reception (negative in India) prevail. On the one hand, the culture this literature represents has vastly changed and is moving beyond its geographical boundaries in various different ways. On the other hand, the literature itself displays a huge diversity of subjects, interests and concerns as well as complexity of themes, structures and techniques, that calls such simplistic categorisation(s) into question. In view of these changes, this thesis explores the effect of the hegemony¹ of the postcolonial perspective, within the present historical moment, in the literary world in general and in relation to Indian English literature in particular, on the reception of this literature.

¹ Hegemony here is meant in the gramscian sense of power obtained either through persuasion of the people or derived from their common consent. (Ranjit Guha paraphrased by Amalendu K. Chakraborty, “Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India (review),” Journal of World History 11, no. 2 (2000): 373-379.)
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Indian English literature moves beyond the vast and ever-expanding borders of English through translations. According to reception theory, cultural context shapes literary reception. The history of reception of postcolonial literatures in a particular linguistic community and its translation practices constitute a part of the cultural context of that community. As such, these factors need to be taken into account in the study of reception of Indian English literature across a linguistic border. This thesis will look at the French reception of Indian English literature\(^2\), with the aim of examining the part French translation practices and the French attitudes towards Francophone literatures from former French colonies play in it.

Using insights from reception and postcolonial studies, this thesis proposes to examine, analyse and compare the Indian, non-Indian and French receptions of three Indian English texts published within the last decade, which exemplify the diversity of Indian English literature. The aim of this study is to examine the receptions of these texts for the effect of the factors such as existing cultural hierarchies, author identities inflected by physical distance from the culture of origin, cultural specificities such as translation practices of an audience, and the interpretive norms and reading approaches employed predominantly for the parent literature within the specified historical moment of reception.

This introductory chapter will begin with a brief summary of the developments and gaps in reception studies and postcolonial studies in general with the aim of pointing out the way these two fields can inform and enrich each other. This will be followed by: a review of relevant cross-cultural, multicultural reception studies within both fields in order to show how this thesis is related to and different from these antecedents, a section defining the field of research and issues specific to reception of Indian English literature, then brief histories of receptions of Indian English literature by Indian, non-Indian Anglophone and French audiences. This chapter will conclude by outlining the structure of the thesis as a whole and the individual chapters that follow.

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\(^2\) The choice of French audience is determined by my ability to read French. This allowed to me to read the French translations in entirety and have direct access to the reviews, articles and scholarly material published in France and in French. The translations from the French epitextual material are entirely mine unless specified differently.
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Reception studies and postcolonial studies

“[T]he goal of reception theory is to identify a range of possible reactions and interpretations at a particular historical moment.”

“The work of art manifests itself as sign in its inner structure, in its relation to reality, and also in its relation to society, to its creator and its recipients.” – Mukařovský

According to reception theory, the reception of a literary text is historically and culturally relative, which means that the reaction of the reading community or audience is conditioned by the historical moment or time in which that audience exists and the culture that it belongs to. When a text is read within one culture at different historical moments, the changes in the preferences, norms, beliefs, reading habits, and prevalent interpretive practices of that audience over time play a role in its reception. Similarly, the reception of that text in other cultures is influenced by the same features in the respective receiving audiences at the moment of reception. The history of reception of a text may be traced over different time periods in both the culture in which it originates (its home culture) and in other cultures as the text travels into them.

Reception theory, though reader-oriented, does not exclude the text. This is expressed by Jauss’s belief in the ability of a literary text to transform the reader’s horizon of expectations (a “set of expectations established by cultural norms, conventions and presuppositions that inform how a reader understands and evaluates a literary work at any given time”). However, reception theory differentiates between ‘a printed text and the literary work’ or between an artefact and the aesthetic object. A literary work or the aesthetic object is defined as the “meaning correlate of the artefact in the collective consciousness of the readers.” The larger the number of meaning correlates through actualisation of the range of readings and interpretations invited by a text, the richer it is as an aesthetic object or literary work. Conversely, if only a limited number of the readings and interpretations invited by the text are actualised by the readers then that is reductive to the text’s potential.

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Iser uses the term ‘indeterminacies’ for the difference between extra-textual reality (the society or culture presented in the text as it is at the moment of production of the text) and its textual representation (the way it is presented in the text); the elements in the text that are left to the reader’s imagination and the gaps or missing links in the narrative caused by structural fragmentation. For him, these indeterminacies invite the reader to imagine and actualise the ‘missing’ elements and interrelations in the process of reading and making meaning.

Iser’s indeterminacies are a property of the text but they become a historically or temporally determined property of the audience, as Jauss argues that a reception study “must be able to describe which elements of the structure are actualized at a given moment within a prevailing system of literary norms.” Reception thus becomes an encounter between the ‘artefact or text’, which is its author’s subjective choice and representation of certain aspects of the extra-textual reality, and the reader’s subjective interpretation or concretisation of that textual reality into meaning – a subjective interpretation that is influenced by the reader’s socio-cultural context and the prevalent interpretive norms, at a given historical moment, of the ‘reading collective’ that s/he belongs to.

The significance of the social context of the reader in the reception of a text is evident in concepts such as ‘interpretive communities’ or ‘reading formations’. Interpretive communities, according to Stanley Fish, are “made up of those who share interpretive strategies ... for constituting [the texts’] properties and assigning [the texts] their intentions”, whereas ‘reading formation’ is defined as “the relationship among texts, readers, and contexts that determines the ways texts are read at any particular point in history”.

However, the shared interpretive strategies do not form or create the interpretive communities but are rather just an expression of predetermined communities and stem from shared contexts. As Kálmán says, “any interpretation logically presupposes an interpretive community, as far as it presupposes a language, a dialect, a culture, an educational background, [and] other texts.” Terms such as ‘formations’ and ‘communities’ imply boundaries and plurality, which in turn imply differences and relationships. The differences and relationships between different interpretive communities are

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defined not only by the interpretive strategies but also by their social context, since “readers are not simply the ‘subjects of the text’, but also ‘social subjects’ who live in a particular social formation, and who are immersed in a variety of complex cultural systems, of which a text is only a single component”. ¹⁴

Normally, a text is first published and received in its ‘home’ culture and then in other cultures, either in its original language or in translation. However, this simple sequence has been complicated by the increased mobility both of authors, through diasporisation of the world, and of texts, through globalisation of the publishing industry. Today a text with emotional provenance from a certain culture or representing a certain culture is not necessarily physically produced or received first within that culture. It can very well be published elsewhere or written by a diasporic author, a situation which problematises the notion of the culture of origin of a text and lends importance to its cross-cultural and multicultural reception.

As we will see later, both cross-cultural and multicultural reception analyses are quite common in film, media and communication researches, where reception studies, in the form of audience studies, have become central ever since the concept of text broadened to include films, soap operas and other cultural products. Whereas in the field of literary studies, cross-cultural studies of the reception of a text or an author are not uncommon, multicultural studies still remain a rarity.

In studies of the reception of a text from one culture by different cultures or audiences, the focus has generally remained on the text (i.e. on the text’s potential or ability to invite different readings through its different elements or structural complexity) or on the audiences (i.e. on the differences in the cultures and/or interpretive practices of the audiences). Attention is paid, both to the social context of an individual reader in the form of his/her ‘interpretive community’ and to the (consequent) differences between the receptions of different interpretive communities. However, this attention is rarely extended to the social context of that ‘interpretive community’ or to the matrix of hierarchical intercultural relations within which it exists and to the geographical and linguistic boundaries that define it. As we will see a little later in the review of some cross cultural reception studies, the relationship between the culture receiving a text and the culture and/or the author producing that text has not acquired the same significance in reception studies that it has in postcolonial studies.

The way in which both the history of intercultural relations and the power differential between cultures play roles in the reception of a text from a dominant culture into a dominated culture is evident in the retrospectively resistant re-readings and rewritings of colonial texts (texts written by authors who belonged to the colonising culture). The awareness of this power differential informs the postcolonial ascription of the role of, to quote Gauri Vishwanathan, “surrogate [coloniser] in his highest and most perfect state”\textsuperscript{15} to the colonial texts, along with the intention to inspire awe and belief in the superiority of the coloniser’s culture as well as the ability to instil the ‘knowledge’ of their own cultural inferiority in the minds of the colonised people. The awareness of the existing power differential is equally evident in the patronising colonial responses of publishers and readers in the colonising country (or dominant culture) to texts by authors from the colonised country (or dominant culture)\textsuperscript{16} and not the least in Fredric Jameson’s first-worldian declaration that “The third-world novel will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce.”\textsuperscript{17}

It is in this context that this thesis posits that intercultural relations are an important factor when a text from a dominated or hierarchically lower culture travels into a dominant or hierarchically higher culture. The power differential and the history of relations between the producing and receiving cultures (cannot but) enter the equation as much here as they are believed to do in the reception of a colonial text by the colonised culture.

The issues become even more complex in the case of literature from diasporas, which are formed as the result of migrations and mass movements induced by the processes of colonisation and globalisation. In other words, the issue of hierarchical intercultural relations becomes even more pertinent when authors write about their ‘home cultures’ from within the ‘dominant’ centre where they live part, or all, of their lives as members of diasporas and usurp, or are accorded, the status of authentic representatives of the ‘home culture’ based on their origin.

The literatures classified as postcolonial, Third World, marginal, migrant or minority literatures (which in many cases are just different names for the same literature) routinely travel into the former colonising, now First World or metropolitan, countries or are produced within them. The increasing diasporisation and multiculturalisation of the world consuming literature and the multinationalisation

\textsuperscript{15} Gauri Viswanathan, Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 10.


of the industry producing it, through processes of globalisation, have made such travelling of texts a common occurrence.

However, the dominated cultures are not forever and uniformly fixed within the same degree of domination. The dynamism of the home culture has an impact on the configurations of diasporas and diasporic identities. Nor is the identity of authors from the ‘home culture’ monolithically diasporic, a fact that sometimes gets overlooked in the case of the aforementioned literatures from dominated cultures. Furthermore, even excluding the diasporas, the dominant audience is not a culturally, linguistically or, in terms of its power relations with the dominated cultures, even historically homogenised entity, nor is it the only audience for the text.

In the globalised world, texts – especially those consecrated by prestigious international literary awards and/or from a literature ‘in vogue’ (as is at present the case of some of the earlier mentioned postcolonial, migrant, marginal, etc. literatures) – travel quickly or are available almost simultaneously, in the original and through translations into various metropolitan languages, to multiple audiences separated geographically and/or linguistically. At the same time, the reach of a metropolitan language such as English, though determined to a large extent by the spread of its earlier colonial empire, is not limited to that empire. Since English is also the current global lingua franca, a postcolonial text in English is available not only to the audiences in the ‘dominant centre’ but also to those in that text’s ‘peripheral’ home in a former colony, other former British colonies as well as other countries which fall in none of these categories but are adopting English as the language of international communication.

These various audiences belong to the same historical moment but to different cultures, which exist in a matrix of hierarchical global relations complicated by the diasporisation and the multiculturalisation of the world. The same channels of distribution and communication that make a text available to these audiences possibly make them aware of and susceptible to each other’s responses to that text. Does this result in a uniformly global reception? How similar or different are the receptions of a text in its various audiences? Is there a dialogue between these receptions? Are they equally susceptible or receptive or reactive to each other’s responses? What role does cultural hierarchy play in this matter? What impact do the increasingly complex aspects of the field of production and consumption of literature have on the reception of texts and the culture that they

18 In postcolonial theory, the colonising country is the ‘dominant centre’ of the empire as opposed to the colonies which are the margins or ‘periphery’.
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represent? And most importantly, what impact does the hierarchical difference between cultures, evident in the commonly used terms such as First World and Third World countries / societies or centre and margins, have on the reception of texts that represent the Third World or marginal cultures and that travel into metropolitan or First World cultures (even if, or especially when, these cultures are no longer clearly separated by definite linguistic or geographical boundaries)?

If the receptions of a text by its different audiences are traced and compared to each other, they could reveal what happens as influences of the shared historical moment, of the hierarchical relation with the culture represented by the text and individual cultural as well as interpretive specificities intersect within each audience. In other words, such an exercise will allow us to observe the responses to the same text by different audiences that belong to the same ‘historical moment or time frame’ but to different cultures, or to use Bennett’s term, reading formations.19 It will create an opportunity to examine not only the similarities and differences in the responses of each audience but also the presence (or absence) of interaction or dialogue between these responses and what this does to and for the text and its parent literature as well as the culture that it represents.

Such a study might also reveal whether (and to what extent), along with the issues such as power differentials between the culture represented by a text and its receiving cultures or cultural differences between the receiving cultures, the hierarchic relations between the different receiving cultures complicate the field of reception of the text in question. In addition, it will enrich our understanding of the text by making us, as readers, aware of “which elements in a literary work appear dominant as a result of a prevailing code (interpretive norms) and which other elements appear perspectively foreshortened or even completely hidden”.20

This is the type of analysis and comparison of reception(s) that the present study proposes to conduct for Indian English literature produced between 1998 and 2008. It will compare the receptions of three Indian English works by three authors, in three audiences which received them almost simultaneously.

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Antecedents: cross-cultural reception studies and studies of reception of postcolonial literature

Globalisation and multinationalisation of channels of production and distribution have resulted in an increase in the global exchange of cultural products, meaning that products aimed at one audience are frequently accessed by other cultures. Increasingly, products are also targeted at multiple audiences or rather at a somewhat homogenised global audience. The awareness of this fact has given rise to arguments of ‘cultural imperialism’ whereby the hegemonic American /Hollywood culture assumes a ‘universal’ character by ‘taking over’ audiences from other countries (cultures) and incites counter-arguments of resistant, active and culture-specific responses from the audiences.

There have been a number of cross-cultural multicultural reception analyses in the field of film and media studies, for example the studies of global audiences of American cultural products such as TV serial Dallas\textsuperscript{21} or Hollywood film The Lord of the Rings.\textsuperscript{22} There are marked differences in the observations made by these studies. The response to Dallas in different countries is found to involve cultural negotiation between the cultures of the different audiences and the culture portrayed in Dallas, meaning that these audiences selectively notice certain aspects of the culture portrayed in Dallas. However, in the study of reception of The Lord of the Rings, the national/ cultural differences between audiences are found to play a very limited role in the global response to the film. The above-mentioned studies examine whether and how the responses of audiences from different countries (cultures) to the same texts differ. Incidentally, they also demonstrate the gradual effect of globalisation or of the awareness of a global audience on cultural production. Although cultural difference or lack of it is considered the most significant factor in cross-cultural receptions by these studies, they do not take into consideration the relations between producing and receiving cultures or between different receiving cultures.

As mentioned earlier, within the field of literary reception, cross-cultural studies are quite common\textsuperscript{23} but multicultural studies remain rare, though not entirely absent as can be seen from studies such as Reception of Jane Austen in Europe\textsuperscript{24} or “Harry Potter through the years: a reception study of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Giselinde Kuipers and Jeroen de Kloet, ”Banal cosmopolitanism and The Lord of the Rings: The limited role of national differences in global media consumption," Poetics 37, no. 2 (April 2009): 99-118.
\item Anthony Mandal and Brian Southam, Reception of Jane Austen in Europe (New York, NY: Continuum, 2007).
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
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American and Dutch reviews”.\textsuperscript{25} Also, the focus of studies of cross-cultural reception of a literary text is mainly on the text and the differences in its reception rather than on the intercultural relations between receiving cultures or between the culture represented by the text and the receiving cultures.

For example, Fokemma and Kunne-Ibsch point out the way in which Manfred Durzak’s study “Plädoyer für eine Rezeptionsästhetik: Anmerkungen zur deutschen und amerikanischen Literaturkritik am Beispiel von Günter Grass Örlich Betäubt” juxtaposes the German and American reception of Günter Grass’s Örlich Betäubt (Local Anaesthetic) revealing, in the process, “the different presuppositions of the respective critical opinions.”\textsuperscript{26} Durzak, reportedly, argues that the contradictory German and American receptions were due to the difference in the degree of their awareness of the social and political context of the novel; since “[t]he German critics, on the basis of their knowledge of domestic political events, consider Grass’s ‘Ballad of a Badger-dog’ a simplification of the political theme, [whereas] the American critics interpret the story ... [as] a veiled portrayal, in parable form, of domestic political events of a specifically American kind.”\textsuperscript{27} Though the subjectivity of critical receptions and the influence of contexts on them is acknowledged here, Durzak’s focus does not seem to include the relationship between the cultures that the texts and readers belong to; nor does he seem to ask whether the American critics are also influenced by the status of their culture in relation to the culture producing the text (given that the historical moment of production and reception of the text is the period after the Second World War\textsuperscript{28}).

Michael Hanne’s The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change analyses the history of receptions of a selected number of seminal literary texts by different audiences. This study refers to the role that relations between the West and the Islamic World might have played in influencing the reception of Rushdie’s Satanic Verses.\textsuperscript{29} However, as the title indicates, the main purpose of the study is to examine whether the power to bring about political (and social) changes (or unrest) resides in the literary texts under consideration in the form of the ability to “offer each [reading] group a different answer, according to the different questions they bring to their reading”,\textsuperscript{30} or whether this power is conferred upon the texts by their audiences’ ability to ask different questions of the texts and to appropriate the texts for their own different purposes. Nonetheless – even away from

\textsuperscript{26} Fokkema and Elrud Kunne-Ibsch, “The Reception of Literature:Theory and Practice of “Rezeptionsästhetik”,” 162; Siegfried Mews, G"{u}nter Grass and his critics (New York: Camden House, 2008), 108.
\textsuperscript{27} Durzak cited in Fokkema and Elrud Kunne-Ibsch, “The Reception of Literature:Theory and Practice of “Rezeptionsästhetik”,” 162.
\textsuperscript{28} Local Anaesthetic, the original in German was published in 1969 and the English translation in 1970.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 142.
the issue of the political or social impact of a literary work – the inference that the text, the author, the readers, the various agents who mediate between text and readers (such as publishers, brokers, booksellers)\(^{31}\) as well as the “context in which the text is received and [...] the way it meshes with the current situation and preoccupations of the readers”\(^{32}\) all play a role in the response to a literary work is significant to the present study.

If we look specifically at postcolonial studies, postcolonialism originated in the against-the-grain reading of the colonial canon and discourse, and continued as a practice of writing back to the empire or metropolitan centre.\(^{33}\) Yet we find that postcolonial studies as a field has been, until recently, curiously unconcerned about the reception of the canon gathered and produced under its own banner and the potential role of hierarchical intercultural relations in that reception. It has remained ‘self-aware’, but with the focus firmly and quite narcissistically on its own theoretical and literary output; whether in generating it or critiquing it.

On the one hand, the postcolonial field has been concerned with analysing, re-reading and rewriting colonial texts and theorising textual resistance to colonial hegemony using theoretical and philosophical tools inherited from Western institutions. On the other hand, it has been concerned with writing back to the empire with the aim of undermining the power of the dominant centre and subverting it from within by appropriating the coloniser’s language, indigenising it, bending it to express the colonised world and hybridising it with words from languages of the colonised.

Domination has been a constant fact of human society. It exists at multiple levels and in myriad forms in almost all human relationships. For this reason, the postcolonial investigation of the resistance to, questioning, and subversion of domination or power relations in colonial, anticolonial, postcolonial and neo-colonial contexts has quickly expanded into other areas such as translation studies, feminist studies and gender studies. At the same time, the postcolonial field has also faced criticism and questioning.

Within the postcolonial field, there are debates regarding the issue of the physical presentation of the term postcolonial (whether it should be without a hyphen and signify the period since colonisation or

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 36.
\(^{32}\) Ibid., 32.
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with a hyphen to signal a break from the colonial era\textsuperscript{34} but also whether the two forms should be used to distinguish between ‘postcolonial’ as a theoretical discourse and the historical period\textsuperscript{35}). There are debates about whether the term postcolonial literature signifies literature that comes out of colonisation or against colonisation or after independence from colonial rule, about whether postcolonial literature should include texts written by writers from settler and non-settler colonising cultures, and about the veracity of the prefix ‘post-’ in view of the continued economic dominance of former colonising and now First World countries.\textsuperscript{36}

This thesis proposes to stay away from these debates and to remain within the parameters of the definition of postcolonial literatures proposed by the writers of \textit{The Empire Writes Back} as literatures from (ex-)colonised cultures in general and ex-British colonies in particular.\textsuperscript{37} However, looking at the postcolonial field from within the reception studies, it is easy to notice that the critiques of the postcolonial field have remained focussed on its outputs. Some of the critiques are levelled at its ‘celebrity’ authors who write the ‘home culture’ from within the ‘centre’\textsuperscript{38} or for the ‘centre’.\textsuperscript{39} Some are levelled at its excessive focus on textual analysis that occludes or neglects the ‘actual’, real-life political, resistance to colonial rule, and practices, during colonial times and some against “the increased visibility of academic intellectuals of Third World origin as pacesetters in cultural criticism [in the First World institutions]” as well as “the First World origins (and situation) of the term [postcolonial].”\textsuperscript{40}

In other words, the focus of the criticism has stayed either on specific texts or authors, such as Naipaul or Rushdie, or on the fact that many of the postcolonial intellectuals are theorising the East, or the Third World or the (ex-)colonised textual resistance to the ‘centre’ from within the institutions in the very West or First World or (ex-)colonising countries that were/are the ‘centre’, while neglecting the historical, political and social realities of colonial rule and resistance to it. However, the focus has stayed away from the potential role of the cultural hierarchy, evident in the terms such as postcolonial or Third World literatures, in the receptions of these literatures.

\textsuperscript{34} Anne McClintock, \textit{Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest}, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 10-11.
\textsuperscript{35} John McLeod, \textit{Beginning Postcolonialism} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 5.
\textsuperscript{37} Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, \textit{The Empire Writes Back}, Introduction, Pg. 1.
\textsuperscript{38} Aijaz Ahmad, \textit{In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures} (London: Verso, 1994), 154.
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Although, as early as 1990, Gayatri Spivak cautioned against the possibility, or rather very real danger, of neo-colonial appropriation of postcolonial critics, criticism and literature(s) through “disciplinary support for the conviction of authentic marginality by the (aspiring) elite” or what Graham Huggan calls the “contemporary metropolitan reward system for ‘oppositional’ intellectual projects”, what happened to a ‘postcolonial literature’ at the receiving end remained neglected until its commercial success and mass consumption forced attention away from theory and theoreticians.

A number of studies in the field of education in multicultural situations examine the way the students’ culture shapes their comprehension of the texts they read. In the field of education, which deals mainly with written texts, culture seems to make a difference to the students’ comprehension of a text from cultures other than their own and their responses to it. For example, the article “How First World Students Read Third World Literature” reports the observations made during a taught university course, where the First World students display a tendency to draw “confirmations of [their] cherished beliefs” (i.e. prevalent stereotypes) about Third World countries from the Third World texts studied in the course, despite the socio-economic context provided by the teachers. Arun P. Mukherjee’s experience, in the case of students in a Canadian institution who display a ‘universalising’ and depoliticising’ tendency in reading texts from Commonwealth literature, is similar.

However, Graham Huggan’s The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins, published in 2001, is the first full-length study to focus on reception of postcolonial literature. The Postcolonial Exotic discusses the global, or more specifically First World, reception of postcolonial literature, describing it as the consumption of an exotic commodity that (re)presents the ‘cultural other’ while reassuringly domesticating and thereby containing it.

Huggan’s study, though ground-breaking, is Anglocentric in terms of literatures and audiences. It discusses the reception of postcolonial literature but the focus remains westward, on a homogenised ‘First World’ audience, notwithstanding the cultural, linguistic and historical diversity of the First

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45 Ibid.
47 Huggan, The Postcolonial Exotic.
World, or indeed the Third. The Indian audience of Salman Rushdie or Vikram Seth is briefly mentioned but the quite sizeable home, diaspora and non-First World audiences of postcolonial literatures are not taken into account. The subtitle of *The Postcolonial Exotic* indicates that this is by choice rather than oversight, and though the issue of cultural hierarchy between the receiving First World and the producing Third World (or ex-colonies) and its potential role in the reception of postcolonial literatures remain implicit in this study, and in the other studies discussed below, this cultural hierarchy is evident in the terminology such as First World (or metropolitan) audiences and markets or even postcolonial literatures.

The studies of postcolonial literature and individual postcolonial authors that have appeared after *The Postcolonial Exotic* have paid some attention to the critical and mainstream reception of postcolonial texts but, although extended to home audience, this attention has remained essentially focussed on the Anglophone world. For example, both the two full-length studies on Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things (TGST)*, one by Julie Mullaney⁴⁸ (published in 2002) and the other by Alex Tickell⁴⁹ (published in 2007), have independent sections on the critical reception of *TGST* that document and comment on the academic and popular response to the work as well as on the difference between responses of the ‘home’ and outside audiences of *TGST*. Sarah Brouillette’s *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* mentions the contradictory home and outside reception of postcolonial texts but mainly argues that ‘postcolonial’ authors, rather than being mere passive victims of the processes of exoticisation and commodification at the hands of First World markets, are aware and active ‘subjects’ within them. Furthermore, using textual and epitextual evidence, Brouillette demonstrates the postcolonial authors’ response to be a negotiation with, resistance to, and/or complicity in these processes.⁵⁰

Published in 2007, Ruvani Ranasinha’s monograph *South Asian Writers in Twentieth-Century Britain: Culture in Translation* presents a historical account of British publication and reception of eight South Asian Anglophone writers from Nirad Chaudhuri to Mira Sayal (of whom six are of Indian origin and two, M. J. Tambimuttu and Ambalavener Sivanandan, are of Sri Lankan origin) covering roughly the period till Rushdie. Using extensive archival material she shows how “the prevalent academic, political and commercial agendas at the time in Britain” ⁵¹ influence the

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⁵₀ Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*.
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publishers’ selection and editing of South Asian texts and the eventual reception of their authors but also how the authors resist, negotiate or conform to these influences or ‘market’ demands.

As the author acknowledges, the intention is to trace the genealogy of publication and reception of work of South Asian authors who emigrated to, or were born in, Britain, and to compare the changing contexts of literary production and consumption\(^{52}\) in order to arrive at a better understanding of the shifting perceptions of cultural difference.\(^{53}\) Ranasinha prefers to look at South Asian literature as a minority or migrant literature rather than as postcolonial literature and equates the consumption of the South Asian Anglophone literature with cultural translation using the terms from translation theory such as domestication, assimilation and foreignisation, to describe the changing contexts of this literature’s production and consumption in the ‘host’ society. She also mentions the ‘home audience’ and the impact of home country on the diasporic literature.\(^{54}\)

Though novel in its approach and significant in its detailed historical, archival analysis of the reception of South Asian (mainly Indian English) literature in Britain, Ranasinha’s study remains interested in the history of intercultural relations in a multicultural society and uses the reception of literature as a tool to trace it. Due to the choice of Anglocentric and diasporic boundaries, this study does not go beyond the established concepts of ‘Western Anglophone audience or market’ and ‘migrant author’. And, by including Tambimuttu and Sivanandan in what remains predominantly a study of reception of Indian English writers – albeit with the intention to rectify the general tendency “to equate South Asian writing with Indian English literature”\(^{55}\) – Ranasinha actually blurs the borders within the ‘South Asian diaspora’.

Since Ranasinha approaches this literature as migrant/minority literature, her analysis of the role publishers play in the reception of these authors through the selection and editing of texts “based on the prevalent academic, political and commercial agendas in Britain”\(^{56}\) does not focus as exclusively on the colonial relations between the authors and the ‘métropole’ as Richard Watts’ 2005 study\(^{57}\) Packaging Post/Coloniality: The Manufacture of Literary Identity in the Francophone World does for the Francophone literature published in France, or as the 2007 Michigan University doctoral

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 1.
\(^{53}\) Ibid.
\(^{54}\) Ibid., 9-10.
\(^{55}\) Ibid., 1. 3
\(^{56}\) Ibid., 8.
thesis “Literary (Neo) colonialism: Publication and Critique in Metropolitan France of Four Francophone African Novels (1950--1970)” by Vivian Steemers.\(^{58}\)

Watts’s study looks at how prefaces of Francophone literature of colonial times ‘package’ the texts they introduce and influence their reception in France but also help trace the changing relationship between France and Francophone literature as Francophone writers appropriate the space of preface and thereby subvert the ‘colonial’ patronage. Watts highlights the ‘effect of the colonial relationship’ on the metropolitan reception of a ‘colonised’ author. He draws attention to the dynamic, changing character of the post-colonial (i.e. post-independence) relationship evident through gradual changes in the provenance or form of the prefaces. He also discusses briefly how English translations of Francophone literature are often decontextualised in nature and hence get appropriated by the prevalent interests (such as that in ‘Black American literature’) within Anglophone institutions that are unrelated to the text. However, Watts’s focus is not on reception of the Francophone text in France or in the home country.\(^{59}\)

Steemers’ thesis looks at the role the epitextual material (author interviews and reviews)\(^{60}\) and peritextual material (physical attributes that convert the authorial text into a book and are the first point of contact with the readers, such as cover, dust jacket, blurbs etc.)\(^{61}\) play in the metropolitan reception of Francophone literature.\(^{62}\) This thesis considers the epitext and critical articles as tools shaping the reception but not as part of the reception. It describes the discourse of the French publishing houses and critics as Africanist (“judging African literature based on Eurocentric criteria and describing Africa as an exotic idyllic pre-civilised place or a dark void”\(^{63}\)) and the French reception of African Francophone literature as neo-colonialist. The arguments are similar to Huggan’s in *The Postcolonial Exotic*, and the focus equally unidirectional (i.e. westward) regarding the audience.

Both Watts’ and Steemers’ studies are specifically of Francophone literatures but deal with their reception as the reception of a ‘culturally undifferentiated or homogenised’ postcolonial literature in the ‘dominant centre’. They, however, do not deal with the home audience of this literature. Nor do


\(^{59}\) Watts, *Packaging Post/Coloniality*.


\(^{61}\) Ibid.


\(^{63}\) Ibid., 2-3.
they distinguish between the audience in France and the Francophone audience outside France or between the Francophone and non-Francophone audiences.

*Unhinging Hinglish: The Languages and Politics of Fiction in English from the Indian Subcontinent*, 64 the conference issue of ANGLES: On the English-Speaking World, published in 2001 by the Institute of English, Germanic and Romance Studies at the University of Copenhagen, carries an essay on the unfinished research project of Maryam Khojan 65 on publication and reception of early Indian English novels in Britain. This project, if it had been completed, might have introduced 66 issues such as the co-option of Indian English literature in the imperial project, its patronising ‘packaging’ by colonial writers and publishers, the commodification of this literature in the centre, the role authors play in this process and the contradictory nature of this literature’s ‘at home’ and metropolitan reception. Khojan seems to have anticipated many of the concerns about Indian English literature that were to gain prominence later.

*The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English* by Catherine Innes, 67 published in 2007, is the first work to talk of the double audience of postcolonial texts and of the need to recognise different kinds of Western readers; though only in a small chapter at the end of a sizeable study on postcolonial literature. This chapter, ‘Citizens of the world: reading postcolonial literature’, summarises the increased visibility, consecration and institutionalisation of postcolonial literatures and the debates around these issues.

Innes comments on the implicit or explicit presumption in many critical analyses of postcolonial literature such as *The Postcolonial Exotic* that a postcolonial text’s audience is essentially Western. 68 Pointing out the large home audience for authors such as Achebe, Innes criticises Huggan’s exclusive and homogenising focus on First World readers of postcolonial literature at the same time observing that he makes “little differentiation between kinds of Western readers”. 69 She argues that such exclusive focus on Western readers tends to assume certain ways of reading postcolonial texts 70 and

66 As the essay informs us, this project remained unfinished because of Maryam Khojan’s death in 1999 due to cancer and the essay is a presentation of what that project would have been, compiled by her supervisor Charles Lock from her drafts.
68 This is equally evident, though Innes does not refer to them, in most of the studies mentioned above where the focus remains on metropolitan audience.
70 Ibid.
that the overemphasis on aspects of hybridity, authenticity or otherness in critical discussions leads to favouring texts that foreground those aspects.\textsuperscript{71} She feels that postcolonial texts have always had a double audience constituted by insider (home) audience and outsider audience and, that postcolonial authors are aware of their double audience and textualise the uncomprehending outsider reader to show the mirror to the outside world, inviting it to be a less ignorant audience.

Innes makes interesting points about the double audiences and a postcolonial text’s ability to construct a hybrid reader who “may assume a number of positions or identities, and become aware of the relationships, including power relationships, between these positions.” She concludes by observing that the tension between the multiple and shifting authorial identities invites readers to become hybrid readers\textsuperscript{72} and that the criticism and teaching of postcolonial literatures should move “away from an emphasis on cultural and anthropological analyses which on the one hand distance the text and on the other encourage readers to see the worlds they encounter as static and unchanging.”\textsuperscript{73}

Innes raises pertinent questions about how the insider and outsider audiences’ reception of postcolonial literature may differ. However, she does not analyse actual audience responses or compare them, preferring instead to “explore the role of implicit readers within [...] anticolonial and postcolonial works, and to speculate on how those roles may shape the responses of actual readers in different locations and times.”\textsuperscript{74} She also does not allude to the complexification of the identities of the insider audience through the same processes (such as independence from colonial rule, modernisation of societies or diasporisation) that generate the multiple and shifting authorial identities.

It is interesting to note that in all the above mentioned studies of the reception of literature, the critics, whether metropolitan or diasporic, or in Innes’s terms outsiders or insiders, discuss the metropolitan Anglophone reception in great detail. The same attention is not given to the at-home or non-metropolitan or non-Anglophone receptions, even by the critics who refer to these audiences.

This study will attempt to fill the gaps in the above-mentioned studies of the reception of literature in general and of the reception of postcolonial literatures in particular. As a multicultural cross-cultural comparative analysis of receptions of ‘one’ literature in three audiences, the present study situates

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 198.
\item Ibid., 208.
\item Ibid., 207.
\item Ibid., 200.
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itself at the intersection of reception and postcolonial studies. Moving away from the focus on
Anglocentric and Western audiences, this thesis conducts a comparative analysis of receptions of
three texts from Indian English literature in its actual ‘double audience’ – the insider Indian audience
and outsider non-Indian audience – differentiating the latter into Anglophone and non-Anglophone
(French) audiences.

Defining the field of research
The choice of Indian English literature is influenced by its rich potential as a field for research on
literary reception. Owing to the medium of expression of this literature, which is at once a colonial
legacy and a hegemonic global lingua franca, and to the status of India as an ex-colonised and Third
World country that is also an emerging economic giant with multiple, ever-increasing diasporas of all
skill levels across the globe, this literature has a complex dual identity: postcolonial, Third World,
migrant, minority, marginal [literature] in the international context (appealing to many of the
prevalent popular, literary and theoretical interests ) and minority, pan-Indian and elite or hegemonic
[literature] in the Indian context (a fact that is not given enough importance in ‘outside’ discussions
of Indian reception). As such its reception, too, is in two directions in terms of present day global
hierarchy. This literature is received into the hierarchically higher Anglophone and non-Anglophone
metropolitan/First World audience (where it is a postcolonial or Third World literature). It is also
received into the hierarchically lower home and Third World audience (where it is a literature in the
hegemonic English language, by an elite minority of writers educated in English).

The high visibility and prominence that Indian English literature enjoys at present as a literature as
well as a commercial product ensures quick translations of Indian English texts into many
metropolitan languages and generates a higher ‘response’ in Anglophone and non-Anglophone
cultures thereby making it possible to conduct a synchronous but multicultural reception analysis.
The study will be synchronous through its focus on a particular historical moment i.e. the decade
from 1998 to 2008, and multicultural through its analysis of receptions in three different audiences –
Indian, non-Indian Anglophone and French – using what Genette calls the epitextual material75 such
as author interviews, and text reviews as well as critical articles. The aim of this thesis is to nuance
the prevalent perceptions about Indian English literature and its reception.

75 Gérard Genette, Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation, Literature, Culture, Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
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The historical moment – 1998 to 2008

The chosen historical moment is significant within the field of Indian English literature. Looking back on her own experience as an Indian English writer, Anita Desai has summed up the Indian English scene in the following manner,

I imagined that writers of the indigenous languages lived richer, more active and involved lives, confident of their roles in the world. Unfortunately, I never met them. There was, in those years, an antipathy, a hostility even, towards writing in English - that colonial language that should have been banned outright at independence. I tried to ignore the assumption that mine was the last generation in India that would write in English but shared in the sense that these were its twilight years. The picture changed abruptly, dramatically, in 1981, when a book called Midnight's Children appeared like a thunderbolt and the author was sent to India on that until then unknown exercise, a book tour.

It was the combination of a book that proved that Indian English was a language in itself, capable of presenting serious and important ideas with vigour and originality … and of the author as a personality that changed the Indian scene overnight. Not only was a whole generation of younger writers (Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Upmanyu Chatterji) energised and given confidence by the success of Salman Rushdie's book, its language and ideas, but all the discouraged, defeated publishers sat up and took notice of them. And the combination of these two phenomena - a new generation of Indian writers addressing Indian subjects and themes in a language taken from the streets, newspapers, journals and films, and a class of enterprising businessmen who decided they were worth publishing - marked the 80s and 90s. It was a heady time, the climax being the spectacular moment when a British literary agent actually flew to India - did he charter a plane? Did he fly it himself? Never mind, he gave the impression that he did - to sign up an Indian author who went on to win the Booker prize.

Things have never been the same since.76

The British literary agent was David Godwin,77 the author was Arundhati Roy, the Booker Prize winning work was The God of Small Things78, and the year - 1997. Things indeed have not been the same since then.

Desai’s article traces the history of Indian English literature from the 1960s to 1997. After losing its initial anti-colonial, reformative and nativistic-nationalistic impulse, Indian English literature had become, until 1981, a quietly anomalous affair published and appreciated mainly outside India. Over the two decades from 1981 to 1997, it transformed itself into a global phenomenon. With its authors winning major literary prizes, attracting six-to-seven-figure advances, selling millions of copies in the original and in translations all over the world, including in India, Indian English literature could no longer be ignored, even by India.

1997 was an important year for Indian English literature in many ways. It was the fiftieth anniversary of Indian Independence and the celebrations included the publication of an anthology of post-

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independence Indian Literature as well as commemorative works on India. The renaissance of Indian English writing, for Anita Desai and others, begins with Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. However, others such as Mongia feel that the current explosion of Indian English literature was unleashed by the Golden Jubilee year hullabalo with its celebratory events, book fairs and the heightened interest in India and things Indian that resulted (and not least by India’s image as an emerging economic power and huge market). 79

One of the major events of the festivities was the publication of an anthology of Indian writing edited by Rushdie (and Elizabeth West) and ‘rushed’ to meet the Golden Jubilee celebrations deadline. 80 Along with two other major commemorative publications dedicated to the fifty years in the life of post-independence India, the *Granta*81 special issue on ‘India’ and ‘The Special Fiction issue’ of *The New Yorker*,82 it was this anthology, *Mirrorwork: 50 Years of Indian Writing 1947-1997*,83 that heralded the next generation of Indian English writing.

This thesis looks at the chosen ‘historical moment’ as the post-97 decade. For Indian English literature, the post-97 years are spectacular not only in terms of productivity but also in terms of international acclaim, critical consecration and commercial success. In addition to the ‘British Empire’ prizes such as the Man Booker and Commonwealth Writers Prize, Indian English authors are winning various other international literary awards and making their mark on newer ‘critical’ territories and markets.

Authors


Jhumpa Lahiri, a second-generation UK-born American migrant of Indian origin, is the first author of Indian/Asian origin to win the Pulitzer Prize (for fiction) in 1999 for her debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. Unlike the other two authors studied in this thesis, Lahiri was not

81 *Granta: India!* (London: Granta, 1997).
famous before being published. She had neither an illustrious career in some other field nor connections in the literary world and has charted a different literary territory that is not linked directly to the ‘colonial’ past, and within which the colonial past has very little significance.

Tarun Tejpal is a well-known Indian journalist and editor whose debut novel, *The Alchemy of Desire*, was a great success in France, achieving a near cult status and going on to win the 2005 Prix Mille Pages. The success of this novel in France was greater even than in India, where Tejpal is a highly respected public figure, or in the greater Anglophone literary world where he is known as a Naipaul protégé.

Kiran Desai, Anita Desai’s daughter, broke Arundhati Roy’s record as the youngest Indian and woman to win the Man Booker Prize for her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss* in 2006, a feat that eluded her mother. Kiran Desai, though one of many authors of Indian origin to win the Booker, is the youngest Indian woman writer to win the more quietly prestigious (and less commercial) National Book Critics award in America and one of the three Indian writers to win this prize for fiction.84

The choice of these authors is influenced by the impact they have made in the literary world in their own distinctive ways and by achieving many firsts while garnering popular and critical acclaim, which translates into a rich source of data for this study. These authors and texts display the diversity of Indian English literature. They are at once the representatives of a specific historical moment (the post-97 decade) within what has come to be known as the field of Indian English literature; they are also markers of undercurrents of change that are transforming the field from within in terms of profiles of audiences, accolades and, more importantly, authors.

**Author Profiles**

Given the multitude of Indian diasporas and the large number of Indian migrants everywhere but most particularly in the Anglophone world, the significant number of Indian English writers writing from these diasporas and the predominance of the postcolonial perspective concerned mainly with the conditions of migrancy, hybridity and globalisation (through which this literature is primarily read), certain perceptions about Indian English writers persist. The image of Indian English writer as


Bharati Mukherjee was the first Indian and woman to win it in 1988. Vikram Seth won it in the autobiography/memoir category in 2005 for *Two Lives* and Vikram Chandra has since won it in the fiction category in 2007 for *Sacred Games*. 
migrant is one such perception that prevails despite the strong presence of resident writers writing from within India, such as R.K. Narayan, Mulkraj Anand, Anita Desai (who now lives abroad), Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Tarun Tejpal and many others.

However, Indian English writers no longer fit into these two clearly defined categories of insider-outside or resident – migrant. Many writers, such as Amitava Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Shashi Tharoor and Vikram Chandra, now move between India and other countries. Some writers, including Arvainada Adiga, Chetan Bhagat or Anurag Mathur, have come back to India after their stints abroad mainly to write. And a few writers, such as Tabish Khair or Kiran Desai, live abroad but have retained their Indian ‘passport’. Diasporic writing too has gone into its second generation although Jhumpa Lahiri and Hari Kunzru are currently the only globally-known representatives of the phenomenon after V.S. Naipaul (if we do not count Kiran Desai as she was not born in the diaspora).

Such diversity of ‘residential status’ means that Indian English literature can now only be defined as the literature written in English by writers of Indian origin. The writers of Indian origin can be divided roughly into three groups based on their citizenship status: resident Indian, non-resident Indian and diaspora or migrant writers. These groups co-exist within the field of Indian English literature. The resident writers are Indian citizens who live in and write from India. The diaspora writers are Indians who have migrated to, live in and are citizens of another country (even if they visit India occasionally or regularly). The non-resident writers are those Indians who live a significant part of their life in some other country but remain citizens of India. This last category is complex; there are Indians who live abroad in their professional capacity for a certain period, Indians who divide their lives between India and some other country, and those who choose to live abroad but are not citizens of the country in which they reside as well as those who have dual citizenship of India and the country in which they reside.

The three authors selected for the study are representative of the three principal groups: Tejpal of the resident writers, Desai of the non-resident writers and Lahiri of the diasporic writers. They signify the complexity of the field of ‘production’ of this literature. By demonstrating that the identity of the Indian English author is no longer monolithic, they provide the opportunity to nuance the prevalent image of the Indian English writer as migrant and to observe its possible effect on reception.

**Audiences**

As a text written in English, an Indian English text’s obvious intended audience is Anglophone
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Since English is not an Indian language and Anglophone Indians are only a minority in India, the Anglophone audience is, as Innes points out, usually assumed to be mainly from Western Anglophone countries. However, the status of English as a pan-Indian language and as the preferred medium of education in India has seen an increase in the number of Anglophone Indians, which, though miniscule in comparison with the total Indian population, is nevertheless counted in the millions and is the third largest in the Anglophone World. Even more importantly, international success and acclaim have ensured an interest in Indian English literature within India. Thus there is a general home audience for Indian English literature in addition to the ‘academicians and critics’.

The ‘outside’ audience is also no longer limited to the Western Anglophone world. The present day global hegemony of English and the size of the former British Empire mean that Anglophone audiences exist in other former British colonies as well as in non-Western countries. The high visibility and commercial success of Indian English literature also ensure that Indian English texts are quickly or simultaneously published in many Anglophone (and English speaking) countries and almost immediately translated into other metropolitan languages. Owing to globalisation of the publishing industry, the temporal axis of the movement of Indian English literature across cultures has shortened considerably and the linguistic range of translations has increased significantly, but the process itself is not new.

Although it became the force it is now between 1981 and 1997, Indian English literature already had a global reach through English and its translations into other metropolitan languages, initially those which had a connection with India, such as French, but later on, due to the steady increase in the popularity and success of Indian English literature, into other languages such as German, Spanish, Italian, etc. The lag between the appearance of the original and translations has been, on average, one year and significantly less between publications in different Anglophone countries. Of all the ‘Western’ languages that Indian English literature is now translated into, French has been the most consistent target language.

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85 The author of this thesis is aware of the distinction between Anglophone (speakers of English for whom English is the first language) and English-speaking (for whom English is not the first language). The choice of the term Anglophone over English-speaking is conscious and determined by various reasons. The main reason is that this thesis does not study the reception of this literature in the English-speaking world in detail, though it indicates the wide range of audiences that can access an English language text in order to problematise the assumptions about a western audience of postcolonial literatures in general and Indian English literature in particular. It concentrates on metropolitan Anglophone audience with the aim to question the term ‘metropolitan’ in view of the diasporisation of that audience and to compare it with the reception in a non-Anglophone metropolitan (French) audience. The other reason is the belief that the term English-speaking is inadequate to describe the peculiar relationship between India(ns) and English and also that in the Indian context (and indeed in other English-speaking countries), reading literature/fiction in English indicates an affinity with English (that is closer to the term Anglophone) rather than the mere ability to use/speak English or even proficiency in it.

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Since the three audiences – Indian, Non-Indian Anglophone and French – have been reading Indian English literature for a long time, there exists a history of their individual responses to this literature, which is the ‘past’ from which the present reception stems and against which it can be compared in order to determine the patterns that have continued and the changes that have taken place within each audience.

**Brief summaries of the history of Indian, non-Indian and French receptions:**

**Indian Reception**

So if a writer decides his/her audience is in the English speaking West then s/he has to write in relation to the West and accede to be read accordingly. In other words s/he will have to deal with the colonial encounter and its repercussions especially in the formation of her/his identity. The writer will have to play by their current rules and be read according to their feelings of guilt or glory. – G.J.V. Prasad. 87

*Mirrorwork*, the 50th anniversary anthology of literature of post-independence India, published in 1997 and edited by Rushdie and West, has an introduction written by Rushdie. This Introduction was a slightly modified version of the article “Damme, This Is The Oriental Scene For You” published earlier in the *New Yorker Special Fiction Issue*, and provoked more reaction than the book, raising a din of protest from critics in India defending the ‘native, vernacular literatures’.

Rushdie, in a characteristically provocative manner, used the *New Yorker* article and the introduction to *Mirrorwork* as an opportunity to argue that Indian English writing was the major Indian literature and the best Indian contribution to the world (of) literature. 88 He also used it to usher in the new generation of Indian English writers who were a “[w]elcome proof that India’s encounter with the English language continues to give birth to new children, endowed with lavish gifts,” 89 alluding specifically to Kiran Desai, the newest and youngest of all voices presented in the anthology, while leaving out many well-known authors writing in English or translated into English from other Indian languages.

Rushdie also used the opportunity to express his concern (and disappointment) at the criticism ‘at home’ that, according to him, has been the bane of Indian English literature. Instead of the ‘aesthetic’ evaluation of the Indian literature produced since independence that the anthology set out to offer,

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Rushdie’s focus was on lauding Indian English literature\textsuperscript{90} and as Sarah Brouillette points out, on “the hostile [‘at-home’] reception of Indo-Anglian writing”.\textsuperscript{91} Delineating the characteristics of this reception and the attitudes of the ‘native critics’ Rushdie claimed that

\[\text{[f]or some Indian critics, English-language Indian writing will never be more than a postcolonial anomaly – the bastard child of empire, sired on India by the departing British.}\]

Criticism levied at Indo-Anglian literature comes solely from Indians, who are themselves, members of the college-educated English–speaking ‘elite’.

Its practitioners are denigrated for being too upper-middle class; for lacking diversity in their choices of themes and techniques; for being less popular in India than outside India, for possessing inflated reputations on account of the international power of the English language, and of the ability of Western critics and publishers to impose their cultural standards on the East, for living, in many cases, outside India, for being deracinated to the point where their work lacks the spiritual dimension essential for a ‘true’ understanding of the soul of India; for being insufficiently grounded in the ancient literary traditions of India; for being the literary equivalent of MTV culture, or of globalizing Coca-colonisation; . . . , [f] or suffering from…. Rushdie – its\textsuperscript{92}

Anita Desai’s reminiscences display a sad resignation and the feeling of isolation felt by Indian English writers of the early post-Independence era as well as bemusement and wonder at the post-Rushdie change. Whereas, Rushdie’s outburst – though not totally unjustified but opportunistic and stubbornly reluctant to acknowledge the veracity of some of the ‘denigrations’ – expresses the Indian English writers’ frustration at being denied legitimacy, recognition and merit by their ‘homeland’ despite being feted by the rest of the world. However, in a way, Rushdie has forced the world to take notice of the ‘Indian reception’ of this literature, and perhaps has been instrumental in reinforcing the perception that this reception is exclusively and simplistically negative.

Together, Rushdie and Anita Desai reveal many of the issues that haunt Indian English literature and writers. The most important of these issues is the unequal nature of the reception ‘at home’ and ‘outside’; not just in the form of the discrepancies between the receptions of this literature within and outside India but also in the problematical relation between these authors, who are considered to be the voice of India outside, and the India they (and the audiences outside think they) represent or speak for. The reasons for the unequal ‘at home’ and outside reception of Indian English literature are varied. At the heart of the problem lies India’s relation with English.\textbf{English in India}

Though India won independence from the British in 1947, it never severed its ties with the English language. The first prime ministerial speech of independent India was in English,\textsuperscript{93} and the Indian constitution was written in English. However, English was not given the status of an Indian language

\textsuperscript{90} Rushdie, “Damme, This Is The Oriental Scene For You,” 50.
\textsuperscript{92} Rushdie, “Damme, This Is The Oriental Scene For You,” 50. This article was reworked and published as the introduction to \textit{Mirrorwork}.
\textsuperscript{93} Jawaharlal Nehru’s ‘The Tryst with Destiny’ on 15th August 1947.
in the constitution and the aim was to phase it out gradually so that it would not be a barrier between the educated elite of urban India and the rural masses. The linguistic differences that had been forgotten while fighting the British raised their heads when Indian states were formed along linguistic borders (that were never clearly defined in polyglot India) and the question of national language arose.

No Indian language was acceptable to all as the national language. Hindi has never been unanimously accepted as the language of independent India, especially in the Southern part. Instead of the initial intention expressed by the Indian constitution in 1950 to let English continue as the associate official (i.e. governmental/central administrative) language until 1965, the compromise of “[c]ontinued use of English as long as non-Hindi areas want it to continue [as an associate official language]” was reached in the 1967 Official Language Amendment Bill. English, ever since, has continued as the preferred pan-Indian language, both at public and state level, due to the rivalry between vernacular languages that prefer to use a ‘neutral’ third language rather than another vernacular.

Gradually the status of English as the global lingua franca, medium of modern knowledge and tool of upward (and outward) mobility has turned it into the preferred medium of education in India and consequently, if not the first language, at least one of the first languages of an increasing number of Indians, especially young urban middle class Indians. The globalisation of English as the ‘common tool of communication’ has also played a part in its dissociation from the colonial baggage in the Indian psyche, though apparently not in the literary world as we are about to see.

**English in literary India**

As mentioned earlier, although provocative, Rushdie’s claims were not totally unjustified. English was more than just a foreign language for Indians. As a colonial legacy, English was resented in post-independence nationalist India in spite of the role the language, and those who could wield it, had played in the struggle for independence. It was this that led to charges of elitism, Westernisation and cultural alienation against the authors writing in English, and to doubts about the ability of English to portray Indian reality as well as about the authenticity of such portrayals. As Anita Desai’s reminiscences demonstrate, Indian English literature seemed close to extinction when Rushdie came onto the scene and revived it.

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94 Krishnaswamy, *The Story of English in India*.
95 Ibid., 148.
In 1988, Agastya, the protagonist of Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *English August: An Indian Story*, expressed wonder at the “[a]mazing mix, the English [Indians] speak. Hazaar fucked. […] nowhere else could languages be mixed and spoken with such ease.” By then, Rushdie had already turned his very own, chutnified version of the English of Indian streets into the language of Indian English literature and India had realised that English was there to stay. When Rushdie’s anthology came out, the status of English in India had changed; as had the relation between English and India due to the growing realisation of the value of English as an asset in the era of globalisation and multinationalisation.

And yet, in 2000, Vikram Chandra was still protesting against unfair judgment at the hands of Indian critics who accuse Indian English authors of using Indian culture to signify “Indianness to the west” and think that their representations of India are aimed at the Western markets and therefore inauthentic. The list of charges against the Indian English writers that Chandra was trying to retaliate against is not too different from the charges that Rushdie delineates. Both express the same desire that literature/text be judged for its own sake. However, Chandra’s position is essentially different from that of Rushdie. For this generation born a decade, or two, after independence, to which Chandra belongs, English is as much an Indian language and a part of Indian reality as any other regional language.

Rushdie had tried to assert the superiority of Indian English literature over all regional literatures, without having any real knowledge of them, thereby further antagonising the (already negatively biased) critics and in effect proving correct their charges of elitism. In contrast, by denying the charges of playing to the Western gallery by choosing to write on India in English, Vikram Chandra claims an equal right to read and write Indian reality in English, a language that formed an integral part of his polyphonic Indian environment. He argues that in a country like India, where writers have always written in languages not their ‘own’ mother tongues but still their own as Indian languages, writing in a certain language does not (should not) mean disowning or being disowned by other languages, just as it is not (and should not be perceived as) an alienation from Indian culture and audience.

As Chandra’s article highlights, the authenticity of Indian English literature continues to be perceived as problematic but for a slightly different reason. The authenticity of Indian English

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98 Ibid.
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literature is problematic today not so much due to India’s relationship with English but because of the prevalent image of Indian English writers as ‘elite migrants’ or ‘globetrotting cosmopolitans’ as well as because of the status of representative Indian literature that Indian English literature enjoys in the outside world. The ascent of Indian English literature in the outside world over the years, through critical acclaim as ‘postcolonial literature’, and because of its global commercial success, has played a pivotal role in conferring representative status on it.

The resultant shift in the hierarchical position of Indian English and vernacular or regional literatures and writers within India has played a significant role in Indian reception. It is against the Anglocentric bias of the Western world, which reduces the multiplicity and complexity of Indian literature in terms of content and language to the singularity of Indian English i.e. postcolonial literature, and credits migrant authors such as Rushdie or critics such as Bhabha and Spivak for being the ‘voices of India and Indians’, that critics such as Aijaz Ahmad and Amit Chaudhuri retaliate.

The combination of Indian English literature’s representative status, commercial success, consecration and critical acclaim in the First World is more potent than the initial hostility to English as the non-Indian and ex-colonial language, in generating the feeling that this literature and its writers use Indian culture and reality as ‘material’ with an eye to the Western market in order to conform to Western tastes, demands and stereotypical expectations regarding representations of Indian reality.

The feeling is stronger in the case of the diasporic writers because of their physical, and hence perceived emotional and cultural, distance from India resulting in a questioning of the Indianness of the diasporic authors and of their work. As seen earlier, some attention is paid to this feeling of the ‘at home’ Indian audience in the studies on reception of postcolonial literatures, although the issue of how this audience reacts to the texts and to writers who write from within India and who choose to stay away from the prevalent interests in First World academia remains quite neglected.

101 However, as Stephen Morton points out, Spivak rejects the label ‘postcolonial’. She has argued that comparatists should learn non-hegemonic languages in order to make the world of hegemonic languages more permeable to subaltern languages and has herself translated from Bengali, one of many Indian regional languages. (Stephen Morton, Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007), 3, 171.) More recently, using example of a Bengali film clip, she contended that meaning is never completely transmitted without a knowledge of local language (Sociolect) and linguistic context. (Writing Past Each other? Literary Translation and Community Conference, Victoria Univ of Wellington Keynote 13 Dec. 2010. Personal communication from Raylene Ramsay)
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Meenakshi Mukherjee’s keynote speech published in the conference issue of ANGLES, while mapping the relationship between Indian English literature and other Indian literatures, also attempts to debunk the notion of an absolute division between Indians who read English and those who read vernacular literatures. More importantly, Mukherjee brings to notice the strange new phenomenon whereby Indian regions display a readiness to claim Indian English writers on the basis of their ‘regional origin’ or ‘link with a particular Indian language’, while expressing bemusement at this attempt to appropriate the Indian English writers into vernacular folds.102 Mukherjee, however, does not specify whether such appropriation happens only in the case of the internationally visible ‘star writers’ she mentions, such as Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri, or also in the case of other resident and/or less visible writers. Nor does she comment on whether this is to be construed as a sign of acceptance, even if grudging, of Indian English literature within Indian literatures, or of a truce between Indian critics and Indian English writers.

Against the background of the predominantly negative image of Indian reception of Indian English literature and in view of the increased complexity of India’s relation with English, the identity of Indian English writers and the field of production and consumption of Indian English literature through globalisation as well as the possible inflections and changes in Indian reception are of major interest to this study.

Non-Indian Anglophone reception

As Innes points out the implicit or explicit presumption regarding Indian English literature as a ‘postcolonial literature’ is that its audience is essentially Western. The other implicit assumptions derived from this are that the Western audience is almost homogeneously the Anglophone ex-colonising or neo-colonising First World, and also that the reception in this Western audience is essentially positive.

The fallacy of the first two assumptions, though neglected until now, is especially obvious today. Nor was ‘Western’ appreciation of Indian English literature ever unproblematic. In the pre-independence period, when Indian English writers such as Mulkraj Anand or R.K. Narayan had to

102 Meenakshi Mukherjee, “Fiction in English in a Multi-lingual Society: Location and Perspective,” in Unhinging Hinglish, ed. Nanette Hale and Tabish Khair (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2001), 23-40. Mukherjee herself is an example of the changing Indian attitude towards Indian English literature. As one of the Indian critics closely linked with Indian English literature, her position in the above mentioned speech has certainly evolved from that in her earlier essays such as ‘The Anxiety of Indianness’. (Meenakshi Mukherjee, “The Anxiety of Indianness: Our Novels in English,” Economic and Political Weekly 28, no. 48 (November 27, 1993): 2607-2611. The authenticity of ‘Indianness’ of the Indian English literature seems no longer to be the issue in the speech as it is in the earlier essay. Amusingly though, Mukherjee is the critic whose remarks incited Vikram Chandra’s article ‘The Cult of Authenticity’.)
look westward for publication and needed introductory prefaces from British writers in order to be accepted by British publishers, British appreciation of Indian English literature had a patronising quality to it.

It is evident from Ruvani Ranasinha’s study as well as Maryam Khozan’s unfinished research, that the publication and reception of early Indian English novels were quite ‘colonial’ in their attitude, which is revealed in the publishers’ expectation of the ‘purity’ of the English language and conformity required of those texts with the literary norms and tastes (of the readers) in London. These studies highlight the fact that the works (and the authors) that were different, but not overly so, were more readily and positively received by the centre. Ranasinha hints at the role that Rushdie’s postmodernism might have played in his quick acceptance and eventual rise in the West.

Khojan’s work brings to light some of the issues in non-Indian Anglophone reception that are still relevant in the study of this reception, such as the adulation of certain authors and the conferral of a nobility of intentions on the authors as speakers for their people and/or the oppressed. The conferral of authenticity, Indianness and native informant status on Indian English authors based on their Indian origin still forms a major feature of the ‘Western reception’ of Indian English literature, in spite of the problematisation of the notions of ‘origin’ by postmodern thinkers and of the notions of authenticity and national identity in view of the increasing fragmentation and diasporisation of nations.

Another and equally important issue that shapes Anglophone reception of Indian English literature is the hegemony of postcolonial theory in the literary field. Not only does this hegemony play a role in the reception proper of the texts but by making ‘postcolonial’ the brand under which this literature is produced and read, it also predetermines the reception of these texts. The hegemony of postcolonial theory shapes the reception not only by favouring the texts which foreground aspects such as migrancy, hybridity, authenticity or otherness that are currently the predominant concerns in the postcolonial field as Innes argues, but also by ignoring or neglecting other aspects of selected texts and other texts that do not exhibit these concerns.

The increasing temporal distance from the experience of ‘colonisation’ and the complexity, contradictions and dynamism of present day India mean that a growing number of Indian English

writers and texts from within India deal with diverse and wide-ranging subjects. Also, given that the Indian diasporas are now more complex and that the ‘migrants’ are in their second or third generations, the concerns and experiences they express are not necessarily the same as those of the authors such as Rushdie, who were striking back at the empire from within the centre. As mentioned earlier, the non-Indian Anglophone audience is no longer limited to the First World, and nor is the First World audience monolithically Western.

This study is interested in analysing the possible effects of these changes on non-Indian Anglophone reception. Also, in many ways Indian reception is a reaction to the outside reception of Indian English literature as the authentic and representative Indian literature. The East is no longer a subaltern, but is the West listening? This study aims to observe whether, and how, Indian reception is effective in or significant to the non-Indian ‘Western’ reception beyond the brief acknowledgement, by critics such as Brouillette, of the fact that it is negative.

French reception

On the one hand, the non-Indian audience of Indian English literature has been persistently equated with the Western or First World audience homogenised into the Anglophone audience. However, even within the Western and First World parameters, Indian English texts have never remained confined to the Anglophone world. From the very beginning, they have been translated into other metropolitan languages, and most consistently into French.

On the other hand, the homogenisation of the Western audience into an Anglophone audience has resulted in a simplified image of the Western reception of Indian English literature and total neglect of certain features inherent in non-Anglophone receptions as well as possibilities of interpretive strategies other than those prevalent in the Anglophone world.

The common and most significant feature of all non-Anglophone receptions (but one that gets overlooked due to the Anglocentric focus) is that these are essentially the receptions of translations of a literature.

104 ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ by Gayatri Spivak is a seminal essay in postcolonial field. It asks whether those who are doubly oppressed under colonial rule and social injustices of the ‘native systems’ like women or lower classes can ever speak or be spoken for; implying that the answer is no. In White Mythologies, another seminal work in postcolonial field, Robert Young countered Spivak by arguing that the question is not whether the subalterns can speak since they can and always do but rather whether they are heard or ‘listened to’.
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Reception of a translation
The exact moment of the beginning of international, or rather Western, interest in Indian English literature can be identified as 1912, with Tagore’s *Gitanjali*. Originally written in Bengali but translated or rewritten into English by Tagore himself, *Gitanjali* was translated into French by the eminent French writer André Gide as *L’Offrande lyrique* within a year of its publication in English. Thus the tradition of French translation of Indian English literature is almost as old as the literature itself, if we do not count the pre-Tagore Indian attempts at writing in English.

Although there must be some bilingual French readers who might read Indian English novels in the original, French reception of Indian English literature is basically a reception of its French translations. At the primary level, as translations of texts written by authors from one country and translated by translators from another language and country, these are translations of texts from another culture. Given that English is not originally an Indian language, there is a widespread presumption in the Anglophone and non-Anglophone Western world that Indian writing in English is inherently a translation from one or more Indian languages, which makes the French translation of any Indian English novel a double translation or translation of a translation.

In addition, the prevalent image of this literature as a diasporic or cosmopolitan literature, with many of its authors coming from various Indian diasporas across the world and hence themselves, according to Salman Rushdie, ‘translated men’¹⁰⁵ (and women), raises the issues of the hybridity as well as the authenticity of their Indianness and consequently of their status as native informants. However, the mythic nature of notions of ‘Indian English as translation of an Indian (vernacular/regional) language and of authors as migrants’ is increasingly obvious, given the number of authors writing in English from within India and the ever-increasing number of Indians who speak English as one of their first languages.

The complexity of the situation reveals the equally complicated issue of the translation of this literature. The sheer number of translations from this literature into various other languages reveals the need to move away from the Anglocentric critical perspectives in order to look seriously and critically at the role these translations play through the selection of texts and the processes of editing, domesticating or foreignising of their content on reception in far-flung readerships.

¹⁰⁵ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta in association with Penguin, 1991), 248-249. “[T]he very word metaphor, with its roots in the Greek words for bearing across, describes a sort of migration, the migration of ideas into images. Migrants - borne-across for translated humans - are metaphorical beings in their very essence; and migration, seen as a metaphor, is everywhere around us. We all cross frontiers; in that sense, we are all migrant peoples.”
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Since translation itself is a subjective interpretation, prevalent translation practices within a linguistic community are akin to interpretive strategies or norms within a reading community. Hence the French translation of Indian English texts should be studied as a form of reception in itself.

Translation as reception

Given the status of France as a Western, First World and former colonising country (even if marginal in the case of India), any analysis of the reception of French translations of Indian English texts (and of these translations as a form of reception) has to be informed by the awareness of the relationship between translation and power.

The relationship between translation and power, as well as the significance of translation in the spread of Empires, in the process of colonisation and in the resultant interactions between dominant and dominated cultures, has been explored at length by postcolonial and translation scholars. Translation, as a selective, subjective, appropriative and manipulative process plays an important role in shaping the reception of a literature and in the perception of its country or culture of origin. As such, it has been an important tool in the ‘civilising mission’ of colonisation.

For example, in “Translation as Manipulation: The Power of Images and Images of Power” Mahasweta Sengupta argues that colonisers justify their ‘civilising mission’ and the inherent superiority of their culture by selecting texts that conform to their own image or perception of the colonised, or through selective translation of the texts. She looks at the way in which “the British constructed a certain ‘image’ of India through a selective rendition of [its literary] texts” using the example of Sir William Jones. She argues that his translation of Kalidasa’s *Abhijnanashkuntalam* (*Sakuntala*) emphasised the simple, natural yet civilised India of ancient times and his translation of *Gitagovindam* reduced Jayadeva’s devotional yet highly human, erotic, luxuriant and poetic lyrics to mere devotional poems steeped with mysticism, thereby aiding in the construction of the mystical – spiritual and simple – natural (to be read as primitive) image of India that coloured all “future rewritings about cultures of India”


108 Ibid, p.162-163

109 Ibid, p.162-163
In this context, it would be of interest to observe the patterns of ‘translation practice’ that emerge from French translations of Indian English texts. There has been no attempt, as yet, to trace the history of the French translation of Indian English literature itself as a form of reception, or to examine or analyse the differences between, and the features common to, French and Anglophone receptions of Indian English literature.

**French translation practice: selective appropriation and manipulation**

The attitude of French publishers and translators to early Indian English literature is similar to that which, according to Ranasinha’s study, was displayed by British publishers and audience towards Indian English authors of the same generation in terms of the expectations of, and actions taken to maintain the purity of, language and conformity to prevalent literary norms (French and British respectively). The French publishers’ attitude and the resultant French translation practice also demonstrates the power translation can (and does) exercise through selective manipulation, appropriation and domestication.

For example, the preface to the French translation of Raja Rao's *The Serpent and the Rope* warns the reader of the textual cuts made “by the publisher's decision albeit with the author's consent”, declaring that "we have had to sacrifice certain pages, certain fables [...] we have made an effort here and there to refashion certain passages." In “Narcissism Thy Name is French Translation”, N. Kamala finds this French practice of domesticating, or recasting the world in its own image, narcissistic and argues that such narcissism has been visible since the earliest French translations of Indian English literature as evidenced by the perfectly fluent and idiomatic French translations where Tagore resembles Lamartine, and R.K. Narayan does not sound like R.K. Narayan at all.

The strategy of target culture-oriented translation is also obvious in French translations of the titles of many works from Indian English literature. A list of works translated from Indian English published by the Municipal Library of Paris demonstrates how French translators frequently change titles of Indian English novels. Sometimes this is done in an attempt to make these titles more familiar and/or exotic for French readers, but mostly distorting, decontextualising and/or reductively naturalising them in the process. The French translations that foreignise the English titles by transforming them

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110 Ranasinha, *South Asian Writers in Twentieth-Century Britain*.
113 Refered to by Rollason in a conference paper in Jawaharlal Nehru University and reproduced in *Les belles Étrangères* edited by Rakesh Sharma.
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so that they become explicitly and familiarly indicative of India, many a time force them out of their intertextual and textual context. On the other hand, sometimes when the titles are domesticated into standard French, the result neutralises or de-emphasises their intent.

This exoticising and decontextualising foreignisation is evident in the translation of the title of Kamala Markandeya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*. The French translation *Le Riz et la Mousson* (Rice and Monsoon) defeminises the original title by erasing the word sieve and reduces the bitter-sweet life experience of a peasant woman indicated in the title to general realities of peasant life in a tropical country like India. Similarly, as Rollason has observed, the title of Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Circle of Reason*, which pays homage to the Bengali rationalist tradition but would be unfamiliar to a French audience, is transformed into *Les Feux de Bengale* (Bengal Lights), which sounds exotic and becomes recognisably India-specific.

The practice of reductive naturalisation and domestication is evident in the case of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, which, instead of *Le Dieu des petites choses*, becomes *Le Dieu des petits riens* (The God of Little Nothings) in its French translation. This translation, though apparently idiomatic in French as it conveys the insignificance of everyday events and people, changes the ‘small things’ into ‘little nothings’. The result is that the very aim of the title to emphasise that small things ‘are’ and ‘matter’, even if they are small and ineffective, is lost in the process.

In view of such traditional domesticating and gallicising translation practices, the question that any analysis of French translations of contemporary Indian English texts needs to ask is whether such practices have persisted in the post-97 decade. Another question is whether such practices have remained limited to the titles of the text. As seen earlier, in the case of Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and The Rope*, domestication continued at the level of the text in the form of the elimination or refashioning of the overly culture-specific parts of the text. What then happens to certain characteristic features of present-day Indian English literature, such as hybridity?

Linguistic hybridity has become almost a trademark of Indian English literature since its rise to prominence as a key feature of the postcolonial literature. It is as if any Indian English text, in order to be authentically Indian English, has to bear the visual marks of one or more Indian languages on

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its English. Most Indian English texts have a smattering of Indianisms or Indian language words punctuating their otherwise ‘correct’ English.

The very nature of this ‘postcolonial’ hybridity, which undermines the purity and authority of the colonial original (English in this Indian context), demands a combination of Indian language and English. This renders it, in theory, untranslatable because, even if the hybrid English is translated into a hybrid French (or any other language), keeping the Indian words intact, such a translation would erase the subversive character of the original hybridity. The glossaries added to each such text would further undermine their postcolonialism by removing or filling the very gaps created by untranslated Indian words or Indianisms. The point of interest, regarding French translation practices, is how French translations deal with the linguistic hybridity in the Indian English texts, even if this hybridity is considered to be merely a textual element or specificity rather than a postcolonial one.

The fact that receptions in non-Anglophone audiences are mediated and shaped by the process of translation fails to attract attention as does the possibility of Indian English texts being approached through critical perspectives other than the postcolonial.

**Non-postcolonial reception**

On the one hand, owing to the near exclusive focus on the reception of Indian English literature in the Anglophone world, where the postcolonial perspective enjoys prominence and is the predominant critical approach to Indian English literature, the possibility of the reception of Indian English literature in non-Anglophone worlds, through perspectives other than the postcolonial, remains unconsidered. On the other hand, the rising interest in the study of English and English literature following the rise of English to the position of the global lingua franca and the predominance of a postcolonial perspective in the world of English literature(s) has made it the ‘cutting edge’ area of literary studies in English. This, in combination with the branding of Indian English literature as postcolonial, has made the postcolonial perspective the prevalent interpretive strategy for this literature, even in the non-Anglophone worlds, almost eliminating the possibility of Indian English literature being read through any other perspective.

That Indian English literature is read as a postcolonial literature even in the non-Anglophone worlds is evident from the increasing number of journal articles, conference papers or book chapters on the subject by non-Anglophone scholars and the courses on postcolonial literature in universities in the non-Anglophone world. The case of Germany is examined in detail by various scholars contributing
to *Mediating Indian writing in English: German responses*, the anthology of essays on German reception of Indian English literature edited by Bernd-Peter Lange and Mala Pandurang in 2006.\(^{115}\)

Against this background, the French reluctance to engage with the postcolonial perspective\(^{116}\) is of interest for this study for its possible effect on French reception of Indian English texts, especially in view of the hegemony of that perspective within the chosen historical moment and in relation to Indian English literature.

France was a marginal coloniser in India and had an extensive colonial empire of its own that, in size, was second only to the British Empire. Postcolonial theory is indebted to Francophone writers/thinkers such as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire as well as French thinkers such as Foucault, Lacan and Derrida, who influenced leading postcolonial theorists such as Said, Spivak and Bhabha. Yet it is only recently that there have been arguments for (and against) thinking about Francophone literatures in terms of postcolonial literatures, and the usefulness of certain concepts from Francophone studies in the field of postcolonial studies.\(^{117}\)

In the article “De-centring French Studies: Towards a Postcolonial theory of Francophone Cultures”, David Murphy traces the origin and journey of *Francophonie* and of Francophone studies along with the relations between France and Francophone literatures as well as that between French and postcolonial literary studies.\(^{118}\) Although the aim of the article is “to argue the case for the development of a postcolonial theory of Francophone cultures”,\(^{119}\) it highlights the fact that the reasons behind the French reluctance to engage with postcolonial theory stem from the history of ‘intercultural relations’ between France and England, the Anglocentric nature of postcolonial studies, and the general French relationship to Francophone studies.

\(^{115}\) Bernd-Peter Lange and Mala Pandurang, eds., *Mediating Indian Writing in English: German Responses* (Münster: Lit, 2006).


\(^{118}\) Murphy, “De-centring French Studies: Towards a Postcolonial Theory of Francophone Cultures.”

\(^{119}\) Ibid., 166.
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Pointing out that one of the main aims of the state-sponsored *Francophonie* has been to check the spread of English, Murphy problematises the idealistic euphemism of the image of *Francophonie* as a linguistic brotherhood, which occludes the history of colonial and neo-colonial relations between France and the Francophone world. He also brings to notice the (French) double standards whereby European Francophone authors such as Milan Kundera and Andreï Makine are included in the French canon while non-European (especially African) authors from former colonies (even if French citizens) are marginalized as Francophone. Murphy argues that the secular and assimilationist state policies towards Third World migrants signify a covert refusal “to accept [a certain kind of] difference within the notion of ‘Frenchness’.”

Against this background, what (if any) effect do factors such as the French rivalry with English and marginalising attitudes towards Third World Francophone literature have on French reception of Indian English literature, which by French standards might be an Anglophone rather than an ‘English’ literature? Against the same background, what can be the significance of the French interest in Indian English literature? And what could be the explanation for the slight shift in French attitudes towards the postcolonial approach to Indian English literature?

Recently, French scholars working on Indian English literature have incorporated discussions of ‘postcolonial aspects’ of Indian English texts in studies that look at these texts mainly through other perspectives. For example, the selection of critical essays *Reading Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things* by Carole Froude-Durix and Jean-Pierre Durix as well as Emilienne L. Baneth-Nouailhetas’s monograph *The God of Small Things, Arundhati Roy*, both published in 2002, discuss certain postcolonial elements of the novel but do not treat the novel as a postcolonial text. As Alex Tickell points out, the essays in the Durix collection, except for Jean-Pierre Durix’s “The Postcoloniality of *The God of Small Things*”, examine *The God of Small Things* from psychoanalytic, post-structuralist and postmodernist perspectives whereas Baneth-Nouailhetas’s analysis is mainly informed by narratology, the dominant critical mode in French literary studies, according to Tickell. Is this shift a result of the hegemony of the postcolonial approach in general, and as an approach to Indian English literature in particular?

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120 Ibid., 172.
Chapter 1: Introduction

There has been no study to date of the French reception of Indian English literature that analyses whether it is influenced by the hegemony of postcolonial perspective or whether the French reluctance to engage with the postcolonial perspective, that critics like Forsdike and Murphy refer to, modifies the way Indian English texts in French translation are read. No work has yet examined whether the French perceptions of India, or the French attitude towards Francophone literatures from former French colonies, play a role in shaping this reception. This study is an attempt to fill these gaps and to forge a link between Francophone studies and postcolonial studies.

Murphy’s article succinctly presents the history of Francophone studies and the issues at the core of the relation between France and Francophone studies. Murphy uses the term Francophone literatures for literatures from former French colonies without making further distinctions based on geographical or cultural differences. It is in this limited sense that this thesis will use the term Francophone literature, staying away from the debates around the term Francophone (such as whether it signifies literature by any/all speakers of French and as such is politically neutral or whether it signifies literature from former French colonies and as such is politically loaded) and circumventing the geographical and cultural complexities of the field.

Methodology

This thesis will analyse and compare Indian, non-Indian Anglophone and French reception of each of the selected texts.

Although, Interpreter of Maladies was published before The Alchemy of Desire, and The Inheritance of Loss after it, the reception analyses will not follow that sequence. Instead, the first chapter will analyse the reception of The Inheritance of Loss, a text that deals with postcolonial issues and is written by a migrant writer, thus representing the prevalent perception of Indian English Literature in terms of text and author profile. The second chapter will analyse the reception of Interpreter of Maladies, which as a text dealing with migrant experience and written by a second generation diasporic writer, adds nuance to the prevalent perception. The third chapter will analyse the reception of The Alchemy of Desire, which represents the doubly marginalised category of Indian English texts: texts which do not have a postcolonial and/or migrant focus and are written by resident Indian writers.

Each chapter will begin with a brief summary of the novel and an account of the extra-textual aspects (such as biographic details, prizes and place in the canon) and textual aspects (such as structure,
Chapter 1: Introduction

themes, narrative techniques and strategies), which are considered to be significant in the reception of a text. This will be followed by an analysis of the popular and critical receptions of each text by Indian, non-Indian Anglophone and French readerships, using available reviews, author interviews and relevant scholarly studies. With the help of these analyses, the thesis will examine whether, and how, in combination with the ‘interpretive’ inheritances of the respective reading communities, the texts, the authorial personae (determined by their origin, interviews and prizes) and their Indian identities play a role in the different receptions and seem to be at the root of the tension and discrepancies between them.

By comparing and contrasting these receptions, this study will draw attention to the features that these receptions share as well as those that are different or specific to each of them. It will also indicate the potential that goes unrealised through the lack of dialogue between these receptions or readerships (or in studying the ways in which these receptions react against or ignore each other). Given that Indian English literature is read predominantly as a postcolonial literature in the Anglophone world, this thesis will also explore whether and to what extent, these receptions follow, or deviate from, the postcolonial perspective.

The study will conclude with a chapter comparing the receptions of the three texts with each other. It will comment on the effect of: the shared historical moment, hierarchical intercultural relations between the texts and their audiences (and among the audiences), cultural specificities within each audience, the authorial identities, the hegemony of the postcolonial perspective and translation on the reception of this literature. The concluding chapter will summarise the findings of this thesis and indicate the ways in which it contributes to the fields of reception studies, postcolonial studies and Indian English literature as well as opening up new paths of research.
Chapter 2: Receptions of *The Inheritance of Loss*
Chapter 2: Receptions of *The Inheritance of Loss*

**Introduction**

The acclaimed Indian English writer Kiran Desai won the Man Booker prize in 2006 for her second novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. The media coverage that followed the award made much of the fact that she was the youngest female to win the Booker and even more of the fact that she was the youngest Indian to do so. Paradoxically, though born and brought up in India, Kiran Desai has spent most of her adult life since the age of 14 outside the country, first in the UK and then in the US.

Kiran Desai, as someone who lives in America but has chosen not to apply for American citizenship, is a non-resident Indian writer. Writers like Kiran Desai, who choose to retain their ‘claim on their Indian identity’, while living in another country are of interest to the present study for the nuance they add to the prevalent image of the Indian English writer as a migrant writer and the effect that the ambivalence of their Indian identity might have on their reception. The ambivalence resides in the fact that they claim to be Indians and the world outside accepts them as Indians but in India they are selectively treated as emigrants or as Indians.

Born in 1971, Kiran Desai is the daughter of the well-known Indian English writer Anita Desai, who left India first to teach at Cambridge University, UK and from there moved to MIT, America. Kiran Desai thus left India at the age of 14. She has lived abroad ever since, and according to her own interviews, will continue to do so, though she visits India regularly. Kiran Desai’s first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, published in 1998, was begun while she was a student in a creative writing program at Hollins University.

Kiran Desai is famous as the Man Booker laureate of 2006 but her debut novel, *The Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* was the winner of the Betty Trask Prize in 1998. *The Inheritance of Loss* (*Inheritance* from here onwards) won the Booker in 2006 but since then it has earned many more accolades. It was awarded the National Critics Circle Fiction Award (USA) in 2007 and the Hutch Crosswords Award (India, 2007). It was shortlisted for the Kiriyama Prize (2007), for British Book Awards Decibel Writer of the Year (2007) and Orange Prize for fiction (2007). *La Perte en Héritage*, the French translation of *Inheritance*, has won the Prix des Lecteurs (France) in 2009.

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2. http://www.hwwilson.com/currentbio/cover_bios/cover_bio_1_07.htm
Chapter 2: Receptions of The Inheritance of Loss

Although being Anita Desai’s daughter doubtless helped, Kiran Desai’s career took off, in more than one way, under Rushdie’s patronage. Not only did the excerpts from her first novel appear in his anthology even before it was published as a novel, but she herself received a special mention in his preface as the ‘freshest and the youngest voice’ of Indian English literature and, as the daughter of Anita Desai, heiress of the first literary dynasty of this literature. His blurb adorns the front cover of Hullabaloo as well as the dust jacket of Inheritance. The effect of Rushdie’s patronage was visible in the bidding war for the publication rights of Hullabaloo and, as some imply, even in the eventual Booker for Inheritance.

Though Kiran Desai’s writing career was launched in 1997 in Rushdie’s anthology, both her books were published between 1998 and 2008. This is a decade that has seen an explosion in Indian English writing, with its writers writing from various locations and bagging prestigious international awards. This decade also marks a change within the Indian English canon. If, until then, the Indian English canon had been divided into the pre- and post-Rushdie generations, 1997 was the beginning of the third generation of Indian English writers, the generation for whom the standard-bearer is Arundhati Roy, the winner of the 1997 Booker for her first and till now only novel The God of Small Things (TGST) and the first resident Indian writer to win this prize.

Desai belongs to the post-TGST generation, because even though the excerpts from Hullabaloo and TGST appeared simultaneously and together in the New Yorker special issue and in the Golden Jubilee year anthology by Rushdie in 1997, TGST was published the same year while Hullabaloo was published in 1998. This also meant that Desai was inevitably judged against the standards set by Arundhati Roy. Desai’s parentage, patronage, prizes and her place within the Indian English canon are some of the extra-textual aspects of Inheritance that play a role in the reception of Inheritance.

As a Booker Prize winning text, Inheritance has garnered heightened media interest, larger sales and popular, as well as scholarly, attention. The prestige that follows the highest accolade in the English literary world has made its author visible and audible. As seen in the number of interviews that followed the Booker, based on Kiran Desai’s autobiographical connection with India and many of the events in Inheritance, she has become a voice to be paid attention to, especially on the subject of India, Indians and Indian migrants. This makes it of considerable interest to see whether and how the

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ambivalent nature of her Indian identity has affected the reception of *Inheritance*, especially in view of the authority and authenticity that have been bestowed upon her.

The issue of reception brings us to the question of audience. Which audience(s) is *Inheritance* written for and which audiences does it reach? In terms of reception theory, who are the intended readers of *Inheritance* and who are the actual readers? The obvious intended audience of *Inheritance* as a text in English is Anglophone readers in Western Anglophone countries, in India and other countries. The sequence in which *Inheritance* has reached these audiences is determined by the sequence of the appearance of its publications. Since *Inheritance*, like most Indian English texts, was translated into French and other major international languages within a year of its publication; the actual audience of *Inheritance* has been much wider and more diverse.

Since *Inheritance* was first published and read outside India, in this chapter we shall first look at its Anglophone reception outside India followed by its Indian Anglophone reception and then its French reception.

This chapter will begin with a brief summary of the novel, an account of the textual aspects that, along with the extra-textual aspects discussed above (such as biographic details, patronage, prizes and place in the canon), seem to be significant in the reception of *Inheritance*. This will be followed by an analysis of reception by each of the three audiences using available reviews, author interviews and relevant scholarly studies. With the help of analyses of the popular and critical receptions of *Inheritance* from Indian, non-Indian Anglophone and French readerships, this chapter will examine how in combination with the ‘interpretive’ inheritances of these reading communities, the text and the authorial persona (determined by her Indian origin, interviews and prizes) seem to play a major role in these receptions and to be at the root of the tension and discrepancies between them.

*The Inheritance of Loss*

Set in the shadow of the magnificent Kanchenjunga, against the backdrop of the 1980s Gorakha uprising in the Kalimpong hills, *The Inheritance of Loss* is the story of a retired Judge, his granddaughter Sai, his Cook and the Cook’s son Biju, an illegal immigrant in New York, America. In addition to its four protagonists, the Judge, Sai, the Cook and Biju, the narrative is peopled by a number of not-so-minor characters.

Each character in *Inheritance* has a story which forms one of the many strands of the narrative. These separate narrative strands are brought together to form a complex text. Though the main
narrative and characters are situated in the Kalimpong region of India during the 1980 political uprising for a separate Gorkha state, they have a wider span: geographically as the characters travel across the world to England, Russia and America, temporally as the narrative moves between the colonial and postcolonial past and global present, as well as spatially as the story alternates between family and public and between national and international spaces.

An overview
The retired Judge, Jemubhai Patel, is a Cambridge educated ICS (Indian Civil Servant) of the dying British Raj. A bright boy from a poor family whose father dreamed of a foreign education and a career in the British government for him, he was married off to the youngest and most beautiful daughter of the richest local merchant, who paid for his Cambridge Education to secure a man who would one day be ‘powerful’ as his son-in-law. Feeling inadequate and inferior in England, experiencing humiliation and racism, Jemubhai returns warped by hatred for both the ‘superior’ British whom he wanted to emulate and the ‘inferior’ Indians, including his own family and wife, about whom he was embarrassed and from whom he wanted to distance himself, knowing full well that he could never ever be one of either the British or the Indians. Having successfully and callously alienated his family, wife and then daughter, he lives misanthropically through his ‘working’ life in colonial and independent India and retires to live alone, with his dog and a cook in a house acquired from a departing Scotsman, till the death of his daughter and son-in-law in a road accident in Russia forces his orphaned grand-daughter Sai on him.

Sai’s arrival reminds the Judge of his own journey to England, his loneliness and subsequent dehumanisation there through feelings of inadequacy and humiliation in face of racism. The cook’s chatter with Sai and his tall tales about the Judge’s past bring back, against the Judge’s will, memories of his humble origins, his marriage, his inadequacies and humiliations as well as his life in and after England. The fights between Sai and Gyan (her tutor turned lover) rake up images of his own violence to his wife. Finally, though otherwise untouched by the insurgency, his humiliation at the hands of the GNLF\(^9\) boys and later on the disappearance of his dog Mutt, the only being he loves and who loves him back, force him to acknowledge and repent the pain and injustice he inflicted on his family and his wife, even if this does not change him much.

Taken in because she could not be pushed on to anyone else, Sai grows up unloved and ignored by her grand-father, who nevertheless feels a kinship to her anglicised self. She is raised and cared for

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\(^9\) Gorkha National Liberation Front – the party, which initiates the separatist movement
Chapter 2: Receptions of *The Inheritance of Loss*

by the Cook, taken into feminine folds by the sisters Lola and Noni. She is tutored first by Noni and then by Gyan, a bright but poor local Nepali. She falls in love with him, only to be deserted later when he falls under the spell of the GNLF leaders’ fiery speeches demanding a free Gorkha state in India.

The effects of the insurgency, the changes it brings, the disappointment in love, realisation of social injustice and suffering of others force Sai to grow up. She becomes aware that hers is not the only story that matters. Even if she has made up her mind to leave, watching Biju’s return and meeting with his father, she feels, if briefly, that “‘Truth was apparent. All you had to do was to reach out and pluck it.” (324)

The Cook comes from the underclass that lives to serve. At a young age, he was pushed into the Judge’s service by his father, himself a servant of some British official. Loyal despite the abuse, penury and hardships inflicted by the Judge during the years in his service or the disappointment at having to serve a ‘brown sahib’, he tries to uphold the illusion of the Judge’s prestige and character in order to salvage some dignity and status for himself. He cares for Sai but, having lost his wife, paltry family inheritance and ties with his family, lives for his only son Biju.

Ambitious for his son, the cook does everything in his reach to send Biju to America with dreams of a better life and money for him. Ignorant of Biju’s plight as an illegal immigrant in America, he is proud of his son’s American achievements. He thinks that Biju is successful, works for ‘white’ men and can help others who want to follow in his footsteps. Though he does not, and is not allowed by Biju to, discover the distance between his illusion and the reality of Biju’s life, the violence and the upheavals caused by the insurgency make him feel insecure. He is scared for his own life and of never seeing his son again.

Gyan is a bright but poor local Nepali graduate, whose ancestors moved to India from Nepal to join the British army. He is appointed to teach Sai Maths. He is attracted to Sai initially because of the differences of class and culture that set her apart and above him but deserts her when he comes under the spell of the rebel GNLF leaders and starts looking at those differences as the symbol of the divide between them and of the oppression of his people. As the informant, he is responsible for the theft of the judge’s guns and the consequent kidnapping of Mutt by the grieving family of the town drunkard, who is wrongly accused and brutalised by the police for the gun theft.
Eventually, he repents his actions but since he has no power to remedy them, willingly lets go of Sai and lets his family take control of his life, even before the insurgency fails.

Lola and Noni are two sisters living in a cottage named Mon Ami. Lola is the widowed owner of the estate and an anglicised Anglophile. Lola’s belief - that India is a sinking ship and that Indians who can should get out while it is still possible - has made her the proud mother of a daughter, Piyali, who lives in London and works as a news reporter for the BBC. Lola is crazy for all things English, from undergarments to Jane Austen, and quite insensitive to and biased against those who think otherwise or are of a lower class. Noni, Lola’s spinster sister, lives with her, tutors Sai to supplement Lola’s pension (until the Maths becomes too difficult for her), feels love and life have passed her by. Both sisters realise the precariousness of their elitist life and beliefs as the situation in Kalimpong gets worse, GNLF encouraged and supported squatters encroach upon their land and some insurgents forcibly enter their house, when the insurgency fails, to hide from the police.

Uncle Potty is the neighbour who lives in the house closest to Cho-oyu built on the land bought from the Judge. Oxford-educated son of an aristocratic Lukhnow family “defeated by bad luck and changing times” (pg. 198), Uncle Potty is an Asterix fan, a homosexual and a heavy drinker who signs away Father Booty’s property along with his own in a drunken stupor, tricked by the opportunists in league with the insurgents.

Father Booty is a Swiss missionary gone native, passionately in love with the rugged beauty of Kalimpong hills, a dairy owner, cheese maker, amateur lepidopterist and Uncle Potty’s friend since that day years ago, when they caught each other eyeing some handsome Tibetan monks. He is someone who has done a lot for the locals, has stopped thinking of himself as an outsider and has allowed his ‘residence permit’ to lapse. Without valid papers he becomes an illegal immigrant in India and is told to leave. He has to leave his lovingly cultivated property in the care of Uncle Potty, who is forced to wash his hands of it during the insurgency.

On the other side of the globe is Biju, the Cook’s son, who is sent to America by his father for a better life and more money. He lives the homesick, miserable and lonely life of an illegal immigrant - constantly on the run from the system, moving from job to job, equally ignored by the legal Indian migrants and Americans, indifferently or callously treated by employers.

Biju’s only friend in America and fellow ‘illegal immigrant’, Saeed Saeed is a handsome, dreadlocked Zanjibarian who is at home in America and whom girls go crazy over (78). He is the
man Biju admires most in America (53) and has become friends with in spite of inherited prejudices against Muslims and black people. Biju is impressed by Saeed Saeed’s refusal to eat ‘pig’ because of his conviction that he is “first a Muslim, then a Zanjibari [and then] an American.” (136)

However their paths diverge when Saeed Saeed marries into an American Hippie family to get the Green Card (at the same time planning to get divorced at the right time and marry a ‘pure’ Zanjibarian girl). Saeed Saeed knows how to work the system and makes his American dream come true while remaining true to his multiple identities. He adds a rare, even if minor, note of success and achievement in Biju’s otherwise bleak story.

Influenced by Saeed Saeed’s adherence to his religion and in reaction to the hypocrisy of Indian immigrants who eat beef as if to prove their assimilation in America, Biju, a Hindu, goes in search of a non-beef establishment and finds work in Harish-Harry’s Gandhi café.

Harish-Harry is Biju’s first, and only, Indian (and as it turns out the last) employer in New York. As Biju gradually discovers, Harish-Harry is a money-minded, sweet-talking hypocrite who exploits his employees, who tries to be a good Hindu by going to temple, by not serving beef and donating money to a ‘cow shelter’ and whose success is soured by his daughter’s total Americanisation and contempt for him.

Ill-treated and exploited by Harish-Harry, increasingly worried about his father as the news of the trouble in Kalimpong reaches him, Biju leaves America. He returns ‘home’ only to get caught in the chaos caused by the insurgency and is robbed of all his American savings and possessions by the insurgents on the run. Son of a poor servant, Biju is a victim, first of poverty, then of globalization and eventually of regional extremism. In the process, he loses not just his dignity and sense of belonging but his dreams too, although not his love of and for his father.

The narrative of Inheritance begins in the middle of the ‘Kalimpong’ side of the story, when at the end of an ordinary day, the GNLF boys creep in on the inmates of Cho-oyu, taking advantage of the dark, the isolation of the house, the ages of the inmates and presence of a dog that is of no use in guarding the house. The Judge is humiliated and ordered around by the boys who are no match for him in either education or status but who realise, and are emboldened by, the fact that an old man, a weak servant and a young girl cannot put up any resistance nor call for help given the isolated position of the house.
This is the first thing to happen in Cho-oyu and in the judge’s life since Sai’s arrival nine years before. It is the beginning of the end of a lot of things in his life including his attempt to hold on to the pretence of status and to keep control over what happens in Cho-oyu. Not only is this event the end of the monotony and the feeling of security at Cho-oyu but also an indicator of the things to come, of a future that is the culmination of many things in the past.

_Inheritance_ ends on a bitter-sweet note, as bruised, broken and penniless Biju is hugged by his father and their meeting is observed from afar by Sai who has made up her mind to leave one day.

As we can see, _Inheritance_ is a complex text. The loose structure of the narrative and the multifaceted nature of the narrative strands permit various associations between them on the basis of gender, class, language or location and these organizing principles can determine the patterns that emerge. At the same time, the text as it is organised seems to invite or favour a certain reading through textual aspects such as structure, narrative technique and themes.

As the overview shows, _The Inheritance of Loss_ is a non-linear, anachronous narrative. It is divided into 53 chapters of uneven length alternating between Kalimpong and New York. Neither the Indian nor the American strand of the story has a well-defined beginning, middle or end. Each strand begins at a point far from its beginning, in the thick of the action, with the gun theft in Kalimpong and Biju’s first job in New York.

The narrative then travels in two directions: forward in the diegetic present and backward in its past. The narrative travels backward, as some action or event in the diegetic present triggers the memories and thoughts of various characters, till it reaches the ‘origin’ of each narrative strand. Whereas, in the diegetic present, the inmates of Cho-oyu and their neighbours go on living their normal routines amidst the rising tension until the insurgency turns ugly and violent, and forces itself into their lives, though ultimately to fizzle out in an uncertain peace and future. Through this constant juxtaposition of the present and the past or different pasts and different presents, the novel creates a loose-fitting mosaic of narrative strands and descriptions. Despite or because of their plurality and differences, these narrative strands and descriptions illuminate each other so as to highlight an underlying pattern or thematic unity.

At first, the multiple narrative strands of _Inheritance_ appear totally divergent and the characters seem to have nothing in common, but closer examination reveals that they are similar in various ways. For example, The Judge (Jemu) and Biju seem to belong to two different worlds in their background,
age, education and status, with only the Cook as the common factor or the link between them. However their stories have a number of similarities. Both come from humble families. Both have ambitious fathers who dream big dreams for their sons and do whatever they have to in order to give their sons a chance at a ‘better life’ and ‘more money’. Jemu’s father is ready to marry him off to ‘an ugly daughter of a rich man’, the Cook offers bribes, procures false certificates and recommendations for his son (179-180). Both run illegal businesses, Jemu’s father Popatlal, that of ‘procuring false witnesses to appear in court’ (pg. 57), Biju’s father, the Cook, producing and selling illegal home-made Chang (country liquor), (Pg. 54).

Jemu and Biju leave India at almost the same age. Jemu departs at twenty, to go to England for his Cambridge education (pg. 308), Biju in the hope of finding work, earning more money and living a better life in America when he is nineteen (Pg. 16). Both feel lonely and inadequate amongst foreigners. Both experience racism. Jemu is turned down by landlords (38); girls openly mock him for stinking of ‘curry’ (39). Biju is turned down by employers, found smelly, offered soap (48-49), asked to use his ‘time off’ to take a bath (23). In all his years in England, Jemu sees “nothing of the English countryside” (40) Biju returns “without name or knowledge of the American president … without even hearing of any of the tourist sites” (Pg. 286). Both come back to India ‘lesser’ men than before, albeit in different ways. Jemubhai, ICS, having lost his ability to smile and feel love, comes back filled with humiliation, hatred and self-loathing that he takes out on his family, wife and other ‘natives’. Biju comes back filled with love and concern for his father, unable to take the American experience anymore but is robbed of everything, including the things brought back from America, his savings and with them his dreams, by his own countrymen.

There are similarities between Gyan and the Judge too, although more in terms of personality and reactions to experiences than in the detail of those experiences. Gyan too belongs to a poor family, whose ancestors came to India from Nepal as soldiers of the British crown. Gyan is as ashamed of his meek, school teacher father (who is not ambitious for himself or for his son and does not have big dreams) as the young Jemubhai who first feels pity, embarrassment and then hatred for his ambitious but poor and uneducated father. Gyan is as much the hope of his family as Jemubhai was, so much so that the lives of the rest of the family are kept on hold for their ‘bright future’. (256) (59)

The Judge sees his young self in Gyan, who is unfamiliar and uncomfortable with ‘Western food and manner of eating’. He senses that Gyan was “someone with plans” who “carried an unmistakable whiff of journey, of ambition” and recognises in him his own “weakness that was not merely a feeling, but also a taste, like fever”. (109). Gyan’s recital of Tagore’s poem, in its absurdity and
unease, mirrors the Judge’s own recitation of *Lochinvar* in the open competition exam for ICS. (112-113)

Gyan, takes out his feelings of humiliation and anger at the difference between them on the woman in his life, Sai (163-164) just as the Judge vents his anger and frustrations on his wife, Nimi (169-173). Gyan too resorts to physical violence in reaction to Sai’s spirited response to his verbal abuse (261) as the Judge does when the usually meek Nimi calls him stupid (304-305). Both, Gyan and the Judge, prefer the feeling of power over love, perhaps because they need to feel superior to their women who come from a rung of society above them.

The female characters from the Indian part of *Inheritance* appear to be very different from each other in their age, nature and marital status. The characteristic they share is ‘victimisation’ at the hands of men. From Nimi to Sai they represent different generations. Nimi, beautiful and from a rich family is married off by her father to Jemu, a man who, though bright and with prospects, is from a humble family and from the later descriptions not necessarily good looking. He forgets her while he is away for five years, and on his return abuses, humiliates, neglects and finally abandons her to a miserable life and death. Mrs. Mistry, the daughter of Nimi and the Judge, is neglected by her father (who pays her board but never visits or takes her home) and has to grow up like an orphan in a convent boarding school.

Sai, orphaned first by her parents’ move to Russia and then through their death, has no option but to live with a reluctant, indifferent and unloving grandfather. She falls in love with the only available young man, her maths tutor Gyan, a bright but poor Nepali who dumps her while under the spell of the insurgency. Lola, though happy in marriage, is now a widow struggling to maintain the estate left to her by her husband. As an old woman no longer in her prime and powerless because a member of a minority, she is readily insulted by the corrupt insurgent leader Pradhan. Noni, as a shy spinster, grows up under the thumb of her father, her misery unrelieved by romance or marriage.

On the other hand, the migrant Indian women seem to be transformed from meek brides into selectively modern women who are survivors and able managers and manipulators of the foreign systems (150) but also keepers of the ‘Indian culture’ through their knowledge of traditions, customs and recipes (234). Unlike the men who seem to warp under the pressures of adjusting to a different culture and buckle under the burden of a hyphenated identities, these women seem to be empowered
by the situation. Doubly so, according to Desai, because the image of ‘victimised’ Indian woman earns them sympathy in the host society and their survival in face of ‘adversities and difficulties’ of migration earns them respect from the host and the home society (50). However, Desai’s portrayal is more ironic than appreciative. The next generation of women migrants might be different from the earlier generation as these younger women come to America as students and not necessarily housewives or new brides; but even they are portrayed as dreaming of marriages to white men instead of careers (49-50).

There are other patterns. The adulation and imitation of the west in the (upper) middle class can be seen in the Judge, Lola, Noni, Mrs. Sen. The ‘Indian’ parents’ tendency to dream ambitious dreams for their children and to push the children to achieve these dreams is portrayed through the Judge’s father, the Cook, Lola, Mrs. Sen, Mr. Kakkar’s (Biju’s travel agent) father and Harish-Harry. The migrant experiences follow a pattern too. The upper class educated migrants, who manage their Western world with ease and look down upon the lower class migrants, are strewn from restaurants in New York to the crowds at the airports just as they can be found in the Judge’s colleagues and the Indian girls Biju takes Chinese food to. The poor migrants who go out in search of better life and money, have to bribe, cheat, and are exploited in the process. They despise the ‘legal migrants’ and their snobbish pretensions just as they are sick of other illegal or poor immigrants who follow in their footsteps and smother them with requests for help when they themselves are struggling to survive. But they have to stick to such life because the costs of going back are equally exorbitant.

However the most striking pattern that emerges from the novel is the image of India. The thoughts, feelings, conversations and descriptions in Inheritance seem to be negative confirmation of certain adjectives that are often used to describe India.

Images of India:

Eternal India

India in Inheritance is unchanged and unchanging. It is the same old backward, crowded and corrupt India that won’t change for the better. During Sai’s journey to Cho-oyu after the death of her parents, the nun and Sai travelling from Dehra Dun to Siliguri by train are shown to view “a panorama of village life” and an India that “looked as old as ever”, with its women too poor to wear blouses under their saris, rows of people defecating on railway tracks in plain view of the passing train (30). This is

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10 Mrs. Shah is transformed from a meek jewellery-laden sari-wearing bride into a modern woman in pantsuit with bobbed hair, who manages to secure a bridegroom for her daughter by making and fed-ээхж a traditional Indian dish to him. Harish-Harry’s wife keeps a tab on the money he earns and is cunning enough to suggest that the staff like Biju sleep in the kitchen where they are always available for work (146).
an India where the fathers of would-be-judges, the servants of retired judges like the Cook, and even
army officials run illegal businesses, where Indians from the educated middle classes to the
impoverished masses want to send their children abroad for better education and/ or better money
and life. When the wife of the drunkard wrongly accused and brutalized by the police for the gun-
theft in Cho-oyu comes repeatedly to ask for help, the Judge embarrassed by the focus it brings on
his own humiliation at the hands of the GNLF boys, thinks “This was why he had retired. India was
too messy for justice; it ended only in humiliation for the person in authority.” (264)

The Cook, boasting about Biju’s latest job in America in the Kalimpong bazaar, is ready to take
everyone with him to America, because it is India “that is so crowded” as opposed to America that
“has lots of room” (85) One of Biju’s prospective employers of Indian origin silences a telemarketer
from an Indian contact center by saying, “One time I went to Eeendya and let me tell you, you canaat
pay me to go to that caantreey again!” (138)

The similarities between the male characters and the victimisation of women across generations, seen
above, also portray the picture of an unchanging, rigid and stagnated society. The only change taking
place in it is its fragmentation and deterioration.

Cracking India\textsuperscript{11} - A disintegrating country

Sai feels that India was coming apart at the seams when she reads news of “Police unearthing
militants in Assam, Nagaland, and Mizoram; Punjab on fire with Indira Gandhi dead and gone ….
The Sikhs wishing … Khalistan, their own country” (108) Grumbling about the Nepali demand for a
separate state, Lola remarks “This state making, the biggest mistake that fool Nehru made. Under his
rules any group of idiots can stand up demanding a new state and get it, too. How many new ones
keep appearing? From fifteen we went to sixteen, sixteen to seventeen, seventeen to twenty-two”
highlighting the fragmentation and growing separatism on the basis of language and religion in
independent India. (128)

The rebel GNLF leader speaks of the injustice they, the loyal Gorakha soldiers, have undergone in
independent India, stoking the fires of the insurgency that forms the backdrop in \textit{Inheritance} (156-161). The police officer who comes to investigate the gun-theft at Cho-oyu, comments “This country
of ours is always being torn apart” (225) Lola, discussing the worsening situation with Noni and Mrs.
Sen, wonders “[w]hat was a country but the idea of it? [if one] thought of India as a concept, a hope,

\textsuperscript{11} Bapsi Sidhwa, \textit{Cracking India} (Minneapolis:Milkweed Editions, 1992). Changed title of the American edition of Bapsi Sidhwa, \textit{Ice-
or a desire. How often could you attack it before it crumbled? To undo something took practice; it was a dark art and they [the separatist Indians] were perfecting it.” (236)

**Incredible India**

*Inheritance* is dotted with descriptions of the ascetic, cold and eternal beauty of Kanchanjenga and the lush flora of Kalimpong hills, a remote and relatively less known part of India, as well as frequent allusions to the state of disrepair and decay that houses such as Cho-oyu and to some extent Mon Ami suffer or the pitiable condition of the flimsy huts occupied by the poor Nepalis. The constant juxtaposition of the decay and disintegration of the human construction and condition with exotic beauty, the at once exotic and Third World India, bring sharply in focus the apparent indifference of the ‘natives’ to the beauty of the nature around them (except for when they are away from home, like Biju, and evoke it nostalgically) and their selfish abuse of nature. This further enhances the feeling of the general ‘poverty’ of the ‘Indians’ and the accruing ‘loss’ of an inheritance (in the form of natural beauty and resources) for India.

Lola advises her daughter Piyali / Pixie to think of leaving India for the UK while the doors are open because India is “a sinking ship’. (47). It is this image of India that all the patterns in *Inheritance*, in unison, seem to strive to convey and which seems to play a significant role in its reception in all three audiences.

**Themes**

**Inheritance of Loss**

Through these negative images and through its anachronous structure the narrative keeps playing on the theme of inheritance and loss by linking the present to the past and by letting the present act as the trigger for each character’s memories. By narrating the events in the past that have significantly shaped and influenced these characters’ present, the novel signals the part individual actions, ambitions, dreams and abilities play in the losses that accrue. The loss that is passed on is more an active legacy than a passive inheritance and there are moments in the novel, which show that it doesn’t have to be either. For example, young and newly married Jemu gives Nimi a ride on his father’s bicycle to make her stop crying. He finds her beautiful and she is touched by that (92). If, like her, he had held on to that moment for the next five years in England (166), their lives would be different and so would those of Sai’s mother and Sai. Nimi’s loss would not be their inheritance but it is.
Voices of the same poverty

Kiran Desai uses Jorge Luis Borges’s poem ‘The Boast of Quietness’ as the epigraph for her novel. During the seven long years of writing The Inheritance of Loss, Kiran Desai is said to have kept this poem by her side. This poem seems to be the defining impulse of the novel. It asserts the difference between Inheritance, which portrays India as a mass of darkness with a thinning silver lining and other “writings of light” that “assault the darkness” by showing the shining side of India but leaving the darkness intact and silent in the process. More importantly, the poem provides a clue to the narrative strategy of the text.

Borges’s poem says “My humanity is in feeling that we are all voices of the same poverty”.

Inheritance as a narrative creates this feeling. It represents all “voices” as ultimately the voices of ‘poverty’, the poverty that is material and/or emotional. It is a concretisation or textualisation of this feeling in the form of a mosaic; the composition of multiple fragments that creates a certain impression, which, even if not ‘the only’ impression, is still the predominant one.

In order to achieve this impression (or effect) and to convey the centrality of these themes, Desai uses various narrative techniques and strategies such as temporal, spatial and focal digressions through multiple internal focalisers and patchwork or montaging of thoughts, conversations, personal histories or memories.

Narrative techniques

Desai uses various narrative voices in Inheritance to create a polyphonic effect. The narrative of Inheritance begins in the middle of the story in an omniscient authorial voice with Sai as the internal focaliser and ends similarly. Between the first and the last chapters, the internal focalisers change and the narrative follows diverse threads or tracks as if to convey that no narrative is ever ‘singular’ (a story cannot be told as the ‘only story’) but ‘multiperspectival’ and fragmented. And also to create the impression that all tracks are simply variations or play on the same ‘narrative theme’ of poverty and loss that is the inheritance of Indians.

The multiplicity of the voices is conveyed in two ways, either by offering different focalisations in consecutive chapters or by using more than one focalizing figure within the same chapter. For example, in chapters six and seven, Sai is the internal focaliser as she remembers the first time she met the Cook, her journey to Cho-oyu, her life before that and then her first night in Cho-oyu, whereas in chapter eight the Judge is shown to remember his journey to Cambridge. Similarly,
although Sai is the experiencing ‘I’ in the first chapter and events are seen through her eyes to begin with, the focalisation changes from the judge to the cook to the Nepali boys to Sai once the boys enter Cho-oyu.

These multiple voices are juxtaposed as if to present different facets or the complexity of a particular situation or the commonplaceness of a certain occurrence. For example, in chapter sixteen the Cook’s description of the Judge’s departure for England contradicts sharply what the Judge is shown to remember of it. The multiple focalisations from chapter 34 onwards show the effects of the insurgency on various lives and the complexity of the situation in Kalimpong. Whereas in chapter seventeen, Biju’s increasing anxiety in response to the flood of his father’s letters asking him to help others is mirrored in Saeed Saeed’s attempts to hide from his countrymen and his frustration at his mother’s tendency to give away his address and phone number to anyone and everyone but also retrospectively in the attempt by Nandu (a fellow villager on the thin thread of whose acquaintance Biju travels to New York) to get rid of Biju; thus highlighting how commonplace the experience is.

Temporal digression is another narrative technique in Inheritance. The Inheritance of Loss develops as a non-linear figural narrative that uses multiple internal focalisers and progresses using anachronous digressions. The suspension of chronology and linearity of narrative helps emphasise the theme of endless continuum, legacy or inheritance whereas digressions cause the narrative to deviate away from or back towards the diegetic present (in which the situation created by the Gorkhaland movement worsens and then diffuses into a troubled peace), as it follows the characters’ memories, thoughts, feelings or brooding ruminations. Triggered by an action, a conversation or an event that echoes something similar in the past, these digressions help create a motif by juxtaposing contrasts.

As mentioned earlier, the narrative begins in the middle of the story and from this zero point then digresses into various pasts to reach the beginning of each character’s story, eventually coming back to the diegetic present. Although some action, conversation or event in the diegetic present or past triggers the digression, the trigger and the digression often create a dissonant pattern where the variations somehow highlight the underlying similarity. For example, in chapter eight, Sai’s arrival is shown to have upset the Judge and stirred up the memories of his own journeys. However, their journeys are not identical because Sai comes ‘home’ from the convent to the only ‘family’ she has after her parents’ death unaware of what the future holds for her, whereas the Judge had left home to go to Cambridge leaving all his family behind to get higher education and better his prospects. The
similarity is not in the detail but in the effect, the feeling of deracination and loneliness, the dejection and the disappointment in one’s lot.

In chapter eighteen, the Judge subconsciously recreates the scene of his oral exam by asking Gyan to recite a poem and is reminded of his own debacle by Gyan’s hesitant performance; however, the difference is obvious. Gyan recites Tagore, an Indian master, the Judge Walter Scott, a poet in the ‘English’ canon. The Judge is interrogated by his British teachers and colonial masters during an exam. The Judge is neither Gyan’s teacher nor master but an upper class compatriot and employer. Again, the similarity is in their feeling of inferiority, humiliation and inadequacy in front of someone ‘superior’ as well as in their attempt to lay claim to the knowledge of the dominant culture, Bengali-Indian for the Nepali migrant Gyan and Scottish-English for the colonised Indian Jemubhai. The similarity is in the display and exercise of power and superiority by the dominant over the dominated.

This strategy of juxtaposition ensures that the minor dissonances and differences highlight the similarities and make the point that all are poor even if differently, that the feeling of ‘lack’ is common to all. This emphasises the narrative theme signaled through the epigraphic poem - that ‘we are all voices of the same poverty’, that ‘poverty’ is the ‘human condition’.

Symbolism is yet another strategy in Inheritance and the narrative themes are highlighted through various symbols such as space, place and food.

The focal and temporal digressions in Inheritance are mostly accompanied by spatial digressions and the narrative actually moves to a different locale emphasizing the multiplicity of ‘voices’ in yet another way. Space and especially place thus play an important role in Inheritance and are often symbolically significant in the way they reflect the state of the character that occupies a particular place. For example, Cho-oyu in its isolation and its crumbling, mouldering state reflects the physical and mental state of its owner, the Judge. The basements of New York restaurants and buildings that the illegal immigrants like Biju occupy, reflect not only these immigrants’ status within the country they live in, in the society that uses their services and in the profession that ‘feeds’ on them, but also the neglect and oppression meted out to them.

The flimsy houses in the Nepali Basti, where Gyan lives, personify their tenuous hold on the land they live in, and on, as ‘migrants’ despite the number of generations and years they have spent there. The gymkhana club, which the rebels use as headquarters during the uprising, symbolises the
position of power that they want to usurp. The isolation and the state of disrepair of Cho-oyu and
Mon Ami and the presence of the ramshackle huts next to them shed light on the social inequality in
a nation that is made fragile by internal divides and is ready to fall apart with extremists sneaking in,
its elite apathetic or supercilious, its poor helpless, dispossessed and youngsters eager to leave. Just
as the change that colonisation in its economic greed wrought in the pre-independence Piphit
(Jemubhai’s hometown) symbolises the loss of innocence and identity; the sorry state of Darjeeling
shows that independence did not halt the process but has let it become an inheritance for the
following generations.

Place is also a symbol of ‘inheritance’, ‘poverty’ and ‘loss’. The very first chapter establishes the
theme of inheritance that is also a loss for the present generation and the loss that is also an
inheritance of the future generations through the symbol of Cho-oyu, the isolated cliff-top house. The
house bought from a Scotsman, the departing colonial master, by the Judge, the new ruling class, is
the symbol of the inheritance of power and eventual loss of it. It is also the sign of the superiority
and status of the upper-class, anglicised, educated elite of Kalimpong elevated - in their position,
standard of living, sensibilities and concerns - away from the average population yet dependent on it
for the upkeep of the things that set them apart and above. The house embodies the inheritance that is
also a loss in the form of the isolation and alienation that it imposes. The violation of its security and
boundaries at the hands of the GNLF boys foreshadows the violation of the sense of security, status
and superiority of the elite at the hands of the insurgents; revealing it to be an illusion that is, in
essence, dependent on the ‘inferiority’ of the masses and hence vulnerable in the face of change.

Another symbol that comes up frequently as a signifier of ‘loss of cultural identity’ and alienation
between the Anglophone elite and other Indians is ‘food’. The food that the anglicised elite in
Kalimpong are shown to eat (canned imported food, Western dishes) in a Western manner, following
Western rituals and their feeling that that is civilised and ‘normal’ shows their distance from their
own country, culture and people. On the other hand, Gyan’s eating habits mark him, in the eyes of
the Judge, as the ‘country’ fellow and his unfamiliarity with Western food and manner of eating
becomes an indication of the ‘lower’ class he belongs to and the distance between him and those in
Cho-Oyu.

Biju’s story is ultimately a ‘story of food’. What Americans and Westernising/Westernised Indian
migrants in America eat is used to mark the difference between them and those like Biju. Eating beef
and not being able to eat spicy food become the symbols of the Indian migrants’ attempt at
integration in their host society and their ‘translation’ away from their Indian habits. By contrast, not
eating beef becomes symbolic of the attempt at maintaining cultural authenticity and difference. As a marker of religion, not eating beef or pork is something that the Hindu (Biju, Harish-Harry) and Muslim (Saeed Saeed) migrants are shown to hold on to as a symbol of their identity.

Thus, through its structure and various narrative techniques the text of Inheritance creates a mosaic or a quilt of characters, events, thoughts, feelings, descriptions and memories, where pieces do not necessarily have a determined place in the narrative to fall into nor do they always fit together seamlessly or perfectly. Precisely because of this, the text creates gaps, remains open and invites multiple readings. The analyses of its non-Indian, Indian and French receptions will illuminate which of the many possible readings are actually realised and how they are determined by the text, the extra-textual factors and the ‘interpretive’ communities that the readers belong to.

**The Non-Indian Anglophone reception**

The Anglophone audience of Inheritance outside India is global and diverse. Following the Booker prize, Inheritance received extensive attention from the English-language press and media, in the form of headlines, author interviews and book reviews, and subsequently by academia in the form of scholarly articles and studies. Even if the praise is not unequivocal and the perspectives are not uniform, the non-Indian Anglophone reaction to the novel is broadly positive.

The pace of the narrative, the style of writing and the ‘richness’ of the story in terms of voices, descriptions, characters and places are the aspects of the Inheritance that are most noticed and praised by the mainstream reviewers. For example The New Yorker review says that, “Briskly paced and sumptuously written, the novel ponders questions of nationhood, modernity, and class, in ways both moving and revelatory.”13 The Boston Globe review admires the way Inheritance “offers all of the pleasures of traditional narrative in a form and a voice that are utterly fresh.”14 According to The Globe and Mail the strength of the narrative “lies in fine strokes, feathery descriptions of people, incidents and moods … [a] prose style [that] is exuberant, sometimes lush, full of arresting images and frequently playful.”15 Another review feels that Desai’s descriptions have the power to bring alive the nature of Kalimpong for the reader and that “[e]ven when immigrant worker Biju calls home from New York City, we can smell the humid air over the telephone line; we can picture the green-black lushness, the plumage of banana, as Desai writes.”16

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Chapter 2: Receptions of *The Inheritance of Loss*

References to the ‘effects of colonisation’ on the Judge and on India are numerous. For example, *Inheritance* is described as a “Tale of Postcolonial India” 17 which “tells the stories of people struggling to overcome the legacy of colonialism - the crimes that took place in the monstrous dealings between nations.”18 *The Montreal Gazette* observes that the Judge’s “seething self-hatred becomes a symbol of how colonial power infects its loyal subjects with its own prejudice, hatred and arrogance, at the cost of one's own sense of identity.”19

As befits a Booker-winning novel and author, the academic attention paid to *Inheritance* is quite noticeable. Although, in the recently published (2009) anthology *Critical Responses to Kiran Desai*, only four out of twenty-three articles are from non-Indian scholars, there already are at least two dissertations from outside India dealing with *Inheritance* and a number of articles in the scholarly journals spread over the years subsequent to 2006.

Out of the four non-Indian essays in the Anthology, two discuss *Inheritance* as a text concerned with postcolonial ‘globalisation’. Jackie Haque’s article, “Aspects of Globalisation in *The Inheritance of Loss*” points out various aspects of globalisation that *Inheritance* deals with.20 Melissa Dennihy’s “Globalisation’s Discontents: Reading “Modernity” from the Shadows”, uses the term ‘shadow class’ to describe, both resident and diasporic Indians, i.e. those “living in India and [those] living in England and America” (1). Dennihy links ‘reading from the shadows’ to the perspective that Desai writes from and wants the readers to identify with or become aware of.21

The thesis from Oslo University compares “[t]he themes of race, gender and class” in *Inheritance* and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* “[t]hrough the lens of migration and multiculturalism in a postcolonial setting.”22 The thesis from Utrecht University explores “the consequences of increased mobility and dislocation [of the author] [on the] translation [as well as] cultural, linguistic and literary identity of [that author’s] literary works in relation to the novel *The Inheritance of Loss*.”23 These theses read *Inheritance* as a diasporic text based on the author’s current domicile, the various migrations and

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journeys within the text as well as the parts of the text that happen in 1930’s England and 1980’s New York full of migrants.

The articles from the scholarly journals conduct in-depth analyses of various aspects of *Inheritance*. For example, in the article “Solid Knowledge and Contradictions in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*”, David Spielman argues that “*The Inheritance of Loss* shows us a radical postcolonial subjectivity in which flexibility, assimilation, and multiculturalism are preferable to maintaining difference.” Spielman’s focus is on the issues of identity and condition of migrancy and he is reading, in *Inheritance*, the celebratory attitude towards hybridity and migrancy ushered in by Homi Bhabha and Salman Rushdie.

Ferguson’s essay “Violent Dis-Placements: Natural and Human Violence in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss***” argues that instead of “the emotional and intellectual investments that convert empty space to place, [in *Inheritance*], this transformation is reversible through violence.” And the novel depicts how “humans use violence in order to degrade place to space in the hope of rebuilding place according to a different agenda.” According to this critic, the backdrop of the violent political uprising is actually used to highlight the anthropocentric nature of human actions and destruction of ‘natural beauty’ by man in his ideological pursuits.

Using as evidence the scene where Lola tries to persuade the GNLF leader Pradhan to remove the squatters from the grounds of Mon Ami using the landslide forecast as a veiled threat and he turns it on her saying that in fact the big houses like Mon Ami are endangered by these things rather than the squatters hut, Ferguson shows how Pradhan or Lola are not concerned about landslides or their effects but are just using them as a psychological weapon and as a threat to undermine each other’s sense of ‘place’ and ‘security’. Ferguson thus imbues *Inheritance* with a politics of identity linked with a place and played out through violent appropriation, de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation that postcolonialism expects in ‘postcolonial’ texts at a linguistic level.

**The shared interpretive inheritance**

Close examination of the various Anglophone ‘readings’ bring to our notice the underlying assumptions, expectations and ways of reading and mis-reading that add up to the ‘interpretive inheritance’ of non-Indian Anglophone community, even if scholars like Haque (who is from

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Bangladesh) amply demonstrate that this community can no longer be homogenised on the basis of language and location.

The most obviously shared interpretive inheritance is that of the ‘postcolonial perspective’ and its theoretical concerns with globalisation and the related issues of identity, race, gender, migrancy, multiculturalism. This is not surprising in view of the predominance of this perspective in Anglophone academia, the presumed ‘postcolonialism’ of the Indian English text through its language and history and the emphasis that *Inheritance* as a text places on these concerns.

The fact that a discerning mainstream review even points out the link between the Judge’s character and Fanon’s *Black Skin White Mask* demonstrates how predominant the postcolonial approach, especially in relation to Indian English literature, is in the Anglophone world. This predominance is even more obvious in the scholarly reviews, which focus on various issues addressed by *Inheritance* and of interest in the field of postcolonial studies, though none offers a reading of *Inheritance* from any other approach.

The detailed and varied scholarly response to *Inheritance* is entirely in keeping with the increasingly divergent interests of postcolonial studies as a field. The far-reaching and lasting psychological effects of colonisation on the mind, behaviour and identity of the colonised as visible in characters from the educated Judge to the illiterate Cook; the legacy of colonisation in the form of language, adulation of the coloniser’s culture and the chaotic fragmenting postcolonial society; the double colonisation of the subalterns such as women, children and the poor, along with the condition and traumas of exile and migrancy, are some of the traditional concerns of postcolonialism and the important role they play in *Inheritance* is duly noticed.

Desai’s portrayal of the role played by colonisation and neocolonisation in present day globalisation, of multicultural societies which have been subject to diasporisation, and her depiction of the encounters between the Third World and the First World populations within the First World in the form of legal and illegal migration, also get detailed attention. The comparatively latest trends in the postcolonial field such as ecocriticism result in some original readings of *Inheritance*. However, this tendency to focus exclusively on various postcolonial aspects of *Inheritance* has its weaknesses.

The most obvious blind-spot of non-Indian Anglophone reception is the intertextual potential of *Inheritance*. And the major problem in this audience is its tendency to accept Desai as, to borrow

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26 Nieves, "Second Novel Missing Author's Comic Flair."
Gayai Spivak’s term, an authentic ‘native informant’, an expert on India and Indians based on her Indian origin and her ‘lived experience’, neglecting the context and nature of this experience.

**Literary inheritance and intertextualities**

The general obsession of the Anglophone press with Desai’s parentage and certain biographical details provides a strikingly contrasting backdrop to the equally uniform silence, both popular and scholarly, regarding the ‘literary connections’ between Desai mother and daughter’s work. Similarly, despite various and frequent allusions to Kiran Desai’s ‘awareness’ of her ‘Anglo-Indian inheritance - of Naipaul and Narayan and Rushdie’\(^{27}\) or the ‘debt to her elders’ that ‘spills out through the cracks’\(^{28}\) in *Inheritance*, there is no apparent desire to situate or analyse her work in relation to the other Indian English writers, whether her predecessors or peers.

There is no attempt to specify what the reviewers or critics feel Desai has learned from her mother’s work and no mention of Anita Desai’s *Fire in the Mountain* as the text that *Inheritance* seems to be influenced by, perhaps because *Fire in the Mountain* does not really belong to the postcolonial genre. None of the reviews or scholarly studies actually does any in-depth analysis of this ‘inheritance’ or ‘debt’ or what in literary terms is the intertextuality of the text. There is no detailed study of the linguistic gimmicks or caricaturisation of characters that Desai has in common with Rushdie. Similarly, although Desai was sometimes hailed as the next Arundhati Roy, no analysis is carried out of the many and quite obvious similarities between *TGST* and *Inheritance*.

Interestingly, Desai is compared to Dickens and Tolstoy as well as Rushdie and Monica Ali. For example, the Oslo University thesis compares “[t]he themes of race, gender and class” in *Inheritance* and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* “[t]hrough the lens of migration and multiculturalism in a postcolonial setting, … [a] prevailing theme in the two novels”.\(^{29}\) Such comparisons reveal the readiness with which *Inheritance* is appropriated to the canon of world literature and ‘migrant literature’ and postcolonial literature, but not thought of in terms of its Indian English inheritance.

Also obvious is the unquestioning acceptance of Desai’s right and ability to lay claim to the Indian reality she knew intimately before leaving it at the age of 14 but has thereafter visited only periodically.

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\(^{28}\) Ackerman, “Desai delight.”

\(^{29}\) Lone, “Race, Gender and Class in *The Inheritance of Loss*” and *Brick Lane*.”
Chapter 2: Receptions of *The Inheritance of Loss*

**Lived experience**

Desai is praised for her historical truthfulness and political acuteness by none other than the 2006 Booker chairwoman Hermione Lee. In her Booker award speech Lee praises Desai as “A distinctive original voice, an audacious imagination that takes readers to undiscovered countries of the mind, a strong power of storytelling and a historical truthfulness.” Lee goes on to describe *Inheritance* as “a magnificent novel of humane breadth and wisdom, comic tenderness and powerful political acuteness.”30 However, as we shall see, the Indian press has reported the local discontent about the ‘historical inaccuracy’ of Desai’s account of the insurgency and insensitiveness in the portrayal of specific people and the general Nepali community of Kalimpong.

Only one or two Western reviews take notice of and mention the book burning, hate mail and negative reaction *Inheritance* suffered in the region of India that it depicts.31 One of the reviews actually expresses surprise at the negative reaction about Desai’s portrayal of Nepalis as petty criminals and labourers saying that it was “an odd complaint since the main Nepalese character, Gyan, enters the story as Sai’s mathematics tutor.”32

Another review praises Desai’s “impressive familiarity with local customs and prejudices.” 33 However, *Inheritance* is dotted with a number of ‘authorial slips’ which, as we will see, the Indian reviewers notice but the non-Indian reviewers do not. Even if one does not go to a fictional work for accuracy as one reader in the Guardian Book club says,34 ignoring the inaccuracies (or the reaction against them), or worse still praising the text for its historical and political accuracy displays a lack of awareness or disregard for the context of the text.

The assumptions of Desai’s authenticity and authority as a native informant have led to other assumptions. One example of this is the assumption of authenticity of the linguistic hybridity of the text and of the preference for hybridity resulting from condition of migrancy. The other is the unquestioning belief that Desai is speaking to the West on behalf of India and Indians.

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32 Moseley, “Tidy and Untidy Novels,” 5.
Assumption of Hybridity

Within the postcolonial perspective, it is assumed that English is a foreign language for an ex-colonised writer and the subversive adulteration is through his/her native language which confers an authenticity on its use. It has gone unnoticed that the issue of foreign and native language is complicated in the case of most Indian English writers, but if possible even more so for Desai whose father tongue is Gujarati, mother tongue German and Bengali (and English!), medium of education English and who may have acquired Hindi as she lived in Delhi, and possibly Nepali as she lived and went to school in Kalimpong for a year before leaving India. It is possible that she speaks all or none of the languages (available to her) other than English or has only a limited knowledge of them (the epigraph offers no proof either way as none of the interviewers ask her about this); furthermore, she has now spent more years in an Anglophone country than in India.

This need not be problematic for the authenticity of the author, or the text, except for the fact that the authorial polyglossia (or lack of it) has rubbed off on the characters in Inheritance in an incongruous manner. The Judge is Gujarati but not a single word of Gujarati comes up in the pre-Cambridge part of his life in the text. Lola, Noni and Mrs. Sen are all Bengalis living in West Bengal but no Bengali words feature in their conversation and the Nepali words used in Inheritance are negligible in number and then meaningless as pointed out by Nepali migrant readers in the Guardian Book Club report.35 This has gone unquestioned and unnoticed by the non-Indian reviewers, perhaps because it fits in with the postcolonial assumption that in an Indian English text the linguistic hybrid would be a cross of English and Hindi, perhaps because through over-interpretation a postcolonial verisimilitude can be found in the situation as a mirror held to the Anglicised, anglophile Indians’ emulation of the British use of ‘Hindostani’ in communicating with the ‘natives’.

To be precise, the language in Inheritance is more a mix than hybrid. Its English is interspersed with Hindi and Nepali but these languages do not mingle. The characters are not switching codes or mixing languages naturally. Hindi is used exclusively between people who cannot speak each other’s languages, for example between the Anglophile characters and servants or Nepalis who can’t speak English or whose language they cannot speak. It is not part of their English or their linguistic make-up. Or else the Hindi or Nepali words are used to signify the language a character would in reality be speaking and which, in the text, is replaced by English. For example, when speaking (or writing) to the Cook, Biju only starts with Pitaji (Hindi word for father) and the remaining sentence in Hindi is then replaced with English. Neither is the English in Inheritance indianised in any way.

35 Ibid.
Closer examination also reveals that the Indian words and sentences are neither very significant in what they say nor indispensable to the meaning of the text. This means that while they do not really hamper or challenge the non-Indian readers, they do create an illusion of Indian reality or of reading an Indian text. The presumption of hybridity, seen in Spielman’s essay, is thus at variance with the linguistic reality in Inheritance.

**The voice of ‘subalterns’**

Postcolonial authors and texts are often credited with the intention to speak for the ‘subalterns’ or writing back to the former colonial centre to make it aware of its own misdeeds. This is evident in the case of Desai too. For example, the assumption that Inheritance is a mirror that Desai holds up to the West for it to see the effects of its greeds, needs and modernity on the ‘poor’ countries, is evident in Dennihy’s essay through her repeated allusions to ‘Western Readers’. Desai is accorded the status of a spokesperson for the shadow class that is ‘Indians’, whether residents or migrants. Dennihy’s essay argues that Inheritance as a text dealing with globalisation and multiculturalism, addresses or has a message specifically aimed at the Western readers, while the presence of Haque (who is from Bangladesh) in the anthology draws attention to the fact that non-Indian Anglophone reception does not necessarily limit itself to a reading community situated in the West or First World, as is usually assumed by Indian and non-Indian postcolonial critics.

Dennihy’s argument, linking ‘reading from shadows’ to the perspective that Desai writes from and wants the Western readers to identify with or become aware of, is quite forceful and persuasive but what has gone unnoticed in the fervour to accord Desai this ‘postcolonial or postglobal/multicultural’ role and intention, is the fact that Inheritance – even if by mimicking the Western stereotypes of India’s ‘Shadow class’, it is subverting them - does not feature a single negative major or minor Western character, but instead only reports impersonalised incidents of racist comments, acts and thoughts. Dennihy does not take into account that throughout the text of Inheritance, the oppressors and the oppressed are shown to be Indians whether in India or abroad, from the very shadow class that Dennihy talks about.

By contrast, the sahibs gone native, like Uncle Potty and Father Booty, are quite harmless and likeable. Father Booty is even shown to have done “far more for the people of Kalimpong Hills than the locals” (193, 258). None of Biju’s American employers are portrayed in too much detail in the narrative nor are shown to be specifically unkind. These employers actually come across as giving

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37 Dennihy, “Globalization’s Discontents: Reading ‘Modernity’ from the Shadows.”
Chapter 2: Receptions of *The Inheritance of Loss*

Biju and other migrants a chance despite the biases they have and the problems they face with the system if caught out. The clever use and exploitation of the migrants’ illegal status does not come through except at the end of the account of Biju’s days working for the Chinese takeaway. The first employer, the manager of Gray’s Papaya actually tells Biju and other illegal immigrants he employs to melt away to avoid getting caught by the immigration inspectors. (16) The owner of Pinnochio’s Restaurant sacks Biju because he is ‘smelly’ but first tries to help by buying him soap, shampoo etc. (49) It is the Indian migrants such as the owner of the Gandhi Café Harish-Harry or the Indian customers whether businessmen, students or others, who feature in the narrative in all their negative glory.

Thus although a postcolonial critic assumes that the postcolonial writer is ‘writing back’ to the ‘dominant centre’, as the title of *The Empire Writes Back* suggests, or is being subversive from within the centre (as Rushdie famously suggested), the text reveals something different - the authorial complicity with the metropolitan centre and global market that critics like Huggan and Brouillette draw attention to. Interestingly though, the factors that are taken by these critics as the signs of this complicity, such as the extratextual aspects like prizes, parentage and patronage play a significant role in the conferral of authenticity on the writer.

**Parentage, patronage and prizes**

The Anglophone reception, non-Indian and Indian, of *Inheritance* is intrinsically linked to the fact that its author is Anita Desai’s daughter and was praised by Salman Rushdie, but even more to the fact that it won the Booker.

As mentioned earlier, by the time she won the Booker Prize, Kiran Desai already had a book under her belt, *The Hullaballoo in the Guava Orchard*, that was praised by none other than Rushdie and had won the prestigious Betty Trask award. Yet most of the mainstream reports of Desai’s Booker win, rather than her previous work or literary merit, focus on the author being the daughter of the illustrious Anita Desai, who has been short-listed for the Booker three times but has never won it, and how “there is an added charm to Desai’s win” because of this fact. As if this history or ‘inheritance of loss’ somehow makes the younger Desai’s Booker even more ‘right’ and valuable.
Rushdie first mentioned the Desais as the first literary dynasty of the Indian English canon in “Damme, This Is the Oriental Scene for You”, 42 referring to the relation between Anita and Kiran Desai (ignoring the Naipaul father-son trio). As mentioned earlier, Kiran Desai was specifically pointed out in Rushdie’s anthology, which had included excerpts from the then yet to be published Hullaballoo and Rushdie’s effusive blurb adorns the cover of Inheritance.

Rushdie’s praise, even if genuine and critically sound, has obvious advantages. Given Rushdie’s high visibility in the English, Indian English and postcolonial canons and his international renown, praise from him validates the talent of a new writer and provides an excellent marketing tool or value addition in the publishing as well as consumer market (in a way that a mother in a similar position cannot). Within the literary canon, it helps situate or fit the work in a literary tradition e.g. in the case of Hullabaloo, the magical realism and in the case of Inheritance, the postcolonialism. In turn, these labels help attract certain readerships and feed into pre-existing demands or markets based on the literary vogue of the moment.

Thus, unlike the title of the novel that is the destiny of the characters of the novel, the author not only seems to have come into an inheritance of gain - an assured place in an established canon currently in vogue, guaranteed recognition with consequent ease of publication and most importantly favourably biased and/or curious readership - but also covered the loss of the Booker in the earlier generation.

Much is also made of the autobiographical details that have found their way in the text and the fact that many of the characters in the novel are based on real people from the author’s own family and her life in Kalimpong. For example, the New York Times review mentions that Desai, like Sai had lived and studied in Kalimpong, that her grandfather resembled the judge in being a native of Gujarat, in his journey to Cambridge as a penniless student, in his career as a civil service judge and the estrangement from his own culture through Anglicisation, that there was a cook in the Desai family on whom the Cook in Inheritance is based, that many of the characters in the text were based on real life people that Desai had observed growing up in Kalimpong, and also that she had experienced the early stirrings of the insurgency at first hand. 43

The frequency with which these details are referred to reveals the popular interest in the ‘authorial persona and autobiographical experience’ that forms, to borrow Genette’s term, the epitext (anything

42 Rushdie, “Damme, This Is The Oriental Scene For You,” 6.
related to the text but not physically attached to the text), but more importantly it highlights the reason behind the conferral of authenticity and native informant status on Desai in addition to the instant prestige, authority and validation conferred by the Booker prize.

The Booker itself influences the sales and then the reception of the winning text and author. It has guaranteed Desai prestige, validation of talent and heightened publisher, reader and scholarly interest. However, the checkered colonial history of the institution behind the prize and the instant consecration, canonisation and institutionalisation in addition to the very large prize money and sales that it offers has invited negative press too. Of the few negative critiques of *Inheritance*, some of the negative mainstream and mainly scholarly response is actually directed at the Booker as a process and institution, rather than the merits or demerits of the text, but the possibility of authorial complicity in the ‘colonial practices’ of the text’s Western market is rarely mentioned and little of the negativity is directed against the text.

Merritt Moseley’s 2008 article on the Bookers of 2006 and 2007, sums up the ‘known history’ of Desai’s win in following terms:

The Man Booker Prize for 2006, announced on October 10 of that year, went to Kiran Desai for her novel *The Inheritance of Loss*. though Desai was a near beginner as a novelist—her Booker winner was only her second book, by some accounts she was still a student in a creative-writing program, and she was best known as the daughter of the well-regarded novelist Anita Desai, three-time shortlisted Booker also-ran—much of the surprise was already in the past. the announcement of the shortlist, with its promotion of younger and sometimes nearly unknown writers and its dismissal of the established names, had manured the ground for an unusual Man Booker decision, and, for that reason—as well as because *The Inheritance of Loss* is a worthy winner—Desai’s victory was generally applauded.44

This retrospective summary draws attention to the mediated nature of the Booker selection but does not doubt the literary merit of *Inheritance*.

Huggan made a powerful argument in his article ‘Postcolonial Exotic’ as regards the role of the Booker Prize in ‘promoting’ the ‘postcolonial texts’ by ‘prizing otherness’, i.e. consecrating the texts that exoticise the margins (the other of the earlier colonial and now metropolitan/First World centre) in a way that is familiar to and expected by the West.45 In her essay “Prizing Sameness? Kiran Desai and The Booker Prize”, Ana Mendes raises the questions that many since Huggan have in their mind as to the nature of the books that get the Booker and the god-like power that established writers and canon-formers like Rushdie seem to have in the literary world. Turning Huggan’s argument around,

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Chapter 2: Receptions of The Inheritance of Loss

Mendes discusses the ‘sameness’ that the Booker Prize seems to favour and encourage in the chosen texts by commenting on how Inheritance is considered a Rushdiesque novel.46

Although Mendes alludes vaguely to it, the essay does not actually formulate the question that she sets out to ask in her title, i.e. whether Kiran Desai got the Booker Prize because of certain characteristics that Inheritance shares with other, or a majority of, Booker-winning texts such as a focus on some aspect of British imperial history and its effects and what, if any, influence the praise from Rushdie might have had in the matter. If we look at the Bookers that are specifically set in India,47 we notice that Inheritance shares with them more than the general sameness (a focus on the colonial encounter in British India, its aftermath and its still lingering effects) alluded to by Mendes. Inheritance is praised for continuing in the fine tradition of Booker winners set in India, such as TGST and Midnight’s Children.48 The list of characteristics that Inheritance and its ‘Indian’ predecessors have in common is longer. In addition to the characteristics mentioned by Mendes, they also share: an Indian child protagonist’s eye-view, autobiographical elements from the author’s life, the English - Oxbridge educated, anglophile Indian elite characters grounded in the English literary canon, the relics of Raj in the form of sahibs gone native or natives gone sahib, and parents who pass on to their children a legacy of loss of self-esteem and identity. These texts portray a present that is haunted, colonised and taken over by its past and share a storyline with the backdrop of politics and history of nation to the ‘micro-narratives’ of individual lives and destinies in addition to an ahistorical, personal take on a particular, violent moment of crisis in the nation’s history. But more significantly, they all present a certain image of India: chaotic, fragmented, disintegrating and reeling from the effects of colonisation.

Ronit Frenkel claims that Inheritance was selected for the Booker because of a certain portrayal of India in it. According to her the Booker

[i]is mediated by a politics of loss in terms of assessing post-colonial fiction from India and South Africa, where texts must fulfill Western stereotypes of what I term “post-colonial pathos” in order to contend seriously for this award. The Inheritance of Loss and Bitter Fruit are exceptionally well-crafted novels that depict post-colonial India and South Africa as places of bitterness and unrelenting historical determinism. These texts communicate a particular idea of history and culture in this form of post-colonial pathos, and are intimately caught up in the mechanisms of empire; they are represented as being overwhelmed by their histories and marked by the triumph of loss or instability over love or redemption.” The theoretical underpinnings of the Booker, which value

46 Mendes, “Prizing Sameness? Kiran Desai and the Booker Prize.”
47 seven in the forty year history of the Booker Prize, including the Heat and Dust by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Staying On by Paul Scott or The Siege of Krishnapur by J.G. Farrell which are narrated from a British protagonist’s point of view and written by non-Indians
particular things from particular places, articulate a “new” version of the old “tensions of empire” where a politics of loss is expected from Indian and South African literatures.\textsuperscript{49}

In a similar vein Desai is accused of orientalist representation of India. In “Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals”, Lisa Lau includes Kiran Desai in the list of ‘the diasporic South Asian women writers who seem to re-orientalise the Orient’ by “distort[ing] the representation of the Orient, seizing voice and platform, and once again consigning the Oriental within the Orient to a position of ‘The Other’.” She asserts that “the pre-occupation with producing writing which is recognisably within the South Asian genre [and]… the problem of generalisation and totalisation and the insidious nature of ‘truth claims’” further exacerbate the effects of such ‘re-orientalisation’.\textsuperscript{50}

Both Frenkel and Mendes however fail to take their criticism of Booker to a deeper level by combining it with the criticism about postcolonial authors’ complicity in commodification of their work. Neither of them recognises or suggests the possibility of the text itself as a product being shaped by certain extra-textual concerns such as getting prizes and cashing in on predominant literary fashions of the time. Lau too fails to question the relation between the tendency to re-orientalise and the market demand for it.

Very few mainstream criticisms are aimed specifically at \textit{Inheritance} as a text. Those which are aimed at the text, seem to criticise mainly the loose structure, the rambling plot and uneven narration teeming with voices, characters and events.

Nevertheless no other review is as extreme or negative as that of Anthony Quinn, one of the judges on the 2006 Booker panel, who reportedly expressed that, “We chose the wrong book” (stating his own preference for Edward St Aubyn’s \textit{Mother’s Milk}).\textsuperscript{51} The Chairman of the 2005 Booker judges, John Sutherland noted the sprawling and rambling nature of the text that “needs a going-over by a good editor” and felt that, “[t]he novel needs control.”\textsuperscript{52} Some are more specific and complain that constant entries of minor characters, the fast-paced narrative going back and forth in time and lack of formal introduction to the characters make it hard for the readers to engage or that the heavy focus on


\textsuperscript{51} David Sexton, “You can’t tell a Booker by listening to the judges,” \textit{Evening Standard}, September 9, 2008.

\textsuperscript{52} Aditi Khanna and Nabanita Sircar, “A Winning Inheritance; Anita Desai’s daughter pulls off a stunning Booker Prize victory, proving conclusively that the literary gene can be passed down,” \textit{India Today}, October 23, 2006.
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descriptions results in the feeling that the plot is “completely overlooked.” Some feel that the novel “does not quite succeed, mainly because the characters remain flat and stereotypical, bound by the political rhetoric they are meant to convey but failing to come fully alive beyond that.”

Such negative reactions are, of course, overwhelmed and overruled by the generally effusive praise and/or acceptance of the literary merit of a text consecrated by the Booker.

**Conclusion**

The general pattern to emerge from the non-Indian Anglophone reception, popular and academic, is that of a certain neglect or downplaying of the Indian context of this work, in the fervour to co-opt Desai to certain debates prevalent within the postcolonial perspective.

It also becomes evident that any assumption of a homogenised Western audience from Anglophone countries is unrealistic as English is increasingly used as the global academic lingua franca and it is possible that some non-Indian Anglophone scholars (and readers) do not necessarily live in the highly diasporised ‘Western’ world.

As mentioned before, strikingly obvious is the lack of attention to the intertextualities between *Inheritance* and other Indian English texts, from the echoes of Anita Desai’s *Fire in the Mountain* found in *Inheritance* to the similarities between *Inheritance* and Arundhati Roy’s *TGST*.

Equally obvious is Desai’s status as ‘the authentic native informant’ on the basis of her Indian origin and the autobiographical connection with the text. This is surprising in view of her young age when she left India and the knowledge of the ‘constructed’ nature of memory. Rushdie has asserted the migrant author’s right to an ‘imaginary homeland’. Desai claims to have written from a very ‘small and personal perspective’. One also has to acknowledge that fiction is an artistically reworked representation of extratextual reality or even researched facts. Nevertheless, such acceptance of the authorial ability to capture a past reality in all its historical, political and social multiplicity is problematic, especially since this authenticity is so readily conferred because the author was born in India and has lived for some time in Kalimpong.

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53 Tomforde, “India’s Kiran Desai wins Booker Prize for ‘moving novel’ - Monsters and Critics.”
54 Nieves, “Second Novel Missing Author's Comic Flair.”
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It is to these issues that the Indian reception of *Inheritance* reacts, thus making the very postcolonial concerns of identity and nation the root cause of the discrepancy and tension between the non-Indian and Indian Anglophone reception of *Inheritance*.

**Indian Reception**

In the now (in)famous Introduction to his 1997 anthology *Mirrorwork*, Rushdie, in the guise of asserting the superiority of Indian English writing (over the vernacular Indian literatures) and its rightful place as ‘the’ representative Indian literature in the canon of World Literature, actually voiced his grievances against its (and his own) ‘unfavourable’ Indian reception.57 The postcolonial book-historians too have pointed out the discrepancies between the ‘at home’ and metropolitan reception of postcolonial writers.58

However, on examination, the Indian reception of *Inheritance* can only be described as mixed but broadly positive. It actually shares many characteristics with the non-Indian reviews such as the interest in Desai’s parentage and prizes, the ‘postcolonial approach’ to *Inheritance*, the admiration for a Booker-consecrated work and the expectation of authenticity based on her Indian origin and connection. What sets it apart is the attention paid to the inaccuracies within the text of *Inheritance*, to the Indian context, and the intertextuality between the mother’s and daughter’s work.

As in the non-Indian reviews, inevitable and quite natural comparison has taken place between the Desai mother and daughter in terms of writing style, language and themes. Such comparison is the result of their relationship but also of Rushdie’s dynastic claims and Kiran Desai’s post-*Hullabaloo* and post-Booker acknowledgements about her mother’s role in and influence on her writing life. For example, *MuselIndia online* and the *Overseas Indian*, the official e-zine of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, seem to echo the declaration in *The Hindu* that, “If Kiran's style does resemble another's, it is surely that of her famous mother, Anita Desai, who has been shortlisted for the Booker three times. It is a literary inheritance Kiran is proud to acknowledge.”59

*Inheritance* has been appreciated by the mainstream and the Indian academia. In praising it the *India Today* review asserts that “*The Inheritance of Loss*, a delightfully original book, justifies every cliché

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in the reviewer's repertoire: it is that rare thing, a triumph of the storyteller's art, nuanced, and even, we must concede, worthy of the most-overworked term in the reviewer's lexicon: luminous.”

Even the sprawling nature of the text is found justified. The Jabberwock interviewer declares that

Reading *Inheritance*, one initially feels it could have been shorter - with many characters and a narrative that leaps around in time and space, it occasionally gets unfocussed. But Desai’s descriptions of the things she had to leave out (the back-stories of characters who seem shadowy in the final draft, for instance) are so vivid, it’s possible to wonder instead if a longer version of the book might have been more effective.

There is a feeling that one can appreciate the book without agreeing with its excessively bitter tone. The *NewsWing* review opines that “[t]hough relieved by much humor, “*The Inheritance of Loss*” may strike many readers as offering an unrelentingly bitter view. … We do not need to agree with this vision in order to marvel at Desai’s artistic power in expressing it.

Only one popular review seems to object to the ‘looseness’ of the narrative and the stereotypical storyline of a migrant novel, observing that:

[w]e drift through 300 pages of event, chronicled in prose so joyously kaleidoscopic that the story itself becomes an irritant.

There is a story though, the one everyone’s writing these days: the aching topography of exile, and the seeming impasse between the seductions of terror and those of love. You've read the apocrypha (Salman Rushdie) and the prole version (Zadie Smith). Here now is the Disney one.

Of course Booker has played a role in the positive response and the pride at an Indian Booker comes through in most of the reviews. Interestingly, the Booker effect has worked retrospectively on the reception of *Hullabaloo* too.

**The Booker effect**

Kiran Desai’s debut novel was read in the context of Rushdie’s praise and dynastic claims. The long gap between *Hullabaloo* and *Inheritance* caused various speculations as to whether Desai, like Arundhati Roy, would stop at only one novel.

Published in the long gap between Desai’s debut and *Inheritance*, Suresh Kohli’s article in Sunday Tribune (2003) on second attempts of ‘famous’ Indian English writers, the one book wonders of the Indian literary scene, “Second attempts tell a dismal tale” remarks that “Kiran Desai’s enviable ‘lush

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and intensely imagined’ *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* hasn’t found a sequel in five years.”64 By referring thus to Rushdie’s praise for Desai in the (in)famous introduction to the anthology *Mirrorwork*, Kohli’s article is raising doubts about Desai’s ability to fulfill the promise implied in Rushdie’s praise, and thereby questioning the validity of that praise.

*Hullabaloo* was also seen by many as an exotic confection. In “The currency of Arundhati Roy”, Amitav Kumar counts Desai amongst the ‘convent educated Indian English writers’ who “reveal their distaste for the poor and the weak around whom for some reason, they cannot help wrapping the eight arms of their narratives.” and amongst “feted Indian writers” “based in the West” who “in simply bringing the news to the West, produce bad prose.” Echoing Huggan, he defines ‘news’ as “the presentation of otherness that is nevertheless utterly palatable to the West.” According to him, “[l]argely inoffensive and mildly cretinous, the ‘masses’ (or if that's too loaded a word, let's opt instead for 'the people') in Desai's novel pose no threat to anyone, least of all to the West.”65

Against this background, it is interesting to note how Amitav Kumar’s earlier scathing response to *Hullabaloo* (unless it is by another person) has changed in his ‘Congratulations, Kiran Desai’, written after Desai’s Booker win. “Congratulations, Kiran Desai” opens with a comment on how widely people had noted the gap between *Hullabaloo* and *Inheritance*, adding that “But a truer yardstick by which to measure Desai’s talent is to note the difference between her two works.” And then he proceeds to say that “*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* was the work of a young writer; it was charming but derivative, and it was also limited by the aesthetic boundaries it had chosen for itself.”66 It is as if the criticism has mellowed on wearing the Booker-tinged glasses, which somehow change the portrayal in the earlier book from a ‘cretinous’ to ‘charming’ and confer a status on the author who now had to be treated with respect, even if still based in the West.

As for the scholarly response, as mentioned earlier, out of the twenty-three essays in the recently published anthology *Critical Responses to Kiran Desai*, nineteen are by Indian academics from various universities in northern India. Most of these essays approach *Inheritance* through the postcolonial perspective. They focus on different aspects of *Inheritance* such as its stylistic nuances, the way it represents the condition of migrancy or issues of identity, rootlessness and alienation; the conflict between issues of globalisation, multiculturalism and economic inequality; the effect of

colonisation on the colonised, the self-other binary, the portrayal of relations, etc. mainly to appreciate or showcase them. *Inheritance* is also read as an eco-critical, as well as postmodern, novel. None of these essays can be described as sceptical or even remotely hostile.

Interestingly, the essays which look at the portrayal of diaspora and the condition of migrancy in *Inheritance* quote Desai’s ‘intentions’ to portray the “enormous anxiety of being a foreigner” (155), of trying “to capture what it means to live between East and West and what it means to be an immigrant” (148); going on to appreciate how well she has done it or discuss the aspects of immigrant and diaspora life she portrays such as displacement, feelings of exile, loss and nostalgia.

These essays seem to bestow a different kind of authenticity on Desai, that of a native informant on the Indian diaspora. They accept unconditionally her right to speak for the ‘illegal Indian migrants’ because she belongs to the same diaspora as them and has experienced ‘being a foreigner and living between East and West’. The essays assume that she is speaking for these immigrants by giving voice to their suffering and exploitation, despite the fact that she belongs to the very category of upper class migrants that she ridicules and despite the contradictory ‘message’ that *Inheritance* ends with – that migrants like Biju should return home while those like Sai decide to leave.

A doctoral thesis from the George Washington University, written by Nirmala Menon looks at *Inheritance* as an Indian postcolonial text. According to the abstract, *Remapping the Postcolonial Canon* questions the homogenisation of literature from multiple geographies and languages into a putative postcolonial canon as well as the hegemony of Anglophone and Francophone literatures within this canon that neglects the literatures in the indigenous or vernacular languages in the former colonies such as India. Menon suggests a remapping of the postcolonial canon through juxtaposition of *TGST* and *Inheritance* with two texts in regional Indian languages.67

Contrary to the ‘Western’ theses, which place Indian English literature in the ‘postcolonial and migrant literary canon’, this thesis places Indian English literature within the ‘Indian canon’ and vernacular Indian literature in the postcolonial canon; thereby effacing the borders within the Indian canon and redrawing the borders within the postcolonial canon. (Academic postcolonialism perhaps? 68) Written by a diasporic (or non-resident) scholar of Indian origin, this thesis problematises the Indian reception in the same way that Haque’s essay problematises the non-Indian reception i.e. by blurring the boundaries between the East and the West. It also problematises the

68 Is the critic attempting to deteritorialise and reterritorialise the postcolonial canon by introducing vernacular Indian texts in it?
division of ‘reception’ based on geographical locations since the diasporas that produce the non-resident or migrant writers are also home to similarly placed, or displaced, scholars and general readers.

This of course is not uncommon. Many of the mainstream reviews of *Inheritance* in the non-Indian Press are written by diasporic writers or reviewers of Indian origin. For example, The *New York Times* reviewer - who praised *Inheritance* as “[b]eautiful …extraordinary… lit by a moral intelligence at once fierce and tender” and found it to be “the best kind of post- 9/11 novel despite being set in the mid-1980s” 69 - is Pankaj Mishra, the editor from HarperCollins who discovered Arundhati Roy for the ‘West’, the author of *The Romantics*, one of the judges for the recently launched Man Asian Prize and himself a non-resident Indian who moves between India and other countries.

The response to *Inheritance* does not particularly seem to justify the Rushdian anxiety about the ‘Indian’ reception of Indian English literature or the postcolonial book historians’ argument that the ‘at home’ reception of postcolonial writers is often unfavourable, until we come to the issue of authenticity or accuracy of depiction of the Indian ‘reality’, especially in its minutiae.

In his essay ‘Representations of India in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*’ in the anthology on Kiran Desai, Dr. Krishna Singh presents the novel as “a brilliant study of Indian culture- both in content and form.” According to this essay, “[s]upported by Indian vocabulary, metaphors and imagery, the novel, creates an atmosphere to transport the readers into that realm where India resides.”70 This must be a balm for the author who has wryly pointed out the Janus face of Indian criticism and has complained of being accused of exoticising India in *Hullabaloo* and ‘exposing its negative side in *Inheritance*.

When questioned in an interview on whether the Indian criticism that ‘migrant writers paint a picture of India that does not exist anymore’ was fair, Kiran Desai responded, “[y]ou get criticized no matter what, that's a part of being an immigrant. If you write a lovely story about India, you're criticized for selling an exotic version of India. And if you write critically about India, you're seen as portraying it in a negative light -- it also seems to be a popular way to present India, sort of mangoes and beggars.”71 Surprisingly though, no one has pointed out that a ‘mangoes and beggars sort of

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presentation of India’ is exactly what Desai herself has produced in Inheritance. With its descriptions of the exotic natural beauty of the Kalimpong Hills forming a stark contrast with the images of the darkly exotic, Third World human poverty and depravation, Inheritance is very much a ‘mangoes and beggars’ kind of text and has proved popular too.

The criticism about exoticising India has not come only from the Indian reviewers or critics either. In her essay exploring the links between Indian and South African women writers, “Without the West: 1990s South African and Indian women writers – a conversation?”, Elleke Boehmer, writes that “I will also make some reference to the Indian diaspora writer Kiran Desai, while acknowledging that her work is often justly criticized for representing India as an exoticised confection.” 72 This comment must refer to Hullabaloo, as the article was published in 2000 and it would be interesting to know what Boehmer feels about Inheritance, which, if at all a confection, can only be described as very dark and bitter.

Kiran Desai has acknowledged the ‘distancing’ she has undergone as a migrant, in the process contradicting her own claims of never having lost touch with India and having her India with her wherever she is. Of Hullabaloo, she has remarked, “I think my first book was filled with all that I loved most about India and knew I was in the inevitable process of losing.”73 In her interviews after the Booker, she acknowledges that “India (of today) belongs to Indian writers in India” and that is why the narrative [of Inheritance] takes place in the 1980s, in the India she knew and was part of.74 She also says that she had to go back to India to write the part that happens in India.75 The question is whether setting the book in a period when she lived in India was enough and whether the immersion and the distant lived experience helped as far as the accuracy of details or the minutiae of the Kalimpong or Indian reality is concerned. And, the Indian answer seems to be a resounding ‘no’.

The authorial ‘slips’

Expatriate authors are often berated for their ‘cultural deracination’ and lack of firsthand knowledge of the ‘lived experiences and changes’ in their country of origin. Their outsider status is never more obvious than when they make naïve blunders that stand out even within a fictional text. These slip-ups reveal these authors’ distance from the ‘culture of origin’ to the ‘natives’ even if they go unnoticed or are lapped up as authentic exotica by the West. These jarring notes are the reason behind some of the negative Indian response to these authors and texts. Many such slip-ups are

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73 Sinha and Reynolds, Critical Responses to Kiran Desai, Introduction, xvi.
74 Barton, “A Passage from India.”
obvious in *Inheritance* and they have not gone unnoticed by the Indian critics, the fact marking the difference between the local and the global reception.

The errors or slips in *Inheritance* are of a factual as well as linguistic nature. Indian scholar Shaymala Narayan has written the most comprehensive account of these in her ‘India and the USA in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*’.76

If we look at some examples from Narayan’s list, Narayan finds the destitute condition of the Judge quite improbable. It is pointed out that, as a retired judge and a former ICS of the Raj, he should be receiving a quite substantial pension.77 As we know, the text itself does not provide any clues or reasons for such penury through the story or the character of the judge. Even if part of his earnings were spent repaying the debts incurred for his Cambridge education, having cut off all ties to his family and abandoned his wife, the Judge does not have any family responsibilities, except for the expense of his daughter’s board and education in a residential convent school. And, from his misanthropic portrayal we can safely deduce that the explanation for his poverty cannot be generosity.

Another example of a ‘slip’ is the use of names such as Boman or even Sai that are unsuitable to the ‘caste’ or the language (Gujarati) that the characters are shown to belong to. As would be obvious to most Indians, Boman is a Parsee name and Sai, Marathi. As Narayan points out, equally incongruous is the presence of massa-massi (massi is mother’s sister and massa is her husband) in the list of relatives asleep around young Jemu who is getting ready for school, in his father’s house.78 In the Indian context, it is highly improbable that Jemu’s mother’s sister and her husband would be part of Jemu’s household. After marriage, an Indian woman leaves the parental house for that of her husband. The members of the woman’s side of family would not live with her in her husband’s house, unless forced to, like Nimi, by circumstances and in that case would most likely be unwelcome.

The autobiographical connections with Kalimpong, which have made Desai’s portrayal of the insurgency and the Kalimpong region in *Inheritance* authentic for Western readers, have rendered many autobiographical details within the novel inaccurate, unjustifiable and insensitive for the Kalimpong residents. The article in *Outlook India*, “Worms in the Cottage Cheese” reports that the

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 36.
“The Kalimpong residents are not happy with *Inheritance* either. Kalimpongwallahs, her aunt included, take offence at Desai’s dark portrait of their idyll …which comes across as a squalid, divided place in her book.”

Apparently there are many objections against various real life details of Kalimpong that Desai has ‘misrepresented’ – insensitively according to her own Aunt, Dr. Bhattacharjee – such as calling the Apollo Deaf Tailors deaf or Father Booty ‘homosexual’ or referring to the colour of the Kanchenjunga peak (that the locals revere as sacred) as ‘pornographic pink’.

According to the article, which quotes many prominent Kalimpong residents, the residents (most of them non-Nepali) are angry at the portrayal of the insurgency and the allusions that non-Nepalis were victimised during the agitation.

The residents vociferously deny that any non-Nepali was beaten up and forced to join the agitation for a separate Gorkha homeland, as Desai describes in her book. Or that there was a communal divide. “That’s all hogwash. The Gorkhaland agitation was a totally non-communal one,” asserts Sandip Jain, a non-Nepali and president of the Gorkha National Students' Front, student wing of the Gorkha National Liberation Front, which spearheaded the agitation.

“Most of the victims of the agitation were Nepalis. The target was the government, its officials and the CPI(M), not the non-Nepalis,” says Bharat Kumar, a third-generation resident of the town, and a trader by profession. Narayan Pal, owner of Apollo Tailors, also takes issue with Desai's book, not least because it refers to his shop as Apollo Deaf Tailors.

Was Father Andre Butty, the Swiss missionary who started a dairy cooperative called Swiss Welfare Dairy in the 1950s and made Kalimpong famous for its cheese and lollipops, a homosexual, as Desai hints [in her novel]? Again, it's a view the locals disagree with. “Such false references to people, especially prominent people who have done a lot for Kalimpong, [are] tasteless,” says Prafulla Rao gravely.

Vimal Khawas has discussed the inaccuracies or misrepresentations of the historical and political reality in the Kalimpong part of the narrative - from the image of Nepalis as migrants or tea plantation workers in the region to the ‘communal’ twist given to the political discontent in Darjeeling – observing: “[s]uch error on the part of the author only reflects the fact [that] she did not do her history homework properly.”

Khawas also comments on Desai’s failure to give a ‘Nepali voice’ to her Nepali characters and her unrealistic use of Hindi slang in a non-Hindi locale.

Desai has used a mixture of English, Hindi and Nepali in *Inheritance*, however, Indian critics have pointed out the linguistic errors that Desai has made, in addition to the (mis)use of Hindi that Khawas brings to notice. Narayan’s review points out the incorrect use of certain Hindi words in *Inheritance*. For example, *Bania* rather than *Sahukar* for money-lender or *Khansama*, the Hindustani

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80 Ibid.
word for Cook, used by the taxi-driver who brings Sai to Cho-Oyu.\textsuperscript{82} A stranger would call for the watchman to open the gate. Strangely, the taxi-driver calls for the Khansama instead of the Chaukidar (watchman) when it is impossible for him to know that the Cook is the only servant in the house.

On the other hand Nepali readers have accused Desai of using meaningless ‘Nepali’ words. Desai has, in fact, used very few ‘Nepali words’. In Inheritance, the Nepali characters, such as the GNLF boys or the wife of the watchman of the Metal Box factory (where the cook receives Biju’s phone calls, pg. 232), are shown to use mainly and only exclamations such as ‘la’ and ‘ma’. John Mullan in his report on the Guardian Book Club reader responses to Inheritance states that

\begin{quote}
A reader who was "born and brought up in a town an hour away from Kalimpong" complained the novel did not do justice to the local population." No other book of recent times has made me so mad as this." "Nepali words that don't exist in Nepali," he or she complained, "were thrown in for exotic effect I suppose." A reader from near Darjeeling doubted the credibility of the novel's fauna (were there cobras at that altitude?), while another, this time from Washington, objected; "Mt Everest cannot be spotted from the town of Darjeeling." This reader suggested that Desai's "ideal reader" was "more possibly the Western reader to whom such misrepresentations wouldn't matter, rather than someone living in Kalimpong.\textsuperscript{83}
\end{quote}

As a nod to the now essential hybridity and an attempt at being authentic, most Indian English novels use words from ‘Indian’ languages but it is quite noticeable that the diasporic Indian writers who have grown up outside India, such as Lahiri and Desai, tend to use Hindi words instead of words from their own (though ‘now-only- in- name’) mother tongues or words from the language of the region they have chosen to locate their fiction in or have shown their characters to be from.

In a north-eastern state of India, Hindi would not be the language of a taxi-driver or the GNLF boys (even if it is understandable in the case of the Cook who is originally from the Hindi-speaking region of Uttar Pradesh). The omniscient narrator of Inheritance does use the clever authenticating strategy of mentioning within the text that something said by the GNLF boys in Nepali was not understood and had to be repeated in Hindi (5). However, the fact remains that the original Nepali words are never transliterated, which suggests (or can be thought to do so) their ‘unavailability’ to Desai. A postcolonial interpretation or explanation of the use of Hindi (by the insurgent local minority in speaking to the upper class) could involve the subversion of the social hierarchy through the parody of the colonial use of Hindostani to deal with the ‘natives’ and especially lower classes or servants.

\textsuperscript{82} Narayan, “India and the U.S.A. in Kiran Desai’s “The Inheritance of Loss”.”

\textsuperscript{83} Mullan, ”John Mullan on readers’ responses to "The Inheritance of Loss" by Kiran Desai | Books | The Guardian,” 6.
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Such incorrect, inappropriate or out of place use of the Hindi or Indian language words gives the impression that they are being used to serve mostly a strategic exotic purpose rather than any linguistic realism and are aimed at the international readership. Kiran Desai is accused of this by the Indian reviewers of *Hullabaloo* too. It is such bending of reality for the benefit of ‘literary strategy’ or in conformation with the ‘postcolonial expectations of hybridity’ that earns the diasporic writers the ire of Indian critics who question their authenticity.

However, the Indian reception is not free from ‘slips’ either. For example, the Western reviews have noted that the cook is only ‘the Cook’ to signify the class and caste influenced relation (or lack thereof) between him and the Judge but Indian reviewers like Narayan find it an expression of the authorial indifference or lack of interest “in the psychological workings of her characters”. Many Indian reviewers and scholars have actually found the Cook’s namelessness so unthinkable that they have ‘mis’read the cook’s name into those of other minor characters such as Nandu, Biju’s fellow villager in New York, or Popatlal, Jemu’s father. Only one or two very vigilant scholars have noticed that the Cook’s name ‘Pannalal’ is revealed near the end of *Inheritance* (323), which of course no Western reviewer or scholar has noticed. (However, it is amusing to note that the scholarly article which notes that the Cook is named Pannalal also thinks that the Judge sends Nimi back to her parental home in India from England.)

Critics such as Narayan have obviously accepted the Western reading and reasoning in terms of class or caste behind the ‘nameless Cook’ and responded to this preconception rather than anything explicit in the text; while others have misread the text in order to give him a name. This demonstrates how readers, including critics, have their own biases and can over-interpret the text based on their ‘horizon of expectation’ and interpretive bias. Perhaps the author has cleverly and intentionally introduced the Cook’s name close to the end or perhaps this has happened inadvertently through the massive editing process that the original suffered. Either way, the namelessness of the Cook seems to have created a gap that has trapped the readers into misreading and missing what could be a signifier of the subtle, even if minor, positive change that takes place in the Judge after the ordeal of the insurgency and Mutt’s disappearance.

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85 Narayan, “India and the U.S.A. in Kiran Desai’s "The Inheritance of Loss".”
Another issue that divides the Anglophone reception or marks the difference between the non-Indian and Indian receptions is the issue of intertextualities in *Inheritance*. Just as the Indian critics notice the inaccuracies or errors within the text, they also notice the echoes of Anita Desai’s *Fire in the Mountain* in *Inheritance*. The frequency with which the Indian critics have mentioned the latter demonstrates how evident the similarities are to Indian readers even if apparently not to the non-Indian critics and reviewers. Shayamala Narayan’s “‘India and the U.S.A. in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss*’”\(^7\) conducts a detailed analysis of both the errors and the similarities, offering the most comprehensive account of the similarities between the two texts.

The protagonists of Anita Desai’s novel are women Nanda and Raka, great-grand-mother and great-grand-daughter, whereas those of *Inheritance* are The Judge and his grand-daughter. However, in both novels the older protagonist is a recluse, living in seclusion in a mountain-top house originally belonging to a British person. As Narayan’s review points out, Nanda Kaul “[l]ike the judge in Kiran Desai’s novel,… lives alone with a cook and avoids all company”,\(^8\) even though in *Fire in the Mountain* we know that the reason behind the seclusion is weariness brought on by a life spent in doing things for others, whereas in *Inheritance* it is the consequence of a life spent alienating others. In both novels the seclusions are interrupted by the younger girls, when circumstances not choice dictate their entry into the lives of the older protagonists.

In both texts, the girls’ arrival is announced through ‘unwelcome’ messages (a letter in *Fire in The Mountain* and a telegram in *Inheritance*) and the girls are shown to travel alone the last lap of their journey to the houses on the mountain-top (Raka to Carigano and Sai to Cho-Oyu) in taxis. However, in Sai’s case Narayan finds it difficult to imagine a nun sending “an eight-year old girl all alone in a taxi on a dark evening” and feels that “Kiran Desai is either mindlessly echoing Raka’s arrival in Carigano (which involved the child travelling alone in a taxi for a few kilometers from Kalka to Kasauli, in broad daylight), or she seems to be interested in a purely negative portrayal.”\(^9\) In both novels, the older protagonists feel their kinship, of blood and nature, with their granddaughters eventually and acknowledge this to themselves reluctantly.

Narayan’s review praises Anita Desai for carefully setting up the event of Raka’s arrival in Nanda’s life while criticising Kiran Desai for not doing so in the case of Sai and the Judge. This is somewhat unjust because in Raka’s case, there are other relatives who could take care of her, if needed. So the
ground for her coming to her great-grand-mother has to be prepared carefully in order for it to appear realistic. In Sai’s case she has nowhere else to go. The ties with her mother’s family are cut when Nimi’s parental family refuses to take her back when she is ‘sent back’ by her husband and finally when Nimi’s ‘accidental’ death in her brother-in-law’s house sends Sai’s mother to the convent. Mr. Mistry, Sai’s father is shown to be an orphan. It would appear that Sai’s arrival has more verisimilitude than Raka’s.

As mentioned earlier, Narayan observes how “Anita Desai individualises the minor characters like the cook or Nanda Kaul’s daughter by giving them names”90 while Kiran Desai leaves Sai’s parents and even the Cook, not-so-minor a character in Sai’s life, unnamed. Although Western reviewers consider it intentional or strategic; Indian reviewers like Narayan find it to be an expression of authorial indifference or lack of interest “in the psychological workings of her characters.”91

Other Indian critics are also quick to notice when Western readers miss the influences from other Indian English authors. In the MuseIndia review, Prof. Murari Prasad observes that though the Chairperson of the Booker judges, Hermione Lee mentions Naipaul, Rushdie and R.K. Narayan, and Anita Desai as Kiran Desai’s literary inheritance, she failed to see “the subtle reworking of the influences coming from Vikram Seth’s A Suitable Boy and Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things in Kiran’s novel. In its representational exactitude, The Inheritance of Loss reminds us of Seth’s novel while in its audacity of imagination it recalls Roy’s celebrated book.”92 Surprisingly, this critic seems to be oblivious to the ‘representational errors’ or authorial slips in Inheritance.

However, despite the reference to the influence of Arundhati Roy here, there is no in-depth analysis of that influence or comparison between the two Booker-winning works even by scholars who mention them together. For example, in ‘India and the USA in Kiran Desai’s The Inheritance of Loss’93 Narayan points out the discrepancies between Sai’s age and what she is shown to think about her experiences in the convent. Narayan observes that a six or seven year old like Sai would not be aware of ‘the titillation in unearthing the forces of guilt and desire’ as described in Inheritance (29) and that this description “would be more relevant to the experience of Rahel in TGST, who is expelled from the school when she is eleven and a half years old for […] deliberately colliding with

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90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
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her seniors […] to find out whether breasts hurt.” But Narayan does not take the comparison any further.

This is surprising in a review that not only discusses the intertextual relationship of *Inheritance* with Anita Desai’s *Fire in the Mountain* in detail but also captures the faint echoes of Naipaul’s *An Area of Darkness* in Sai’s train journey (from Dehradun to Siliguri on the way to Cho Oyu), which is dotted with descriptions of people defecating on the railway tracks. The review also compares *Inheritance* to its contemporaries like Tabish Khaire’s *The Bus Stopped* (2004) where the bus passengers are poor but a feisty lot, unlike Desai’s passengers, who are poor but with “eyes half dead, like animals on their way to death” (Desai, 215)

The similarities between *TGST* and *Inheritance* are too many and too significant to go thus unnoticed but unnoticed they go. Could it be that intertextual relations, too, are made to observe certain borders, such as those between diaspora and nation, and are assumed possible, by the critics, only within those borders?

We can see that, based on their own ‘interpretive and critical inheritance’ in relation to English, the Indian English literature and its writers, the Indian critics display certain traits in their response to *Inheritance*.

One such trait is the firm belief in the Indian English writer’s westward inclination and consequent cultural alienation based on the feeling that English as a foreign language and colonial legacy is an inauthentic medium of expression for any Indian experience, which persists despite the knowledge that English is now as much an Indian language as it is the global lingua franca and despite the presence of a huge number of resident writers, readers and critics. The other is the tendency to react to the non-Indian Western response to an author and a text rather than the author or the text. Both are however nuanced by Desai’s ambivalent ‘insider-outsider’ position as a non-resident writer.

The Indian response to *Inheritance* reflects the ambivalence of the relation between India(ns) and Desai. The interest in Desai’s biography and prizes as well as the broadly positive response reveal the pride in her achievement as an Indian. On the other hand, the criticism of her inaccuracies and gaffes reveals an awareness of her distance from India and a reaction against the status of authentic

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94 Ibid.
native informant that the West automatically confers on the Indian English writers in general and diasporic writers in particular.

Also obvious is the hegemony of the postcolonial perspective as the only approach to the Indian English texts. The overemphasis in *Inheritance* on the postcolonial issues of identity, migrancy, hybridity and marginality or even globalisation has directed the ‘Indian’ attention away from her ‘stereotypical’ representation of Indian women as the victimised subalterns in India or selectively modern women in the diaspora, or her purely bleak and negative representation of India and Indians that is so readily accepted by the Anglophone and non-Anglophone audiences.

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, the reception of Indian English literature is not limited to Anglophone audiences. Through almost immediate translations into non-Anglophone languages, such as French, many other audiences have access to *Inheritance*.

**French Reception**

The September 2007 issue of *Le Magazine littéraire* praises Desai for “the mastery of her narration, her sharp imagery, the realism of her dialogue and her subtle humour” (« La maitrise de la narration, l’acuité des images, la justesse des dialogues, la finesse du rire»)\(^95\) However, the review is referring not to the original but to the 2007 French translation by Claude et Jean Demanuelli, translators of many other Indian and Pakistani English novels besides *Inheritance*.


It is obvious from the dates of the French reviews that the French reception of *Inheritance* is basically the reception of its French edition and as such is mediated and shaped by the process of translation. The quick appearance of the French translation belies the complexity of the issues involved in translation of the text and in the reception of that translation.

As a translation of a text from another culture, the French translation of *Inheritance* faces the problem of dealing with cultural and linguistic gaps that inevitably exist in a text from another culture. The language of *Inheritance* poses an additional problem.

Within the postcolonial perspective, as an Indian English text, *Inheritance* has a peculiar relation with English. Within this frame, English is the former coloniser’s language for a writer of Indian origin and the linguistic mixture of English, Hindi and Nepali or insertion of Hindi and Nepali words in the otherwise standard English in *Inheritance* is the means of subverting that language. This makes such linguistic hybridity, in theory, untranslatable as French does not ‘enjoy’ the same status as English or the same relationship with Hindi and Nepali.

Even outside the postcolonial perspective, the translation of this particular linguistic mix is problematic. As we have seen earlier in this chapter, the language in *Inheritance* is not really a hybrid. The linguistic mix of English, Hindi and Nepali also portrays the peculiar relationship between their users in India and especially Kalimpong, the text’s locale. It is still untranslatable because neither domesticated French nor the hybrid of French, Hindi and Nepali would convey the relationship portrayed in the original.

The way these issues are dealt with reveals what goes on at the level of translation as ‘reception’. The text faces the issues of domestication/foreignisation of language and editing of content that any text which goes through the process of translation faces in general but any Indian English text, which is to be translated into French, faces in particular. As we saw in the introductory chapter, some Indian and non-Indian scholars working in the field of Indian English literature have observed that the French translations show an inclination towards domestication through standardisation or editing of the language and content, but also of domestication or exoticisation of the titles of the texts.96

*Perte*, as a translation, displays, to some extent, the above-mentioned French tendency to domesticate and edit. For example, the ‘Apollo Deaf Tailors’ is translated as *Les Tailleurs sourds* (290) editing out the European name (Apollo) of an Indian shop, instead of explaining the ‘colonial’ context of this incongruity. In another place, instead of glossing, the Nepali word *momo* is translated into *boulettes de mouton* (lamb meatballs) (375) and the Nepali word is erased altogether. The translator has also filled up some linguistic gaps through the translator’s notes. For example, the taxi-driver who brings Sai to Cho-oyu, calls for the Cook in Hindi. This is left unexplained in *Inheritance* whereas in the French translation, the Hindi phrase is left intact in the text but explained in a footnote on the same page (*Perte* 46). Santa and Banta’s Punjabi invocation of God is translated within the text but the Urdu word *Intezam* is explained in a footnote (546).

96 Christopher Rollason, “Problems of translating Indian Writing in English into Spanish, with reference to “A Married Woman” by Manju Kapur” (translated as “Una mujer casada” by Dora Sales Salvador), in *Writers Meet* (Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi), 2006); N. Kamala, “Narcissism Thy Name is French Translation,” in *Translation/Representation*, ed. Anisur Rahman and Ameena Kazi Ansari (New Delhi: Creative Books, 2007), 171-180.
This however is inconsistently done and not all ‘Indian’ phrases or words are edited out or translated or explained. For example, the word \textit{atta} (flour) (\textit{Perte} 169) or \textit{Huzoor} (sir) (94) are left untranslated and unexplained as in the original. In some places the untranslatability of certain features of Indian English is covered up through editing. For example, the transliterations used to emphasise the American accent of Biju’s one prospective Indian employer are altogether edited out of the French translation. (\textit{Inheritance} 137, \textit{Perte} 266). \footnote{Desai, \textit{La Perte en héritage}. All page numbers on the page above are from this edition.} However, the most obvious example of domestication is the French translation of the title of \textit{Inheritance}.

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, a list of works translated from Indian English literature published by the Municipal Library of Paris demonstrates how French translators frequently change titles of Indian English novels. \footnote{Municipal Library of Paris, “List of subcontinental works of fiction translated into French from both,” in \textit{Les Belles Étrangères}: 20 écrivains indiens (Arles: Picquier, 2002), 279-287.} These changes move between ‘domestication’ and ‘exoticisation’ but are strategically aimed at making the titles familiar and understandable to the French readers. In other words, the change in the title is either an attempt to make the title familiarly exotic or recognisably India specific for French readers or to make it sound ‘right’ in French, even if this reductively distorts and decontextualises the title in the process.

The attempt to make Indian English titles familiarly exotic can be seen in the French translation of the title of Kiran Desai’s debut novel. \textit{The Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard} becomes \textit{Le Gourou sur la branche}. \footnote{Kiran Desai, \textit{Le Gourou sur la branche}, trans. Jean Demanuelli, (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2007).} The original English title has a hint of ‘British Raj’ nostalgia through the word ‘Hullabaloo’. As Hullabaloo (an uproar), the anglicised version of Indian war cry of ‘Hulla Bolo’ i.e. ‘attack’ would be unfamiliar to the French readers, the French title incorporates the more widely known, and now international, word of Indian origin ‘Guru’ or ‘Gourou’.

The translation of the title of \textit{Inheritance} is a good example of how French translations, by domesticating a title into standard French, neutralise or de-emphasise the original intent. The original title is an oxymoron. It is a juxtaposition of inheritance, a term that connotes something of value transmitted from the past, and loss, a term that has negative connotation, but the leading term of the title is inheritance. As the English title suggests, \textit{The Inheritance of Loss} is indeed a narrative of loss: loss of a human being’s capacity to love, loss of identity and culture through the psychological impact of colonisation and loss of hope and rights that the ‘downtrodden’ suffer. However, the emphasis is on ‘Inheritance’, the legacy that is passed on to next generations. Through this emphasis...
on the initial word, Inheritance, a tiny crack is left open for the possibility of change through human will and agency.

The title is translated into French as *La Perte en héritage*, which means the loss of inheritance or loss as inheritance. Even though ‘the loss as inheritance’ is more appropriate a translation of the two, it inverts the original title. Through this inversion, the French title foregrounds the ‘loss’, thereby creating a bleaker image and a negative and totalising view of the situation. Since the loss in *Inheritance* is a postcolonial heritage or a colonial legacy, this totalisation is, as we will see, curiously at odds with the general French reluctance to engage with ‘postcolonialism’ of *Inheritance*.

Away from the issues of translation, since *Inheritance* reached the French audience within a year of its publication in the Anglophone world, the historical moment of reception of *Inheritance* in the (Indian and non-Indian) Anglophone and French audience is virtually the same. What effect does this have on the French reception in terms of similarities and differences? As we have argued, the postcolonial perspective is the hegemonic interpretive approach to Indian English literature (in the Anglophone world in particular but even outside it) within this historical moment, though not in French literary studies. What effect does this hegemony and the French divergence from it have on the French reception?

The reception of *La Perte en héritage* shares the Anglophone reception’s interest in the biographical details, the prizes and the broadly positive response to *Inheritance* as a text. The approach to postcolonial perspective in the two receptions is, however, at a variance from each other.

Most of the French reviews talk about the author as Anita Desai’s daughter and as winner of the Man Booker Prize. For example, the *Livres Hebdo* review mentions Kiran Desai as the writer of *Hullaballoo* and as “[t]he daughter of the great Anita Desai, to whom the book is dedicated, has been awarded the Man Booker Prize, the National Book Critics Prize and the anglo-Indian Hutch Crosswords prize” (« *La fille de la grande Anita Desai, à laquelle le livre est dédié, s’est vu récompensé par le Man Booker Prize 2006, le prix du National Book Critics, le prix anglo-indien Hutch Crosswords »). This review also mentions that “the book was considered for the Prix Medici for foreign fiction and the Prix Femina, in the foreign fiction category” (« *adressé aux jurees des prix Médicis étranger et Fémina étranger »*).101 Interestingly, two reviews refer to the

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Booker prize as “*le prix Goncourt Britannique*”¹⁰² (British Goncourt) or “l’équivalent britannique du Goncourt” “the British equivalent of the Goncourt”.¹⁰³

We see the same downplaying of the Indian context of *Inheritance* in the French response as in the non-Indian Anglophone response. Like the non-Indian Anglophone reviews, French reviews too, do not mention the intertextualities between Kiran Desai and other Indian English writers, especially Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy. In general, they, too, are not aware of or do not pay attention to the negative reaction of Kalimpong residents. Only *Le Magazine Littéraire* mentions the discontent and the demonstrations that took place in India against the negative portrayal of Nepalis.¹⁰⁴ They also do not remark on the ‘cultural’ inaccuracies in the novel.

However, the French reception does show some very distinctive characteristics. The most significant feature of the French reception of *Perte*, especially in comparison with the Anglophone reception, is its failure to acknowledge the ‘postcolonial’ elements of the text as postcolonial. For example, most French reviews, with one or two exceptions, talk of *Inheritance* as essentially a comment on the effects of ‘mondialisation’ or globalisation in its portrayal of the condition of migrancy and of the legacy of loss, a loss of identity in the privileged and of rights in the under-privileged of India, passed on from generation to generation as this is conveyed through the juxtaposition of the lives of its three protagonists Jemubhai (ICS, a Cambridge-educated judge), Sai (his orphaned granddaughter) and Biju, the Cook’s son. *Le Magazine littéraire* calls *La Perte en héritage*,

[a] novel on exile, loss and alienation [that] subtly addresses the big contemporary questions such as globalisation which takes Manhattan and a remote Indian town in the same creative and destructive torment, multiculturalism, economic inequalities, fundamentalism, terrorism and the crisis of violence of identity.

[u]n roman sur l’exil, la disparition, la distance intérieure, [qui] aborde de façon subtil de grandes questions contemporaines : la mondialisation qui prend dans une même tourmente créatrice et destructrice, Manhattan et un village indien reculé, le multiculturalisme, les inégalités économiques, le fondamentalisme, le terrorisme, la violence identitaire.¹⁰⁵

The review links the issues of economic inequality, identity crisis and alienation to the effects of globalisation and does not refer to the effects of colonisation.

*L’Express* is emphatic in its denial of the issue of ‘colonisation’. It states that “*Inheritance* deals not with colonisation but with globalisation and its effects” (« *La Perte en héritage* traite non de la

¹⁰⁴ Schneider, “Une histoire de famille.”
¹⁰⁵ Ibid.
Chapter 2: Receptions of *The Inheritance of Loss*

colonisation, mais de la mondialisation. Et de ses conséquences »). L’Ouest France, ignoring the Judge’s story, says that Kiran Desai “evokes the destiny of the poor and the dispossessed people caught in the web of globalisation” (« évoque le destin de pauvre hères pris dans les filets de la mondialisation »). The Paris Match review describes Uncle Potty and Father Booty as the relics/survivors of decolonisation but does not allude to colonisation or its effects. The reviewer mentions “an India crushed under the weight of globalisation” (« une Inde broyée par la mondialisation ») but does not refer to the impact that colonisation had already had on the Indian economy.

*Le Temps* mentions the unequal power relations between Indians and the west, of yesterday and today, thereby bringing in the issues of ‘First and Third World, neocolonialism and social inequalities’. For this review, the subject of the novel is “Indians’ relationship with the West” (« le rapport des Indiens à l’occident ») and Kiran Desai “portrays different ways of being Indian in relation to the West, to the British in the past and to American employers today” (« dépeint ... toutes les façons d’être Indien face à l’occident. Face aux Anglais hier. Face aux employeurs américains aujourd’hui ») through the Judge and Biju but also through the Judge’s friend Bose, who is fighting to get the same pension as his British colleagues and his son, who is fighting to get the same salary as his American counterparts, thereby underlining the “divisions at work between India and the rest of the world but also within India.” (« frontières à l’œuvre entre l’Inde et le reste du monde mais aussi en Inde même »). The relation of the Judge and Bose with the British and that between Bose’s son and his American bosses is seen as analogous. The fact that the relation between the Judge and Bose and their British employers is also that of colonisers and the colonised is ignored.

Only *Le Monde des livres* review alludes to ‘the effects of colonisation’. According to this review, *Perte (Inheritance)* “deals with the theme of clash of cultures where hatred and biases are grafted onto the problems created by colonisation and its trail of injustices” (« porte sur le thème du choc des cultures [où] haine et préjugés se greffent sur les problèmes laissés par la colonisation et son cortège d’injustices »).

As we can see, most French reviews focus on ‘mondialisation’ or globalisation as the root cause of problems portrayed in *Inheritance*. They fail to mention that what happens to the Cambridge-educated Judge, and is passed on through his wife and daughter to his orphaned grand-daughter Sai,

110 Ibid.
is undeniably an effect and legacy of colonisation or that, the regional unrest that forms the backdrop to the novel is a result of the arbitrary borders drawn by the British for administrative ease.

Is this attitude of the mainstream French reviewers related to, or effect of, the French reluctance to engage with postcolonial theory that scholars such as Charles Forsdick and David Murphy refer to? If yes, it is surprising in view of the acknowledgement of the postcolonial elements in Arundhati Roy’s TGST by some French scholars. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, if the shift towards studying the postcolonial elements of TGST is the effect of the hegemony of the postcolonial perspective, especially in relation to Indian English literature, then the failure to engage with Inheritance and the postcolonial elements in it seems paradoxical and only after we analyse the French reception of Interpreter of Maladies and The Alchemy of Desire, can we form an opinion as to its reason.

Incidentally though, the lack of scholarly articles on Inheritance, too, is surprising in view of the almost immediate ‘academic’ interest in TGST. TGST was published in 1997 and the anthology of French scholars’ essays was published in 2000. Perte was published in 2007 and has not yet received such attention.

There are no scholarly articles or major studies on Perte in France, as yet. However, the novel is discussed in an essay from the L’UQAM (Université du Québec, Montreal) in Canada. The essay “La Rencontre entre L’Occident et L’Orient: Fiction ou Réalité” by Claire Rothman discusses various non-Indian and Indian authors from Kipling to Kiran Desai who have written on the ‘encounter between India and the West’, analysing the orientalist and occidentalist images in their fiction.

Rothman feels that Kiran Desai “is fascinated by the way people look at the Other and especially the myths generated by Indians about the West and by the Westerners about Indians and other peoples from developing countries” (« est fascinée par la question du regard que l’on porte sur l’Autre, et plus particulièrement, par les mythes générés par les Indiens vis-à-vis de l’Occident, et par les Occidentaux vis-à-vis des Indiens et des autres peuples de pays en voie de développement »). Rothman talks of the racism and isolation that the Judge experiences in Britain, Biju’s loneliness in

112 Forsdick and Murphy, Francophone Postcolonial Studies, Introduction, 8.
113 Froude-Durix and Durix, Reading Arundhati Roy’s “The God of Small Things”.
115 Ibid.
America and images of the West, either as a superior culture or materialistic culture, that Indians have.

Rothman’s essay complicates the concept of the metropolitan audience for the translations in French, in the same way that Haque’s article complicates the concept of metropolitan Anglophone audience, by indicating the wider ‘Francophone’ (to be read as French speaking or French from countries other than France) audience that can access these translations. But, in a striking contrast with the significant critical response from the Anglophone (Indian and non-Indian) scholars, this essay is the only ‘scholarly’ work on *Inheritance* in French, if not from France. Even away from the postcolonial approach, the critical silence on the novel is surprising in view of the French interest in narratology reported by Alex Tickell,116 as *Inheritance* is a work of considerable narrative complexity.

The combination of lack of scholarly interest and lack of engagement with the postcolonial elements has led to some gaps in the French reception of *Inheritance/Perte*. The most noticeable of these gaps is the lack of attention to the close link between its central character, the Judge, and the white-masked colonised in texts such as Fanon’s canonical *Black Skin, White Masks*.117

The evolution of the character of Jemubhai can be seen as closely modelled on Fanon’s psychoanalysis of the black victim of colonisation. Jemubhai, sent to Cambridge for studies, suffering from loneliness, subjected to racism and humiliated through the inability to overcome his own inferiority complex, is forever marked by his English experience. He hides his discomfort, inadequacies and feeling of isolation under impassivity, mistaken for dignity by the British, and under fury for the Indian ‘ineptitude and inferiority’ (a belief that is inherited from the coloniser and internalised) that taints him through its link to his origin. He dons a mask of hatred (for the British and for the Indians) that eventually ends up replacing any other feelings that he might have had. He tries to compensate for the impossibility of overcoming his dark skin, by becoming more English than the English in his behaviour and in his treatment of the ‘natives’, whether strangers or family.

One French review observes that the judge “creates for himself a mask of hatred that he will never take off. Treated as Indian in England, he wishes to be English in India” (« *s*e façonne ... *le masque qu’il ne quittera plus, celui de la haine. Indien en Angleterre, il se veut Anglais en Inde »)118 thereby indicating that the psychological transformation in the Judge, who imitates the British coloniser’s

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118 Koutchoumoff, “Le mal des frontières.”
behaviour in order to feel superior, begins when he starts hating his own people and ends up alienating himself from them. However, this review fails to notice the obvious connection between the mask donned by the Judge, a victim of British colonisation and racism and Fanon’s description of the ‘white’ mask that the face of a ‘black’ colonised turns into under the psychological impact of French colonisation.

Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* looked at the psychological impact of colonisation on its victims, their need to identify with the ‘white coloniser’ through their language, behaviour and treatment of other natives. This interiorisation of colonial stereotypes in the form of a dichotomy or schism between the (mimic colonial) self and (colonised self as) other by those educated in colonial languages and institutions later became a central tenet of early postcolonial theory. Although the theory became more detailed and nuanced as time went by, it also changed in its focus from psychoanalysis of real victims to textual analysis of fictional texts and characters.

In the introduction to a recent edition of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Maxim Silverman observes that Fanon’s work, though seminal for postcolonial theory, has remained quite marginal in the world of ‘Francophonie’.119 This observation seems to be validated by the fact that even a mainstream English review mentions Fanon and *Black Skin, White Masks* in relation to *Inheritance*120 while the French reviews do not. Could it be that, the marginal status of Fanon and Francophone literature in French literary world, and the French reluctance to look at Francophone literature as postcolonial, and as such subversive of, or resistant to, French colonial rule plays a role in this present day inclination to overlook the connection between Fanon’s psychoanalysis of a black victim of French colonisation and a character in an Indian English, postcolonial, Booker-winning work?

In “De-centring French Studies: Towards a Postcolonial Theory of Francophone Cultures”, David Murphy points out the marginal status of Francophone literature (written by writers from former French colonies) in the French literary world.121 Is the French attitude towards Francophone literature reflected in the French attitude towards *Inheritance*, which as a text in English by a writer from a former British colony would be an Anglophone text? Although *Inheritance* as a literary and commercial success consecrated (or fuelled) by the Booker Prize has commanded swift translation and attention in the French media, is it subconsciously marginalised as an Anglophone text? Is the French translation practice of domestication of language, content and titles of Indian English texts an

120 Nieves, “Second Novel Missing Author’s Comic Flair.”
121 Murphy, “De-centring French Studies: Towards a Postcolonial Theory of Francophone Cultures.”
indication of this? Is the lack of scholarly articles on Inheritance a reflection of this attitude? (If yes, then what can explain the interest in TGST?) And are the various errors or ‘slips’ in the French reviews to be read in the light of this attitude?

Lost in translation? – The errors in the reviews
Translations play an important role in ‘taking across’ a text from one language and culture to another; and so do readings by the critics and professional reviewers. Both, translation and ‘professional’ reading are selective and subjective interpretive acts that shape the reception of a text in its target audience. They also reflect the readers’ attitude towards the text in question.

Since the act of reading is subjective, variances in the reviews are expected but the errors in the French reviews, though minor in themselves, and probably immaterial to any individual reader of Perte, seem to be errors of neglect and become quite significant and revealing in their sum total.

For example, the Elle review reads Perte as “the story of a Judge, who is sent to pursue his higher studies in postcolonial England” (« l’histoire du Juge, envoyé faire ses études dans l’Angleterre postcoloniale »). This is an error as to the time the story is set in because when the Judge is in England, India is still under British rule; unless the term postcolonial is used to signify the period after the moment of colonisation rather than decolonisation.

The review in Le Monde des Livres asks who is at fault “if sent to England for higher studies on a hard earned scholarship, he (Jemubhai) transforms himself into this deathly rigid being” (« [s]i envoyé en Angleterre pour y faire ses études grâce à une bourse péniblement obtenue, il (Jemubhai) s’est transformé en cet être d’une rigidité de mort »). This is incorrect since Jemubhai learns in the mission school on scholarship but he goes abroad thanks to the dowry paid by his father-in-law, an eminent and rich man through his links with the British Government, to secure a promising and upcoming young man for his daughter.

The Lire review claims that Jemubhai, the old Judge is “as much a symbol of contemporary India seduced by the ‘enlightened West’” (« autant un emblème de l’Inde contemporaine séduit par l’occident et ses lumières »). As we know, Jemubhai is more ‘violé et marqué’ (violated and

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122 Duchatelle, “Testament à l’Indienne.”
123 Jordis, “La réussite au prix du mensonge.”
scarred) than ‘séduit’ (seduced) by his British experience, as is Biju, if by ‘as much’ a comparison with Biju is implied.

Le Temps sends Jemubhai to Oxford instead of Cambridge when the certificate from Cambridge looms large in the encounter with the GNLF boys in the opening pages of the novel. It is actually uncle Potty, the reader of Asterix and survivor of decolonisation, who went to Oxford. Le Magazine Littéraire talks of Jemubhai’s Cambridge years (années Cambridge) but also of “aborted literary dreams” (« ses rêves littéraires avortés »), perhaps an allusion to his miserable performance in his oral exams, since the Judge is never shown to have any literary inclination or dreams.

Two French reviews also get the only love interest in Inheritance terribly wrong. Lire published an extract of Perte (Éditions Deux Terres) in its July-August issue in 2007. This extract is preceded by a synopsis of the author’s life and of the text. This synopsis comments that in Inheritance, Kiran Desai “[n]arrates the story of Sai, a young girl from northern India, whose first love(r) is irresistibly attracted to the United States. Having left to live in New York, he experiences the solitude and disappointments of exile before coming back” (« raconte l’histoire de Sai, jeune fille du nord de l’Inde dont le premier amour est irrésistiblement attiré par les Etats-Unis. Parti s’installer à New York, il connaît les solitudes et les désenchantements de l’exil, avant de revenir au pays »).

From the descriptions of the long queues of people of all ages waiting to be interviewed for an American visa in Inheritance, any Indian youth can be claimed to be irresistibly attracted towards the US. The first line of the above mentioned review thus might apply to Gyan, Sai’s Nepali mathematics tutor turned lover, even if in the story he discusses running away to Australia with Sai. But the next line of the review leaves us in no doubt that the person referred to is actually the Cook’s son, Biju who as an illegal immigrant is struggling to survive in New York. In Inheritance, Biju is definitely neither shown to be Sai’s first love nor even her childhood friend. To be fair, the French translator has done nothing to give this impression either. Sai is in fact jealous of Biju being the ‘first love’ in the Cook’s life. The same error can be seen in the review in Le Point, which begins with “The inheritance of globalisation. An orphan (girl) on the slopes of the Himalayas. Her lover in the United States” (« La Mondialisation en héritage. Une orpheline sur les contreforts de l’Himalaya. Son amoureux aux Etats-Unis »).

This is perhaps, the most extraordinary ‘slip’ of all.

125 Koutchoumoff, “Le mal des frontières.”
126 Schneider, “Une histoire de famille.”
Chapter 2: Receptions of *The Inheritance of Loss*  

Just as the translation and reviews of *Inheritance*/ *Perte* tell the French readers about *Inheritance* and shape their response to it, they also tell us about the attitudes of the translators and reviewers towards *Inheritance*. The errors in the reviews not only expose the carelessness of the French reviewers and their distance from the subject but also seem to answer (affirmatively) our question about the subconscious marginalisation of *Inheritance* as an Anglophone text and about the role that the French attitude towards Francophone literature plays in it. Apart from the domestication in translation and careless errors in the reviews, the French reception displays another very distinctive feature.

**Reading India**

The reviewers of *La Perte en heritage* constantly refer to the portrayal of India in *Inheritance*. It is as if the reviewers are reading *Inheritance/Perte* as a story of India. Although this is perhaps common in popular press and would have been more significant in the case of scholarly reviews if there had been any, it is still interesting to see the way the text is so readily read or viewed as a commentary on present day India rather than a fictional narrative.

The *Livres Hebdo* review says “*The Inheritance of Loss* combines individual story and grand history, portraying, moreover, an India where resentments and bitterness accumulated over generations combine with the need to Westernise or modernise” (« La Perte en Héritage combine petite et grande histoire, montrant de surcroît une Inde où les rancœurs accumulées depuis des générations se mélangent avec le besoin de s’occidentaliser »). The review in *Lire* finds Desai’s characters to be the “[e]mblesms of contemporary India, a nation disfigured by arms trafficking, religious extremism and identity hysteria” (« [e]mblèmes de l’Inde contemporaine. Une nation défigurée par les trafics d’armes, le fanatisme religieux et l’hystérie identitaire »). For *Le Monde des Livres*, the story of *Perte* is “the story of the last fifty years of an India, groaning and coming apart at the seams” (« [l]’histoire des cinquante dernières années » of an India that « craque et gémit aux coutures »). According to the *Elle* review, “humiliation and deception link the characters of *Inheritance* who are pawns in the game of history and victims of ‘modernity at all costs’.” And that “[t]hrough them Kiran Desai paints a portrait of an independent India that aspires to imitate Western norms repudiating its own culture” (« l’humiliation et le mensonge » link all the characters of *Perte* that are « marionettes de l’histoire et victimes de la modernité à tout prix » and

129 “Le roman en héritage.”
130 Clavel, “Kiran Desai de l’Himalaya à Brooklyn.”
131 Jordis, “La réussite au prix du mensonge.”
that « [à] travers eux, Kiran Desai dresse le portrait d’une Inde indépendante qui aspire à copier les références occidentales, jusqu’à renier sa propre culture »). It seems that the characters are considered to be symbolic of, to misquote Malraux, ‘la condition indienne’.133

For L’Express “Biju’s story is the story of India’s failed Western dream. But the disappointments of the new world are matched by the chaos of an India prey to nationalist delirium and trapped in the vice of traditions” (« [I]’histoire de Biju est celle d’une idylle avortée entre l’Inde et l’Occident. Mais aux désillusions du Nouveau Monde répond la pagaille d’une Inde en proie aux délires nationalistes, prise dans l’étau des traditions »). According to Paris Match, Biju’s American dream fails to come true because he feels homesick but more importantly because he is the victim of “Indian fatalism that never loosens its prey” (« la fatalité de l’Inde, qui ne lâche jamais ses proies ») and Sai is trapped in “[t]he inextricable mess of a nation scarred by the arms trafficking, religious extremism and identity hysteria” (« [l]’inextricable pagaille d’une nation défigurée par les traffics d’armes, le fanatisme religieux et l’hystérie identitaire »).135

The India that emerges out of these reviews is the India that wants to, but fails to, become like the West and in the process is losing its own culture. It is a chaotic fragmenting nation trapped in its traditions, prey to nationalist and fundamentalist extremism as well as sectarian extremism based on specific cultural or regional identity. Indians might dream all they want but will fail due to the ‘fatalistic’ Indian culture that still has its hold on them.

Through Inheritance Desai has conveyed her belief or reading of India as a sinking ship and the French reviews do not question this reading, validating Huggan and Brouillette’s respective criticism that the writers of postcolonial literatures and metropolitan readers are complicit in the production, perpetuation and consumption of certain stereotypes about postcolonial cultures. French reviewers seem to accept Desai’s representation of India as authentic and real because it fits in with the ‘Third World’ image of India prevalent in the west and because they see her as a reliable native informant based on her Indian origin; without questioning the ‘distancing’ that she has undergone since her move abroad at the young age of 14.

133 La Condition Humaine is André Malraux’s famous book.
134 Busnel, “Kiran Desai.”
135 Frain, “Temps Durs pour les Hindous.”
Conclusion

Like the Indian and non-Indian Anglophone receptions, the French reception of *Inheritance* reveals that although geographical borders are often blurred by the diasporisation of the world, certain borders are still at work between different readerships. The study of French reception also draws attention to the fact that the homogenisation of non-Indian audience into an Anglophone ex-coloniser west is inexact.

Although the French reception of *Inheritance* does share many characteristics with its non-Indian Anglophone reception, they are markedly different from each other in their approach to *Inheritance*. The French response to *Inheritance* as a post-global rather than postcolonial text has resulted in a failure to notice similarities between *Inheritance* and Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*. Such a comparison could have been very fruitful as it would have opened *Inheritance* up for comparisons with other Francophone texts in general and Francophone migrant literatures in particular.

French translation practices and the casual way of dealing with *Inheritance* as a text raise doubts as to whether the French attitude towards Francophone literature (especially literature written by those from former colonies) as marginal has coloured their interaction with Indian English literature, seen as an Anglophone literature. These doubts are strengthened by the French reviewers’ inclination to read *Perte* as a story of the nation of India rather than a fictional narrative and their ready acceptance of Desai’s portrayal of India as a sinking ship.

Reading India Writing India

The acceptance of the authenticity of Desai’s portrayal of India is the point on which the receptions by the three readerships most completely diverge. Depending upon which side of her ambivalent identity the reader stands, the expectation of authority and authenticity from Desai as a native informant (based on her connection with India and the Indian Diaspora as well as the truth claim of (her) lived experiences) and the reaction to her presentation of India change.

Generally, reception of the diasporic Indian English writers’ representation of India is fraught with issues such as exoticism or writing for a Western readership avid for cultural difference, complicity with the centre or the metropolitan readership’s demands for cultural exotica and the question of authenticity of the representation. Kiran Desai’s ambivalent Indian identity has not altered but nuanced the reception of *Inheritance*. 

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Chapter 2: Receptions of *The Inheritance of Loss*
The Postcolonial Exotic

According to Huggan, in the industry of the postcolonial exotic, Third World cultural commodities such as literature are consumed for their cultural difference and denuded of their subversive significance as they cater to and are consumed and contained by the First World market. According to him, the literary prizes like Booker control and feed into this industry by consecrating certain differences thereby validating and authenticating them. The Indian English writers (in their capacity as postcolonial writers) become accomplices (whether willing or not and even if self-consciously aware and deliberate) in the process of this ‘postcolonial exotic’ by producing images of India and Indians that are palatably different and familiarly exotic in response to the taste and demand of their Western/First World readerships. 137

Desai’s descriptions of the beauty of the lush and wild nature of Kalimpong Hills, which is seemingly ready to take over human space and place and which also forms a backdrop to the Third Worldly squalor and poverty of the region spiced with the ‘insurgency’, present an India that is different because of the unfamiliar locale and yet in agreement with the First World perception of India. As a diaspora writer of Indian origin whose ‘subject matter’ remains India and Indians and who presents them in a certain way, Desai comes under suspicion of participating or being complicit in ‘postcolonial exoticism’ as Huggan defines it.

Desai displays, as according to Catherine Innes all postcolonial writers do, 138 an awareness of her double audience. Inheritance, for its deft handling of multiple themes of current interest, has been called an “intelligently postcolonial” 139 novel. Looking at the way it addresses the interests of its multiple audiences (and markets); it can also be called ‘intelligently exotic.’

Desai’s self-consciously aware portrayal of the upper class, educated and ‘legal’ migrant Indians and the exploited illegal immigrants seems to be a clever play on the expectations of her insider audiences, both ‘at home’ and diasporic. On the one hand, the materially successful but emotionally deracinated ‘legal’ migrants from various backgrounds, who meet Biju in various places from restaurants to airports, are at once familiar and different for the ‘resident’ readers and fit in with these readers’ image of the First World diaspora. The exploitation of the illegal immigrants also fits in with the postcolonial perception of the neo-colonial oppression of the Third World.

137 Huggan, The Postcolonial Exotic.
138 Innes, “Citizens of the world: reading postcolonial literature.”
139 Moseley, “Tidy and Untidy Novels,” 295.
On the other hand, the sombre portrayal of India and the different and dark world of the illegal immigrants is as much a confirmation of the ‘legal’ diasporians’ perception of the India that they have eagerly left behind at the same time as it is a play on their feelings of guilt of indifference and relief of distance from India and the illegal immigrants’ world. Perhaps this could be termed a ‘cathartic exoticism’ aimed at the ‘legal diasporians’, since it displays all “[t]he blatant hypocrisies of exoticism - complacency masked as appreciation; novelty mediated through cliché; the creation of a cultural distance”\(^ {140} \) at the same time as it lightens their burden of guilt by confirming certain perceptions they have about India.

**The authenticity of a native informant**

From the Indian readers’ perspective, the Indian English authors’ bestowed and assumed (in the sense of being presupposed by the west and taken on by the writers) status of native informants is suspect because of their presumed linguistic and cultural alienation. In the case of the diasporic authors, this feeling is even more pronounced because of their ‘distance’ from India, because they do not participate in the everyday life of the place, are not part of the changes taking place there and, consequently, their experiences of the country are perceived as mediated, secondhand, touristic or nostalgic.

In Desai’s case, authenticity as an Indian writer is even more problematic because she left India just after the first stirrings of insurgency in Kalimpong, when she was only fourteen. Her ‘lived experience’ in, and autobiographical connections with, Kalimpong as well as with India, are too inadequate for an unquestioning acceptance of the authenticity of her representation of either. Yet, she has been granted such authenticity and the ambivalence of her Indian identity has been in her favour in more ways than one, as is evident in the prizes she has won and the position from which she writes.

**The consecration**

Desai describes herself as “an Indian writer who lives in America.”, “whose connection with India was never broken” and who “in an odd way, owes her (Booker) award to US president George W. Bush whose 2004 reelection led her to put off becoming a U. S. citizen.”\(^ {141} \) The Trask Prize is for Commonwealth writers under 35 (prize website) and the Booker Prize is for British or Commonwealth citizens. Thus, in reality, she owes not just the Booker but both her awards to not

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becoming an American citizen or to retaining her status of an Indian writer who lives in America. At the same time, as someone who has adopted America as her ‘domicile’, she can still express pride in winning the National Critics award and claim it as the proof of America claiming her as its own while the Indians feel pride in her Booker.

The right to write on India

Desai’s in-between or outsider/insider position has another advantage. Writing from, to borrow Homi Bhabha’s term, a ‘third space’ between two cultures and locations she can (and does) claim to be writing about India as an Indian and about Indian migrants who travel between East and West and experience moving from a poor country to a rich one, as an Indian diasporian. At the same time, by keeping the focus of Inheritance away from the First World she can claim to be writing for the Third World illegal immigrants without offending her First World audience. This strategy, however, is open to criticism of complicity in the industry of postcolonial exotic, though such criticism has not been articulated yet, as we have seen in the critical literature we have examined.

Authorial Complicity

In the industry of the postcolonial exotic, the proof of authorial complicity with the metropolitan economic centre and market is the authors’ use of their native informant status to represent and perpetuate the stereotypical perceptions about the ‘other’ (whether former colony and the ex-colonised or Third World and the Third Worldians) in the guise of presenting difference. Desai’s presentations of India and Indians, both resident and diasporic, the elite and the masses, conform to the expectations of her various audiences although she professes to present a different India.

Desai says that, for her, Inheritance is as much a ridicule of “India of the fanatics as well as that of Anglophone Indians, who have done higher studies, who long for a Hollywood type romantic love affair at the same time as they take delight in traditional ceremony with its masses of fine jewelery” (« l’Inde des fanatiques autant que celle de ces Indiens Anglophones ... qui ont fait des études supérieures, [et] n’aspirent qu’à une histoire d’amour à l’occidentale tout en étant ravis d’une cérémonie traditionnelle avec des tas de bijoux »).143

143 Busnel, “Kiran Desai.”
Chapter 2: Receptions of The Inheritance of Loss

Desai belongs to this elite Anglophone class but says that she is dismayed at the self-satisfaction of this class. In one French review/interview, she claims to see India differently and to feel that as an author it is her duty to

fight against the false image that people have of their country. At a moment when the entire world is bent on turning India into the new El Dorado, she (who, is Gujarati by origin, was born and schooled in Delhi, and has lived in London, Mexico and New York) presents a more nuanced vision of the Indian miracle. “The media has eyes only for the bright side of Indian reality,” she argues. “However, it would be foolish to believe that that is the sole reality. There also exists an India that is torn between tradition and modernity, where desires override the guilt.”

However, Desai’s nuanced version of the Indian miracle is not very different from the stereotypical Third-World image of India. This desire to show the underbelly of India is neither new nor unique to Kiran Desai. From Nirad Chaudhari to Naipaul to Arundhati Roy, authors of Indian origin and the supposedly ‘sympathetic’ British writers like Kipling and Forster have done that willingly and quite successfully for a long time. That Desai has been successful in representing the unshining, dark or Third-World India is apparent from the reviews.

La Gazette acknowledges that “[t]hrough [her] highly colorful characters, Kiran Desai scratches the varnish of the Indian miracle, so lauded by the media” (« [à] travers [s]es personages hauts en couleurs, Kiran Desai gratte derrière le vernis du « miracle Indien » que nous vantent les medias »). The review further adds that “going against the existing clichés about her country, the author exposes an India that is lost, torn between modernity and tradition, between fundamentalism and desire for Westernisation” (« [à] contre-courant des clichés sur son pays, l’auteure met à nu cette partie de l’Inde en perdition, tirailée entre modernité et tradition, entre fondamentalisme et désir d’occidentalisme »).

The authenticity bestowed upon Desai by her Indian origin and the visibility offered by her diasporic location and the Booker Prize legitimise her ‘subjective’ representations of India, Indians and Indian diasporians, for her readers. The ‘otherness industry’ or the ‘alterity industry’ created, run and

144 Ibid.
146 Ibid.
148 Huggan, The Postcolonial Exotic, x.
fed into by the print industry and authors alike, that is at work here ensures that the media and the news that talk of the ‘shining India’ become ‘fictitious’ or illusory while fiction takes on the role of ‘révélatrice’ of truth and of the, to borrow Arundhati Roy’s term, ‘India not-shining’.149

The perpetual First World need of ‘new exotics’ and the appeasement of its touristic gaze through them, argued by Huggan, means that this industry is continuously in search of new others or old others in new garbs or rather different stages of undress. The bleaker the image that is portrayed of India and the as-yet-unrevealed negative aspect of India is exposed to the international gaze, the more authentic and true the portrayal is considered to be. The question is: who has the right to scratch the shine from India, the insider or the outsider or the insider/outsider? In the increasingly trans-nationalised, diasporising world the boundaries that separate these identities have become less defined. Yet the inflection that distance from India brings to these identities seems to shape the reception of literary works.

**The Insider/Outsider**

Is one an insider or outsider when one lives in and writes from another country and claims an Indian identity? Authors like Desai, who have spent more of their adult life outside India than inside claim to have kept their ties intact through yearly visits of short duration. They claim that their India is with them anywhere they go or live. Years ago, another famous Indian English writer, Raja Rao, used to say that “India is everywhere” suggesting that he carried his India with(in) him.150 Salman Rushdie has fiercely defended the right to write his imaginary homeland, the India of his mind.151

Desai too, while wishing to continue her American life, claims that “India is as much here, in New York, as in London or Toronto or even New Delhi. Her India is with her, wherever she is” (« L’Inde c’est ici, à New York, aussi bien qu’à Londres, à Toronto ou encore à Delhi. ... Son pays est partout avec elle »).152 She justifies her living outside India as necessary for her writing because, according to her, the sense of being an outsider is an essential part of a writer’s equipment; the distance helps her see objectively (“I go back to India three or four months a year.” “I am always happy to be in India, because it is my home, but being in America frees up my imagination and gives me a more

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151 Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*.
152 Busnel, “Kiran Desai.”
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objective view point. I like to write about India from a distance"¹⁵³ but also because “t]he reality of life in India can be very overwhelming.”¹⁵⁴

Looking back at the authorial slips that Indian reviewers notice but that are overlooked by the readers, reviewers and critics outside India we realise one thing. The Indian expectations of factual and linguistic accuracy seem to stem from the same notion of *authenticité originaire* or authenticity of origin that colours the non-Indian assumption about Desai’s reliability as a ‘native informant’. Perhaps, as the earlier mentioned reader of the Guardian Book Club said, the factual errors in *Inheritance* are unimportant for the Western readers but to the Indian readers such errors reveal the author’s ‘outsider’ status. This happens in an especially disaffecting manner, when authors emphasise that being an outsider is necessary for their writing, as Kiran Desai has repeatedly done in her interviews.

In contrast to Desai, who lives in America, Arundhati Roy not only lives in India and shares the Indian reality with Indians but fights (what she thinks are) its ills and has donated her Booker Prize money to an Indian cause.¹⁵⁵ Could this be the reason behind the unwillingness of the Indian critics - who did not flinch in pointing out the similarities between the Desai mother and daughter’s work- to see the similarities between *Inheritance* and *TGST*?¹⁵⁶ There are numerous and quite obvious similarities between certain characters, themes and events in the two novels that remain unexplored.

For example, the resemblance between Pappachi and the Judge, the England returned, Oxbridge-educated anglophile patriarchs of both novels, is striking. Both characters are affected by the ‘colonial ‘injustice’ in their past and respond to it with the ‘passive but brooding silence’ in their old age. Both, the Judge and Pappachi, are cruel and abusive to their wives, Nimi and Mammachi. Pappachi is as indifferent and unfair to his daughter Ammu as the Judge is to Sai’s mother, even if Ammu is not as neglected as Sai’s mother who never gets to know her father or his home. The physical state of the houses both men own and live in, Cho Oyu in the case of the Judge and the Aymenem house in the case of Pappachi, reflect the age and mental malaise of their owners.

¹⁵⁶ Of course, even Roy was not spared the Indian wrath for taking artistic liberties with the ‘political reality’ of her chosen locale in *TGST*.
Many events in *TGST* are echoed in *Inheritance*. For example, the descriptions of Sai’s days in the convent in many ways remind us of those of Rahel’s. In both novels, the sons are forced to return home because of their fathers. Estha returns to Aymenem because his father leaves India and Biju returns to India because he is concerned about his father. Biju’s homecoming is similar to that of Estha in that they both come back ‘diminished’, even if in different ways: Estha silenced by the burden of his past and Biju robbed of everything by his own countrymen. Both undergo a subtle feminisation, through the traditionally feminine chores they do for subsistence. Estha does the housework in his father’s house and Biju works in restaurant kitchens.

One act of defiance, or conscious rebellion on Ammu’s part, her love affair with ‘lower-caste’ Velutha, casts its effect on all but mainly the children’s lives in *TGST*. One naïve act of compliance, interpreted as rebellion, on Nimi’s part, affects her own life and consequently also those of her daughter and grand-daughter in *Inheritance*. Nimi accidentally accepts the invitation of the wives of other civil servants to go out with them and unknowingly joins the crowd gathered to see Mahatma Gandhi, an unsuitable act for the wife of a man in civil service in British India. She is beaten by the Judge and sent to her parental house never to come back. Her daughter, Sai’s mother, grows up in a convent like an orphan who has no family. Both Ammu and Nimi die unwanted and away from their families.

In both novels, the ‘lovers’, Velutha in *TGST* and Gyan in *Inheritance*, are involved in a political uprising that is in essence against the Anglophone, anglophile upper class that Ammu and Sai belong to and the power and the values they symbolise. The moment in *TGST* where Rahel and Estha notice Velutha in the rebel procession, and he refuses to show recognition is echoed in *Inheritance*, where Sai notices Gyan in a similar procession and he refuses to recognise or acknowledge her.157

There are also certain similarities between themes, concerns and issues that the two texts deal with. Both texts portray women across generations as victims – as wife, daughter and grand-daughter – of patriarchal dominance. Both texts highlight the inadequacy of other loves in adult life to overcome unfulfilled family lives, past traumas and childhood losses. In both texts, the Westernised India and Indians depicted in juxtaposition with the ‘natives’ or average Indians illuminate the disparity between the lives, concerns, values and interests of the two groups.

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157 Haque, *Aspects of Globalization in "The Inheritance of Loss"*, 72. Haque is the only scholar to have mentioned this similarity.
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Both texts use a particularly violent moment in the nation’s or a specific region’s history, the Naxalite uprising in Kerala in *TGST* and the GNLF movement in Kalimpong in *Inheritance*, as the backdrop to the story of a particular family and the circle of people linked with it. Both novels show the effect of colonisation on an entire Indian generation and the loss of self-esteem that becomes the legacy of the future generation. Both novels explicitly reject the notion of ‘grand narrative’ or a ‘single’ story, through the epigraph in *TGST* and through Sai’s thoughts near the end of *Inheritance* (pg. 323).

There are other similarities. The autobiographical elements from each author’s life appear in the form of locale and certain lived experiences in their texts. Both authors are accused of exoticism because of the clever choice of unfamiliar and hence exotic locale as the setting of their narratives. On the one hand, there was a wave of public criticism, especially in India, against the fictionalised or (mis)represented political reality in both texts and, on the other hand, an effusive appreciation, especially in the west, of the lyrical prose and the authors’ talent. The autobiographical truth claims about both texts forced close relatives of the authors, Roy’s mother and Desai’s aunt, to hasten to distance themselves publicly from the text.158

None of this however gets critical or popular attention. The failure (or reluctance) to see the obvious similarities between these two texts is impoverishing for their reception as literary texts. More importantly, from the point of view of the reception of *Inheritance*, this failure highlights the Western readership’s appropriation of *Inheritance* away from its Indian context and the Indian readership’s refusal to accept Desai fully and unconditionally as an insider.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of the receptions of *Inheritance* demonstrates that non-resident writers like Desai nuance the predominantly expatriate image of Indian English writers at the same time as the ambivalence of Desai’s Indian identity inflects her relationship with her various audiences but especially with her ‘home audience’. The Indian audience, which takes pride in her literary achievements and international accolades, is wary of her ‘native informant’ status in the world outside. This makes the Indian critics more aware of her ‘slips’ and distance from Indian reality and in some ways it makes them react more to her reception in the Western world than to *Inheritance* as a literary text. In other words, the Indian reception of *Inheritance* is shaped at once by the Indian

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reaction to Desai’s choice to remain Indian while living in America and to the Western reaction to *Inheritance* and Desai.

The non-Indian audiences of *Inheritance*, Anglophone and French, share the assumptions of Desai’s reliability as a native informant and the authenticity of her representations of India and Indians. On the other hand, the French reception shows a marked tendency to read a certain image of India in *Inheritance* that, when seen in the light of the French translation practice of domestication and the signs of subconscious marginalisation of Anglophone literature, appears quite colonial. Though there is significant popular French and Anglophone interest in *Inheritance* and these audiences share certain characteristics, the effect of the shared moment of reception does not translate into any noticeable further French step towards the postcolonial approach after the slight shift seen in the case of *TGST*. The analysis of the other two texts in our corpus may shed light on, or provide clues to, this paradox or confirm whether the French recognition of the postcolonial elements in *TGST* was just an exception. Whatever the answer to that question, the receptions of *Inheritance* demonstrate that when texts are read exclusively within or against certain perspectives such as postcolonial perspective, such readings remain partial and impoverished. The readings of *Inheritance* in each of its readerships are reductive, even if differently, to the complexity of the text in their exclusive focus on or away from the postcolonial perspective.

The most interesting point to emerge from the analysis of receptions of *Inheritance*, though, is the link between Indian English literature and the concept of ‘India’. Analysis of receptions of *Inheritance* prove Sarah Brouillette’s argument that the post-modern questioning of the idea of the origin and the nation notwithstanding, metropolitan reception remains obsessed by its desire to link the ‘authenticity’ and ‘representationality’ of postcolonial literature to the ‘nationality’ or ‘the origin’ of the author.\(^{159}\) The analysis of the French reception of *Inheritance* proves Catherine Innes’ claim that ‘Western’ readings of postcolonial literature are ‘cultural and anthropological analyses’.\(^{160}\) Furthermore, it shows that, notwithstanding the debates around Fredric Jameson’s essay describing the Third World texts as national allegories, Third World texts continue to be read more as ‘authentic representations’ of the culture and even more importantly the nation that they represent than as literary texts.\(^{161}\)

\footnote{Brouillette, “Books Without Borders.”}
\footnote{Catherine Lynette Innes, “Citizens of the world: reading postcolonial literature,” in The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English, Cambridge introductions to literature (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 207. I describe the claim as implied since Innes is actually suggesting that the teaching of postcolonial literature in British and American institutions should move away from emphasis on cultural and anthropological analyses which distance the text and encourage the readers to see the worlds these texts represent as static and unchanging.}
\footnote{Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism.”}
The analysis of French reception demonstrates that despite globalisation, diasporisation and the rise of ‘multiculturalism’, the nation remains not only the site on the basis of which literatures are read, evaluated and authenticated but also an entity that is read, evaluated and authenticated through literature. It remains not only the homeland that the authors can imagine, represent, write or give voice to or the origin and source of their authenticity but also a site that is received, read, interpreted as well as fixed by the readers (reading through the filters of their own experiences, contexts and education).

Kiran Desai claims the right to write ‘honestly’ about India from a very personal perspective because she comes from India. This writing is considered representative of India by the rest of the world because she is of Indian origin. But more importantly, the very fact that this writing is so readily accepted as (re)presentation of present day India shows that there is an ‘India of the reader’s mind’\textsuperscript{162} and Desai’s subjective representation taps into it.

In this context, the question of insider-outsider status, rights and responsibilities should become even more problematic in the case of a second generation immigrant writer like Jhumpa Lahiri. Does the reception of her work demonstrate this? That is the question that I seek to address in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{162} In \textit{Imaginary Homeland} Salman Rushdie claims the right to write the India of his mind.
Chapter 3: Receptions of *Interpreter of Maladies*
Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2000 for *Interpreter of Maladies*,¹ her debut short story collection. Lahiri’s Pulitzer caused a sensation not only because it is very rare for a first work or a short story collection to win Pulitzer² but also because, as the media kept highlighting, Lahiri was the first Indian to do so.

This is even more paradoxical than in the case of Kiran Desai, who was born in India, had spent a few years there before moving abroad and is not yet an American citizen. Lahiri, though a frequent visitor to India, was born and brought up outside and is an American citizen. As the daughter of migrants from India, Lahiri is a second generation migrant. Writers like Lahiri are of significance to the present study for the nuance they bring to the ‘diasporic’ image of Indian English writer since the hyphenation of their Indian identities is further enhanced by generational distance.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in 1967 in the UK and grew up in Rhode Island, America from the age of three. Lahiri has lived in America ever since. She has three Masters degrees and a doctoral degree from Boston University, has taught creative writing, was the vice-president of PEN American Center from 2005 to 2007³ and is currently on President Obama’s ‘committee on the Arts and Humanities’.⁴

*Interpreter of Maladies*, her debut short story collection, was published in 1999. Her second book, *The Namesake*,⁵ a novel, was published in 2003. It has been adapted into a film of the same name by the well-known movie director Mira Nair, herself a diasporic American of Indian origin. Lahiri’s third book, *Unaccustomed Earth*,⁶ another collection of short stories was published in 2008. All three works deal mainly with the diasporic experience or, to be specific, experiences of the first and second generation Bengali Indian migrants in America and as such have autobiographical links with Lahiri’s life.

Unlike Kiran Desai or Tarun Tejpal, Lahiri was not famous before beginning her literary career. Though some of her stories had been published before *Interpreter of Maladies* and she had received

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² From 1947, when the Pulitzer Prize for Novel changed to Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, till 2000, when Lahiri won it there are only 6 short story collections in the winners’ list excluding Lahiri’s.
awards before Pulitzer,\(^7\) she did not have an illustrious career in some other field like Tejpal who is a respected journalist, editor and public figure in India and a close friend of V.S. Naipaul. She had no known illustrious connections in the literary world as Kiran Desai had through her mother, Anita Desai and patron, Salman Rushdie.

In interviews following the Pulitzer, Lahiri has expressed her unease at being labelled as a hyphenated Indian writer but since then, she seems to have become part of a sisterhood of diasporic Indian women writers in America, who “look out for each other [and] draw strength from each other”\(^8\) by writing blurbs for each other and attending each other’s readings. Her adoption into or by the larger community of minority and migrant writers of diverse ethnic origins in America is also evident from Amy Tan’s blurb\(^9\) on the front cover of the post-Pulitzer paperback edition of *Interpreter of Maladies*.\(^10\)

Being a migrant of Indian origin and writing on migrant or diaspora experience in America have automatically ensured Lahiri’s work a place in the canon of migrant American and South Asian American diasporic literatures as we shall see in her American reception.

Though Pulitzer is Lahiri’s most mentioned literary prize, she has won various other prestigious literary awards for *Interpreter of Maladies* and her subsequent work. In addition to the Pulitzer, *Interpreter of Maladies* won the PEN/Hemingway Award, *The New Yorker* Debut of the Year award, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Addison Metcalf Award, and a nomination for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. The title story “Interpreter of Maladies” has won the O’Henry award for Best American short story. Lahiri was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2002.\(^11\) *The Namesake* was nominated the ‘Best Book of the Year’ by *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Newsday*, *San Jose Mercury News* and also ‘New York Magazine Book of the Year’.\(^12\) Lahiri’s latest work *Unaccustomed Earth* has been on the bestsellers lists in America. Of the eight stories in *Unaccustomed Earth*, “Nobody's Business” was originally published independently in the New

\(^7\) Jhumpa Lahiri, “Accursed palace: The Italian palazzo on the Jacobean stage (1603-1625)” (United States -- Massachusetts: Boston University, 1997), *Vita*.


\(^9\) Amy Tan is a Chinese-American diaspora writer.


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Yorker in 2001 and was selected as one of the Best American Short Stories in 2002 and the title story “Unaccustomed Earth” won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award in 2008.13

*Interpreter of Maladies* appeared in 1999, amidst the increased interest in, and excitement about, India in America following the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of Indian Independence, and in Arundhati Roy’s shadow, not unlike Kiran Desai’s first novel *Hullaballoo in the Guava Orchard*.

Though Lahiri does not feel fully American and says she feels as if she belongs in Calcutta in some fundamental way,14 she has expressed no desire to claim an Indian identity or India as ‘home’. Yet *Interpreter of Maladies* was originally published as *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and beyond*.15 According to Lahiri’s own essay written in response to the Indian reviews, her experiences in and of India have nourished her as an author and, although as a child she did not let her ‘Indian’ world enter her writings, many of her earliest ‘adult’ writings were written and set in India and/or had India as setting.16 India has remained a constant even if gradually diminishing physical presence in her work.

Lahiri has increasingly moved away from the experiences of the first-generation migrants to focus more on those of the subsequent generation. Since this generation is linked with India mainly through the parental agency and has lived in America all its life, the physical presence of India as a geographical location in her work has reduced. And yet, because of her Indian origin, she continues to be linked with Indian (English) literature.

The readiness with which Lahiri is placed within the South-Asian American and Indian English (diasporic) literary canon, her sudden and steady rise to fame following her Pulitzer and her consistent focus on Indian diasporic experience have made her a very visible symbol and audible voice of the Indian diaspora in America. This, in combination with the general high interest in Indian English literature (as well as diaspora and minority literature) at the moment, and the increased significance of issues such as migrancy, authenticity, hybridity and identity following the globalisation, diasporisation and multiculturalisation of the world, makes it of considerable interest to examine whether and how Lahiri’s second generation Indian-American identity influences the

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15 Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*.
reception of her work and sets it apart from the reception of first generation diaspora writers of Indian origin like Kiran Desai and the resident writers in India like Tarun Tejpal.

Though all Lahiri’s works have appeared between 1998 and 2008, the focus of this study will remain on the analysis of the reception of *Interpreter of Maladies* because *Interpreter of Maladies* introduces most of the themes and concerns that inform Lahiri’s subsequent work and it is the only work in which the diasporic experience is diluted by non-diasporic Indian characters. It is also the only work where first-hand experience of colonisation plays some, though very small, part in the form of the effects of partition of India into India and Pakistan and then of Pakistan into Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Equally relevant to this study is the opportunity to examine the effect of Pulitzer as a prestigious literary prize on the reception of *Interpreter of Maladies* and compare it to the effect that the equally prestigious but more commercial and substantial17 Booker (Prize) has had on the reception of Desai’s *The Inheritance of Loss* and the prestigious but, outside France, relatively less known Prix Mille Pages on Tejpal’s *The Alchemy of Desire*.

What Catherine Innes says about the audience of postcolonial texts18 is also applicable to the texts of diasporic authors. By Innes’s logic, the diasporic authors’ home audience would be considered their country of origin and the outsider audience their adopted country. However, the insider home audience of diasporic writers is not limited to their geographical ‘home’ or country of origin. It also consists of the other members of the diaspora that the writers belong to.

The subtitle ‘Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond’, which was dropped in the subsequent editions of *Interpreter of Maladies*, seems to suggest that the intended audience for *Interpreter of Maladies* was double, though perhaps not in the sense in which Innes employs the term. Lahiri’s insider home audience is as much (or more) diasporic Indians as (than) resident Indians and as such not limited by the geographical limits of India. Due to the global reach of English and translations into other languages such as French, her outsider audience is not limited to non-diasporic or non-Indian Americans either.

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17 The Pulitzer winner gets USD 5000 whereas the Booker winner gets £50,000
18 Innes, “Citizens of the world: reading postcolonial literature.” According to Innes this audience is split into a cultural insider home audience and cultural outsider metropolitan audience.
This chapter will trace and examine the reception of *Interpreter of Maladies* among its Indian, non-Indian Anglophone and French audiences with the aim of nuancing the concept of a home and outsider audience. It will observe whether and how the response of the resident Indian audience differs from or resembles that of the diasporic Indian audience. It will also examine similarities and differences between diasporic and American responses as well as Anglophone and French responses with the aim of exploring the role that Lahiri’s identity possibly plays in these responses to *Interpreter of Maladies*.

The chapter will begin with a brief summary of the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* followed by analyses and comparison of its three receptions. The reception analysis will follow the sequence in which *Interpreter of Maladies* was published in three geographical locations, beginning with America, followed by India and then France.

**Interpreter of Maladies**

*Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of nine short stories. As the original title *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond* suggests, the stories are set in Bengal, India and Boston, America but happen in the ‘third space’ which is at once in-between two cultures and beyond the geographical limits of the places in which these stories are set.

**A Temporary Matter**

“*A Temporary Matter*” is the story of one week in the life of an Indian-American couple, Shoba and Shukumar, who are growing apart from each other in their inability to communicate and share the grief they feel following the loss of their first child. The story is told in Shukumar’s voice. Shoba, a proof-reader and the sole earner in the family, starts putting in more hours at work to keep busy and away from home. Shukumar, a doctoral student at home on a break from teaching to finish his dissertation, is unable to focus on his work or normal everyday life.

When for a week the electricity supply to their area is turned off in the evening for some repair work; unable to avoid each other or to pretend they have things to do, they are forced to be together. On Shoba’s suggestion, they decide to play a game where they tell each other something that has not been told before. Thus begins the game of confessions in which they, at first, disclose the small misdeeds or things they had done to hurt each other, the disappointments they had felt and, eventually and finally, reveal things that could be the final nail in the coffin of their marriage. When Shoba tells Shukumar that she wants to be on her own for a while and has rented an apartment near
her office from her savings, hurt and wanting to hurt, Shukumar tells her that their baby, whom Shoba had not had the chance to see or hold, was a boy and that Shukumar had held him before he was cremated.

The story ends with Shoba and Shukumar weeping together “for the things they now knew” (22).

**When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine**

“When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” is the story of the bond that develops between Lilia, the ten-year-old daughter of a first-generation Indian immigrant couple in America and Mr. Pirzada, an Eastern Pakistani academic in America on a scholarship, whom her parents befriend and make part of their family for the duration of his stay.

While Mr. Pirzada is in America, the civil war between the geographically distant East and West Pakistan erupts as East Pakistan demands independence. Lilia’s familial world is filled with anxiety and worry for Mr. Pirzada’s family in Dacca while her American world follows its normal course. Lilia’s most vivid memory of that time is of her parents and Mr. Pirzada “operating as a single person, sharing a single meal, a single body, a single silence and a single fear.” (41) When the war and Mr. Pirzada’s scholarship are over, Mr. Pirzada returns home to his family. Lilia’s family life continues, as before, without him. However, for young Lilia, closure and the realisation of loss come with Mr. Pirzada’s letter which thanks them for all they had done for him during his stay and informs them that his family is safe and that he is back with them.

**Interpreter of Maladies**

The title story is set in India and is about the day that the Das family, a second-generation Indian American couple and their three children, spend visiting the Konarak temple with Mr. Kapasi, their Indian taxi driver-cum-tour guide, who has a knack for languages and in his other job works as an interpreter between a doctor and his patients who speak a different regional language.

The story is told from the perspective of Mr. Kapasi, who observes a family that looks Indian but is dressed, talks and behaves like foreigners, where the young parents look and act more like siblings than responsible parents and treat their children with casual indifference. He recognises the signs of an unhappy marriage in the Das couple from his own experience of his wife’s silence and indifference since the death of their first son. He is intoxicated by Mrs. Das’s interest in him and his job as “Interpreter of Maladies” but feels insulted when she expects him to interpret and cure her
malady of the past eight years, revealing that one of her sons, Bobby, is the result of an afternoon when she had given in to the casual but expert advances of Mr. Das’s friend who was living with them for a week. Angered by Mr. Kapasi’s question whether what she felt was ‘pain or guilt’ (66), Mrs. Das walks away from him to join her family only to discover that Bobby is missing. They find him surrounded and under attack by monkeys. Mr. Kapasi rescues Bobby and brings him back to his family.

The story closes with Mr. Kapasi observing the Das family’s attempt to ‘fix’ and cheer up Bobby and feeling that this is how he will remember them.

A Real Durwan

Boori ma is a destitute old refugee woman, who lives under the letterboxes of an old apartment building in Kolkata. She survives on the charity of the inhabitants and in return sweeps the stairwell of the building and is a sort of ‘Durwan’ (gatekeeper). The story is told from a third-person perspective and follows Boori ma as she goes about her business of sweeping the steep stairwell, enumerating her troubles and muttering about her real and/or imagined past riches.

When one of the tenants of the building installs a washbasin in the stairwell, a race to embellish the building begins. Boori ma, displaced from her shelter and unable to do her job due to the continuous movement of workers, takes to wandering in the market and to spending from her meagre savings. She is robbed in the market crowd and is blamed by the tenants when the washbasin gets stolen. The tenants accuse her of being an accomplice in the theft and, ignoring her repeated pleas to believe in her innocence, throw her out of the building.

The story closes with the tenants eager to find a ‘real’ Durwan to replace Boori ma and the utterly destitute Boori ma walking away with her broom.

Sexy

Dev and Miranda’s affair begins when Miranda, lonely in the unfamiliar Boston, meets Dev, a married Indian immigrant, in a basement store. She attempts to get closer to him by trying to know more about his language and the place he comes from. She even goes to an Indian shop to look at the photo of a Bollywood actress (Madhuri Dixit), whom, according to Dev, his wife resembles. The realisation that his wife is beautiful leaves her numb. She then knows that their affair will lead nowhere but continues it because she is still drawn to him.
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Miranda and Dev’s affair has a parallel in (Miranda’s friend) Laxmi’s cousin’s husband and his blond mistress. Miranda realises this when she looks after that cousin’s son, Rohin, for a day. When Rohin says that Miranda is sexy, she remembers how Dev had said the same thing. When Rohin tells her that sexy means “loving someone [one doesn’t] know” (107), she imagines that he must have gathered that meaning from his parents’ fights about the father’s mistress. The similarity between herself and that mistress, unknowingly pointed out by Rohin, hits her hard. She refuses to see Dev that weekend and their affair ends suddenly when they are unable to meet the next two weekends.

The story ends with Miranda sitting alone at the mapparium where Dev had called her sexy.

Mrs. Sen’s

Mrs. Sen, a newly married Indian woman has come to America to be with her husband. She misses the liveliness of the communal camaraderie in India and is trying to cope with the loneliness and silence in her American life.

The story is told from the perspective of Eliot, an American child, whom Mrs. Sen babysits in her own house after school. He observes Mrs. Sen’s daily preparations for the evening meal, her attempts to learn driving, her Indian hospitality unappreciated by his mother, the strangely formal way in which Mr and Mrs. Sen treat each other. He is a witness to Mrs. Sen’s anguish at the lack of human contact and of liveliness in her American life, her pleasure when she receives letters from ‘home’ and her weakness for fresh fish. He is her companion on the bus ride to the fish shop and in her unfortunate attempt to drive there one day that results in an accident. The accident, though minor, puts an end to Eliot’s stint at Mrs. Sen’s as his mother decides that he was old enough to stay on his own after school.

The story ends with Eliot alone in the silence of his home.

This Blessed House

“This Blessed House” is the story of a newly married Indian-American Hindu couple’s move to a house of their own where the wife keeps discovering Christian memorabilia, and the husband’s frustration at his wife’s childish, ‘unHindu’ fascination for those Christian things and her refusal to discard them.
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The story is told from the husband, Sanjay’s perspective. Barely two months into marriage, he is already unsure whether he and his wife Twinkle really love each other as they disagree on many things and are quite different in their natures. Her obvious disregard for his dislikes irritates him. It all becomes too much for him when the guests gathered for the housewarming get excited by Twinkle’s account of the mystery of the ‘blessed’ house and follow her through the house on a hunt for more ‘treasures’, which leads to a huge silver bust of Jesus in the attic.

The story ends with Sanjay, conscious of the ‘wow’ effect Twinkle has on people, wearily but carefully carrying the bust to the living room; realising fully that Twinkle will never move it to a discreet place or stop talking about it and that he will have to bear with it for the rest of their lives together. (157)

**The Treatment of Bibi Haldar**

Set in India, and told in the first person plural narrative voice, which signifies the voice of a collective of Indian housewives, “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” is the story of a spinster who suffers from epileptic fits and is by common consent a little strange in her strong desire to get married.

Her ailment baffles people around her, who nevertheless feel sympathy for her since her relatives, a cousin and his wife, neglect her and, superstitious that her ailment is bad for their baby, throw her out of their house. She lives in a makeshift room on the terrace of the building, with the support of the ‘narrators’ of the story. One day they discover that she is pregnant but not who the ‘father’ is. Bibi gives birth to a son and, transformed by this responsibility, raises him by running a business from her room with the support of the ‘narrators’.

Years pass. The story ends with the narrators acknowledging that their attempts to discover or guess the father’s identity remained unsuccessful but “Bibi, to the best of [their] knowledge, was cured.” (172)

**The Third and Final Continent**

The story “The Third and Final Continent” is a first-person retrospective account of an Indian migrant’s journey from India to London to America, his first few weeks and subsequent life in America.
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The narrator first leaves India for London but returns home to get married to a bride selected for him by his brother. A few days after his marriage, he leaves for America where his wife is to join him later, once her passport is ready. He spends the few weeks, till his wife’s arrival, as a paying guest in an old American woman’s house. The landlady, Mrs. Croft, is a hundred-and-three years old, very frail but indomitable and independent woman. They develop a strange bond as Mrs. Croft appreciates the narrator’s formal and respectful behaviour and the narrator admires her independence and strength of character. He moves to an apartment when his wife Mala arrives but they remain (emotionally and perhaps physically) strangers to each other, until one day, while out for a walk, he takes her to visit Mrs. Croft, who, they discover, is bed-ridden due to a fall. Mala’s kind and gentle amusement at her husband’s interaction with Mrs. Croft, his sympathy for Mala as she undergoes Mrs. Croft’s scrutiny and Mrs. Croft’s delighted declaration that Mala was a perfect lady break the ice between them. Eventually, they read of Mrs. Croft’s death in the newspaper. Their life continues its course. They make friends, own a house, have a son, keep visiting India but decide to grow old in America.

The story ends with the now-old narrator looking back, amazed and quietly proud of his modest achievements and the life lived across three continents.

**Style and narrative techniques**

‘Lucid’, ‘limpid’, ‘un-self-conscious’, ‘not-showy’ are some of the adjectives that are used by reviewers to describe Lahiri’s prose. In an interview after her second book *The Namesake*, when asked about her style, Lahiri speaks of her affinity for the simple and the plain and her aversion to excess and to form and spectacularity for the sake of effect. However this simplicity is deceptive and the language is well-crafted. This is obvious from the precision of each sentence, word and description. Lahiri’s language rarely displays Rushdie or Roy-like playfulness with words, language or form. Her subject matter and choice of genre, especially in *Interpreter of Maladies*, also plays a role in this.

However, *The Interpreter of Maladies* is not uniform or monotonous. Lahiri experiments by using a variety of narrative voices or perspectives in different stories in the collection. For example, in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”, she uses a first person plural narrative voice. She acknowledges doing this consciously, as an experiment in emulation of Faulkner’s collective narrative voice or the

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communal ‘we’ in his story “A Rose for Emily”. The difference between Faulkner’s ‘we’ and Lahiri’s ‘we’ is in the degree of involvement that that first-person plural narrative voice has in the actual action. In “A Rose for Emily”, it is Emily who keeps others at bay through pride whereas, in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”, Bibi asks for help, goes to people when her own relatives push her away. Where Faulkner’s ‘we’ are just passive observers, Lahiri’s ‘we’ are active participants and as such responsible, even if partially, in what happens in Bibi’s life.

More often, the narrative voice acts as a focaliser looking at the action through the perspectives of certain characters, who are all of different ages, genders and nationalities. This technique works at two levels and Lahiri uses it consciously and strategically. At one level, since the narration is through the perspective of a character within the story, what is said and how it is said is a subtle revelation about that character. It makes one think of that character’s role in the event that is narrated. For example in ‘The Temporary Matter’, the story is narrated through Shukumar’s perspective and what is described, thought and said is as much a revelation about him as the state of their marriage or Shoba. And by the end of the story, the reader is forced to revise some of his/her initial impressions about Shukumar.

At a more general level, the strategy of using various narrative perspectives allows Lahiri to express the universality of maladies, human experiences and also the possibility of interpreting and understanding the other, whoever that other is. The purpose seems to be to invite a certain reading of the collection, indicated by the title. As we shall see from the account of the receptions, the strategy has been extremely successful.

The themes
Each of the nine stories in Interpreter of Maladies has different protagonists and a different storyline. However, the stories and the characters are interlinked in various ways. From these links a certain number of themes emerge. Interpreter of Maladies introduces most of the themes that Lahiri’s subsequent work deals with, such as experiences of the Bengali Indian diaspora in America, the generational difference between them that is obvious in the significance of food and home in their lives, the change from the feeling of exile, loss and belonging somewhere else to the feeling of being entre-deux (in between) India and America, and the change in gender relations. These themes are equally, if not more, predominant in The Namesake but less so in Unaccustomed Earth, which

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focuses more on the experiences of the adult second generation than on the experiences of the first generation or on relations between first and second generation.

**The diasporic experience**

Migrant or diasporic experience is the main focus of *Interpreter of Maladies*. Of the nine stories in the collection, only three take place in India and of those three only one, “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” has exclusively non-diasporic characters. The title story, “Interpreter of Maladies” is told from the perspective of Mr. Kapasi, a non-diasporic Indian tour guide but the family he interacts with is a second-generation diasporic Indian-American family in India on a visit. In “A Real Durwan”, Boori ma has the same linguistic and cultural background as the tenants of the building where she has taken shelter but still, she is not Indian or a native of the region since she was deported to Calcutta after partition (70). In fact, as a refugee who is forced to live in exile and is displaced from her ‘home’ through events over which she had no control, Boori ma is perhaps the only character in *Interpreter of Maladies* who is a diasporian in the original sense of the term.

Unlike Boori ma, the majority of the diasporians in *Interpreter of Maladies* are not in a forced exile from homeland nor is their dispersal directly linked to colonisation. They have migrated of their own volition, mainly for economic purposes or in search of a better life. The sense of exile, loss and deracination, though not unreal or less painful, is thus self-inflicted in the case of the first generation and inherited but progressively less powerful in the case of the subsequent generations.

**The first generation**

The first-generation migrants in *Interpreter of Maladies*, such as the narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” or Lilia’s parents in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” mainly belong to the first wave of Indians to migrate to America in the wake of the liberalisation of the American immigration policy in 1965. For this generation, the novelty of the situation and the resultant lack of familiarity between the immigrants and the host country enhance the feelings of isolation, exile and loss felt at leaving the homeland and the family behind.

At the same time, these feelings forge relations and create communities within the diaspora, based on shared linguistic and cultural contexts. Lilia’s parents pore over telephone directories to find people

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21 It is not specified whether the partition referred to in ‘Real Durwan’ is the partition of India into India, West Pakistan and East Pakistan, or it is the separation of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, from West Pakistan that we read of in ‘When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine’. Most probably it is the latter.

22 The term Diaspora, which meant the dispersal of the Jews, has gradually become synonymous with any forced migration.
who, like Mr. Pirzada, might be from their part of the world and initiate contact with them. The narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” talks of some of the friends made in a similar manner, who are still friends. Mr. and Mrs. Das are children of parents who are best friends. The linguistic proficiency and education of the first generation made assimilation in the job market and economic success easier for them. As a result, they form a model diaspora despite their resistance to total assimilation, their strong desire and tendency to retain ties with ‘home’ and the culture of origin, and attempts to pass these on to the next generation.

Of course, not all first-generation migrants belong to this post-65 generation. Some first-generation migrants, such as Dev in “Sexy” or Sanjeev in “This Blessed House”, are younger and more recent migrants. The first generation, instead of being a monolithic or clearly defined group, thus overlaps many generations or age groups which makes a distinct difference to their diasporic experiences. The increased familiarity of the host population with the physical if not cultural presence of migrants is obvious in the case of the younger first-generation migrants. Miranda in “Sexy”, as a child, has had an Indian family called ‘Dixit’ as neighbours, who were called ‘Dig Shit’ by the neighbourhood children under their breath and accused in private by the adults of spoiling the look of the neighbourhood by neglecting their lawns (95).

However, her own childhood fear of the picture of the goddess Kali in the Dixit home (96) is transformed into an involuntary attraction for Dev with his exotic foreign looks and the ‘hint of an accent’(87) in his speech. And Sanjeev in “This Blessed House” occupies a high post and is being considered for a higher one.

**The second generation**
The second-generation migrants are the children of the first-generation migrants. This generation, either very young at the time of migration or born in the host country, is distinct from the first generation. The first generation experiences a feeling of exile and deracination in the host country and attempts to recreate a convenient approximation of the ‘lost’ homeland for which it feels nostalgic; whereas the second generation experiences a feeling of being entre-deux or in between two cultures, two languages and two identities but not two countries. For this generation, the culture, language and identity are linked more to the parental generation (and home) than to any distant geographical location.
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Their acculturation and assimilation in the host country are shaped by the previous generation’s attitudes but create an inevitable distance between the two generations. For example, though Shoba and Shukumar in ‘The Temporary Matter’ first meet in a Bengali poetry recital, they are not really interested in it (13). They are comfortable in their Bengali American identities and quite cosmopolitan in their food tastes. Shukumar prefers Shoba’s independence to his mother’s inability to cope with his father’s death, and is unable to sympathise with his mother. In “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, Lilia’s parents actively encourage her participation in American traditions like Halloween (34-35) and she is not burdened by any particular religious tradition. (25) But she describes her parents and Mr. Pirzada as a unit ‘they’ of which she is not part and talks of a ‘we’ that consists of her and other American children in her class.

This generation is unable to understand their parents’ paradoxical attachment to ‘India’, which they have left behind in their search for a ‘better life’ and yet pine for, hold on to or even return to. Lilia is baffled by her mother’s pride in the fact that Lilia was born in America and will not have to experience the rationing of food, tough competition to get into a decent school or effects of political upheavals (as they did). This pride is at odds with her parents’ constant reaching out to other Bengalis in close proximity or finding fault with certain American practices. Shukumar in ‘The Temporary Matter’ is almost resentful of his mother’s decision to sell the house he was born in and move back to India after his father’s death.

The second generation is more American than Indian. With the increasing number of years spent in the host country, the links with the distant home (country) inevitably get weaker and the pull of the home culture lessens as the host culture asserts its influence, but also as new attachments and bonds are formed within the host country. Lilia’s interest or curiosity about Mr. Pirzada’s country is not encouraged by her teachers, who are guided by the assimilationist education policy in American schools. Mr. and Mrs. Das in “Interpreter of Maladies” are Indian only in their looks but American in their attire, speech and behaviour. They visit India since their parents have moved back there but are more tourists than natives or even migrants coming home.

Apart from the emotional distance from the ‘home’ culture and the difference in what signifies ‘home’, gender relations and food are additional markers of generational difference between Lahiri’s migrants.
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**Gender Relations**

The relations between genders are markedly different between the two diasporic generations under focus in *Interpreter of Maladies*. In the post-1965 first generation, the primary migrants are mainly men. They go back home to get married like the narrator of “The Third and Final Continent” (or are married) and their wives join them later like Mala and Mrs. Sen. The marriages are mainly arranged marriages as is evident in the initial formality or distance between the husband and the wife. The wives might be housewives like Mala and/or secondary earners like Mrs. Sen or working women like Lilia’s mother but it is they who run the house, cook and take care of the children as can be seen from Lilia’s father’s lack of awareness as to what Lilia gets taught in school. The ‘emotional’ dependence on the husband that is obvious in Shukumar’s mother, who is unable to cope with his father’s death, mirrors the mental breakdown of the narrator’s mother after his father’s death in “The Third and Final Continent”, though the latter belongs to a previous generation in India. The post-1965 first generation’s life in the diaspora is quite similar to what it would have been in India with minor unavoidable adjustments necessitated by the move to another country.

In the second generation, the patriarchal hegemony no longer seems to be operative and it is the wives who seem to be dominant. In ‘The Temporary Matter’ Shoba is an able ‘homemaker’ and superb cook but it is she who is the main earner while Shukumar is on a break to finish his doctoral dissertation. Shukumar is shown to admire her for her independence that forms a stark contrast with his mother’s total dependence on his father. Shoba is more decisive and dominant than Shukumar even in the life after the loss of their baby. It is she who initiates the game of confession, with the intention to declare her decision to move out, that too after setting the wheels in motion.

In “Interpreter of Maladies”, the situation appears to be a typical first generation one, where Mr. and Mrs. Das’s ‘love’ marriage fits in with their parents’ wishes and Mrs. Das is at home looking after their three children born in quick succession while Mr. Das is the sole earner. However, though Mrs. Das resents, and is bored with, what she has to do, she does not seem bothered about not earning and it is she who chides Mr. Das about counting the pennies (49). It is she who has kept the secret of Bobby’s birth untold for eight years and managed to keep Mr. Das in the dark about her adultery and about no longer being in love with him.

In “This Blessed House”, it is Sanjeev who gives in to Twinkle’s wishes even as he is secretly frustrated by her lack of desire to help in organising the house, her indifference to household chores, her childishness and her fascination for the Christian paraphernalia she keeps discovering in their
new house. He resignedly feels that he will have to tolerate the silver bust of Christ (and the other Christian mementos) in the house for the rest of their days together. But since, only a few months into marriage, Sanjeev already hates certain things because Twinkle loves them, one is left wondering whether and how long ‘the rest of their days together’ (157) are to last. The changed gender relations in the younger generation subvert the old patriarchal culture but they also seem to be portrayed as destabilisers of the family structure.

The significance of food
Food is another important marker of difference between the first and the second generation. The lack of familiar food plays a significant role in enhancing the feeling of alienation and loss in the first generation as can be seen in the case of the narrator of “The Third and Final Continent”, who survives on cereal almost till the day Mala arrives in America. In Mrs. Sen’s case, her craving for fresh fish symbolises her craving for the home, family and life she has had to leave behind but also the means of reconnecting with them. Fresh fish is the one familiar and dear thing that represents all such things now unavailable or left behind.

For this generation, food also becomes the means of connecting with the host country and making it one’s own. The craving for fresh fish initiates Mrs. Sen’s encounter and interaction with America and Americans. The owner of the fish shop regularly calls her to inform her of the arrival of fresh fish. It is the fish that forces her to travel on her own (with Eliot) in the local bus and to attempt to drive the car, albeit unsuccessfully and with disastrous consequences. Food plays an equally significant role in forming relationships and building communities within the diaspora. The bond between Mr. Pirzada and Lilia’s family is a shared language but also a shared cultural context of which food is an integral part. As a bachelor, Sanjeev in “This Blessed House” accepts invitations to get-togethers, from people with whom he has nothing in common, mainly for the opportunity to eat the food from ‘home’ that those get-togethers offer.

Food is an integral part of cultural identity in the diaspora and as such a symbol. Just as easily as food becomes a means of facile consumption and appropriation by the host culture, it also becomes the marker of cultural difference and resistance to appropriation by the host country. In “Sexy”, on weekdays when Dev cannot be with Miranda, she frequents an Indian restaurant for lunch with Laxmi, her colleague. For her, consuming Indian food thus becomes a means of ‘having’ the absent Dev. However, the man in the Indian grocery shop that Miranda visits (in search of Madhuri Dixit’s
photo), emphasises that she does not ‘belong’ by pointing out that the Hot Mix she is looking at is ‘too spicy’ for her.

However, the food from home is less significant for the second generation. In ‘The Temporary Matter’, Shoba and Shukumar are cosmopolitan in their food taste and enjoy both Indian and other cuisines. In “This Blessed House”, while Sanjeev (a first-generation diasporian) attends parties solely for ‘Indian’ food and makes proper curry on weekends, Twinkle (a second-generation diasporian) lacks both the will and the skill to cook Indian food which she thinks of as “a bother” (144). In “The Third and Final Continent”, the only time and place where the narrator’s son gets to eat rice with his hand is when he comes (to his parents’) ‘home’ from Harvard to spend weekends.

Though central, the diasporic experience is not the sole focus of *Interpreter of Maladies*. *Interpreter of Maladies* approaches the concept of cultural encounters and difference from various perspectives and highlights the universality of the problems of communication.

**The other**

Of the nine narrative voices of *Interpreter of Maladies*, Shukumar and Lilia are second-generation migrants; Sanjeev in “This Blessed House” and the narrator in “The Third and Final Continent” are first-generation male migrants; Eliot and Miranda are Americans; Mr. Kapasi and the collective of housewives telling the story of Bibi Haldar are Indians. The anonymous narrator of ‘Real Durwan’, as Richard Walsh argues,23 can be taken as the author. Through these focalisers or narrative voices, *Interpreter of Maladies* presents a panorama of perspectives on India and Indians, America and Americans. The ‘other’ and the images of the other that emerge from the stories are different depending on the ‘viewpoint’ of the narrator.

For example, for the second-generation diasporians, India and even the previous generation represents the other as they feel closer to America and Americans. In ‘The Temporary Matter’, the electricity outage irritates Shoba and reminds her of power failures experienced in India where life in such situations continued almost uninterrupted, children kept themselves occupied by playing verbal games, and ceremonies went on in the dark and the heat. Shukumar is deprived of experiences of India by his father who is unwilling to take Shukumar to India after his near-death experience of

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23 Richard Walsh, “Who Is the Narrator?,” *Poetics Today* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 510-511. According to Walsh, “the extradigetic heterodiegetic narrators who cannot be rendered homodiegetic or intradigetic are in no way distinguishable from authors.” In other words, an external narrator who is not a part of the narrative s/he narrates, as a witness or a character is the author himself/herself.
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dysentery there as a child. Shukumar’s interest in India is more impersonal or academic as is obvious from his dissertation topic, “The Agrarian Revolts in India”.

The first-generation migrants alluded to are Shukumar’s parents and Shoba’s mother. Shukumar describes his father as ‘nervous minded’, the one who kept his son away from India because of one childhood illness. Shukumar cannot understand his mother’s emotional breakdown after his father’s death, resents her move to India, and depends on Shoba to say the right words when she visits. Shoba’s mother is polite without being friendly and accuses Shukumar of not even being there with Shoba at the time of the birth of their stillborn child (9). In contrast, the Americans appear friendly. The Bradford couple, who live on the same street as Shukumar and Shoba, wave at and chat with them when they are sitting on the front steps during the electricity outage. Shukumar’s supervisor shows consideration in giving him a break from teaching duties so he could be home after the loss of the baby and finish his dissertation. And Shoba’s friend Gillian is shown to have agreed to take Shoba to hospital if her labour starts when Shukumar is absent.

By contrast, from an Indian perspective, the second-generation migrants are more ‘American’ than Indian and represent as much an ‘other’ as Americans. In “Interpreter of Maladies”, Mr. Kapasi finds the Das couple Indian in looks but foreign in all else. He observes the Das couple’s casual almost irresponsible behaviour when it comes to their children, Mrs. Das’s indifference and lack of interest in her family, especially the husband, her self-centred reluctance to share her food or things with her children, and her casual revelation of her secret to him, a total stranger, with the expectation of an easy fix. The migrants come across as Westernised, self-centred, irresponsible and with little or no knowledge of India. At the same time, Mr. Kapasi himself comes across as someone good at his job, perceptive and caring as a human being and, though disappointed in his relationship with his wife, conscientious in fulfilling his duties towards her and his children. Even though he feels insulted and then snubbed by Mrs. Das, he curbs his urge to tell Bobby the secret of his birth and saves him from monkeys.

Though the stories are told from different perspectives, the perspectival focus of *Interpreter of Maladies* remains undeniably westward tilted and the representation of India(ns) and America(ns) noticeably unequal.
India-Indians vs. America-Americans

Only three of the nine stories deal with India and non-diasporic Indians and their portrayal does not come across as positive. In the title story, the India that is portrayed is a ‘darkly exotic’ India, land of ancient sculptures and temples but also present day ‘Third World poverty’ that the First World tourists are interested in. The Das family is on a day trip to the famous Konarak (Sun) temple in India. The difference between the past glory and present day conditions is highlighted through the description of the condition of the road there. The erotic sculptures on the temple wall signifying a sexually liberal society are contrasted with present-day sexually repressed Indian society through Mr. Kapasi and the rice snack vendor’s reaction to Mrs. Das’s American clothes or Mrs. Kapasi whom even Mr. Kapasi has never seen fully undressed. Mr. Das clicks photos of the poor turbaned man who passes by in a bullock cart pulled by bullocks that are as emaciated as the man, the authentic and exotic poverty of India to be distributed and ‘consumed’ later in the form of Christmas cards.

The other two stories set in India conform to the stereotypical image of Indian women as victims through their doubly marginal women protagonists who remain voiceless: Boori ma, the destitute refugee in “A Real Durwan” and Bibi Haldar, the epileptic, neglected, ugly and not so young woman in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”. They are shown to be tolerated and treated charitably by the secondary characters such as the tenants in the building where Boori ma has taken shelter and the collective ‘we’ narrating Bibi’s story, but not as equals and only as distractions at the periphery of their own lives. Boori ma is allowed in the houses but has to crouch in the doorways and hallways and knows not to sit on the furniture. Bibi is attended to when she needs help, is always left alone at night, and though the collective ‘we’ advises her or listens to her, she is not close to any one person and is never really part of anyone’s family life.

Some of the characters such as Bibi’s cousin and his wife are almost cruel or become so like Boori ma’s patrons near the end of “A Real Durwan”. Boori ma’s unconcerned dismissal in the end, or the casual (sexual) cure administered to Bibi Haldar by a man, who never comes forward or helps her take care of the child, are the elements which strategically highlight the exploitation of the ‘subalterns’ that runs underneath the communal exterior. The image of Indian society that emerges from both accounts is that of a casually charitable and tolerant but not really caring and sometimes even cruel society.

The India that the diasporians like Lilia’s mother talk of is a place that they are glad to leave behind; where food is rationed, decent schools hard to get into, power breakdowns are common and the risk
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to life high. In contrast, America is the land of plenty and peace, distant from the problems in other parts of the world, with a promise of better life and better opportunities. There are no major American characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* except for Mrs. Croft in “The Third and Final Continent”, Miranda in “Sexy” and Eliot in “Mrs. Sen’s”, and very few minor American characters.

Mrs. Croft is the symbol of pre-1965 America. She personifies the initial aloofness and unfamiliarity of the host country and its gradual acceptance of the difference and appreciation of qualities of the migrants. Her age emphasises the novelty of the post-1965 changes and her death signals the end of the earlier era. Miranda is the epitome of the change as she symbolises the move from a dread of the ‘culturally different other’ to fascination, even if ignorant and somewhat naïve, for the ‘exotic other’. She also symbolises the American desire to know the ‘other’ through her attempts to experience Indian food, read about India and finally by letting go of Dev, the ability to empathise with the ultimate ‘other’, Dev’s wife. Eliot, as a child, represents the ‘neutral’ or non-judgemental American gaze and the potential (and hope) of true understanding and acceptance of the ‘other’ which may or may not remain unactualised. Of the very few minor American characters, most come across as friendly except perhaps Eliot’s mother who is unwilling to go beyond formal relations and the children who call the ‘Dixits’ ‘Dig Shits’ or adults who find fault with the Dixits’ lawn, though even they are not openly or threateningly rude.

One would expect that such reluctance to show the downside of the host country and society and the presentation of an India that is obviously experienced at one remove would play some role in the Indian reception of *Interpreter of Maladies* or evoke a negative response but we shall see whether this expectation is fulfilled by the Indian reception. However, the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* need not be reduced to an India vs. America binary as the underlying problem in most stories is essentially that of communication and therefore can be read as universal.

**Maladies of communication**

The maladies interpreted in *Interpreter of Maladies* are in many ways maladies of communication, either as the inability to convey what is felt and thought or the slippage between what is felt or thought and done. In one interview, Lahiri has confessed that she is drawn to characters, who “face some barrier of communication” and she likes “to write about people who think in a way they can't fully express.”24 This impossibility of communicating is not necessarily exclusively linked to a

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cultural or generational difference or to an existence at the cusp of two worlds, cultures, languages and identities. It is more the result of emotional barriers, distances or incompatibilities and/or the unwillingness or emotional unavailability of the potential receivers of the communication. For example, in “A Temporary Matter”, the loss of their first child has split Shoba and Shukumar’s individual world into an inner and outer world and their relationship into phases before and after the blow. They are unable to go back to being as they were before the loss or move forward by putting it behind them and are thus caught in-between the past and the present - within the loss. Their inability to communicate with each other stems from this fact. In “Interpreter of Maladies”, Mr. Kapasi and his wife live together but the death of their eldest son has created an emotional barrier between them which is not so different from that between Shoba and Shukumar. Bobby’s presence and the secret behind it are a burden on Mrs. Das’s conscience but they are more a consequence than cause of the distance between her and Mr. Das, which appears to be a result of the combination of lack of emotional release for her and his unavailability to share the everyday burdens of parenting. As a child, Lilia is unable to give words to her anxiety for Mr. Pirzada’s family and her feeling of loss at his absence while Eliot is not asked by his mother whether he wanted to continue at Mrs. Sen’s. In “This Blessed House”, Sanjeev and Twinkle seem to be emotionally incompatible, and the slippage between Sanjeev’s real feelings about Twinkle’s behaviour and his actions in response to that behaviour is more a compromise determined by practical considerations than any true understanding. In “A Real Durwan”, nobody believes Boori ma’s accounts of her past and nobody is willing to listen to her plea that she was innocent in the theft of the washbasin. Miranda is not able to talk about her affair to anyone and her desire for a deeper connection remains unexpressed and unfulfilled as both Dev and Laxmi remain self-centred and unaware of her loneliness or her need to talk. In all these cases, the people involved could be of any nationality, culture, language or gender. As we shall see, this aspect of Interpreter of Maladies gets less attention than the fact that they are diasporic Indians in its reception.

**Interpretation/ Translation**

In one of her interviews, Jhumpa Lahiri is asked whether she sees herself as an “Interpreter of Maladies”, Lahiri’s response is that though it was not premeditated, that is how it has turned out to be. In the article “My Intimate Alien”, responding to the Indian reaction to Interpreter of Maladies, Lahiri claims the diasporic experience to be an act of cultural translation and differentiates herself from her parents’ generation saying that “Unlike my parents, I translate not so much to survive in the

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25 Ibid.
world around me as to create and illuminate a non-existent one”, the borderland in which her parents’ world and her world come together. Simultaneously accepting and rejecting all the labels used to describe her, she asserts, “whether I write as an American or an Indian, about things American or Indian or otherwise, one thing remains constant: I translate, therefore I am.”

Many of the characters in Interpreter of Maladies are interpreters and translators either in the sense Lahiri’s parents are or in the sense Lahiri thinks she is. On the one hand, the first-generation migrants are translating themselves and their culture for survival and self-preservation, in the process of adaptation to the host country. As Lahiri observes about her parents, for this generation, “translation is not only a finite linguistic act but an on-going cultural one. It is the continuous struggle … to preserve what it means … to be first and forever Indian, to keep afloat certain familial and communal traditions in a foreign and at times indifferent world.”

The modified recipes and rituals in many stories in Interpreter of Maladies are markers of this process. In “Mrs. Sen’s”, Mrs. Sen makes the fish stew without the green bananas (133) that it should have and would have had in India, or uses tuna instead of bhetki in croquettes (123) and makes do with fish that, to her, does not taste the same as in India even if it is fresh. The linguistic and communal ties are created and maintained by poring over telephone directories for familiar names and through dinner invitations or get-togethers, as in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” or “This Blessed House”. Parents arrange their children’s marriages but in a manner palatable to the couples, who are thrown together casually or informally and get to spend weekends together before they get married, as in “This Blessed House” or in “Interpreter of Maladies”.

On the other hand, some of the characters are interpreters or translators between cultures and languages. In the title story, Mr. Kapasi works as an interpreter for patients who speak a different language than the doctor to whom they come. In the story of Boori ma and Bibi Haldar, the lives of two marginalised women, who do not speak for themselves, are being (re)told. This is the unfamiliar world that Lahiri, as an author is translating or bringing across for the host culture. The children, Lilia and Eliot are the neutral medium through which the host culture perceives the other or the alien culture. By not judging the unfamiliar as ‘abnormal’, they translate the cultural difference into a merely human one or like Rohin, unknowingly interpret the other culture’s pain (and views about the

27 Ibid.
host culture) for the host culture. Children thus represent the borderland zone, the potential for the two worlds to come together.

The constant foregrounding of the theme of interpretation or translation in *Interpreter of Maladies* begins with the title of *Interpreter of Maladies* and as we shall see it guides the response, in all three audiences but especially the American audience, not just to the text but also to the authorial persona or rather identity.

**Non-Indian Anglophone/ American reception**

*Interpreter of Maladies* was first published in America and its non-Indian Anglophone reception is dominated by the American response. Though some of the stories from the second short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* were published independently before its publication, prior to *Interpreter of Maladies* Lahiri had no major published work to her name. As a review of her novel *The Namesake* points out, “When her debut short-story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*, was published in 1999, she morphed almost overnight from unknown grad student to best-selling writer,”28 who has had an overwhelmingly and unanimously positive reception.

The pre-Pulitzer reviews are thus understandably more mainstream and in view of Lahiri’s sudden rise to fame, interested in her biographical details, her immigrant origin and experience as well as autobiographical links with the stories. *Interpreter of Maladies* is considered a chronicle of migrant experience since seven out of nine stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* deal with Indian migrants in America and “most of Lahiri’s characters move between the Indian subcontinent and the United States. They date, vacation, emigrate and work across cultural and national borders.”29 The titles of reviews are quite expressive of their contents: “Sub-continental Drift”,30 “A Voice Echoing in the Cultural Chasm”,31 “Liking America, but Longing for India”.32 The combination of the authorial identity and intensive, though not exclusive, focus on diaspora experience in *Interpreter of Maladies* obviously invites such response.

However, these reviews seem to allude only to the first generation experiences or homogenise the

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30 ibid.
generational difference that Lahiri tries to ‘translate’. Only one review mentions Lahiri’s second generation audience, even if in a mocking tone. The reviewer feels that Lahiri has expressed the second generation’s angst and that “[i]t’s easy to imagine a new generation of Americans, born of Indian immigrant parents, greeting the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri with … astonished greediness … Someone understands! Someone finally gets all the tiny bargains that assimilation asks of us! Someone knows how awful my mother's kitchen smells!” Interestingly the reviewer keeps comparing Lahiri to Philip Roth, an American Jewish writer.

While most review(er)s praise how well Interpreter of Maladies portrays immigrant angst, some have talked about the image of India that comes across from the ‘Indian’ stories in Interpreter of Maladies and the positive representation of America. “‘Liking America, but Longing for India’ appreciates the positive light in which America is portrayed in Interpreter of Maladies. The reviewer points out that “Ms. Lahiri's characters realize, however, that America offers them, or at least their children, opportunities they would never have at home.” And to take a non-American example, The Scotsman review admires Lahiri’s balanced portrayal of the diasporic attempts to be Indians in America and hold on to Indianness, that “like innocence is precious and hard to hold on to”. Though this review homogenises the first and second generation’s responses to being Indian in America, it does not fail to notice that, “another side of India emerges when Lahiri sets her stories solely in Calcutta - where her protagonists are not Harvard academics but stair-sweepers and outcasts. The nostalgic mist of homesickness lifted, India emerges raw, chaotic and often harsh.”

Along with Lahiri’s Indian origin, migrant lineage and diasporic focus, the title of Interpreter of Maladies plays a significant role in the perception of the authorial image as the interpreter between cultures and consequently in the reception of the text. For example, the San Francisco Chronicle review is titled, “Interpreting Indian Culture With Stories”, USA Today describes the stories as ‘Painfully beautiful passages from India’, a clever play on the title of Forster’s A Passage to India and on the meaning of the word passage which at once links Interpreter of Maladies to India and the Indian migrants’ physical and emotional journey away from it.

The curiosity about the title is evident in many interviews and Lahiri makes most of the opportunity

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34 Kakutani, “Liking America, but Longing for India.”
36 Kipen, “Interpreting Indian Culture With Stories.”
37 Deirdre Donahue, “Painfully beautiful passages from India,” USA Today, August 12, 1999.
that this offers. In one of her earliest interviews, Lahiri describes how a chance meeting with someone who worked as an interpreter for Russian patients in an American clinic, made her think of the phrase years before she wrote the story. When asked about the significance of the title as the metaphor and theme of the *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri acknowledges that more than just a metaphor or theme of the book, it is the role she envisages for herself, that it is the “desire to be able to interpret between two cultures” that draws her to writing.

Amongst the overwhelmingly and unanimously positive reception, a very minor, but noticeable because of its rarity, negative note concerns the few comments on the stories set in India, which echo the feeling expressed by *The Scotsman* that “Lahiri is less confident on all-Indian terrain: her stories have the charming but one-dimensional feel of fables.” Most interestingly, despite the fact that only three of the nine stories are set in India and only two deal with ‘Indians’ and the opinion such as above, *The Scotsman* reviewer thinks of the stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* as ‘Indian tales whispering across parallel worlds’. Lahiri is, thus, still considered an ‘Indian’ writer by some in spite of having lived in America since the age of three.

Lahiri not only gets instantly slotted into the over-predominant diasporic image of the Indian English writer and the Indian English canon, but also to Indian culture and sensibility. For example, the *Booklist* review points out that “[t]he past few years have seen a number of fine writers springing from India - some living on the subcontinent and others, like the author of this collection of stories, who live elsewhere but whose work is still imbued with Indian culture and sensibilities. In varying degrees, Lahiri explores ‘Indianness’ in all her stories, wherever they are set.” From what we read in the anecdote below, Lahiri, I suppose, should be as (if not more) grateful that this reviewer had about as much say in her selection for Pulitzer as her own mother.

In “My Intimate Alien”, Lahiri’s response to Indian reviews of *Interpreter of Maladies* in an Indian magazine (which interestingly appeared as “To Heaven Without Dying” in America), she tells an anecdote where a Bengali man wrote to Lahiri’s father from India to check whether as another Bengali he could apply for the Pulitzer too. According to Lahiri, when she told her parents that the Pulitzer was ‘given’ to works preferably on American life and by American citizens, her mother

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39 Millar, “Indian Tales Whispering Across Parallel Worlds.”
40 Ibid.
42 Lahiri, “My Intimate Alien”; Lahiri, “To Heaven Without Dying.”
interjected that they had made an exception in Lahiri’s case. Lahiri wryly comments that perhaps she should be thankful that her mother, for whom Lahiri is firstly and forever Indian and in Interpreter of Maladies has written about Indians, was not on the Pulitzer committee.

In many ways this anecdote underlines the role that Lahiri’s hyphenated identity plays in the reception of Interpreter of Maladies across its various audiences. Interpreter of Maladies received many awards and honours the year it was published (1999) and the Pulitzer the next year (2000). Though in a way, the Pulitzer conferred a mantle of ‘Americanness’ on Interpreter of Maladies, the pre- and post-Pulitzer interviews make obvious the popular interest in Lahiri’s hyphenation as well as the degree of her attachment to India and America. They too reflect the tendency to culturally ‘other’ or ethnicise Lahiri that is seen in many of the above-mentioned mainstream reviews.

The prevalent interest in migrant and minority literatures from the diasporas (whether resulting from colonisation or globalisation), and the related issues of multiculturalism, identity but, more importantly, cross-cultural communication have ensured Interpreter of Maladies an equally enthusiastic scholarly attention. Most scholarly reviews, with a few exceptions, choose to focus on a theme or a single story rather than the entire collection. However, the scholarly reception, too, seems to be shaped by the combination of the hyphenated identity and role of the author epitomised by the title and reinforced by the epitext (reviews and interviews) of Interpreter of Maladies and the pattern that emerges is interesting.

For example, in “Interpreters of Cultural Difference: The Use of Children in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Short Fiction”, Michael Cox points out the significance of the title of Interpreter of Maladies and examines how Lahiri uses children as interpreters between cultures in three of her stories: Lilia in “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”, Eliot in “Mrs. Sen’s” and Rohin in “Sexy”. According to him these children act as a medium for “intercultural contact” and offer insight into “cultural difference and cultural accommodation, and in particular into the not uncommon impulse to exaggerate or exoticize distinctions.”

Cox notes that Lilia is made aware of Mr. Pirzada’s non-Indianness but finds nothing to distinguish him from her parents, Eliot is portrayed as a non-judgmental observer of both Indian and American

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44 Ibid., 120.
culture through Mrs. Sen and his mother, whereas Rohin offers Miranda the insight into her and
Dev’s mutual exoticisation and the possible effect of their affair on Dev’s family. Cox emphasises that

Lahiri’s child observers, untainted by the effects of prolonged enculturation, bring to the narrative forefront those conflicts or core issues—maladies, perhaps—that arise between and among native and immigrant groups. In these stories, quotidian aspects of North American culture are revealed as hardly universal; the divide between Hindu and Muslim South Asians as highly artificial; and extramarital affairs between men and women of different cultural backgrounds as having less to do with individual attractiveness than with the perception of a group’s exotic charms.  

However, the article points out that Eliot can’t be aware of what would be appropriate as attire for an Indian woman for an afternoon interview in her own home, and it is the narrator-author who observes, through Eliot, that Mrs. Sen’s sari “was more appropriate for an evening affair” (112). Cox is obviously implying that the children are only focalisers and it is the third-person omnipresent narrator and through him/her the author – who holds the camera, is calling the shots and speaking through these children. It is Lahiri who is acting as ‘cultural interpreter’, interpreting not only between American and diasporic Indian cultures but also between diasporic Indian and Indian cultures.

This valorisation of her in-between position is also evident in Taylor Shea’s “Interpreter of Maladies: A Rhetorical Practice Transmitting Cultural Knowledge”. Based on the theories that rhetoric involves the instinctual transmission of cultural values and authors are shaped by their cultural background, Shea argues that “the rhetorical aim of a literary text is to communicate an author’s cultural situatedness.” This argument implies that, Interpreter of Maladies is a textualisation of Lahiri’s ‘entre-deux’ position and representation of the community that she belongs to. According to Shea, the context and the purpose of Interpreter of Maladies can only be understood by understanding its author.

In “The Borderlands of Identity and a B-Side to the Self: Jhumpa Lahiri's 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine', ‘The Third and Final Continent’ and 'Unaccustomed Earth'” Leah Harte explores the
“link between borders – both geographical and metaphorical – and identity as it relates to immigrant characters’ experience of cross-cultural and international passages” in Lahiri’s fiction. Harte acknowledges that categorisation of Lahiri’s fiction as postcolonial would be ‘limiting’, but finds postcolonial theoretical concepts an effective approach to it. Harte examines the effect of various borders, which Lahiri’s protagonists cross, on the formation of their respective identities, using Bhabha’s ideas on the issue. Like Harte, many critics perform a selectively postcolonial reading of Lahiri’s work.

Three stories in Interpreter of Maladies have been approached through a postcolonial perspective: the title story, “This Blessed House” and “Sexy”. Simon Lewis and Michael Prusse think of “Interpreter of Maladies” as a rewriting of E. M. Forster’s A Passage to India, especially the cave scene between Prof. Aziz and Adela after which Adela accuses Aziz of trying to rape her. Lewis feels that Lahiri rewrites Forster at two levels. By narrating “Interpreter of Maladies” from the perspective of an Indian male and converting the female tourist character from ‘coloniser’ and racially different ‘Adela’ to a diasporic and hence culturally different though racially similar ‘Mrs. Das’, Lahiri moves beyond the postcolonial binary of ‘coloniser self’ and ‘colonised other’ and also “beyond Eurocentric or Oriental images of India to those of a contemporary postcolonial nation more concerned with dialogue with its own diaspora than with its former colonizers.”

Michael Prusse tries to go beyond Lewis’s reading by exploring the relation between A Passage to India, a novel (according to him) about the impossibility of human relations to transcend race and origin, David Lean’s neo-colonialist, revisionist film version of the novel and Lahiri’s story. For Michael Prusse, Interpreter of Maladies is “informed by [Lahiri’s] own hybrid identity.” Prusse finds the title story, “Interpreter of Maladies”, to be a rewriting of E.M. Forster’s A Passage to India that, unlike Lahiri’s own biography, undermines the postcolonial celebration of hybridity as well as Bhabha’s optimistic vision of a third space where migrants and the host culture shape and transform each other. According to him, Lahiri’s hybrid migrant Mrs. Das and locally rooted resident Mr. Kapasi fail to understand each other as dismally as Forster’s racially different characters.

52 Lewis, “Lahiri’s ‘Interpreter of Maladies’.”
53 Michael Prusse, ““East is East” or transcultural cosmopolitanism?,” 144.
Interestingly, not only does Prusse think of Lahiri’s story as a rewriting of a colonial text, but he also argues that the figures in Lahiri’s stories undergo a process of ‘being and ‘becoming’ that is typical of postcolonial subjects (even if it is not in keeping with the postcolonial optimism).

Joel Kuortti’s “Problematic Hybrid Identity in the Diasporic Writings of Jhumpa Lahiri” is a postcolonial reading of “This Blessed House”.

Kuortti makes it clear that the reading is postcolonial in its examination of the hegemonic hierarchy between India and America in a neo-colonial, rather than colonial-postcolonial, context. Proposing that the Christian paraphernalia in Sanjeev and Twinkle’s house is neither ‘hidden’ nor ‘left behind’ and the perceived emptiness of their house is illusory, Kuortti argues that the story is a rewriting of colonial discovery, exoticisation and appropriation of the colonised culture and also that within the diasporic context, the empty space is analogous to identity which gets constantly and eclectically translated into something hybrid.

“Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies: Colonial Fantasies in “Sexy””, by Eva Tettenborn, is a postcolonial reading of “Sexy”.

Tettenborn argues that Sexy “successfully problematises colonial ideas and fantasies of possessing the cultural other.” According to her, both Dev and Miranda exoticise each other by conjuring up certain stereotypes. Just as Miranda thinks of Dev as the “sexually insatiable man of colour”, Dev thinks of her as the easily available promiscuous Western woman. However, given the hierarchy between the cultures they belong to, Miranda’s sentiments are described as colonial and Dev is considered to subvert the colonial exploitation by looking at Miranda as someone ‘waiting to be discovered’ by him.

To add a non-American note to the scholarly reception, Adriana Stoican has presented a different reading of two of Lahiri’s female protagonists, Bibi Haldar and Twinkle. Stoican argues that the two stories, “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” and “This Blessed House” offer a strategically subversive ‘overlap’ of normative and anti-normative concepts of womanhood. She claims that Bibi chooses to become a single mother thereby dispensing with the necessity of a man in her life when the normative ‘wifehood’ is denied to her as a ‘sick, average looking and hence a(b)normal and

55 Ibid., 212.
57 Ibid., 12.
58 Ibid., 11-12.
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marginalised woman’ by the patriarchal society. And, by not ‘taking care of the house or cooking traditional meals or discarding the Christian paraphernalia’ Twinkle refuses to conform to the normative behaviour of a traditional Hindu wife and upsets Sanjeev’s patriarchal expectations.

Stoican feels that through these two women Lahiri subverts not only the “Hindu hegemonic norms and Western stereotypes of subaltern female identities” but also the criticism about ‘apolitical safety’ of her (and other South Asian diasporic women writers’) fiction and it can be added, the accusations of ‘reorientalism’ against these writers that Stoican does not refer to. Though Stoican does not name it as such, this reading is quite close to postcolonial feminism.

By thinking of Lahiri’s writing in terms of a ‘postcolonial’ rewriting, critics like Lewis or Prusse highlight the power differential between Lahiri and her receiving audience or Lahiri’s ethnic minority position within a dominant center or host culture. Linking Lahiri in this way with the postcolonial tradition and through it with the Indian English (diasporic) literature, these critics clearly give precedence to her Indian origin and Indian side of her identity over the American one even as they emphasise its hyphenation and cultural ‘otherness’. Stoican, too, is linking Lahiri’s writing to her Indian identity by claiming that Lahiri subverts the Indian or rather Hindu patriarchal expectations.

By contrast, Laura Karttunen’s “A Sociostylistic Perspective on Negatives and the Disnarrated: Lahiri, Roy, Rushdie” is a rare example of ‘Western’ assertion of Lahiri’s ‘outsider’ status vis-à-vis India. Using “Interpreter of Maladies” (the story) as one of the examples, the article defines the ‘disnarrated’ as the ‘terms, phrases, and passages [which describe] what does not happen [at a particular moment in the narrative] …[and] allow authors to react to social expectations or engineer and disappoint those of the reader’. For example, when Mr. Kapasi observes Mrs. Das not doing certain things such as holding her daughter’s hand or stopping her from playing with the door locks, as a mother she disappoints Mr. Kapasi’s and the reader’s expectations about a ‘good’ mother. Karttunen argues that, by telling what Mrs. Das does not do Lahiri makes visible the social expectations about motherly behaviour at the same time as she disappoints them.

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60 Ibid.
61 By apolitical safety Stoican seems to imply the safety of not addressing political issues or not engaging with politically charged aspects of diasporic existence.
62 Stoican, “Continuities and Discontinuities in Jhumpa Lahiri’s ”Interpreter of Maladies”.”
63 The diasporic writers’ orientalist representations of the country and culture of origin.
64 Lau, “Re-Orientalism.”
66 Ibid.
Chapter 3: Receptions of *Interpreter of Maladies*

However, Karttunen does not accept that by using Mr. Kapasi as a focaliser Lahiri manages to portray an Indian perspective. Karttunen feels that, “[i]n a bicultural text like Lahiri’s, where the cultural background of the narrator (who, we infer, is American) differs from that of a character (an Indian, Mr. Kapasi), the two angles of perception may easily diverge.”67 According to Karttunen, Lahiri’s ‘outsider’ or ‘American’ narrator is plainly visible when Mr. Kapasi is shown to use words like ‘rest room’ or notice the ‘shirtlessness’ of the street vendors (a common thing in India) and on the verge of orientalism when the ‘erotic’ sculptures, which through regular exposure Mr. Kapasi would barely notice, are described in detail. By choosing to put Lahiri in company of Roy and Rushdie on the one hand, and thinking of Lahiri as culturally American, Karttunen’s response, like Lahiri’s mother’s, becomes a classic example of the paradoxical ambivalence that Lahiri’s enhanced hyphenation introduces.

Another, equally distinctive, response to Lahiri’s hyphenation is the focus on her migrant American status. In ‘Foodways and Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*’, Laura Williams argues that food, or rather culinary practices, in Lahiri’s stories and other migrant literatures are at once a signifier of ethnic/cultural difference and the process of assimilation or acculturation, though Williams does not think of them as a marker of the difference between various diasporic generations or their changing relationship with their country of origin. Williams distinctly places Lahiri in the canon of migrant American literature by comparing her to diasporic writers of other ethnicities in America i.e. the culinary ‘other’.68

In “American Spaces in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri”, Judith Caesar compares (and contrasts) Lahiri’s treatment of empty spaces to that by ‘American-born’ authors whose protagonists generally run away since “life is outside not within.”69 Caesar compares the utopian and dystopian space inside an American house in “The Third and Final Continent” with “Nobody’s Business” in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Caesar observes that,

Lahiri uses the architecture of old American houses as an emblem of the emotional spaces between the people who live in those houses, of the interior walls within the mind, of the stairs that connect the levels of experience, of the doors that shut others in or out, of the exterior walls that would normally delineate public from private space but which, again and again, do not. And yet she does not treat these American inner spaces in exactly the same way as her American-born predecessors.70

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67 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
Chapter 3: Receptions of *Interpreter of Maladies*

Caesar feels that in “The Third and Final Continent”, the empty interior of Mrs. Croft’s house becomes symbolic; first of the narrator’s ‘private space’ within America and later, during the visit to Mrs. Croft, of the emotional space between the narrator and his wife, Mala. Mrs. Croft bridges the emotional distance between them by letting them see each other through her eyes. Caesar argues that for the narrator and Mala, Mrs. Croft’s house becomes the metaphor of the romanticised America which accepts them in all their differences. Caesar claims that through Mrs. Croft’s house, Lahiri reimagines the American interior and by presenting a utopian image of this space points out the ‘American’ malady of ‘empty and desperate inner lives’. For Caesar, Lahiri reimagines American space through “eyes that have seen other cultures and a mind that has understood other ways of thought.” The reimagining is possible because of the presence of the author’s other culture. The authorial image, thus, remains that of an interpreter, who interprets America to Americans through her hyphenated, ‘other’ culture-tinged Americanness.

Lahiri has been praised for reviving the short story genre and for the well-crafted elegance, poise and poignancy of her stories. However the mainstream and the scholarly focus has remained more on the content and the presentation of the stories as well as on the authorial intention and role. One notable exception, which looks at *Interpreter of Maladies* (in its entirety) as a literary text within a genre is Noelle Brada-Williams’s article “Reading Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* as a Short Story Cycle”. This article looks at *Interpreter of Maladies* as a set of diverse stories interconnected by themes rather than characters and locale. Noelle Brada-Williams argues that *Interpreter of Maladies* belongs to the genre of short story cycles even if it defies the unity imposed by “a single location and/or a small ensemble of recurring characters”. According to her, though *Interpreter of Maladies* “features diverse and unrelated characters, a variety of narrative styles, and no common locale … even transcends national boundaries, being set in both India and the United States … the intricate use of pattern and motif … including the recurring themes of the barriers to and opportunities for human communication; community, including marital, extra-marital, and parent-child relationships; and the dichotomy of care and neglect” in the collection binds the stories together.

Brada-Williams posits that though the stories are distinctly different, they have elements which balance each other and this balancing dialogue is signalled through the carefully mirrored plots of the

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72 Ibid.
74 Ibid., 451.
first and the last story of the collection. She observes that “The Third and Final Continent” both reflects and reverses the plot of the first story, “A Temporary Matter”. While the first story of the cycle relates the tale of the death of a son and the possible destruction of a marriage, the concluding story provides a tale of the survival and resilience of both the parents’ marriage and their son.”75

With most relevance to the present study, Brada-Williams links this dialogic balancing of perspectives to Lahiri’s positive reception in India and America. Brada-Williams claims that through such balanced representation, Lahiri counters the possibility of a homogenising reading by outsiders who consider the finite representation of a community in an ethnic literature as representation of the whole, at the same time as she satisfies the demand for non-stereotypical representation within the community.76 Brada-Williams thus points towards Lahiri’s double audience, the possibility of and reasons behind divergent readings in each audience and Lahiri’s response to them, though not with the intention to highlight authorial awareness of the double audience or her strategic complicity with either market. However, by thinking of Interpreter of Maladies as part of a representative ethnic literature, this critic too makes it obvious that, for her, it is Lahiri’s ethnic minority or Indian origin that makes it so.

The variation in the scholarly response, as in popular response, thus, seems to be directly determined by the part of Lahiri’s hyphenated identity (including the ‘in-between’ signified by the hyphen) that is perceived to be predominant by that particular reader.

Conclusion

The mainstream interviews and reviews keep the focus consistently on Lahiri’s ‘hyphenation and unbelonging’ (which, as is obvious from numerous interviews, the author does not resist but rather encourages) and on the exploration of migrant experience, the feelings of cultural and emotional exile and loss of homeland and identity in Interpreter of Maladies. They, especially the mainstream reviews, homogenise the characters in Interpreter of Maladies into ‘Indians’, as migrants pining for the lost homeland, by neglecting to mention the non-Indian and the non-migrant (because American by birth) second-generation Indians. The mainstream epitext reveals the cultural ‘othering’ of Interpreter of Maladies as a text and representation and that of its author into a predetermined role and visible ethnicity.

75 Ibid., 453.
76 Ibid., 452-453.
Though the effect of the hegemony of postcolonial perspective as approach to Indian English literature is evident in the scholarly response, this response is more analytical and less voyeuristic about the author. Nevertheless, the scholarly interest in the experiences of diaspora as migrants and as a minority within the host culture, the issues inherent in this ‘intercultural’ situation and Lahiri’s role as a mediator or translator between the two cultures made possible by her hyphenation or entre-deux position means Lahiri remains fixed in her ‘Indian’ American identity. It is this identity that shapes the Indian reception, too, though in different ways.

**Indian reception – diasporic and resident**

As is amply demonstrated by *Interpreter of Maladies*, America and the American audience can no longer be homogenised or monolithically categorised as non-Indian. Just as the writers of Indian origin are no longer physically bound within the geographical borders of India, the readers of Indian origin are dispersed in Indian diasporas all over the world. The Indian reception of *Interpreter of Maladies* is thus not limited to the geographical location that is India and includes the resident as well as diasporic reception.

**Diasporic Indian reception**

It is doubly appropriate that the response of the diasporic Indians in America is placed ‘between’ non-Indian Anglophone (predominantly American) response and the resident Indian response: because they read *Interpreter of Maladies* before the resident Indians and also because they occupy the same in-between place as the author and as such can be considered Lahiri’s ‘real insider’ audience. The one distinguishing character of the diasporic, and predictably scholarly, reception is its direct and immediate awareness of and reaction to the American / Western reception of Lahiri and her work.

Raj Chetty’s “The Indian on the Bookshelf: Placing Jhumpa Lahiri in Contemporary American Literature” is the most comprehensive response to both mainstream and scholarly American reception. Chetty’s article criticises Lahiri’s rise to the status of the ‘representative’ voice of Indian-Americans in America, which he ascribes to the American media’s attempts to highlight the relationship between America and the ‘new’ (economically developing) India by foregrounding the role of ‘India(ns)’ within America. He argues that such facile ‘ethnicisation’ of identities elides

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alternative voices from the same space as Lahiri.

Citing arguments put forward by other minority voices such as Bharati Mukherjee, Amy Tan and Rey Chow against the ‘neo-orientalist’ attitude of the dominant culture to reduce the minority writers into easily knowable, consumable and familiar categories which force hyphenation and impose othering, Chetty argues that Lahiri has been reduced to the exotic erotic stereotype of ‘soft, seductively soothing Indian femininity’ through the voyeuristic vocabulary of mainstream American epitext.

He raises various other issues such as the tendency to pigeonhole Interpreter of Maladies into ‘Indian/ Indian-American categories’, and homogenisation of the characters in the stories into ‘displaced and uncomfortable Indian migrants who do not belong’ and need to assimilate. According to him, ignoring the way in which Lahiri presents an America that is constantly redefining itself through characters like Twinkle and destabilizes or complicates the easy assertion of ‘Indian identity and its hyphenation’ through the example of the Das family can only be seen as the effect of a ‘politics of reading’. Here Chetty is alluding to the practice of reading ‘Indians’ in Interpreter of Maladies and reading Lahiri as a representative ethnic writer. Chetty’s claim that the Pulitzer consecrates and sanctions such ethnicisation of Lahiri, her work and her characters is similar to Graham Huggan’s argument that the Booker encourages the exoticisation of the marginal other by consecrating postcolonial texts that present the ‘cultural other’ in stereotypical, familiar and palatable ways.

The arguments in this article form part of Chetty’s master’s thesis, “Versions of America: Reading American Literature for Identity and Difference.” Chetty’s thesis is informed by Huggan’s The Postcolonial Exotic and Rey Chow’s criticism of othering of ethnic minorities in the west. The thesis proposes to expose “how ethnic and multicultural identity politics supplant aesthetic criticism and transform ethno-cultural identity into an aesthetic object, even if done as a celebration of hybridity or liminality as a putatively liberating space ([and] hyphenated identity as embodying that space).” Chetty argues that the over-emphasis on these writers’ hyphenated identities and ethnic origins fixes them and their work into an ethnic minority category, which then becomes the hegemonic (and

78 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
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A reductive) way of reading their work. As a means of subversive resistance to such ethnicisation, Chetty suggests that diaspora writers like Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee can be read “as simply American without regard to ethnicity” 82.

Throughout the article and the thesis, Chetty uses examples from the American reviews, interviews and scholarly articles to argue his case and is thus responding or reacting to the American reception. It is obvious that Lahiri’s and Chetty’s own diasporic identities play a significant role in his response. Using Lahiri and Mukherjee as the cases in point, Chetty seems to be writing back to the exoticising, ethnicising tendencies of the hegemonic host culture.

While Chetty accuses the American media of exoticisation of Lahiri, in “Not too spicy” 83 Lavina Dhingra Shankar barely stops shy of calling Lahiri and Divakaruni (another Indian-American diasporic, though first generation, woman writer 84) exotic mistresses 85 of cultural translation. Examining how both authors negotiate their various audiences, Shankar argues that their consecration with quintessentially American prizes 86 and positive American reception is the result of their ability to fit in with the expectations of their audiences and the easy accessibility of their work to the host (American) audience. Shankar marks the difference between the two authors observing that,

Unlike Chitra Divakaruni, who seems to appeal simplistically to mainstream feminist audiences by dishing up an exotic and easily digestible India – oppressive, patriarchal, yet spicy and mystical – Jhumpa Lahiri seems to claim multiple audiences by using … the insider’s ‘double-voiced irony’ – which exploits its ‘insider’ position in order to begin a subversion from within.” 87

Shankar does not specify whether Lahiri is an ‘insider’ American or Indian or both. However, using Lahiri’s prizes as the proof, Shankar claims that, “Jhumpa Lahiri’s claiming of American audiences is more obvious than her predecessors, as her point of reference is American, rather than Asian, and reveals her choice of America and Americans in subject matter, location, characterization, and narrative perspective.” 88 Shankar is also quick to point out that the final story in the collection, “The Third and Final Continent”, praised by the American reviews as “fulfillment of the promise of

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82 Ibid.
84 Divakaruni is the author of *Mistress of Spices*.
85 Though the subtitle of the article is ‘Exotic Mistresses of Cultural Translation in the Fiction of Chitra Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri’, the article is more about the authors than any of their characters. The allusion to mistresses is a play on Divakaruni’s famous novel (and the Hollywood movie by the same name) ‘The Mistress of Spices’.
88 Ibid. 36.
America, … [i]s somewhat reductive … For Asian American readers, this immigrant story seems ignorant about the history of the race and class struggles faced by many South Asians since the Asian Exclusion Acts of the early 1900s.”

It is obvious that Shankar is speaking for and agrees with the Asian American i.e. diasporic readers, since a little later she accuses Lahiri of a ‘simplistic celebration of Americanness’ and criticises her protagonists’ attempts at americanisation and retention of their original culture as pathetically superficial and their fossilisation of India into a place to visit for drawstring pajamas and Darjeeling tea as ‘imperialistic’.

In “Ethical Responsibility in Intersubjective Spaces: Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's “Interpreter of Maladies” and “A Temporary Matter””, Gita Rajan reports the general American perception that Lahiri’s American success and awards were a direct result of the American desire to catch up with Arundhati Roy’s Booker and the India craze initiated by The New Yorker special fiction issue published to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Indian independence in 1997 but, more than that, it was a result of Lahiri’s ‘gendered ethnic identity’.

However, Rajan herself believes that Lahiri’s success partially stems from her ability to make American readers think about the ethical issues involved in the seemingly familiar, everyday ‘American’ situations by successfully evoking the shared ‘collective memory’ of ethical norms. Rajan finds Lahiri’s use of memory different from that of the postcolonial or minority literatures, where memories are often used to elicit images of victimisation and/or physical, emotional or cultural subjugation, but orientalist in its evocation of the familiar (even if not necessarily negative) memories of South Asians who “meditate at dawn, hack code all day, and cook curry for dinner” in her ‘community of readers’ i.e. Americans. According to Rajan, Lahiri achieves this through the “marking … taming and domesticating of South Asianness” and by presenting ethnic lives from the safe distance of familiar stereotypes of a quietly different, model diaspora.

89 Ibid., 44.
90 Ibid., 44-45.
92 Ibid., 124.
93 Ibid., 128.
Two diasporic critics, who, even if not uncritical, are more concerned with readers and readings than the author and her writing, are Rajini Srikanth and Asha Sen. In “Collecting and Translating the Non-Western Other: The Perils and Possibilities of a World Literature Website”, Rajini Srikanth cautions against the danger of “easy consumption by English speaking readers of non-Anglophone cultures” that websites like “World without Borders” face. She observes that readers can easily opt to remain within the limits of textual representation and choose aesthetic pleasure over serious effort to know more about the cultural context. Using “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” as example, Srikanth argues that though the story offers aesthetic pleasure, its simplistically self-sufficient presentation of the complex history of partition of India and Pakistan allows the (Anglophone) readers to feel that they do not need additional contextual information to understand the universal theme of friendship and compassion in the story. Srikanth suggests that Lahiri might be questioning this attitude or holding the mirror to American readers by highlighting the insular approach of Mrs. Kenyon (Lilia’s American teacher). Srikanth’s argument is quite similar to Innes’s argument that postcolonial writers textualise the naïve outsider reader in their work as a negative example, which the real outsider readers should try not to emulate.

Asha Sen also observes the need for a contextualised reading of South Asian American women writers like Lahiri, Divakaruni and Mukherjee in place of the orientalist privileging of ‘modern America over traditional India’ binary at the hands of these authors and their readers. Sen argues that the diasporic experiences in these writers’ work should be read within the context of colonialism and history of earlier migrations rather than through the lens of the American dream.

Most of these diasporic Indian critics are writing, like Lahiri, from America. The diasporic Indian response to Lahiri is predominantly Indian-American but not exclusively so. It is not limited to the Anglophone world either, as is demonstrated by the mainstream review in French and two scholarly articles by diasporic Indian scholars: one in France and the other in Denmark.

The review “Les Maladies de l’éloignement” (The maladies of being away / distance) by Tirthankar Chanda, highlights the fact that Interpreter of Maladies is a ‘migrant’ text. Chanda feels that Lahiri
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“focuses on the experiences of the uprooted in the ‘new world’, voluntary exiles forever walking a tightrope between their two worlds” («se penche sur l’univers des déracinés du Nouveau Monde, exilés volontaires en perpétuel équilibre »)\(^99\) and that Lahiri’s own experience (and that of her parents’ generation) of being in-between two worlds informs her stories.

The scholarly article by Geetha Ganapathy-Doré appears in *The Global and the Particular in the English Speaking World*, edited by Jean-Pierre Durix.\(^100\) In “The Narrator as a Global Soul in Jumpha Lahiri’s “Interpreter of Maladies”” Ganapathy-Doré describes Lahiri as a global soul rather than a hyphenated Indian or American writer. She claims that, in *Interpreter of Maladies*, rather than a culturally imperialistic force, “America becomes a metaphor for the promises of a globalized world”. Also that “by lending voice to people who think in a way they can’t fully express… Jhumpa Lahiri succeeds in being a wonderful interpreter between nations”\(^101\) and transcends the ‘ethnic’ and ‘diasporic’ labels.

A more critical note is introduced by Tabish Khair in “The Knowledge of Loss, the Loss of Knowledge: Jhumpa Lahiri, Shashi Deshpande, Mahasweta Devi”. Khair compares the representation of the knowledge of loss of a child in Lahiri’s “A Temporary Matter” to that in Deshpande’s *Small Remedies* and Devi’s *Hajar Churashir Ma* (Mother of 1084). He argues that the differences in the representations by the three authors reflect differences in the authorial perceptions but more importantly in these authors’ discursive affinities that are linked with their ‘locations’ (predominantly Christian First World in the case of Lahiri and Hindu Indian/Third World in the case of the other two writers). Khair feels that Lahiri’s story is imbued with a Christian pathos where knowledge and loss are irrevocably interlinked in contrast to the other two works where knowledge of loss leads to knowledge of self and to enhanced social awareness. He links Lahiri’s success in the west to such implicit privileging of hegemonic ‘associations and assumptions’ in her work. Khair, too, seems close to Brouillette’s argument about a postcolonial writer’s complicity with the expectations of the metropolitan audience.

Interestingly, these diasporic critics from Anglophone and non-Anglophone world (except for Ganapathy-Doré) continue to speak of Lahiri essentially, even if not exclusively,\(^102\) in terms of her

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\(^99\) Ibid.
\(^101\) Ibid., 64.
\(^102\) Shankar and Rajan do allude to her ‘double identity’ and ‘global’ audience.
South-Asian ethnicity and American audience. As diasporians, these critics do not exactly fit into the geographically determined ‘home or insider’ audience category assumed by the postcolonial Book Historians such as Robert Fraser and critics like Brouillette. They think of Lahiri’s work as South-Asian ethnic literature and prefer to distance her from the postcolonial diasporic canon. Yet it is they who display a reaction that postcolonial critics expect of the ‘home audience’. They seem to be critical of the ‘outsider’ reception of Lahiri and even if not negative, their own response to Lahiri cannot be called uncritical. Aware of the American reception, their response expresses the same concerns, such as exoticisation, commodification and consumption of a culturally othered literary work and authorial complicity in metropolitan reception that the postcolonial book historians and critics address, even if not necessarily in those terms.

But as we shall see, the Indian reception of *Interpreter of Maladies* does not fit in with the postcolonial arguments about the ‘at home’ reception of Indian English literature with which Lahiri is linked through, or rather because of, her Indian origin.

**Resident Indian reception**

The Indian response to *Interpreter of Maladies* is broadly positive, even if not as unanimously as the non-Indian Anglophone i.e. American response. As we shall see, it shows a unique and interesting approach to Lahiri’s identity.

*Interpreter of Maladies* has invited a huge mainstream and scholarly response in India. Though the popular or mainstream reviews available are more focused on Lahiri’s biography, connection with India and her Pulitzer along with the other prizes; the scholarly response is quite varied. A few mainstream reviewers, not unlike Lahiri’s mother, find it interesting that Lahiri, with an obvious migrant origin and stories set in India and about diasporic Indians, was considered for (and won) the Pulitzer. They display an awareness of the mainstream American reception of *Interpreter of Maladies*.

However, the most interesting characteristic of Indian reception is the emphasis on Lahiri’s Bengali identity, which is no doubt fed by the feeling of connection with Kolkata that Lahiri expresses in her interviews and her focus on the Bengali diaspora in America. For example, in ‘Oh Calcutta!’, Somadatta Mandal includes Lahiri in a list of diasporic Bengali Indian English writers claiming that

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103 Fraser and Hammond, *Books Without Borders*.

104 Lahiri, "My Intimate Alien"; Jhumpa Lahiri, "Maladies of Belonging."
“one cannot escape the pleasures of acute Bengaliness in their writings”\textsuperscript{105} whereas \textit{The Times of India} review finds the stories in \textit{Interpreter of Maladies} “often evocative of the genre stories written in Bengali in the forties and fifties.”\textsuperscript{106} One scholarly article actually compares “A Temporary Matter” with a Bengali story of a broken marriage.\textsuperscript{107} And the review in \textit{Manushi}, a Bengali magazine, accords Lahiri an insider status by saying that in \textit{Interpreter of Maladies}, “the etic eye, so prevalent in expatriate literature, is substituted for by the more intimate emic eye.”\textsuperscript{108}

In “Fiction in English in a Multi-lingual Society: Location and Perspective”, the well-known Indian critic Meenakshi Mukherjee alludes to an interesting, and to her, unexpected and unaccountable, shift in Indian response towards “regional appropriation of Indian English writers”. Referring specifically to the case of Jhumpa Lahiri, Mukherjee points out how after Lahiri’s Pulitzer, \textit{Desh}, an influential vernacular literary journal which “hardly ever used translated material” not only published a Bengali translation of one of Lahiri’s stories but also featured her on their cover, “all because her second name still proclaims her one-time Bengali origin”. Acknowledging that the reception of these writers is not necessarily always favourable, Mukherjee further adds that

Similar warmth is displayed in the Bangla literary world towards Amit Chaudhuri, Sunetra Gupta Ghosh (both of whom write in English), and for the same reason. … The Bengali appropriation of Jhumpa Lahiri is … comparable to what has happened to Arundhati Roy in Kerala [where even the hard core vernacular readers] feel intensely possessive of \textit{The God of Small Things}.\textsuperscript{109}

Perhaps the immediate and widespread scholarly attention that Lahiri garnered in India is less surprising against the background of this trend. Articles appeared soon after the publication of \textit{Interpreter of Maladies} in India. Anthologies of essays followed the publication of \textit{The Namesake} and deal extensively with both works. \textit{Jhumpa Lahiri: The Master Storyteller}\textsuperscript{110} was published in 2002 and \textit{Jhumpa Lahiri: Critical Perspectives}\textsuperscript{111} was published in 2008. Though the first anthology is out of print and unavailable at the moment, the appreciative tone of the title is obvious. The second anthology deals with \textit{Interpreter of Maladies} and \textit{The Namesake}. Of the thirteen essays in this anthology, seven deal exclusively with \textit{Interpreter of Maladies} and \textit{The Namesake}; while the remaining essays deal exclusively with \textit{The Namesake}.

\textsuperscript{108} Anurima Banerji, “\textit{Interpreter of Maladies}: A Collection of Short Stories by Jhumpa Lahiri,” \textit{Manushi}, n.d.
\textsuperscript{109} Mukherjee, “Fiction in English in a Multi-lingual Society: Location and Perspective,” 14 15.
In the introduction to the anthology, Nigamananda Das points out that Lahiri’s first generation Indian-Americans cherish past and memories, which form an integral part of their identity, while her second generation Indian-Americans “reflect both proximity and distancing from it”\(^{112}\) and do not think of themselves as ‘others’ vis-à-vis America.

In “Family as Space in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Stories”, Himadri Lahiri\(^{113}\) praises Lahiri for moving beyond “the façade of cultural experience of her diasporic characters” and for portraying them as individuals rather than reducing them to ‘tokens’ of the ethnic group that they belong to. The article explores the way Lahiri projects familial space as representative of interaction between community and individuals, arguing that, with increased acculturation, the control of community and family on the diasporic individual lessens.

Reetamoni Narzary’s “Where's Home? Patterns of Loss and Longing in Interpreter of Maladies” categorises Interpreter of Maladies as a text exploring diasporic experiences.\(^{114}\) Buddhadeb Roychoudhuri’s “Metaphor of Pain: Reflection on Interpreter of Maladies”\(^{115}\) thinks of Interpreter of Maladies as an exploration and representation of pain felt by diasporic women. And Shahnawaz Begum’s ‘Generation in Diaspora: Perspectives of Child Characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's Stories’\(^{116}\) argues that Interpreter of Maladies is an exploration of the predicament of the second generation diasporians which is distinct from that of the first generation but through its child protagonists it also looks back at the experiences and lives of the first-generation migrants.

Binda Sah’s “Matrix of Sexuality in Interpreter of Maladies”\(^{117}\) examines how Lahiri has explored female sexuality in her stories “Interpreter of Maladies”, “Sexy” and “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”. The article is interesting for its reading of Dev’s affair with Miranda as a demonstration of the Indian male’s dubious reaction to exposure to the liberal sexuality of West and for its comparison of Bibi Haldar’s cure to that of Kubja,\(^{118}\) a character in Mahabharata. Even more interesting is Sah’s claim that perhaps the latter is an instinctual expression of Indian myths dormant in Lahiri’s racial

\(^{112}\) Ibid., Introduction, 16.


\(^{118}\) As the article explains, Kubja, a physically deformed and ugly woman, is shown to be transformed into a beautiful damsel by Lord Krishna's divine touch.
memory. Obviously, such a claim privileges Lahiri’s Indian identity over or across the hyphenation. Similarly, Zinia Mitra’s “An Interpretation of Interpreter of Maladies”\(^{119}\) makes repeated references to ‘Indian flavours’ that Lahiri’s stories evoke\(^{120}\) and finds Lahiri’s similes as profound as Arundhati Roy’s.\(^{121}\)

Like Mitra, two other Indian critics think of Lahiri as part of the Indian literary scene, especially the feminist writing of writers such as Arundhati Roy and Manju Kapur. In “Transcending Gender Parochialism in Modern Indian Feminist Fiction”,\(^{122}\) Sanjay Kumar argues that breaking free from a feminist vision circumscribed by concerns with gender equality, modern Indian English feminist writing and writers such as Roy, Lahiri and Kapur are delineating their work “in a universal and existential hue, thereby transcending the parochial feministic perception.”\(^{123}\) According to Kumar, these writers see all human beings, whatever their gender, nationality, class or race, as existing in a spiritual void and as puppets of some ‘invisible’ grand design. Kumar feels that for this reason, their work demonstrates a psychoanalytical awareness of the fact that “any manifestation of strength is, in fact, a desperate attempt to masquerade [a] weakness of one sort or the other,”\(^{124}\) and is full of commiseration for both the exploited female and exploiting male as victims of life. Kumar, rather than comparing these writers’ work or characters, is pointing out the general similarities of intention but it is significant that for him, Lahiri is essentially as Indian as resident writers such as Roy and Kapur in spite of her diasporic location and enhanced hyphenation of her identity.

Nandini Sahu, is the other Indian critic who does not differentiate between Indian English writers based on the geographical location from where they write. In “The Nostalgic Note in their Flute - A Reading of Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri”,\(^{125}\) describing Lahiri and Roy’s writing as nostalgic, Sahu argues that the cultural, racial and familial past as well as memory play a significant role in Roy and Lahiri’s (literary) consciousness and colour their preoccupation with living. For Sahu, both writers write from between the “paradisal past and tormenting present”\(^{126}\) and in their work, “life is viewed as a nostalgic recollection through the eyes of sensitive, vulnerable and observant characters [who] live in two worlds – one within and one without and the past keeps intruding in the


\(^{120}\) Ibid., 97-98.

\(^{121}\) Ibid., 99.


\(^{123}\) Ibid., 33.

\(^{124}\) Ibid., 34.


\(^{126}\) Ibid., 47.
present.” Interestingly, Sahu thinks that Lahiri, like Roy, gives English a new flavor by Indianising it and proves wrong the assumption that “a language a writer uses must be his or her own, and it must mean everything to him”. This critic feels that Lahiri’s writing proves how deep cultural roots are and leaves one with the distinct impression of “obsession with and admiration of traditional Indian culture.” Lahiri is, thus, considered forever and foremost Indian.

By contrast, Raji Narasimhan’s essay “Deeply Different, Deeply Similar: Jhumpa Lahiri’s "A Real Durwan" and Rajee Seth's "Baharee Log"” transcends the linguistic barriers between Indian English and vernacular literatures by comparing Lahiri’s story with Seth’s story in Hindi. Narasimhan points out the similarities between the characters of the old women protagonists of the two stories, Lahiri’s Boori ma, a destitute refugee, and Seth’s neglected mother of a drunkard son, and observes the difference in the way the two authors have given ‘voice’ to them. Narasimhan claims that, while Seth approaches her character as an insider, allowing her to speak and layering her character with nuances through what she says, Lahiri remains an outsider vis-à-vis Boori ma whose speech is described but who is not allowed to speak. She is always spoken for and remains voiceless but for the phrase ‘believe me don’t believe me’ which in the end changes into a plaintive ‘believe me believe me’. This essay links Lahiri’s predicament to her diasporic identity and yet calls her an ‘Indian’ writer, thereby appropriating her into an inclusive Indian literary canon. The unavailability of an Indian language to Lahiri or her distance from the character of Boori ma and her socio-linguistic milieu notwithstanding, there are no claims of inauthenticity or intentional exoticisation of a ‘dark India’.

However, not all critics offer unconditional praise. Jaydeep Chakrabarty’s “Diasporic Dynamism in Representing India: The Narrative World of Jhumpa Lahiri” praises Lahiri’s work for the way it subverts the American “dream of [coercive] homogeneity” through its portrayal of “the absent presence/ present absence of the country of origin”. However, the critic feels that the superficiality of her knowledge about India is evident, when she calls the Oriya language Orissi in the title story or shows Dev pointing out Bengal to Miranda forgetting that it is now ‘West Bengal’. He observes that Lahiri’s focus on lower classes in her Indian stories makes her “vulnerable … to the charge of selling

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127 Ibid.
128 Ibid., 55.
129 Ibid.
132 Ibid., 26.
Indian Poverty."\textsuperscript{133} For this critic, thus, Lahiri is obviously a diasporic Indian writer who is, to borrow Rushdie’s phrase, ‘writing back to the centre’ from within. However, though Lahiri’s ‘slips’ and lack of in depth knowledge about India are pointed out, the criticism about ‘exoticising dark India’ is indirect and quite mild.

The most noticeable exception to the general ‘appreciation’ and/or ‘appropriation’ is Harish Trivedi’s “Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation”.\textsuperscript{134} Pointing to Lahiri’s tenuous hold on Bengali language and equally tenuous knowledge about India, Trivedi questions Lahiri’s ‘assumed’ (to be read as presupposed by others and taken on by herself) status of cultural translator or translator between cultures. However, by remaining willfully focused on Lahiri’s ‘Indian stories’ and using her lack of knowledge of Bengali to question her status as translator between cultures Trivedi in a way emphasises her ‘Bengali Indian’ origin, even if negatively.

These essays prove that Lahiri’s hyphenated identity allows a selective categorisation of her work as expression of diasporic and Indian diasporic experiences at the same time as it lends itself to appropriation into an inclusive Bengali-Indianness or Indianness. Even though in the article “My Intimate Alien”,\textsuperscript{135} Lahiri mentions charges of inauthenticity and exoticisation in Indian mainstream reviews of Interpreter of Maladies, the positive response seems to outweigh the criticism and none of the scholarly essays come across as overly or exclusively negative.

**Conclusion**

Within the field of postcolonial studies, the ‘at home’ reception of Indian English writers, especially the diasporic writers, is assumed to be negative and the ‘at home’ audience of these writers is generally assumed to be within India and homogeneously made up of resident Indians. Lahiri’s diasporic reception nuances the concept of ‘insider’ audience while her resident reception does not conform to the prevalent image of ‘at home’ reception.

Interestingly, the diasporic response to Interpreter of Maladies is more critical than the resident response. The diasporic critics are more concerned with the issues of the assumption of representative status of and by a second-generation writer like Lahiri. They raise the issues of authorial complicity with dominant culture and a reductive celebration of Americanness that ignores

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{135} Lahiri, "My Intimate Alien."
or occludes the negative experiences of other migrants and dissenting voices of other immigrant / migrant writers.

In contrast, the resident Indians display the tendency of, to borrow Meenakshi Mukherjee’s term, ‘appropriating’ Lahiri into a transnational Bengaliness and Indianness. They seem proudly appreciative of her constant allusions to the connection with Calcutta, her refusal to belong fully to America, her focus on Bengali Indian diaspora pining for India and the fact that she has made an attempt to write from Indian perspectives. They compare her work to work in Bengali and in other Indian literature and, surprisingly, compare her (favourably) with Arundhati Roy despite the marked differences in their works.

The most striking difference between *TGST* and *Interpreter of Maladies* is the image of America that comes across from the two texts. In *TGST*, the America Rahel experiences, from within the glass office of a gas station where she works nightshifts, is unfriendly, racist and depraved where drunken, drugged men swear at her using race, colour and gender-specific epithets, men get stabbed and thrown out of cars, and pimps offer her jobs. By contrast, Lahiri’s America is a land of peace and plenty, where within a generation migrants’ dreams come true, where Americans are friendly. The other difference is the link with the colonial past. India’s colonial past is very present in *TGST* through the Anglophile, Anglicised Oxbridge educated characters like Pappachi and Chako and also through the influence of English language and literature within Ipe family and household. This past is only remotely present in *Interpreter of Maladies* through characters, such as Boori ma and Mr. Pirzada, that are affected by the partition of India and Pakistan.

The contrast in relations between community and individuals in the two texts is almost absolute. In *Interpreter of Maladies* the first-generation migrants, especially women, miss the genial communal atmosphere and easy camaraderie of Indian suburbs and apartment buildings. The community participates in pleasures and sorrows of its individual members. It takes care, even if inadequately and casually, of the needy and outcasts at its margins. Though occasionally callous and cruel to them, it does not crush or tyrannise these members. *TGST* paints a different picture. The community in Aymenem is close-knit but rigidly stratified and oppressive. The community in *TGST* is cruel to its individual members and actively exploits the ‘subalterns’ in its established hierarchy, such as women, children and lower castes.
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Though Indian critics think of Roy and Lahiri as feminist Indian English writers, the two writers’ portrayal of women is quite different too. The family in *TGST* is patriarchal as it is in the case of most first generation migrant Indian families in *Interpreter of Maladies*, however, in *TGST* most women, even the educated and upper class characters, are victims of that system and of society, although differently in each generation. Mammachi suffers abusive treatment and later indifference at the hands of Pappachi and Ammu’s husband is alcoholic and asks his wife to sleep with his boss to save his own job. Ammu leaves him to come back to her parent’s house but is looked down upon because of this and has no rights or say within the house. Rahel is a rebel, but weighed down by the tragic past. The female workers in Chako’s factory are victims of Chako’s sexual needs. By contrast, most of Lahiri’s women are educated and independent even if it is they who run the houses and look after the children, in keeping with the patriarchal system. They are not victimised by their husbands. Even within the first generation migrants, migration seems to bring couples closer and make them more equal, and in subsequent generations, women seem to be stronger and more able than their men.

None of the critics, whether American, diasporic Indian, or resident Indian, who compare Roy and Lahiri as part of the same Indian English and Indian feminist canon, seems to pay attention to these marked differences or their link to Lahiri’s diasporic identity or location. As we have seen, such ‘inclusiveness’ is withheld from Desai.

Brada-Williams’s claim about the role that Lahiri’s ‘balanced representation’ (of Indian, diasporic and American perspectives) plays in positive reception of *Interpreter of Maladies* in India and America\(^\text{136}\) certainly seems valid.

In comparison with the extensive American, diasporic and resident Indian response, French response to *Interpreter of Maladies* is surprisingly scant.

**French reception**

*Interpreter of Maladies* was published in France in March 2000 as *L’Interprète des maladies*\(^\text{137}\) after it won the Pulitzer. Though French reviews report the heightened sales which the award ensured and though the French reception itself is as unanimously positive as in the non-Indian Anglophone and

\(^{136}\) Brada-Williams, “Reading Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* as a Short Story Cycle,” 452-453.

Indian audiences, it is very thin. There are barely a few mainstream reviews and no scholarly ones during the nine years since its publication and in spite of three serious and acclaimed works to the author’s credit. Only Lahiri’s second work, The Namesake which appeared in French translation as Un Nom pour un autre\textsuperscript{138} seems to have attracted a slightly increased attention after Mira Nair’s film adaptation appeared in 2006-2007. However, contrary to the average lag of one year between the publication of Indian English originals and French translations, Un Nom pour un autre appeared as late as 2006, just before the film. (\textit{Sur une terre étrangère},\textsuperscript{139} the French translation of Unaccustomed Earth, Lahiri’s third book, appeared in 2010 again after a lag of two years and it, too, has not earned a large number of reviews.)

The available epitext, interviews and reviews, even though insubstantial or almost negligible, is not without interest in terms of where it places Lahiri and what it finds noteworthy or not. Diverging from the pattern in the other two chapters, I plan to look at the French reception before looking at \textit{L’Interprète des maladies} as a translation. The reasons for this will become obvious when we analyse the work’s reception.

In his article ‘Deux Indiennes d’Amérique’ (Two Indian Women from America), André Clavel juxtaposes the work of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies. Though he discusses Mukherjee’s work in more detail than Interpreter of Maladies, according to him the characters in Interpreter of Maladies are torn between “the magical Orient, exoticism and nostalgia that burns like a stick of incense on one side, on the other, the frustration and the cultural uprootedness of the exiles’ America” (“[d]’un côté, l’Orient magique, l’exotisme, la nostalgie qui se consume comme un bâton d’encens. De l’autre, la frustration et le déracinement, dans l’Amérique des exilés »).\textsuperscript{140}

Clavel describes Mukherjee and Lahiri as follows: “Indian by origin, they now live off their pens in United States. And are haunted by the question of identity. … Both are torn between the India of their ancestors and America, where the winds of migration have thrown them” (“Originaire d’Inde, elles vivent aujourd’hui de leur plume aux Etats-Unis. Et sont hantées par l’identité. …Toutes deux sont tiraillées entre l’Inde de leurs ancêtres et les Etats-Unis, où les ont jetées les vents de la diaspora »).\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
Mukherjee prefers to think of herself simply as an ‘American’ rather than as an Indian-American. In 1997 she declared that “I am an American, not an Asian-American. My rejection of hyphenation has been called race treachery, but it is really a demand that America deliver the promises of its dream to all its citizens equally.” On the contrary, in spite of having lived all her life in America, Lahiri does not think she belongs to either of her two cultures and, though more American than her parents, does not feel fully American. Though uncomfortable under the label ‘Indian English writer’, Lahiri has also resigned herself to being called Indian-American. Clavel does not take into account the two writers’ distinct approach to their diasporic identities or the generational difference between them. He appears to think of Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee simply as Indian women writers in America based on their Indian Bengali origin and American domicile.

The article in Le Point quizzes its readers as to whether, since Lahiri was, “born in London in 1968 to Bengali parents … [and] educated in the United States. Is she Indian or American? (« [n]ée à Londres en 1968 de parents bengalis … [et] éduquée aux Etats-Unis. Est-elle indienne ou américaine? ») Though it answers its own question by saying that “[s]he lives the experience of the in-between” (« [e]lle vit l’expérience de l’entre-deux »), within the article, Lahiri is described as “torn between India, the country of origin and America, the adopted country” (« écartelée entre l’Inde, terre des ancêtres, et l’Amérique, terre d’immigration »). She is complimented on the way she portrays the ‘entre-deux’ or being in-between cultures, unlike Rushdie, “without forced exoticism, without exploring the innumerable mythologies of eternal India” (« [s]ans exotisme forcé, sans explorer les mythologies innombrables de l’Inde éternelle »). Yet the precedence given to her Indian origin becomes obvious when her rise to fame with her debut work is ranked with Indian English authors such as Arundhati Roy and Vikram Seth or when she is described as Dorothy Parker but ‘en sari coloré’ (in a colourful sari).

The review of L’Interprète des maladies in Le Monde appreciates that “unlike many writers from former British colonies who often write in English only in order to be sure of being read and to avoid bad translations, Jhumpa Lahiri writes in English because it is her language; she almost never resorts to a peppering of Bengali words. She is in no way a folklorist or an ethnic writer” (« [c]ontrairement à beaucoup d’écrivains des anciennes colonies britanniques qui n’ont souvent recours à l’anglais...”.

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145 Ibid.
146 Ibid.
147 Dorothy Parker was an American short story writer.
148 “Le sang neuf de l’Inde.”
que pour être certains d’être lus et éviter de mauvaises traductions, Jhumpa Lahiri écrit en anglais parce que c’est sa langue; elle n’a d’ailleurs quasiment jamais recours au saupoudrage de mots bengalis. Elle n’a rien d’un écrivain folkloriste ou ethnique »).149

However, in the process of emphasising Lahiri’s distance from those writers from former British colonies for whom English is not their first language and who pepper their English with words from their native languages to give it an ethnic flavour, the article draws attention to her Indian origin. It ascribes the originality of her writing to her bicultural upbringing as diasporic Indian living in America but visiting India frequently, sometimes even for months, missing school, even if it acknowledges that “[t]his flavour of the exotic would amount to nothing without real mastery of writing” (« [c]ette flaveur exotique ne serait rien sans une vraie maîtrise d’écriture »).150

As we noted in the two previous sections, the reception of Interpreter of Maladies in its non-Indian Anglophone and Indian forms seems to hinge upon the issue of authorial identity. As a second generation migrant who was born and brought up outside India and has never lived in India (in spite of her frequent visits as a child), the hyphenation of Lahiri’s Indian identity is markedly distinct from the first generation migrant writers. Though Indian in origin, she would not have the same connection with India that someone who was born in India and lives there or has moved somewhere else after spending a few years there. Lahiri has never claimed to be Indian in the sense that someone, who is born in India and grows up as Indian (till migration introduces hyphenation in that Indianness) is. As her interviews show, she neither claims to fully belong to India or America nor speaks of herself as exclusively Indian. She has resigned herself to the term Indian-American151 but speaks of herself as ‘as American as if she was born there’. (“I belong to this nation as if I had been born here” (« J’appartiens à cette nation comme si j’y étais née »)152 and “more American than her parents [even if] less American than the average American”.153

The response in the non-Indian Anglophone and Indian audiences reflects an awareness of the generational difference that enhances the hyphenation of her diasporic identity and a perceptible inclination towards one or the other of the three parts of her identity, namely Indian, American or in-between, but the French response is less variegated. Lahiri, though she has not received much

150 Ibid.
151 Lahiri was born in London. Her parents moved to America when she was three years old and she was naturalised as American later. Lahiri, Un Nom pour un autre.urned 18.
153 Riggs, “Lahiri knows firsthand about alienation.”
individual attention, is usually mentioned in French articles on Indian English literature and counted amongst the new ‘Indian’ voices. She is consistently categorised as an ‘Indian writer writing from America’ and included in the ranks of Indian English writers. The gradual but distinct fading out of India from her work or the lack of links between her work and Indian English or Indian works is ignored.

It is against this background that the French translation of her work is considered here to be part of the tradition of French translation of Indian English literature. Since Lahiri does not experiment with language or plots or narrative techniques apart from changing the perspectives, and since there are no Indianisms and very few Indian words in Interpreter of Maladies, L’Interprète des maladies offers less of an opportunity for linguistic domestication than many other Indian English or postcolonial works. However, translations of the title of the collection and the titles of some of the stories within the collection do display, to some extent, the same naturalising tendency we observed in French translations of titles of Indian English texts such as The God of Small Things and The Inheritance of Loss.

As we can see, the English title of Interpreter of Maladies avoids any article for the noun interpreter, to make it clear that the word is not used to signify any particular person. The absence of any article introduces an ambiguity as to whether the title alludes to the characters (in the stories) who act as interpreters of maladies or to the role the author assumes or desires to play between her two cultures. At the same time, this absence highlights the uniqueness of the phrase and signals the possibility that the role can be played by anyone. The French title adds an article before the noun ‘interprète’ according to French grammatical conventions. However, the choice is not innocent, since instead of an indefinite article (Un or Une) it prefers the definite article L’. By avoiding the indefinite article which would have been gender specific, the French translation attempts to maintain the ambiguity as to whether the title refers to the author herself, but by introducing an article where there is none ends up domesticating the peculiarity of the title.

The French translations of titles of some of the stories within the collection are equally problematic. For example, the first story in Interpreter of Maladies is “A Temporary Matter”. At first glance, this title appears to allude to the electricity outage (for the purpose of repair work at a certain time in the evenings) that Shoba and Shukumar have to suffer along with the occupants of other houses on their street and which is temporary as it is to last only about a week. However, as the story reveals the disintegration that has set in after the death of their first baby in Shoba and Shukumar’s life,
relationship and marriage, the title acquires a deeper significance. The title points not only to the temporary matter of the power breakdown but to all matters temporary: the food that Shoba stocks up in the happier days and Shukumar uses up after the sad event, Shoba and Shukumar’s love for each other, their relationship with each other, their marriage but also life itself (whether it be their baby’s life or human life in general). At the same time, the title introduces ambiguity and faint hope as to the final outcome of the story since the communication breakdown between Shoba and Shukumar could be temporary too. It suggests the possibility that just as the repairs end the problem with the power supply early, the ‘game of hurtful confessions’ that Shoba and Shukumar play during the dark evenings might have unplugged the emotional blockage and restored the channels of communication between Shoba and Shukumar. Perhaps the distance that Shoba has decided to put between them or even the decision to stay apart might end up being a temporary matter. However, the translation of the title in French, ‘Un dérangement provisoire’, which means a temporary disruption / disturbance / failure, is too obviously linked to the electricity outage and as such is reductive of the multiplicity of allusions in the original. If read as a hint about the nature of the problems between Shoba and Shukumar, it is misleadingly and excessively optimistic about their seriousness and temporariness.

The title of the title story is translated in the same way as the title of the collection: L’Interprète des maladies. Here too, the article introduces the same finality as in the title of the collection. Mr. Kapasi is not ‘the’ interpreter of maladies, and by the end of the story it is doubtful whether he is an interpreter at all. For Mr. Kapasi, Interpreting the maladies of medical patients is just one of his jobs until Mrs. Das over-interprets it or reads a ‘romantic’ and metaphysical meaning into this work. It is also a failed ambition and dream, the lofty ideal that he has not been able to reach. He is unable to become a professional interpreter because of family obligations. And in the case of Mrs. Das, he is unable to perform as an interpreter or fails in his attempt to interpret her malady because of the cultural barriers between them and also because he fails to understand that she expects a cure, not his understanding or help in expressing her malady.

Another problematic translation is the title of the story “Mrs. Sen’s”. The question that remains unanswered in the English title is Mrs. Sen’s ‘what?’ Whether the author wants to imply Mrs. Sen’s apartment or place, her bond with Eliot, her emotional state or her actions is left uncertain by the original title. The problem in translating the possessive in French relates to the preposition; whether the preposition should be ‘chez (at)’ or ‘de (of)’ would depend on the noun that follows “Mrs. Sen’s”. If it is Mrs. Sen’s apartment, place or house, it would be ‘Chez Mrs. Sen’ and if it is any other noun, it would precede ‘de’ (of) which will then be followed by Mrs. Sen, ‘… de Mrs. Sen’.
Instead, the French title simply says ‘Mrs. Sen’, shifting the focus from what Mrs. Sen possesses, does or feels to Mrs. Sen herself. Rather than confronting the problem, or perhaps to avoid ‘interpreting’ the ambiguity in the original, a reductive translation is performed.

**Conclusion**

The French response to *Interpreter of Maladies*, as we observed is almost negligible in terms of quantity. But what material is available shows a tendency to consider Lahiri ‘Indian’ and as such an Indian English writer, ignoring the complexity of her hyphenated second-generation Indian-American identity.

In spite of a considerable body of ‘migrant literature’ in French, which deals with the condition of the ‘entre-deux’ or ‘being in-between cultures’, Lahiri’s exploration and expression of that condition has not generated interest or response. It is on this point that the three receptions of *Interpreter of Maladies* diverge.

It is possible that the scant French response might be a result of the fact that Lahiri is considered one of many diasporic Indian writers who deal with the same concerns of ‘identity, exile, loss, translation from one culture to another and the condition of migrancy’. Perhaps overfamiliarity with these themes and of Indian English literature has led to lack of attention to the specificity that Lahiri brings to these themes through the more pronounced hyphenation of her identity as a second-generation immigrant and increased distance from ‘India’.

However, the lack of interest could also be because Lahiri does not present the overfamiliar or expected Third World India and there are few subalterns amongst her Indians, who are almost universally well-established, educated diasporians. Or perhaps it could be that the Pulitzer carries much less weight than a Booker and well-settled migrants who suffer from self-inflicted ‘communication’ problems are found to be less interesting than those who face the postcolonial problems of resisting the psychological domination of the ‘centre’ and cultural ‘othering’ by the host culture.

**Conclusion to the chapter**

From the analysis of the reception of *Interpreter of Maladies*, it is obvious that Lahiri’s hyphenated identity and her diasporic focus play a pivotal but different role in the response of all three audiences.
Chapter 3: Receptions of *Interpreter of Maladies*

The non-Indian Anglophone response is extensive and positive but the effect of the intersection between the ‘interpretive community’ the readers belong to and Lahiri’s hyphenated identity is obvious. The non-diasporic American, or rather the Western audience, fixes Lahiri into her South Asian ethnicity. Despite the enhanced hyphenation of Lahiri’s identity as a second generation diasporic American, Lahiri’s Bengali Indian origin bestows an authenticity on her representation of the ethnic community and the wider Indian community she belongs to. Although, to borrow Gita Rajan’s phrase, her ability to evoke familiar American situations and to step into the American perspective, as well as her unIndianised English, give her an added advantage. The significance of this combination is obvious in the ease with which Lahiri is accepted as ‘interpreter/translator’ of her ‘culture of origin’ by her ‘host’ readership.

Her ‘Indian origin’ also links her to the Indian English canon and ‘postcolonialism’. The effect of this and the effect of of the hegemony of postcolonial perspective as approach to Indian English texts can be seen in the selectively postcolonial readings of stories in *Interpreter of Maladies*. At the same time, Lahiri’s obviously more Americanised second-generation status allows the diasporic American audience of other ethnicities to identify with Lahiri on the basis of the shared concerns. This audience engages with *Interpreter of Maladies* as a distinctly migrant American or minority text.

If her Bengali-Indian origin is significant to her Western audience, it is equally significant for her diasporic and resident Indian audience. The diasporic Indian audience seems to link her immediately to the established Bengali-Indian-American writers like Bharati Mukherjee and Divakaruni and place her within the existing South Asian diasporic community and canon. They think of her work as distinct from postcolonial Indian English literature but their criticism is informed by the debates and concerns within the field of postcolonial studies. They themselves perform the role of insider audience, usually accorded to the ‘at home’ or resident audience of diasporic Indian English writers, in their reaction to the reception by the American or the outsider/ host/ metropolitan audience.

Surprisingly, and in contrast to the prevalent perception in the postcolonial field, the ‘at home’ or resident Indian response to *Interpreter of Maladies* is not negative. In fact it is almost unanimously positive. Though aware of Lahiri’s diasporic status and focus, the Indian reception of Lahiri is different from that of other diasporic writers. In marked contrast with the cultural alienation that diasporic writers are accused of or forced into, Lahiri is appropriated into an inclusive Bengali Indianness. The role that her Bengali Indian origin and her near- exclusive focus on and flattering
positive representation of the Bengali Indian, even if largely diasporic, community play in this response is obvious.

The significance of Lahiri’s ‘origin’ in the negligible French response is evident in the way she is consistently linked to Indian English writing. Her Indian ‘origin’ is of much greater interest to the French than her Indian American hyphenation.

**The ‘alien intimate’**

The hyphenation of Lahiri’s identity is distinct from the first generation ‘diasporic’ or ‘migrant’ writers because it is deepened by the increased generational gap. India for her is a world that is intimate but alien. It does not exist for her in the same way as it does for the first-generation migrants such as her own parents or many of the diasporic Indian English writers. Her familiarity with India is evident in her ability, however limited, to look through an Indian perspective or focalisation. But this familiarity is in many ways second-hand because it is acquired from her parents, as a tourist, or as a child. This is evident in her strategic choice of resident Indian characters, all of whom belong to an older generation. Yet this familiarity allows her enough distance from her American life and makes it possible to look at the diasporic experience as if from the outside.

While Lahiri herself expresses the feeling of not fully belonging to either side of her bicultural identity, the combination of her origin and her ‘lived experience’ marks her in a way it does not the first-generation writers. The ‘speaking for’ subalterns, the urbanism, the distance from the masses, the cultural faux-pas which are found inexcusable in the first generation diasporic writers are not taken to heart in her case.

The same privilege is accorded to her by her American side when it comes to the first- or second-generation diasporic experience. Though her lived American experience seems to matter less to her audiences than her Bengali-Indian origin, it gives her portrayal of the diasporic experience an authenticity for the Indian audience and accuracy for the American audience, at the same time as her representations of India are authentic for the American audience and considered sympathetic by the Indian audience. Hyphenation of her identity thus makes her, for her two worlds, to twist her own words around, an alien intimate.

The attention accorded to Lahiri is, thus, like Desai, due to her origin, location and subject matter. These link her not only to the very visible canon of Indian English literature but also to the prevalent
interests within literary institutions, and within the hegemonic postcolonial perspective, such as diasporic experiences, life in the globalised world and cultural encounters within multicultural societies. What then happens in the case of writers, such as Tejpal, who write from within India and neither share these experiences nor write about these issues?
Chapter 4: Receptions of *The Alchemy of Desire*
Chapter 4: Receptions of *The Alchemy of Desire*

**Introduction**

*The Alchemy of Desire*¹ is the fictional debut of Tarun Tejpal, an investigative journalist, editor, publisher, entrepreneur-turned-novelist from India.

Of the three broad categories of Indian English writers based on their residency status discussed in the introduction, Tejpal belongs to that of the resident writers. Despite the fact that there have always been a number of well-known Indian English writers who have lived in or have returned to India and written from ‘within’ India, and some also like R.K. Narayan who had not even travelled abroad until towards the end of his writing career, the predominant image of Indian English writers has been that of a migrant writer, especially in the post-Rushdie years.

The tide has somewhat turned with Arundhati Roy. Indian English writers writing from India have not only increased in number; they also have been increasingly noticed. Writers like Tejpal are of interest to this study as a counterpoint to the established perception of the Indian English writer as diasporic writer and the diasporic writer as the ‘native informant’. In addition, they add an extra dimension to existing assumptions and criticisms of Indian English literature and its reception as postcolonial literature.

Within the present study, Tejpal as a male, resident writer and *The Alchemy of Desire* as an Indian text, devoid of issues of identity, migrancy, hybridity, exile and in-betweenness that are of significant interest in the postcolonial field, act as counterpoints to the other two authors and their texts.

Born in 1963, Tejpal had had a long and varied career by the time *Alchemy* was published. Tejpal was editor of *India Today*, one of India’s leading magazines and managing editor of another leading magazine *Outlook India*. With Sanjeev Saith, he was the founder of IndiaInk, which was the first to publish Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*.² As the founder of *Tehelka*, the online news portal that shook India with its sensational exposés of match fixing in the world of cricket and corruption in the Defence Ministry of India, Tarun Tejpal has constantly been in the news and is a well-known and respected name in India and other parts of Asia. After the *Tehelka* exposés, he was declared to be “one of Asia’s 50 most powerful communicators” by *Asia Week* magazine and *Business Week* counted him “among 50 leaders at the forefront of change in Asia.”³

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The Government came down with all its might on Tehelka, Tejpal, his financial backers and those working with him. While in the thick of the battle for the survival of Tehelka, Tejpal wrote his first novel *The Alchemy of Desire*, which was published in 2005. His second book *The Story of My Assassins* was published in 2009 and is a fictional account of the lives of five young men who are in jail for plotting to kill a journalist. Though it falls outside the limits of the time frame chosen by this study and has a totally different storyline, like *The Alchemy of Desire, The Story of My Assassins* has a mix of autobiographical elements from the author’s personal life and journalistic insights from his professional life.

*The Alchemy of Desire* was a finalist for the Prix Femina in France in 2005, and went on to win the Prix Mille Pages in France, that year. Since then, it has also won the 2007 Prix des Lecteurs du Livre de Poche. As we shall see, although prestigious and highly respected, the Prix Mille Pages does not play as significant a role in the reception of *The Alchemy of Desire*, even in France, as prizes such as the Booker or the Pulitzer play in the global reception of the texts, which win these major awards in the Anglophone publishing world.

*The Alchemy of Desire* (the text will be referred to as *Alchemy* from now on) was praised by none other than V.S. Naipaul, a personal friend of Tejpal, who had flown across continents to support him during the *Tehelka* ordeal and who had specially invited Tejpal to his own Nobel Prize ceremony. Arundhati Roy is also a close friend and gets a special mention in the acknowledgements at the end of *Alchemy* as one of those who stood by Tejpal in the aftermath of the *Tehelka* ordeal and, as it happens, the days of writing *Alchemy*. Although Roy has been conspicuous in her silence on *Alchemy* and in her absence from events related to the novel, Naipaul was even present for the book launch gala.

By the time *Alchemy* was published, Tejpal had had a 20-year career in journalism and was well known in India, before the *Tehelka* ordeal made him extremely famous, nationally and internationally.

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5 Chatterjee, “Madman or Messiah?.”  
7 “Tarun J Tejpal.”  
internationally. Naipaul’s praise and the French literary honour, though not crucial to Tejpal’s personal fame, were important in the literary world. And yet, as we shall see, they proved limited in their significance in the reception of *Alchemy*.

The general perception might be that Naipaul’s status in the literary world, the tenor of his relations with India and the rarity of praise from him would ensure immediate heightened attention to the debut novel of an Indian, who was not widely known outside India until after the *Tehelka* episode. Another perception would be that his endorsement was an invaluable and validating asset in the ‘literary market’ but also a pointer towards a special place for Tejpal - at a distance from the Indian English canon - and as such ensured *Alchemy* critical attention as a serious literary work. We shall see how, though not totally wrong, these perceptions are not entirely right either.

Since *Alchemy* was published in 2005, as an Indian English writer Tejpal is part of the post-Arundhati Roy literary generation and belongs to the decade 1998-2008. Before *Alchemy*, Tejpal’s link to the Indian English canon was as the publisher of *The God of Small Things* (*TGST*) and as a critic. As an engagé journalist-turned-novelist, with *Alchemy* he became part of the long tradition of thinker-activist writers in India to which Arundhati Roy now belongs. The difference, though, is that Roy’s activism attracted more attention after her literary success and she acquired the status of a global dissident and spokesperson for the downtrodden subsequent to the fame and prestige that came with her Booker Prize, whereas Tejpal’s writing career began while under attack from the then ruling Indian Government for exposing corruption in its highest echelons.

As the first novel of a well-known journalist (-publisher-editor), who had faced the might of the State and not only survived with his head held high but had made a comeback while that same Government was still in power, *Alchemy*, when it was published, generated keen interest, in India but also outside. This interest was further stoked by Naipaul’s praise. As we shall see, these extra-textual aspects play an interesting role in *Alchemy*’s reception. Attracting more attention than the text, not only do they set the tone of the reaction to the text but in many ways overshadow its literary aspects.

Equally significant for the analysis of *Alchemy*’s reception is the general lack of scholarly interest in it, even in France, where *Alchemy* was a huge popular success and was consecrated with a French literary prize. The negligible role that the French success and prize play in *Alchemy*’s Indian and non-Indian Anglophone reception becomes significant when considered in comparison with the role
that success in the Western Anglophone world usually plays in the Indian and the non-Anglophone reception of Indian English works and diasporic writers.

Also conspicuous is the absence of concern, in the at-home reception of *Alchemy*, about issues such as authenticity, exoticism, intended audience or negative representation of Indian reality. In view of the prominence of these concerns in the Indian response to Indian English writers and texts from the diasporas and, considering the place erotics, Hinduism and the history of post-independence India occupy in *Alchemy*, this is surprising. The question that needs to be asked is: what role do the factors such as author’s resident status and/or *Alchemy*’s deviation from issues central to the postcolonial perspective play in the lack of such concerns.

**Audiences**

The question of the audience for *Alchemy* is interesting. As a book that was published first in India then almost immediately in England, *Alchemy* was obviously aimed at the Indian, but also wider, Anglophone audience and eventually (and now almost naturally) at audiences in other languages. However, the question of the intended and actual audience is complicated by *Alchemy*’s subject matter, its author’s opinion as to who is important (to him) as audience and the novel’s surprising success in France.

*Alchemy* is an exploration of the workings of sexual desire and creativity, constantly prioritised over the (social, political and historical) national context against which it is juxtaposed. On the one hand, *Alchemy* defies the expectations likely to be raised by Tejpal’s profession and image, both sharply in focus at the moment of its publication, since it is not the political satire or provocative social, national or political commentary that one would expect from a serious and engagé journalist-editor-publisher of Tejpal’s stature. On the other hand, in transcending supposed ‘Indian’ inhibitions about sensuality, sexuality and erotics, *Alchemy* meets the expectations of a willingness and audacity to push the established boundaries that go with such an image.

At the same time, while the exploration of sexual desire may be a bold and risqué subject in the context of present-day India (a scenario changing fast) it is certainly not so in the international context, where it is at once a modern concern and a classically ‘Indian’ theme evoking the *Kama Sutra* and the walls of the Khajuraho temple. Catherine Innes suggests that each ‘postcolonial text’ has a double audience of insiders and outsiders or those who belong to the culture represented by that
Chapter 4: Receptions of *The Alchemy of Desire*

text and those who do not and also that postcolonial authors are aware of this double audience.12 Is *Alchemy* as a text ‘aware’ of its (Indian and international) double audience and cleverly aimed at both audiences?

**Author’s intended audience**

Tejpal describes *Alchemy* as “deeply India specific”13 and feels that *Alchemy* “addresses emotion and love and sexuality in an adult, even-eyed way, something very few Indian novels do.”14 In view of Tejpal’s statements and Indian reticence regarding open expression and discussion of sexual desire, the intended audience of *Alchemy* seems to be Indian. However, Tejpal’s relationship with the Indian audience is ambiguous.

Though Tejpal is thankful for the public support and acknowledges that “the outpouring of goodwill and affection from people of all classes”15 was the incredible upside of the Tehelka ordeal, he is almost contemptuous of Indian reviewers, denigrating their critical competence, judgment and professional integrity:

> I think between incompetence and malice, almost no decent reviewing takes place in India. Mostly it is the clever, collegiate ‘quiz competition’ kind of notices that pass of for book reviews. Media journeymen -- out of work journos, copy editors in publishing houses, peripheral academics, precious column writers -- these are the ones who are handed out books. Most of them lack the skill, the craft, the heart, the understanding of the tradition, to assess serious books. They lack the ability to inhabit the intent or ambition of a book. They praise bad books, damn good ones -- all without understanding or reason.

> However the sweet thing -- and proof of their incompetence -- is the fact that this reviewing makes no difference to the life of a book. Reviewers in India can neither make nor break a book. In the final analysis, the reviewer here is merely another reader, but cursed with the burden of having to make a telling pronouncement. Into all this throw envy and malice. A very sad potion is what you get. 16

Also, when asked “Where do you expect the readers of *The Alchemy of Desire* to come from - here [India] or abroad?” Tejpal’s response has been “Everywhere. […] I hope the book speaks to people of different cultures and languages, travels the world [and] its emotional concerns […] prove universal.” 17

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12 Innes, “Citizens of the world: reading postcolonial literature.”
15 Ibid.
17 “Rediff interview with Tejpal.”
Explaining his long wait to find the right tone and right story, Tejpal says that

my struggle for twenty years was to find the tone to tell the kind of story I wanted to in the kind of way I wanted to. And a lot of that had to do with trying to capture the noise, chaos and teeming-ness of India without making it phoney and a caricature. This is not easy when you write in English. The English language, after all, represents the character of the people it was born out of, the English people -- thus it is a language of understatement, reserve, coolness.

But Indian reality is anything but that -- it is noisy, emotional, overheated, anarchic, folksy, swinging pell-mell between rationality and irrationality. So the task is to expand the language, bend it creatively without resorting to caricature. To find a tone that allows you to tell a story without too much simplification. 18

Tejpal has emphatically denied that *Alchemy* is aimed at the Western audience. 19 However, the English translations or explanations which precede or follow many, though not all, common Hindi words and phrases used in *Alchemy* are superfluous for Indian readers and undermine this denial.

By a readership informed in the postcolonial perspective, such as the Anglophone and Indian critics, Tejpal’s aspiration to capture and present ‘Indian reality’ or bending English to suit it might be considered an indication of *Alchemy*’s implicit westward orientation. As might be the way he introduces and erases the ‘Hindi’ gaps by the translations/ explanations in English, his dual focus on exotic erotics and his portrayal of a chaotic and fragmenting post-independence India. Has this implicit westward orientation been an issue in the response to *Alchemy*? Does Tejpal’s apparent desire to push back the boundaries of Indian literature and sensibility contradict the implicit westward orientation of the novel? Or do the two impulses co-exist (or have they been strategically brought together) suggesting an awareness of a double audience that is then reflected by the text? But then *Alchemy* has not remained limited to these two audiences or to English.

The translation of Indian English texts into other languages has become a routine process now, linked more to the general success of Indian English literature. In spite of the weight that prizes like Booker or Pulitzer lend to winning texts, this process is quite delinked from an individual text’s success in the Anglophone world. And yet, it is very rare for a translation of any text, especially a non-Anglophone translation of an Indian English text, to become a success in its own right or to become more successful than the original. *Alchemy* has achieved this feat in its French translation. This adds an additional dimension to the ‘double audience’ and makes it interesting to analyse the novel and to observe its reception in this ‘third’ context.

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19 Kumar, “Alchemist of words.”
Chapter 4: Receptions of *The Alchemy of Desire*

*Alchemy* was launched in India in March 2005 and in the UK in May 2005 by different publishers. It was published in France as *Loin de Chandigarh*\(^{20}\) in September of the same year and the USA edition came out in the following year. This chapter aims to compare the receptions of *Alchemy* in these readerships in the order in which they received it. As *Alchemy* reached its Indian reviewers before the non-Indian reviewers, the analysis will begin with its Indian reception followed by the non-Indian Anglophone reception and finally the French reception.

The chapter will present a brief summary of the novel and an account of the textual aspects that indicate its complexity. These will then be followed by an analysis of each reception using reviews and author interviews, with the aim of examining whether and how the author’s image in combination with the subject matter influenced the reception of *Alchemy*, especially in India but also outside, or in some ways distracted the readers into not noticing the literary aspects and complexity of the novel. These three receptions will then be compared to examine the shared and specific aspects of the responses of each readership to the text and observe which of the multiple readings that the complexity of the text invites are in reality actualised by these readerships.

**The Alchemy of Desire**

Moving back and forth between the small town of Chandigarh, the capital city of Delhi and Gethia (a small hamlet in the foothills of the Himalayas overlooking the Jeolicote Valley), Tarun Tejpal’s *The Alchemy of Desire* is a sprawling novel of 518 pages, divided into five parts. The narrative is a first-person account of the journey of a couple (an un-named narrator and his wife Fiza) from love to sexual passion and from marriage to alienation to the possibility of getting back together again and each of the five parts of the narrative represents a different phase of their relationship.

**An overview**

The book description on the HarperCollins website proclaims that it is the story of “a penniless would-be-writer” who “halts work on his novel only to feed his ceaseless desire for his beautiful wife.”\(^{21}\) The author himself declares that he has attempted “to write an intimate, emotionally taut story without ceding the space for larger ideas.”\(^{22}\) And so, the intimate narrative of the ups and downs in a former-journalist and would-be-writer narrator’s desire for his wife (and in his ability to write) and the unraveling of their relationship alternates with other narratives linked with different


\(^{22}\) Gill, “Tarun Tejpal: Secrets and Sensations - The Independent.”
periods in the history of the nation. These other narratives are the stories of two failed novels and the life stories of two women who change the narrator’s life in different ways.

The narrative begins in the middle of the story with the proclamation: “Love is not the greatest glue between two people. Sex is” and from there on proceeds to tell us, in the narrator’s voice, of his loss of desire for his beautiful wife for the first time after meeting her while in college, falling in love with her and then spending fifteen years of passionate married life together. As the desire dries up, their love and marriage lie in ruins and Fizz leaves. From here the narrative moves into the past, to the time when the narrator decided to become a writer.

Supported wholeheartedly by Fizz, the narrator leaves his job as a journalist to do two things that he has always wanted to do - write and never be physically away from Fizz. The first novel he attempts is an ambitious grand epic, which encompasses in its grand scope India in its colonial, anti-colonial and post-independence phases. It depicts three generations of men in one family, each man symbolizing his generation. The grandfather represents the Indians who try to curry favour with the British in the colonial days. The father represents the English-educated generation that turned against the British to follow Gandhiji, made sacrifices for the nation in the anti-colonial phase but eventually turned into (often corrupt) power-mongers in the post-independence chaos. Finally, the son represents the Westernised materialist youth of post-independence India, disillusioned, disappointed in the previous generation and wanting to break free from the shackles of the (colonial and anti-colonial) past. In (the narrator’s) real life, the writing, when it goes well, becomes a way of stoking the desire between the narrator and Fizz to newer levels and sex becomes the means of filling the void when writing fails.

When the attempt to write this epic fails and the manuscript ends up at the bottom of the lake in Chandigarh, the narrator and Fizz decide to move to Delhi. Their journey from Chandigarh to Delhi in the truck moving their belongings or rather the drivers of the truck give the narrator the idea for his second novel. The distance between the world of those two truck-drivers and the ‘modern’ Delhi they visit for the first time inspires the ‘cosmos-in-a-kernel’ (the narrator of Alchemy defines it as a ‘one incident illuminating the universe kind of novel’ 173) second novel. It is about the journey of a Sikh orphan - sheltered within a bubble of religion, from the innocent world of his seminary into that of modern India, which co-exist at a short physical but huge temporal distance away from each other and encounter each other through him - symbolising the journey of the Sikh religion from noble to
fanatic militancy within India. The narrator prises himself away from his mundane job as a copyeditor when Fizz points out that it has begun to take hold of him and attempts the second novel, which also fails. Around the same time, through Fizz’s job as a research assistant to a female academic working on masturbatory habits of men, the phantoms of others begin to haunt their desire.

Their life takes a dramatic turn when the narrator inherits a lot of money as his grandmother dies. This is preceded by the life story of the narrator’s grandmother Bibi Lahori: a narrative of the past of the narrator’s family linked to the colonial legacy of the partition of India. Bibi Lahori’s husband and their farmhands are killed by some Muslim fanatics driven by religious frenzy in the wake of India’s partition. She watches this happening from where she is hiding and then methodically disguises herself as a boy, collects as many valuables and money as she can hide on her person, sets fire to her husband’s mutilated body and escapes from what is now Pakistan to India. There Bibi rebuilds her own life and then of her sons, whom her husband had already sent to India for their safety. She develops and runs a huge estate and becomes a leading figure in her community. As a strong woman apparently untouched by emotion, she is feared and respected by her family but not loved. As someone who is equally disappointed in his father as Bibi is, the narrator is shown to be close to her until her lifelong hatred for the Muslims alienates them when she learns of his love for Fizz, a Muslim. In Bibi’s death their lives meet again and the narrator is tempted to write about her life but discards the idea as he thinks he has material enough only for a short story.

The narrator’s share of Bibi’s estate allows the narrator and Fizz to buy a house in Gethia, a hamlet in the foothills of Himalaya. Their life takes another turn and is almost ruined when, while renovating the house, they discover the hidden diaries of Catherine, the former owner of the Gethia house and the narrator comes under their spell. This is followed by the story of Catherine’s life embedded in the colonial past of India. Catherine is the daughter of an American adventurer-traveller-antique dealer father, who is a connoisseur of erotica, and a passive and religious mother who has little interest in sex. Catherine, as the inheritor of her father’s adventurous spirit and interest in ‘desire’, sets out on a journey to seek both. After a heady, bohemian start in Paris, Catherine meets Sayd, an Indian prince, marries him and travels to India. Since Sayd is homosexual, theirs is a strange marriage where they love each other but find sexual satisfaction in other, sometimes the same, men.

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23 Sikhism as a religion turned militant in response to Mughal colonisation and religious persecution. Its ‘noble’ militant nature is reflected in the Kirpan or dagger that Sikhs carry which (is now a religious symbol but) was originally for self-defence and protection of the weak. However the militancy turned into religious fanaticism and political separatism in 1980s, as Tejpal describes in Alchemy, when they demanded a separate state and fought against the Indian army from within the Golden temple in Amritsar in India, the most important Sikh shrine in the world.
Chapter 4: Receptions of The Alchemy of Desire

The ménage-à-trois goes wrong when they are both attracted to and have sexual relations with Gajsingh, Sayd’s handsome and loyal servant. Sayd dies of consumption before, jealous of Gajsingh’s relations with Catherine, he is able to destroy Gajsingh. Gajsingh remains Catherine’s servant/lover after Sayd’s death. Their idyll is, in turn, ruined when Gajsingh’s wife comes to stay with him and he has a family of his own. Jealous of Gajsingh’s attachment to his family, Catherine favours the other married couple in her service, who convert to Christianity, over Gajsingh. That couple takes advantage of the situation and, supposedly, slowly poisons her to death. The narrator becomes obsessed by Catherine, her life, her sexual adventures and secrets while deciphering her diaries to the point where he feels physically (sexually) possessed by Catherine. His obsession dries up his desire for Fizz and drives Fizz away. He comes out of his obsession when he uncovers the secret of Catherine’s life and then once again feels the pull of his former life and love for Fizz. He remembers the beginning of his and Fizz’s love and life together and goes in search of Fizz to try and bring her back in his life. The story ends with Fizz’s telephone message that she will come to Gethia in a few days and the narrator sitting down to write the story that begins with “Sex is not the greatest glue between two people. Love ….”

The commentary on India and political events in post-independence India occupies a large part of Alchemy in the form of other narratives, the narrator’s musings or direct summaries and a number of minor characters that are interspersed through the intimate account of the narrator’s life; even if the personal life takes precedence over the national context. Through the interweaving of personal and national narrative, Tejpal has managed to create a web of stories where the two narrative strands briefly touch each other while running their separate courses.

This multiplicity of narratives and characters in combination with the minutiae of descriptions has given Alchemy a thematic and textual variety and complexity. These textual aspects indicate the potential for multilayered reading which is further enhanced, rather than limited, by the structure of the text through its links to two literary traditions, one Indian and one Western. There is also a strong undercurrent of ‘non-dit’ or ‘unsaid’ in Alchemy which is one of its most fascinating aspects, especially in view of the context of Alchemy’s production and various autobiographical links between the text and Tejpal’s life.

The analyses of the receptions will make it possible to find out which of these textual aspects are significant in the response to Alchemy. They will also reveal which of the many possible readings of Alchemy are actualised, or left unactualised, together and/or individually, by the three audiences and
what role the extra-textual aspects, such as author’s identity, image and persona or the conditions in which *Alchemy* was produced or the hegemony of the postcolonial perspective as an approach to Indian English literature, play in these readings.

**Structure**

*Alchemy*, though not a cosmos-in-a-kernel type of narrative, is not as rambling and loose as its size and non-linearity make it appear. The narrative in all its multiplicity and detail is quite strongly structured and at two different levels, the physical and the temporal. At the physical level, the text is divided into five parts loosely organised around five concepts from Hindu philosophy. Temporally it is anachronous in the movement of the narrative through present, past and future but also cyclic, since at the end, the narrative jumps right back to its very beginning and the end of one narrative is the beginning of another.

**Physical structure**

At the physical level, the anachronous narrative of *Alchemy* is divided into five parts. The title of each part is a Sanskrit word accompanied by its English translation. These five title words are five concepts from Hindu philosophy: *Prema* (love), *Karma* (action), *Artha* (money), *Kama* (desire) and *Satya* (truth). Each part is loosely organised around the theme or concept expressed by its title and the end of one part announces the beginning of the next part.

For example, ‘*Prema*: Love’, the first part, ends on the narrator and Fizz’s decision to move from Chandigarh to Delhi and the next part, ‘*Karma*: Action’, narrates their move to Delhi. At the end of the second part, the narrator hears of the money left to him by Bibi Lahori. In the third part, ‘*Artha*: Money’, that money allows them to buy, repair and restore the Gethia house. During the restoration, the workers discover Catherine’s diaries and by the end of the third part, the narrator is hooked on to them. The fourth part, ‘*Kama*: Desire’, is the story of Catherine’s life, as it is deciphered and retold by the narrator from her diaries. The diaries and the fourth part of the novel end in Catherine’s death. The fifth part ‘*Satya*: Truth’, brings the narrator back to his own life but he is still possessed by Catherine’s story and by the urge to find out the whole truth of her life. Once the narrator uncovers Catherine’s secrets, he sets out in search of Fizz and love, *Prema*.

**Textualisation of différance**

The physical structure has a postmodern dimension to it. The Sanskrit title words have multiple meanings which demonstrate the multiplicity of meanings and the elusive nature of the concepts
signified by them. Each part of *Alchemy* explores the various meanings and expressions of these concepts but also deviations from them in real life. Through the subtle discrepancy between the title and the content of the part that follows, *Alchemy* attempts to give form to the ambiguity and elusiveness of the concept, incidentally, in the process, defying the singularisation of the original title word through the English translation.

The way the title words in *Alchemy* defy a singular translation can be read as a comment either on the inadequacy of English or on the sophistication of the original title word. It is also possible to read the discrepancy between the title and the material organised around it as an attempt to observe and underline the slippage between the abstract and the concrete or the ideal and the real, or a principle and its practice in real life; similar to what Vikram Chandra claims to have attempted in his *Love and Longing in Bombay* or to what Sherry Simon, describing how the poststructuralist paradigm of communication makes translation a figure of indeterminacy, calls “the aporia of communication or the irremediable difference between language and the world of reference”. However, in combination, these two aspects of *Alchemy* suggest the possibility of yet another reading.

Deconstructing the authority of sign, Derrida observes that the meaning (the signified) of a word (the sign or the signifier) does not reside in the word. The meaning can be explained only through other, essentially dissimilar, words and thus becomes different and gets continually deferred in time and space. Derrida calls this slippage between the sign and the signified *différance*. As we will see in the following discussion, the combination of the multiplicity of meanings of the title words that escapes or exceeds the translation, and the slippage between the title words and the diegetic reality in *Alchemy* can be read as expression or textualisation of a deconstructionist play on *différance*, between a signifier and the signified, a word and its meaning, a concept and its actualisation or a desire and its fulfillment.

**Prema**

The first part is titled ‘*Prema*’, translated into English as Love. *Prema*, the Sanskrit word signifies love in all its multiplicity. It is not only the love between lovers; it is a general term for love felt by any individual. When it is felt for any other individual(s), it can mean love (emotional or physical/sensual) between two lovers as well as friendship, parental love, sympathy, empathy or affection.

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24 Chandra, “The Cult of Authenticity.”
Chapter 4: Receptions of *The Alchemy of Desire*

The opening sentence of this part and of the novel, “Love is not the greatest glue between two people. Sex is” makes the distinction between love and physical desire but erases the multiplicity of the original term or possibility of various kinds of loves (even between two lovers) that the Sanskrit word implies.

On the other hand, within the text, there is a discrepancy between the title of the part and its content. Whatever the place and the role of love and desire in a relationship, this part is about the slow death of physical desire and love between the couple, about the unravelling of their relationship. And eventually the death of desire becomes the signifier of a slow death of love and all the other feelings between them. Even the narrator’s desire to write, so intricately entwined with his desire for Fizz, is dead or rather has mutated into the obsession with reading and deciphering Catherine’s diaries.

**Karma**

*Karma* or action is the theme of the second part. The other meanings of the Sanskrit word are work, deed or destiny. In this part, the narrator and Fizz act on their impulse to move away from the small town of Chandigarh, where they found each other and fell in love, to Delhi, the epicentre of India. It also shows them searching for a house and finding jobs. Once again the distance between real life and the chosen theme comes to the fore, as action does not result in progress or even achievement. The narrator is shown to get carried away by the mundane routine of his sub-editorial work and his ability to do it well, in the process forgetting his real goal of ‘writing’. Even the books, which Fizz proof-reads for Dharma Books disappear into a ‘biblioblackhole’ (184).

This part is interwoven with the history of the narrator’s family, the story of Bibi Lahori, whereby the personal and the national, the intimate and the grand narratives in *Alchemy* touch each other. The other meaning of *Karma*: destiny or what Josna Rege calls the commonsense meaning of *Karma* (“the law of causality as it applies to the long-term effects of individual or collective human action”, to which “[a]ny happening for which an explanation is not immediately apparent can (thereby) be ascribed”28) is subtly brought into play through Bibi’s story.

On the collective level, the (in)human actions in the aftermath of partition, including Bibi Lahori’s methodical and apparently unemotional collecting up of jewels and money, moments after her

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27 A neologism. In astronomy, black hole is the compact high density mass formed in space when a huge star collapses. The gravitational pull of a black hole is so strong that even light cannot escape from it. In *Alchemy* the narrator uses the term biblioblackhole to signify a mysterious bottomless pit in the book world where books disappear without a trace.

husband is murdered, in preparation for the life ahead, is the *Karma* (effect of individual and collective human action) of the narrator. It is the narrator’s *Karma*: first in the form of estrangement - a result of his love for Fizz, a Muslim - between him and Bibi, whose hatred for Muslims is a legacy of partition and what it did to her, and later in the form of the inheritance that Bibi leaves for him (193-194).

At the same time, moving beyond the effects of colonial rule (such as its psychological effects, known in postcolonial theory as, the colonisation of mind\(^{29}\)) and its legacies (such as the partition of the country), *Alchemy* also emphasises the role of collective *Karma* of India, the actions of the politicians, leaders and people (of India) in bringing India as a nation down and away from the lofty ideals such as tolerance, non-violence and unity and the resulting ethnic religious discord and rise of fundamentalism.

On a personal level, certain deeds (*Karma*) of Fizz and the narrator catch up with them in the end. Fizz, in her role as a research assistant for Mrs. Khurana (Ms meanqueen), interviews men on their masturbatory habits, and these interviews and the sharing of other men’s secrets become the erotic fuel in the love-life of Fizz and the narrator. The narrator confesses the feeling of defilement that accompanies this act (192). This need for a voyeuristic aphrodisiac seems to be ultimately the beginning of the end of their seemingly unceasing desire, even though initially it appears to boost their love life to new levels just when the narrator had begun to think that they “were pretty much at the end of plumbing all there was between two people” (191). This phantom ménage-à-trois becomes their *Karma* (destiny). And the final nail in the coffin of their desire is hammered by Catherine’s diaries, which apart from the narrator’s initial comment on Catherine’s similarity (or superiority) to Lady Chatterley do not seem to be shared with Fizz.

**Artha**

Bibi’s story is the link to the next part, *Artha* or ‘money’, through the money left to the narrator by Bibi. This money - that the narrator and Fizz, do not earlier have and are impervious to - leads them to their dream house in the mountains and eventually to the end of desire and of love, and to the brink of emotional ruin. The security and fulfillment of desires that money apparently brings to their life is an illusion and, as the narrative shows, it actually takes those very things away from their life.

\(^{29}\) According to postcolonial theory, the colonisation of mind as an effect of colonisation signifies the colonised people’s interiorisation of the belief of superiority of the colonising culture and inferiority of the colonised culture under the influence of colonial education and literature.
Money brings them the Gethia house with the shelf of Catherine’s diaries hidden like a worm at its core.

*Artha* is also ‘meaning’, the essence of a word or life. *Alchemy* as a whole is also a quest for meaning - of life, human actions, desires, relationships and love - which however remains elusive and forever out of reach; in the process making one realise that perhaps the meaning lies in the quest and not at its end.

*Kama*

The fourth part is ‘Kama’. The meaning of Kama is erotic desire, sexual pleasures and acts (sex) but also aesthetic or sensual pleasures. These get conflated into the physical aspects of the term in this part. All shades of sexual desire, from seduction to obsession, are portrayed through Catherine’s story. However, none leads to contentment or happiness; since the mutuality or ‘give and take’ and fulfillment through procreation, as well as a balance of this aspect of life with other aspects that is implicit in the Sanskrit word, are defied at many levels by Sayd, Catherine and all those, including the narrator, for whom desire becomes a way of life - an end rather than the means (or the whole rather than a part of life).

*Satya*

The fifth and the last part of the book is ‘Satya’ or ‘truth’. In Sanskrit, *satya* also means ‘correct’ and ‘righteous’ and signifies knowledge of the universal constant: something that is pure and cannot be distorted by time, space or person. However, what happens in this part demonstrates the relativity of truth.

The narrator’s attempts at uncovering the truth of Catherine’s life, or rather death, lead him to various versions of these events. From those different versions the narrator tries to piece together the whole picture of the life of Catherine, who shares (or rather with whom he shares) his obsession with desire, sex and chronicling the pursuit(s) of both. In the process, he realises that one can dig out facts but the truth remains elusive. His search for Catherine’s daughter takes him across the world to the squalor of a seedy room in America and a confused old lady who is quite a far cry from her grandfather and her mother’s spirit of adventure, or from her mother’s (Catherine) and father’s (Gajsingh) good looks. The narrator’s search for truth ends in the realisation that finding facts is not discovering truth and what is true is not necessarily always right or beautiful.
The search for truth about someone else’s life leads him to some truths about his own life. Catherine’s life story gives the lie to his belief that great sex makes great and lasting relationships as well as great stories. He realises that “[d]esire from a distance, has magic. Up close, it’s only prosaic coupling. Without the plinth of a narrative, a story, it cannot be a glorious monument. It’s only the bits and pieces, only a rubbing-rubbing. [and that, he] had picked something grand and followed it till [he] had arrived at its mundanities.” (480)

Once over his obsession with facts, the narrator becomes aware that, while he was deciphering Catherine’s past, the nation had grown further away from the ideals that had knit it together in the fight for independence but also realises that this was not important to him, since “[t]he truth was [he] couldn’t care less. Nations and masses of people will go their own perverse way, shining and declining in random cycles of stupidity and valour. [He] had [his] own life to contend with and, as anyone who has lived knows, one little life demands as much attention and steering as an entire nation.” (432)

Catherine’s story teaches him that some pasts are better left in the past and also that “You had to find your story. Not the Pandit’s, not Pratap’s not Abhay’s story. Not the story of the young Sikh and his beloved horse. Your story. And you had to live it. And when you had lived it, you wrote it. No better or worse than you could write it” (518). He feels that only a lived experience can be authentically told as a story and that he needed Fizz to listen to the stories he needed to tell.

However, the unfinished contradictory sentence at the end (or the new beginning) points to the fact that these are his truths and liable to change, thereby indicating the relativity, uncertainty and problematic nature of truth which is at variance with the meaning of Satya.

Alchemy’s physical structure, thus, has a significance. However, it is not rigid. Since the narrative is non-linear, the five parts of Alchemy are not chronologically distinct. Each part of the narrative begins where the previous part ends but they are also linked repeatedly by the anachronous movement of the main narrative through present, past and future, thereby creating a temporal structure that is at once part of and distinct from its physical structure.

The temporal structure
With each part, the narrative of Alchemy moves ahead but at the same time reaches back into the distant past, and also foreshadows future events. For example, the first part ‘Prema’ and the narrative
of *Alchemy* begin in the middle of the story. The narrator is already under the spell of Catherine (and her diaries) and is growing distant from Fizz. But when Fizz leaves the narrator, the narrative moves back to the time when his desire for her was endless and when the narrator quits his job to embark upon his first attempt at writing. The end of this part signals not just their move to Delhi but also the distance that the future is to put between them.

In each part of *Alchemy*, in addition to the main characters and the main narrative(s), there are a number of minor characters, each of which has its own story even if small and not always relevant to the main narrative (except as a story told by the narrator). This ‘narratives-within-a-narrative’ structure and the cyclic movement of narrative through time have links with the tradition of epic narrative in India.

For Tejpal, *Mahabharata* is the ‘best ‘book’ in the history of literature" and in *Alchemy*, the narrator proclaims that it is “the greatest book in the world.” (194). Within the novel, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagwad-Gita* are referred to quite frequently. *Alchemy* as a narrative has close links with the circular or epic narrative style of *Mahabharata*, where there is always a story within a story, a story behind a character and the end of one story is only the beginning of another; where the story one begins with is also the narrative thread that strings and holds multiple narratives loosely together and also where the story teller is one of the main characters of the story being told and the narrative is fundamentally his story.

The structure of *Alchemy* is, thus, doubly significant. However, as we will see, though a few (Anglophone and French) reviews notice the five-part structure organised around five Hindu concepts and some refer to its epic proportion or ambition, the duality of the structure and its significance, both epic and postmodern, have gone unnoticed in all three audiences.

**Themes**

*Alchemy* is a complex web of characters, descriptions and summaries of national history with its personal and national strands continuously linking with and delinking from each other. The themes that emerge from the narrative are not limited to the five concepts around which *Alchemy* is physically organised. Even more importantly, the extra-textual context around the ‘birth’ of *Alchemy* suggests other themes which occupy a very limited or almost no physical place in it and yet inform and enrich the whole text in the form of the *non-dit* or unsaid.

Desire

As the title of the novel indicates, desire is the main theme of *Alchemy*. However, unlike the title words of the five parts of *Alchemy*, desire, the most significant word and theme in the text, appears only in English and not as a translation of the original Sanskrit word, *Ichcha*. Though desire in the title of *Alchemy* seems to signify mainly sexual desire, the Sanskrit word *Ichcha* can mean any of the multiple forms of desire such as wish, want, longing, need, ambition, aspiration, greed, lust (for a thing or a person) but also the very motive or drive behind human life—the will. *Alchemy*, the text, traces desire in all its forms thereby defying the singularity of the meaning of desire assumed in the title.

In *Alchemy*, the personal narrative alternates with national and fictional narratives. Through these narratives, the intimacy of personal and physical desire is layered with desires of others (individuals as well as collectives) as well as other forms of desire such as needs, greed, wants, aspirations, thereby making desire itself a grand event of human life. For example, the narrator’s desire to write or tell stories is entwined with his desire for Fizz. In his failed novel *The Inheritors*, the individual or personal desires are symbols of desires of a particular generation. Through three men of the same family, the desires of three successive generations clash with and shape each other. Pandit’s desire for power and money leads him to corruption and collaboration with the British. Pratap’s desire to defy his father and assert himself leads him in the other direction, against the British and into the independence movement; whereas, Abhay’s life is shaped by his desire to gain material success and to be free of the burden of history and of the previous generation’s ideals and sacrifices.

Bibi Lahori’s desire to be in control of her own life results in (supposed) lack of other desires or feelings. The account of Catherine’s life and of her attempt at living sexual desire to the exclusion of everything else, even her own daughter, that ends in loneliness and ruin is the culmination of the narrative on desire. In Catherine’s life, which has come to meet his own, the narrator finds a reflection of his own life as it could (or has) become. This brings a change in his perception of place of desire and love in the scheme of things and in his life. Only Fizz and, to a certain extent, Gajsingh seem to go beyond the egocentricity of desire in their loyalty and selfless love.

The other word in the title, alchemy, though it appears only once within the whole text[^31] is significant in its suggestion of mysterious, intricate and transformative chemistry. Alchemy, as a

[^31]: Alchemy as a word and in combination with desire appears only in the epitaph on Catherine’s gravestone, ‘Who can ever hold the essence of fire? Who can ever know the alchemy of desire?’ (514)
word, in its meaning of transformation or transmutation, has become synonymous with the process aimed at transforming all base metals into gold, the most precious metal. The perceived value of gold resides in its physical ability to remain unaffected by air, water and most acids and yet have a high pliability that allows it to take different forms. But more importantly this value resides in the ability of gold to symbolise purity, unchangeability and imperishability.

The title of *Alchemy* signifies the novel’s aim to explore the workings of desire as the motor of life. It also signifies the quest for transcending the physicality, and perishability of desire by turning it into something lasting and at the same time, the impossibility of that quest due to the physicality and perishability of human life. *Alchemy*, the text, expresses the all-pervasiveness of desire, its ephemerality and transience while suggesting that love might be the ‘Parisa’ (the Sanskrit word for the philosopher’s stone) that turns the base metal of desire into something precious while human life lasts, but which the narrator has thrown away; perhaps never to find it again.\(^{32}\)

The title of the novel thus adds another layer to the play on *différance* that *Alchemy* attempts to give form to by portraying the differing and deferring of the meaning of (the concepts expressed by) the title words through the contents of its five parts.

**Storytelling**

*Alchemy*’s focus on desire in the case of the narrator is dual: sexual desire and the desire to tell stories. *Alchemy* is also a reflection on writing or ‘storytelling’ and the relation between reality and fiction.

*Alchemy* is conscious of its own storytelling activity (pg. 169). This consciousness is evident in the constant references to the past as well as to the future within the narrative. For example, *Alchemy* begins with the narrator “recalling” that it was the death of desire, not of love, that tore him and his wife apart and that she left him because he willed her to do so. (3) The word ‘recall’ makes us aware of the fact that we are about to hear a story about the narrator’s past. But at the end of the first part, ‘*Prema: Love*’, while still within the diegetic past, the narrator refers to his then-distant future and now the diegetic present. After the first visit to Delhi in search of a job that would let them move there, the narrator has a feeling that they (he and Fizz) will never come back to Chandigarh and then

\(^{32}\) In one Indian story, a man in his quest for the ‘Parisa’ keeps touching the chain around his neck with the pebbles on the beach. After the umpteenth pebble his action becomes mechanical and he stops looking at the chain each time he touches it before throwing the pebble away. At some point he suddenly realises that the chain has turned into gold and that he must have found the Parisa but thrown it away.
Chapter 4: Receptions of *The Alchemy of Desire*


goes on to say, “What I did not know was how far away we would end up going. So far that it would be difficult to tell who we once were.” (111-112)

The reader is made aware of the constructed and cyclic nature of the narrative by its beginning and ending. *Alchemy* begins with “Love is not the greatest glue between two people. Sex is” and ends with “Sex is not the greatest glue between two people. Love ...” These two contradictory statements are also the opening lines of two stories. The first sentence opens the story that is being narrated as *Alchemy*. The last sentence is the opening line of the story that the narrator is about to write when *Alchemy* ends. Since this sentence contradicts the first line of *Alchemy*, the reader cannot be sure whether the narrator is about to retell the story of *Alchemy* differently or tell a different story altogether.

At the same time, the unfinished status of the sentence signals an uncertainty as to how it (and the narrative) is going to end. Whether the narrator will say love ‘is’ the greatest glue between two people or something different and whether Fizz and the narrator will get back together. By leaving *Alchemy* in a way incomplete, it also signals the uncertainty about the narrator’s ability as a storyteller, raising doubts as to whether, unlike all the other stories he attempted to tell, including *Alchemy*, the story he is about to write will be completed or even told if Fizz does not stay.

Any story, in order to be successful, must be able to create a believable illusion of reality and persuade the reader to feel that it is ‘real’, while s/he is reading it. *Alchemy* achieves this by mixing historical reality and fiction or setting a fictional narrative within a certain period of Indian history. It also makes the diegetic reality seem real by constantly juxtaposing it with diegetic fictions and other diegetic realities. For example, the story of the narrator’s life is juxtaposed with many different stories: stories of his attempts at storytelling, of the stories he wished to tell and of those he failed to tell, those that others told him and those he told others, the stories that find him and the stories he discovers. The diegetic (textual) reality of his life is also juxtaposed with other diegetic realities: historical in the form of the story of Bibi Lahori and autobiographical in the form of Catherine’s diaries, but also in the form of the news that Fizz watches. All of this is then enveloped in the form of a story that he is about to tell.

Through this juxtaposition, *Alchemy* problematises the perception of reality and fiction. The narrator in *Alchemy* thinks of “news as nothing but third-rate stories, which silence the ‘first-rate stories’ in our head” (117). For him, reality is thus just a story told from a certain perspective and fiction is
nothing but reality constructed and presented from a certain perspective. *Alchemy* expresses this belief by blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction at various levels while making its own fictitious and constructed nature obvious. By juxtaposing the extra-textual reality in the form of the history of India with the textual reality in the form of the story of the narrator’s life within its text, *Alchemy* makes one ask whether the Indian ‘reality’ in *Alchemy* is to be considered fiction because it is narrated by a fictitious character, or whether the narrator’s story is to be considered real because it is taking place within this narrated reality (and contains so many autobiographical elements from the author’s life).

The significance of perspective in storytelling is also emphasised by the contradictory first and last sentences of the narrative, which imply a change in the narratorial perspective. *Alchemy* is told from a perspective in which desire plays the most important role in a relationship, not love. Seeing that this claim is invalidated by Catherine’s story and the contradictory nature of the final sentence with which the narrator is about to embark upon another story, one can be certain that the story that he tells will not consider desire as the greatest glue in a relationship, though whether it will valorise love over desire remains uncertain because the line remains unfinished.

The narrator of *Alchemy*, as an aspiring writer, also muses about various aspects of ‘storytelling’ or writing and reflects on the changes in the writer within him, for example, his initial preference for grand ambitious epics as opposed to minimalist writing or short stories. The narrator documents his attempts to write different types of fiction or to tell different stories such as an epic novel, *The Inheritors*, a cosmos-in-a-kernel novel about the young Sikh; a short story on Bibi Lahori’s life; a historical-supernatural-thriller through Catherine’s story; and sketches on various secondary characters such as Amaresh (a fellow journalist), Philip (the friend whose flat the narrator and Fizz share in Delhi), Sobers (the narrator’s friend from college) or Shutleri (the narrator’s boss in Delhi).

The narrator talks about different approaches to telling stories, such as broad brush strokes or minimalist nuancing, the different approaches to ‘writing’ such as a forced discipline or spontaneity, the things to do or to avoid as a writer or within the writing: his instructions to himself to focus on ideas and characters and avoid writing about sex (the manifesto, 56-57). The narrator realises the significance of an interested listener or reader for any storyteller and in the activity of ‘storytelling’ through the memories of the time when Fizz’s listening made him ‘tell stories’. He almost equates the relation between a writer and a reader to sexual intimacy unhindered by body in his narration of how he is possessed by and obsessed about Catherine (or her diaries).
Alchemy thus becomes an exploration of and reflection on the act of storytelling but also the textualisation of that act as it is taking place.

A large part of Alchemy is devoted to establishing the context within which the narrator’s story takes place. It is an intimate account of a personal experience set within the history of post-independence India. Through The Inheritors (the narrator’s failed first novel) and Catherine’s life-story, Alchemy is also linked with pre-independence India. Thus, though it is not shown to play any direct role in Alchemy except perhaps in Bibi Lahori’s story, India as a nation is a significant physical presence in the narrative.

Image of India

India, as a nation, is presented and commented upon mainly in the narrator’s voice. The narrator describes India as “a Gymkhana club, where the people have the votes, but the politicians and bureaucrats have the membership” (53), “a country forever in search of a cause and a focus” (102) and Indian independence as a “flawed freedom.” (71) The rising factionalism and religious extremism in the India of the 1980s, as a result of which the country is fragmenting and coming apart at the seams, are described as “fault-lines [that] were being opened every which way. Social, political, individual; region, religion, language, caste, community. Fault-lines that had been sealed and sutured fifty years ago to create a nation [but] were being undone stitch by stitch.” (174) In Alchemy, the blame is directed at the politicians, leaders and bureaucrats and also the society which in its desire for materialist progress, leaves the innocent, honest, hardworking, generous and fine-spirited ‘rurals and tribals’ (154) dispossessed.

When Alchemy nears its end, India is “a nuclear weapons state” (432) and the “beast fatted on religious myths” (174) “in raging vogue” (432), a reference to the rise of the ‘loony petty’ (54) ‘Hindu right’ (that was in power and against Tejpal in the Tehelka ordeal). But the narrator then firmly turns away from ‘the nation and the people’ to focus on steering his own life, deep in trouble at that moment (433), choosing the personal over the collective and self over the nation, indicating what is more important to him but also that one is as important as the other. In view of the autobiographical links between this narrator and the author, the disguise, if there is one, is very thin indeed.

Tejpal’s image as a journalist and the Tehelka-man is at once the extra-textual baggage of Alchemy and part of the text because of the autobiographical links between the author and the protagonist.
(narrator) in the novel. The simultaneously extra-textual and textual bond between Tejpal and
Alchemy is seen, especially outside India, as the factor that validates reading Alchemy as the story of
India. However, the relation between the Tehelka-man, Tehelka ordeal and Alchemy or between
Tejpal’s image and the circumstances in which Alchemy was written is not seen as an influence that
has shaped Alchemy. As we shall see, Alchemy tends to be read, by the non-Indian audiences, as the
story of the nation of India based on the author’s image and on the extent to which India is a physical
presence within the text. In the process, the minimal role India plays in the narrative and the constant
prioritisation of the personal story over the (his)story of India gets overlooked.

Alchemy’s non-Indian reviews show that the general image of post-independence India that emerges
from Alchemy is seen as informed by the author’s professional insights as a journalist, and as such
‘true’; but Alchemy as a representation is not considered to be informed by Tejpal’s experiences as a
person at the moment of its conception, and as such subjective. The possibility that Alchemy is
Tejpal’s reaction to his pre-Alchemy experiences of persecution at the hands of the State or an
expression of his disenchantment following these experiences is not even remotely considered by the
reviewers. As a result, the strong undercurrent of non-dit in Alchemy that stems from this extra-
textual context remains neglected.

The non-dit in Alchemy

Dharma

The most striking feature of Alchemy, which I shall indicate has remained unnoticed or unmentioned
by all three audiences, is the absence of ‘Dharma’ from the Hindu concepts chosen as titles for its
five parts. Dharma as a term signifies religion but also individual code of conduct or ethics, sacred
duty or the essence of any self in the form of its function and nature. And though no part of Alchemy
seems to deal exclusively with Dharma as a theme, it informs the whole text. This is indicated by the
constant references to Hindu philosophy, Mahabharata and in particular Bhagwad-Gita and what
each says about life.

In Alchemy, Dharma as religion is constantly alluded to in various, though very brief, references to
the Hindu right or Hindu extremists in India. Religion plays an explicit role in the story of Bibi
Lahori’s life, first in the form of the link to India’s partition as “a haranguing disciplinarian fantasy
with poisoned follicles” and then, towards the end of Bibi’s story, in the estrangement between Bibi
and the narrator due to his love for Fizz who is half-Muslim. However, it does not prevent the
marriage between the narrator and Fizz, or in the earlier generation between Fizz’s parents (where
the father is Muslim and the mother Sikh, 488). Religion is significant, in its initial unimportance and then over-importance, in Catherine’s story where most of the main characters belong to different religions (Sayd is Muslim, Catherine Christian and Gajsingh Hindu), which play no part in their relations until the very end, when Catherine turns very religious and favours the converted Christian servant couple over Hindu Gajsingh.

The other, more significant and subtle meanings of Dharma such as duty, righteousness and the code of ethical-moral conduct run through the narrative silently. These are violated repeatedly by the narrator in relation to Fizz while under the spell of Catherine’s story but also by the other characters in their own different ways. The violation of Dharma at various levels or the discrepancy between the meaning and the practice of Dharma in Alchemy as a whole, signifies the violation of Hindu Dharma that goes on in everyday life. It can also be read as criticism of the rightist beliefs dominating Indian political life when Alchemy was written, and which, while claiming to uphold a religion, violate the basic human principles such as compassion and tolerance.

When considered in the light of Tejpal’s persecution at the hands of the rightist government, this explicit absence and implicit omnipresence of Dharma in Alchemy becomes significant and opens Alchemy up to a different reading which, as we will see, remains unrealised by all three readerships. The other non-dit aspect of Alchemy is the influence of the events surrounding Alchemy’s birth.

Alchemy’s birth
Alchemy is undeniably shaped by the situation of its birth which, however, does not feature in any explicit manner within the text. We saw earlier that Alchemy was conceived and written while Tejpal was trying to salvage Tehelka from the ruins after the Government crackdown on it in the wake of the Tehelka exposés, and also that though India as a nation occupies a large place within the text, Alchemy consistently puts it in second place, preferring to talk of the personal and turning deliberately away from the national.

Alchemy is ruthless in its comments on, or criticisms of, Indian politicians, leaders and government in general, including those of the earlier ruling political party (Congress), and the references to the Hindu rightist party (BJP33) that was exposed by Tehelka, though minimal, are scathing. That the major part of Alchemy is set in the period when the Hindu right was still to gain influence, or actual

33 The Bharatiya Janata Party
power, is significant as is the disintegration of the narrator’s life in the last decade before 2000, when it is on the rise.

Considering the way Tejpal was treated by the State, his disenchantment with the nation might not be momentary and perhaps is still in place. Although, this has not kept Tejpal from finding his way back (for long) as can be seen from the resurrection of Tehelka, the disenchantment comes through in Alchemy. Then at its strongest, this disenchantment is expressed or dealt with through the escape into the world of the intimate, through the return to the ‘First Things’, \(^{34}\) things as they were before the ordeal and things that come before everything else.

In view of what was happening in Tejpal’s life at the time of writing Alchemy, the importance given to the ‘personal and intimate’ over the national in Alchemy and the narrator’s comments on India’s past and present are obviously Tejpal’s way of writing back to the nation-state. And we do get a glimpse of the depth of his disenchantment with the nation, even if only once. In the decade before 2000, coming out of his obsession with Catherine’s story, personal life deeply in crisis, the narrator takes a look at what was happening around him in India and finds it trapped in “an extraordinary burlesque of the petty”\(^{(432)}\), fallen from the high ideals of tolerance, non-violence and unity. However, turning firmly away from the nation, he declares,

\[
\text{[t]he truth was I couldn’t care less. Nations and masses of people will go their own perverse way, shining and declining ... I had my own life to contend with and, as anyone who has lived knows, one little life demands as much attention and steering as an entire nation.}
\]

Chances were the country would find its way more quickly than I would find mine. \(^{(432)}\)

Alchemy is, thus, a multilayered text and as such can be read at various levels. The narrative, structural and thematic sophistication shows that Alchemy is not just a novel praised by Naipaul or Tehelka-man Tejpal’s first novel and definitely not just a sensationalist novel. It is a complex text of considerable literary merit and mettle. However, as will be seen in the analyses of the receptions, the various readings invited by Alchemy’s structural duality, thematic complexity, its choices and selective silences remain largely unactualised by all three audiences. The complexity of Alchemy remains largely unexplored, mainly because of the lack of academic interest displayed by all three readerships, with one noteworthy non-Indian exception.

\(^{34}\) First Things is the name of the narrator’s Gethia house in Alchemy and also of the last part of the last chapter where he goes in search of Fizz.
Indian reception

As the first fictional work of a respected journalist-editor, *Alchemy* would have naturally attracted attention in India but since it was written during, and published after, the *Tehelka* ordeal (Tejpal’s battle for survival against the Government crackdown on *Tehelka* for exposing the corruption in its Defence Ministry), the heightened interest and focus on Tejpal at the time rubbed off on *Alchemy*, turning it into a media event. Though broadly positive and only from the mainstream (without any attention from scholars), the Indian reaction is quite discerning and not uncritical. Despite Tejpal’s earlier mentioned contempt for Indian reviewers, they have neither shown malice nor the collegiate (under-graduate level) naïveté, that Tejpal accuses them of as reviewers. And at least two of the reviewers are themselves successful Indian English writers; one a long established predecessor of Tejpal, the other a contemporary.

Since Tejpal was in the limelight because of the *Tehelka* ordeal and much was written about him in that context, the biographical details, though mentioned briefly, do not form an important part of the Indian reviews. In the Indian reception, Tejpal’s profession and the milestones in his long career such as the publication of *The God of Small Things* and the *Tehelka* incident do not loom too large basically because they were too well known and quite fresh in the public mind. Nor do these details take attention away from Tejpal’s prose or bold style. However, as we will see, the focus remains on certain aspects of *Alchemy* more than others. Of the two aspects which have proved to be the most significant in the Indian reception of *Alchemy*, one is textual and the other purely extra-textual.

The most ‘talked of’ textual aspect of *Alchemy* as a novel is its focus on sex or physical desire. The ‘adult’ subject matter is noticed and commented upon but does not raise too many eye-brows, since, even though the subject seems at odds with serious, public interest journalism, it is in keeping with Tejpal’s outspoken belief that "[t]he erotic is an intrinsic part of our lives. Sex is not obscene, corruption is!" What most reviews comment upon is the treatment of the subject and the quality of the language. The comments of course are both positive and negative. For example, *India Today* calls *Alchemy* “a love story written on body.” *The Independent* review claims that

> [t]he passion in the novel is deeply organic to the characters and the narrative. As an attempt to compel readers to look at desire without the crippling impulse of shame and hypocrisy, it works beautifully. … The novel details intimate relationships with few missteps, without reducing them to voyeuristic fodder.

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35 In India, after year 10 students go to junior college and the under-graduate years in University are called senior college.
36 As seen in the section on audience pg. 5-6
39 Gill, “Books.”
Chapter 4: Receptions of The Alchemy of Desire

The Sunday Tribune admires the way Tejpal has treated the subject

Tejpal, the alchemist-wordsmith, through impassioned pounding, does succeed spectacularly in transforming the base metal of raw sexuality into the refined gold of art. ... Its rich sexuality lifts this work way, way above the ordinary. Rare is the Indian writer in English who has ventured thus far with the language, force, imagery and originality; rarer still a work suffused with erotica, much of it literal but a lot of it metaphorical too. Devoid of clichés as well as pornographic clutter, The Alchemy of Desire is about a young couple unburdened by either money or inhibitions, glorying in the glories of love. Forever fixated with each other and each other’s bodies – and minds".40

The Tehelka review, though overwhelmingly positive and perhaps less credible in view of the relation between Tehelka and Tejpal, is not sycophantic in tone. It describes Alchemy as a “stunning novel [that] re-states the erotic in Indian fiction with beauty, imagination and the power of truth” and admires the way Tejpal has handled the subject. “The border-line between erotica and pornography being so thin universally, Tejpal performs a grand sleight of hand, of word and feeling, of touch and smell and sensation and posture to mediate a stunningly direct position that is both lyrical and explicit.” The reviewer acknowledges that the portrayed sexual experience remains one-sided and gendered (in the case of the narrator). However, the reviewer’s comment that “Fizz’s impending return is too pat”, reveals that he has failed to notice the uncertainty of her staying or of the resurrection of love implicit in the unfinished last line.

This, however, is the only Indian review to mention Khajuraho or Kama Sutra in the context of Alchemy and to refer to Tejpal’s predecessors and the path-finders in ‘bold’ (Indian English) writing, namely Khushwant Singh and Shobha Dé. This is also the only review to mention the sanitisation of the writing characteristic of vernacular languages (Malayalam in particular) in matters of sex and sexuality because of the hypocrisy of Indian society (and media) in the matter and the linguistic freedom that English offers.

In contrast to such praise of Tejpal’s handling of his subject, the Guardian review describes Alchemy as “[t]he story of a couple obsessed with each other and, at least from the perspective of the male partner (who is also the narrator), with sex.” While the review in World Literature Today says that Alchemy “is about the tides, the paroxysms and flaccidity, the intensity and dampness of sexual

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Many Indian writers, especially women writers, express the unavailability of words (in the sense of lack or/and their inability to use them) experienced while writing on sexual matters in vernacular languages and the freedom that English allows them.
desire in newly wedded couples, libertines, homosexuals, voyeurs, lovers, et alia [and] Tejpal has very carefully designed his plot to accommodate all of them.\footnote{Ramlal Agarwal, “The Alchemy of Desire,” \textit{World Literature Today}, September 1, 2006.} This review conveys a feeling that there is a willful overabundance of sex in \textit{Alchemy} that leaves the readers too enervated to notice whether the text has any literary merit.

Khushwant Singh, mentioned in the \textit{Tehelka} review, is in many ways Tejpal’s predecessor as a journalist-writer but also a ‘bold’ writer known for his colourful language. He describes the opening sentence of \textit{Alchemy} as “an ear-splitting bang” and \textit{Alchemy} as “a long saga of a young couple madly in love and with ravenous appetite for sex which would make a randy goat appear impotent and a nymphomaniac frigid by a comparison with the hero and heroine. ... with more sex thrown in than any I have ever read of in any book.”\footnote{Singh, “The tehelka of desire.”} Singh’s comment though colourful, and not totally exaggerated or unjustified, seems to conflate Fizz with Catherine who would fit the term ‘nymphomaniac’ better.

However, the question that none of these review(er)s asks is why an astute journalist like Tejpal would choose to write on sex and writing while being subjected to persecution at the ruling government’s hands. Neither do they ask whether and in what way \textit{Alchemy} was a reaction to the rightist ideology and religious extremist actions of supporters of that government or an escape into a private world of his creation and under his control that expressed his beliefs or even an attempt at salvaging \textit{Tehelka} by producing something that will not fail to sell. And, while the possibility of a ‘politics’ behind the erotics in \textit{Alchemy} has remained largely unconsidered, excessive attention is paid to some of Tejpal’s personal relations.

Tejpal’s connections in high places, whether in the literary or political world, are a well-known fact in India. \textit{Tehelka}’s board members include V. S. Naipaul and Amitabh Bachchan. Many of the founding members of the resurrected \textit{Tehelka} are celebrities and movie stars amongst other important people. However, for Tejpal the budding novelist, one connection proved most important and, for \textit{Alchemy}, one extra-textual aspect proved even more effective than its subject in provoking comments and reactions.

The reception of a book is often largely determined by its publicity where along with (or sometimes even more than) the text as a story, the work is also a packaged product that is sold and can be
bought. The package, which in the case of a book includes its dust jacket and the pictures, blurbs or review summaries on it, plays an important part as the first point of contact, whether visual or textual, between the book and its readers. *Alchemy*’s packaging has changed over the different editions with the exception of one factor. All editions of *Alchemy* carry the same blurb on their front cover.

“At last – A new and brilliantly original novel from India”

V.S. Naipaul.

This single blurb is important for the reception of *Alchemy* in general but Indian reception in particular. The fact that it came from Naipaul was as significant as what it said. As Nilanjana Roy observed, “Rarely has a simple blurb caused so much heartburning in Delhi’s literary circles. But then this one … was handed out by V. S. Naipaul, known to bury debut authors rather than praise them.”

Such a positive reception is rare from Sir Vidia for anything Indian. In this instance it is loaded and not just with surprising praise. His blurb insinuates a lot of things. By ‘[a]t last’ he is signifying that there has been a long tradition of novels from India but that there were none worthy of his praise and the adjectives such as ‘brilliant and original’ coming after ‘[a]t last’ are denied to any of the *Alchemy*’s predecessors. Not surprisingly, the blurb put many Indian backs up. Yet, we can see the allure that Naipaul’s anti-Indian image gives his praise. It makes the Indian readers at once curious as to what the novel contains to deserve such praise and whether it indeed deserves that praise. Many Indian reviews are, therefore, essentially a response to this blurb, whether they disagree with it or agree with it, even if reluctantly.

For example, Khushwant Singh describes the blurb as “[t]he first and the loudest bang” counting *Alchemy*’s bold opening line as the second. He does not fail to recognise the barb under the blurb and observes that by “lavishing praise on Tejpal’s first novel, Sir Vidia has dealt a back-hander at other Indian writers who have made their names in the world of English writing: Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy et al.” However, that does not stop Singh from acknowledging that “*The Alchemy of Desire* puts Tarun Tejpal in the front rank of Indian novelists” or from saying that he himself is “inclined to agree with Naipaul” and that “Tejpal has turned out a masterpiece.

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49 Singh, “The tehelka of desire.”
[Alchemy] is a novel that must be read.” Nor, does it stop Singh, as we shall see later, from pointing out the shortcomings of the novel.

Some anti-Naipaulians begin with the wish to prove Sir Vidia wrong. For example, The Sunday Tribune reviewer confesses that, “I was tempted to dump [Alchemy] (unread) in Chandigarh’s Sukhna Lake, like the nameless protagonist in Tarun Tejpal’s novel, … [because] V.S. Naipaul commends it as a new and brilliantly original novel from India,”50 but then ruefully agrees with Naipaul’s opinion of the novel further on in the review. The World Literature review, evidently sarcastic about Naipaul’s endorsement, says “[i]t is gratifying that ‘at last’ an Indian author in English has been able to elicit a favorable response from the “greatest living writer writing in English.”51 A rare Indian review that does not mention Naipaul or the blurb, “Body Politic” in India Today Plus, however, admires Tejpal for “playing bold, breaking out of the received wisdom of the Indian novel in English”,52 thus in a way agreeing with Naipaul’s verdict without ever alluding to it.

The Guardian review by Tabish Khair, himself a non-resident Indian English writer (author of The Bus Stopped, 2004), is titled “Can Tarun J. Tejpal’s The Alchemy of Desire live up to V.S. Naipaul’s ringing endorsement”. Khair quite rationally points out that:

Tarun J Tejpal’s The Alchemy of Desire would have been significant even without this endorsement, as it is written by a major contemporary editor and publisher, a person who, as the publicity material puts it, is “famous in India” for his uncompromising journalism. What Naipaul's statement does is raise the question: can ordinary criticism support his endorsement? Are the 518 pages of this novel thick enough to bear this burden?53

Khair thus signals the superfluity of Naipaul’s praise (at least in the Indian context) and the burden of expectation (and apparently doubt) it places on Alchemy. This informed review (the only one to mention the political undercurrent in Alchemy, even if very briefly) concludes with the opinion that Alchemy “is no doubt a significant novel, but one would need to shut more than one eye to consider it as good as other debuts from India, Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things or Shashi Deshpande’s Small Remedies.”54 By throwing a negative light on the subjectivity of Naipaul’s praise, Khair neatly attaches the ‘new, brilliant and original’ adjectives to some of the very predecessors that Naipaul had tried to (or unintentionally managed to) denigrate.

50 Ramchandran, “Fruit of passion.”
51 Agarwal, “The Alchemy of Desire.”
53 Khair, “Guardian:Saturday Review.”
54 Here Khair is wrong about Deshpande. Small Remedies (2000) was her sixth novel not first.
The following quotes appeared in the article, “The Blurb Bubble” in *Outlook (India)*

“Most celeb writers give the blurb without bothering to read the book,” explains Khushwant [Singh], "most of them don't have the time. They applaud a work just because it is by someone who is a friend or whom they like. A classic example is V.S. Naipaul who rarely has anything nice to say but will go out of his way to say nice things about me just because I am a friend. A recent example of how Naipaul went out of his way to help a friend was the blurb he provided for Tarun Tejpal's debut novel, *The Alchemy of Desire*. The blurb, "At last—a new and brilliantly original novel from India", was according to many critics so "over the top" that it ended up attracting more attention than the book itself.

Tejpal's then publisher, Ashok Chopra, admits the much-talked-about blurb would not have happened if Tejpal was not so "close to Naipaul; he rarely does it for anyone...Tarun was different.”

Khushwant Singh and *Alchemy’s* Indian publisher express what many felt, that the blurb was more a result of the well-known friendship between Tejpal and Naipaul than the arguable brilliance and originality of *Alchemy* as a novel, though leaving the latter part unsaid.

Although the combination of *Alchemy’s* bold approach to sexuality and the Naipaul effect proved extremely potent, it would be unfair to suggest that the Indian reviewers commented on nothing else. *Alchemy’s* sprawling size, style and prose do receive some attention. For example, in spite of sharing Naipaul’s enthusiasm about *Alchemy* and calling it a masterpiece, Khushwant Singh draws attention to its shortcomings.

[*Alchemy*] is flawed with unnecessary detail and repetition. [Tejpal] is obsessed with the flora and fauna of every place he visits. He cannot resist the temptation to show off by filling whole paragraphs of their names: he is not really involved with them. It is the same with his portrayal of sexual aberrations; they go on ad nauseam without much rhyme and even less reason. He could do with some lessons from his mentor Naipaul who is the master of terse, lucid prose. 56

In contrast, The Sunday Tribune finds “[t]he narrative … fast-paced and moving. The prose — crackling with energy, and at times, scorching — … a delight, [and], [t]he descriptions … evocative, authentic and sensual be it of botanical life, the greasy pole in a newspaper office, the chaotic traffic or the engrossing bodily explorations.” 57 This review also admires the way *Alchemy*

captures the chaos that is India and was India down the ages with myth, lore and legend flourishing alongside rationalism; where reason and unreason are both gods that Indians bow to; where the ephemeral obsesses as much as the eternal; where the existential and the essence are inseparably intertwined; and where either the past catches up with you, or you are driven, by unseeable demons, to catch up with the past to make sense of the present.

Given that Tejpal is a resident writer who has always lived in India, it is interesting to note that the term authenticity still comes up in praise of the descriptions in or the Indian reality captured by

56 Singh, “The tehelka of desire.”
57 Ramchandran, “Fruit of passion.”
**Alchemy.** Although others have noted the skill with which Tejpal has captured the intimate details of the hills or his ability to evoke the sights and smells of Chandigarh, this is the only review to mention the issue of authenticity and without any apparent sarcasm.

**Conclusion**

Some interesting facts emerge from the Indian response to *Alchemy*. The most significant of them is the lack of serious interest in its literary characteristics despite the huge interest reported by the media. The available material on *Alchemy* is mainly in the form of mainstream reviews and interviews, indicating that the interest in *Alchemy* is primarily as the debut novel of Tejpal and though the novel has caused a sensation, it is more because of the sensational blurb by V.S. Naipaul and to some extent the audacious subject matter than its literary merit or complexity.

The Indian reviews reveal that Naipaul’s well-known anti-Indian image influences the Indian reviewers’ reaction to his praise, which is at once important and suspect. They seem to react to the blurb before the novel. They cannot invalidate Naipaul’s praise nor can they discount its prestige and its impact in the outer world; but they can (and do) write back at it.

The combination of *Alchemy*’s subject matter and Naipaul’s praise seems to have distracted the reviewers from many other aspects of the texts and exhausted the interest in *Alchemy* to the extent that even a general curiosity about the autobiographical connections between the author and the text is missing from the reviews and most interviews. Also missing is the alertness regarding the intertextualities between *Alchemy* and other Indian English texts that the Indian reviewers generally display in the case of Indian English texts. Given how numerous both the autobiographical connections and, as I shall indicate later, intertextualities are, this lack of interest is quite surprising and suggests that *Alchemy* is not taken seriously as a literary text.

Could the reason for this apparent lack of serious interest be *Alchemy*’s obvious deviation from many of the postcolonial expectations or characteristics, such as hybridity or the condition of migrancy to name just two, and also the author’s undeniable Indian identity, which disarms many stings that are effective in the case of the diaspora writers and invalidates many complaints that are usually raised against the ‘outsiders’? Despite the general belief in the westward gaze of Indian English texts and their use of cultural markers (such as Sanskrit terms) as evidence of their own Indianness,⁵⁸ and in

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⁵⁸ In his article ‘The Cult of Authenticity’, Vikram Chndra reports (and protests against) being accused by a prominent Indian academic of using Sanskrit words, in his novel *Love and Longing in Bombay*, as markers of Indianness aimed at the west.
spite of the evident interest of Western reviewers in the portrayal of the erotics in *Alchemy* and their numerous references to the *Kama Sutra*, there is no charge of exoticism against Tejpal in the Indian reviews. Is this an effect of Tejpal’s insider status and his post-*Tehelka* ‘knight in shining armour’ image?

In addition, although *Alchemy*’s French prize is mentioned on Tejpal’s website and reported in the media, this outside award does not feature in most of the Indian reviews. This absence is not surprising because this international recognition was given after the French translation of *Alchemy* was published, which was almost six months after *Alchemy* was published in India, subsequent to most Indian reviews. The immediate non-Indian Anglophone reviews (primarily in the UK and other countries where *Alchemy* was published immediately after India) do not refer to *Alchemy*’s popularity in France or the French award, obviously for the same reason but, as we shall see, they do not mention the Indian reaction to *Alchemy* or to Naipaul’s blurb either.

**Non-Indian Anglophone reception**

As seen at the beginning of this chapter, *Alchemy* was published in the UK almost simultaneously with its Indian publication. However, it appeared in the rest of the Anglophone world, including America, after its French publication. The non-Indian Anglophone reviews thus come from a wide range of countries. Tejpal’s fame as the *Tehelka*-man and one of the leading personalities in Asia has even garnered *Alchemy* a review from China. However, the only review that can be labeled as academic comes from the German scholar Dieter Riemenschneider with whose work the term ‘New English literatures’ is associated. This review is included here in the non-Indian Anglophone reception since the review appears in an Indian online journal in English and is not translated from German.

From the available reviews, *Alchemy*’s subject matter seems to play a major role in the non-Indian Anglophone reception. Tejpal’s bold opening line announcing the central theme of the novel has caught the reviewers’ imagination and also set the tone of the reviews. For example, *The Christian Science Monitor* review observes that “*Alchemy* begins: ‘Love is not the greatest glue between two people. Sex is’ and there is a good bit of explicit sexuality in this story.” The *Tampa Tribune* review points out how “[w]ith that provocative opening line, author Tarun J. Tejpal begins *The...

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Chapter 4: Receptions of *The Alchemy of Desire*

*Alchemy of Desire*, a story about a man and woman with an insatiable appetite for each other.”

Whereas *The Observer* review comments that although the narrator proclaims “Love is not the glue that holds relationships together. Sex is”, “the collapse of his 15-year relationship the moment his lust dies suggests that relationships are better glued with some emotion after all.”

The opening line of *Alchemy* has made an impact but the implication of its contradictory relation with the last sentence and even the significance of the incomplete last line are lost on, or prove unimportant for, these reviewers.

Some feel that there is an overdose of ‘sex’ in *Alchemy*. *The Observer* review feels that the narrator and the ravenously libidinous characters in Catherine’s diaries make one “wish for a character who is not permanently erotically agitated.” Another review referring to a rule in the narrator’s manifesto which says “[a]void writing about sex-difficult to pull off, easy to trash”(57) comments “[u]nfortunately, the author doesn't heed his own advice, and page after page of the novel is taken up with undescriptive explanations of how often and where the narrator has sex. These explanations are neither exciting nor informative, and one is left wondering whether they are simply included to explain the title and the naked woman on the cover.”

In contrast, some reviews compliment Tejpal for maintaining the fine line between the erotic and the pornographic by keeping the descriptions artistic and *Kama Sutra*-esque. The *Sunday Times* review calls Tejpal “a hormonally-fuelled writer obsessed with the act of creation in its widest sense delighted to flout the ‘never write about sex’ maxim that his character unwisely sets himself” and goes on to add that “sex is practically a character in its own right here, endlessly examined in all its luscious, experimental glory. At times this can get a bit much (can they not just have a cup of tea?), but overall the prose works.” It further compliments Tejpal for “[l]argely avoiding cliché or off-putting gynaecological detail, [and] beat[ing] an erotic path through the depths of human desire: sexual, artistic, political.”

Thus, the erotics in the novel gets a lot of attention, though none of the reviewers attempts to discern whether there was any ulterior motive behind it. However, it would be unfair to suggest that nothing else is noticed. Quite a few critics have mentioned the way the novel brings together multiple narratives thereby combining the exploration of desire with an introspective glance at the nation. *The*
Sunday Times describes Alchemy as “the story of a passionate marriage that disintegrates. … [and] an exploration of the clamour, creativity and confusion at the heart of a nation in flux, a land that seems destined for ‘rule by lunacy’.”\textsuperscript{66} Another review describes Alchemy as an “epic … set against the vivid backdrop of India's shift into modernity” which intends to “span love and sex, colonialism and independence, India's partition and many more polarities” but ends up portraying “vibrant local color, undying attachments and a lot of sex.”\textsuperscript{67} This review notices the rich detail of everyday life and the sweeping summarisation of politics in Alchemy but does not link it to the context of Alchemy’s birth or the author’s relation with the nation at that moment.

One review feels that “readers who have a familiarity with Indian culture and history will find it an easier read than others”\textsuperscript{68} while, amusingly, a different review, referring to the narrator and Fizz’s hilarious and scary bus journey to Delhi, wonders whether “this actually happens in real-life India.”\textsuperscript{69} The reviewer feels that in Alchemy “India is just made to sound quaint and twee with its bicycles and buses and the barsatis with their balconies and the politics.”\textsuperscript{70} So much for Tejpal’s authenticity as a ‘resident informant’!

The only reviews to mention Naipaul’s blurb are the reviews from Australia. Alchemy reached Australian shores in 2006 and these reviews show an awareness of other receptions of Alchemy that comes from their place at the far end of its journey in the Anglophone or rather global market. The Australian just presents the blurb in a short comment on Alchemy but the Canberra Times review talks of Tejpal’s career and Tehelka at length and combines it with an interview with the author. It gives a synopsis of Alchemy’s reception.

[Alchemy] immediately garnered [Tejpal] a six-figure publishing deal in Britain and lavish praise by no less a literary luminary than Nobel prize-winning novelist V.S. Naipaul. In Britain it was acclaimed for its boldness of vision and its erotically charged prose. In France it was shortlisted for the prestigious 2005 Prix Femina. It has since been published in 16 countries.\textsuperscript{71}

However, this awareness of the other receptions does not seem to have any undue influence on this review. Alchemy, here, gets linked to the author’s image. The reviewer feels that Alchemy “reflects the same gritty qualities as [Tejpal’s] journalism, investigating the many faces of human desire, and the complex chemistry between love, sex and ambition with the same fearless, no-holds-barred quality he brings to Tehelka” as opposed to the “disproportionate attention to the sensual nature of

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{68} Segal, “The Alchemy of Desire.”
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
The Alchemy of Desire, particularly in the British press, which revelled in the novel's erotically charged prose.”

As in the case of the Indian reception, the lack of academic interest in Alchemy outside India is obvious. However, Riemenschneider’s review article in the online literary journal MuseIndia is one notable exception. This review/article examines the five-part structure of Alchemy in detail. Riemenschneider points out how each part flows into the next and how the title words invite us to explore the meaning of the text’s message and to question the role of desire in life, especially “against the socio-ethical context of a modern society that, religious-philosophically speaking, acknowledges [the] existence [of desire] but finds it difficult to publicly condone its value, including its artistic representation.”

Riemenschneider also suggests other possible readings of the novel’s message such as the conflict between lust and love or good and evil. He feels that the novel’s strength lies in the author’s “ability to integrate a number of themes into a tightly-knit and sensually appealing narrative whole, of themes arranged as polar opposites [such as] sex versus love couched in numerous sexual episodes and references that convey moments both of epiphany and elusiveness.” The article, though very brief, is impressive in its ability to outline and introduce a number of complex philosophical concepts and questions in such a small space.

Most importantly, it pays attention to Alchemy’s post-modernist exploration of the activity of storytelling. Riemenschneider points out the way the last sentence of Alchemy takes us right back to its opening sentence. He notices the contradictory nature of the first and the last sentence as well as the incomplete nature of the last sentence and asks pertinent questions such as

[are we invited to reconsider the truth or the untruth of the story told? And will the narrator tell us another story after having finished this one? Or are we meant to ask what it will be about? A rewriting of the former? A relativisation of the meaning of a story – or story telling? Casting doubt on meaning itself?]

Riemenschneider very rightly observes that such “reflections and practices of a postmodernist kind […] occur rarely in the Indian English novel.” Riemenschneider’s reading is evidently informed by

72 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
his knowledge of Hindu philosophy and/or Sanskrit as well as colonial literature on India,78 Indian English literature and modern theories. Riemenschneider substantiates, in the most positive way, the possibility of a hybrid Western reader suggested by Catherine Innes.79

As the only serious and scholarly reading that looks at Alchemy as a complex literary text, this article is quite important for any literary study of Alchemy. But within the reception analysis it is doubly significant as a German academic’s ‘Indian’ and postmodern reading, in English, of an Indian English text. This reading and the reader are significant for the way they illustrate and emphasise the complexity of the question of ‘categorisation’ of audiences of Indian English literature. Together, Riemenschneider and his reading nuance the concept of ‘cross-cultural’ reception by problematising the link between culture and geographical location or origin of a reader (since even the Indian readers do not offer an ‘Indian’ reading of Alchemy the way Riemenschneider does).

Conclusion
Alchemy’s non-Indian Anglophone reception over the span of more than a year, demonstrates the geographical and cultural diversity within the category as well as the way in which globalisation of the publishing industry and media complicates (and problematises) such separations by displaying their awareness of each other’s responses.

One of the most peculiar characteristics of this reception is the weak response to Naipaul’s praise of Alchemy. Naipaul’s blurb was the most significant extra-textual aspect in the Indian reception. However, it does not seem to play the same role in the non-Indian reception. This is surprising in view of Naipaul’s status in the world of English literature and his known asperity towards Indian English literature and India, which is also evident in his sensational blurb’s calculated barb at the rest of the Indian English literature and literati.

The Tehelka exposé and persecution at the hands of the then-ruling government had given Tejpal an international renown which formed Alchemy’s extra-textual context. However, as the literary debut of almost the most well-known Indian at that time, Alchemy seems to have generated a strangely lacklustre response in the non-Indian Anglophone audience. That response lacks the Indian ‘bristle’ at Naipaul’s blurb and the French adulation of the romantic eroticism, even if the lack of scholarly

78 He is the only one to notice the link between Catherine’s life story and other colonial and Indian English texts with similar portrayals of sexual attraction between a white woman and brown men.
79 Innes, “Citizens of the world: reading postcolonial literature,” 200. Protesting against Graham Huggan’s perception of the ‘western’ reader as exclusively a consumer of exotic Third World cultural commodities, Innes argues that the western reader can be a hybrid reader who, though a cultural outsider, is able and willing to read from an ‘insider’ perspective.
attention seen in the non-Indian Anglophone world is common to all three receptions of *Alchemy*. Could the reason behind the lack of serious academic interest in the novel be over-familiarisation with Indian English literature, or, as in Indian reception, *Alchemy*’s apparent deviation from postcolonial expectations and interests?

The exception, Riemenschneider’s review, demonstrates *Alchemy*’s other (than postcolonial) potential but as a result of his interest in the postmodern and philosophical aspects of the novel. This is obvious from the absence, in the review, of any mention of the extra-textual context of *Alchemy* and of the underrcurrent of *non-dit* that is at once a personal, political and artistic reaction of its author to that context.

In contrast to Riemenschneider’s review, on the whole, the non-Indian Anglophone reception gives the impression that *Alchemy* is basically noticed only because it is the *Tehelka*-man Tejpal’s debut novel which happens to have a stunning opening line and sizzling subject besides a journalistic take on the post-independence India. Even Naipaul’s endorsement seems to have been ineffective in generating a desire to take a serious look at *Alchemy* even if only to verify or vilify his claims. As we shall see, like Riemenschneider, the French reviewers’ reviews are informed by their knowledge about India, albeit in a different manner.

**French reception**

Since the French reception of *Alchemy* is the reception of its French translation, it is necessary to look again at the issues involved in the process as a translation, especially within the tradition of the French translations of Indian English literature, and to examine how significant they proved in the success of *Alchemy* in France.

*Alchemy* was published in 2005. In keeping with the recent trend of rapid non-Anglophone translations of Indian English literature, *Alchemy* was translated into French the same year. Unusual and astonishing was the way that, as a translated Indian English text, it captured the French imagination and found the success that it has since known in France. According to one of Tejpal’s recent French interviews, *Loin de Chandigarh*, the French translation of *The Alchemy of Desire* has sold around 300,000 copies in its various editions in France alone.  

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In the first year after its publication in France, the book sold around 50,000 copies and was already in its 10th edition. As Livres Hebdo review reports, “since its publication by Buchet-Chastel in September 2005 in France, his first novel The Alchemy of Desire, has known an unprecedented success for an Indian book. With its 10th printing now underway, it has sold 32,000 copies in the original edition and 14,000 copies in the bookclub editions.” (« [s]on premier roman, Loin de Chandigarh, a obtenu en France, depuis sa parution en Septembre 2005 chez Buchet-Chastel, un succès inédit pour un livre indien. Alors qu’une 10e réimpression est en cours, il s’est vendu à 32,000 exemplaires dans l’édition originale et 14,000 dans les versions club. »)81 The review in Le Figaro says that “after eleven editions and the sale of 60,000 copies, Buchet-Chastel handed over the publication to Livre de Poche” (« après onze impressions et 60000 exemplaires vendus – Buchet-Chastel passe le relais au Livre de Poche ») and that in this popular edition, it crossed “the line of 20,000 copies, as early as the 8th day of April (« la barre des 20000 volumes dès le huitième jour d’avril »).”82

As can be seen from the number of Indian English texts translated into French since Rabindranath Tagore’s Gitanjali in 1913, the process of translation of Indian English texts into French has long become a routine matter. This process is related to the prominence acquired by Indian English literature but almost unrelated to the success of any individual text in the Anglophone world. Still, the success of a translation on the scale seen above is very rare.83 This astonishing phenomenon makes the analysis of the French reception of Alchemy of considerable interest and significance for the present study.

French Translation

The huge success of a translated text depends on various factors which sometimes include the name or the fame of the translator. Sometimes a translation is successful more because the translator is someone famous or famous as a translator than because of the original author or text as had happened in the case of William Jones’s translation of Kalidas’s Abhijnanashkuntalam or, to take a more

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83 The French reviews of Le Dieu des petits riens (TGST) and Les Enfants de minuit (Midnight’s Children) speak of global sales and sales following the Booker each text won but not particularly of their sales in France. Even the reviews of La Perte en héritage or L’Interprète des maladies do not mention any sales figures. In contrast, all French reviews of Chandigarh mention its spectacular success in France and many refer to the number of copies sold in France alone. Though French publishers were in general unwilling to reveal exact number of copies sold, two publishing houses in France acknowledged over phone that Les Enfants de minuit sold more than 15,400 copies from 1983 to 1997 in the collection ‘Le Nouveau Cabinet Cosmopolite’ and more than 6000 copies in the ‘cosmopolite’ paperback edition. Similarly L’Interprète des maladies sold 5,000 copies in Edition Grand Format Mercure de France and 6,500 in papaerback Edition poche Folio (Gallimard). (Personal Communication from CPEDERF in France) As we can see the figures are nowhere as impressive as in the case of Chandigarh.
Chapter 4: Receptions of The Alchemy of Desire

recent example, in the case of D. H. Lawrence’s translations of three works of Giovanni Verga, a 19th century Italian author not much known in the Anglophone world until then.84

The issue is even more important in the case of debut novels, where the author is unknown as a literary writer even if famous for other reasons (as in the case of Alchemy). However, it would be safe to assume that the success of Loin de Chandigarh could not be a case of a very well-known translator’s name being the cause for the success of the translation, since it is not publicised or marketed or reviewed as Annik Le Goyat’s (the French translator of Alchemy85 ) translation.

Some other issues that need to be considered in translation in general and French translation of Indian English literature in particular are the domestication of content and titles observed by scholars such as Rollason and N. Kamala.86

Domestication of content
As we have seen in the introductory chapter, N. Kamala’s observations about the idiomatic and linguistic fluency of French translations, which make Tagore resemble Lamartine and R.K. Narayan sound fluent in French,87 suggest a systematic translation practice of domestication at the level of the text or, if we agree with Venuti that domestication is the predominant mode of translation,88 an unwillingness to leave foreign elements foreign. Such domestication into standard literary French or tendency to smooth out the foreign elements can be seen in Loin de Chandigarh (Chandigarh from here on) to some extent.

For example, unable to keep away from Fizz, the young narrator travels for hours in the early morning from Chandigarh to Nahan to meet Fizz whom he has accompanied to her aunt’s house only the day before. The narrator describes the way Fizz looks at that moment as “beautiful beyond any singing of her.” (18) This non-standard English phrase is translated into perfect French as « Il n’y avait pas de mots pour chanter sa beauté. » (31, Chandigarh). When Fizz calls the narrator crazy for

84 Personal communication from Ellen McRae based on her research and thesis in progress (21 June 2010).
D. H. Lawrence translated Giovanni Verga’s books (Mastro-don Gesualdo (1923), Little Novels of Sicily (1925) and Cavelleria Rusticana and Other Stories (1928) several decades after they had been written. Because of Lawrence’s fame as a writer, he created interest in Verga amongst English language readers.
85 Not much information is available on Goyat, apart from the fact that she seems to have translated many livres de jeunesse (Books for the Young/adolescents) and following the success of Chandigarh has gone on to translate Tejpal’s second novel L’Histoire de mes Assassins and another Indian English text, the 2008 Booker Prize winner The White Tiger by Arvind Adiga.
87 Kamala, “Narcissism Thy Name is French Translation.”
coming there to meet her, he asks her whether he was “Good crazy or bad crazy’ she replies “Really good crazy”. ‘Really’ is often used as a superlative in Indian parlance. It means ‘very’, but with a negative shade, and the phrase is a play on the word ‘good’ used by the narrator. The French word ‘trop’ is closer to this sense of ‘very’ than ‘très’. However, instead of « un trop gentil fou », “really good crazy” is translated as « un très gentil fou » in Chandigarh. Though one of the implied meanings (that Fizz is happy to see him and is thrilled by his crazy action) is caught correctly, the play on the words and the other meaning (that given the high risk of getting caught red handed in a house full of relatives, it is absolute madness to visit her there) is lost.

In the section entitled Karma, eager to embark upon his second novel, the narrator loses all interest in office politics. To express his indifference, to say he did not give a damn, he uses the phrase “I couldn’t care a camel’s ass” (168), an indianism, which is translated as « Je me moquais comme d’une guigne » (221 Chandigarh). This is also a slang expression but, as a stock French slang expression, a naturalisation, or domestication of the peculiar into familiar. In the episode of the hilarious and scary bus ride to Delhi of the narrator, Fizz and the two Sikhs (the bus driver and the cleaner), the bus fails at a busy signal causing a traffic jam. When the cleaner, in his attempt to start the bus, pulls the gear-stick out, Fizz exclaims “omigod! Omifuckingod!” (150). This is simply translated as « Oh! Nom de dieu » (199), and the bus driver’s terrified invocation “theoneandtruegodbemerciful! Bemerciful!” (150) turns into a simple « Dieu miséricordieux! » (199), and a little later into « Dieu du ciel! Dieu miséricordieux! » (199).

These translations demolish the strange compound words, formed as a result of the Indian way of speaking fast, by separating them into individual words. The translations also diminish the originals in various ways. The deletion of the word ‘fucking’ from Fizz’s exclamation not only erases the profanity of the original but is reductive to the character of Fizz who comes across as warm and humane but indifferent to religious and social dogma. The driver’s appeal to the ‘oneandtruegod’ to be merciful is translated as ‘merciful God’ and the ‘oneandtruegod’ who for the Sikhs exists everywhere and in everything is converted to a very Christian ‘God in the sky’. In both cases, the translation domesticates the linguistic and religious particularities of the original at the same time as it drains the originals of the distinctive colourfulness of colloquial speech and their disruptive and inventive quality.

Occasionally, a typically ‘English’ reference is totally erased in the translation. For example, as the narrator’s desire for Fizz fades when he falls under the spell of Catherine’s diaries, Fizz asks him
whether anything was worrying him, alluding to his lack of desire. In *Alchemy*, the conversation between the narrator and Fizz goes as follows

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I think it is dying. [The narrator]
I’ll talk to it, she said.
In Hindi, [the narrator] said, You have to talk to it in Hindi. This is the Hindi belt.
She said, But it doesn’t understand Hindi – it’s too full of old Ezra. (12)
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Ezra is used here to imply Pound, Ezra Pound’s surname, as a play on the double entendre or the sexual connotation of the word ‘pound’. However, the second part of Fizz’s reply is missing from the French translation, which reads only as « *elle ne comprend pas le hindi* » (23) (“it doesn’t understand Hindi”). On the other hand, the ambiguity of the narrator’s first sentence where he uses ‘it’ instead of ‘penis’ or any other slang word for the male sexual organ, indicative perhaps of the Indian discomfort in alluding to sexual organs or of the fact that both the narrator and Fizz know what the issue is without specifying it, is removed by translating “I think it is dying” as « *Je crois que ma queue est en train de mourir* » (23) where the word ‘queue’, an explicit slang word for male sexual organ, replaces the ‘it’ in the original sentence.

Of course this does not happen often or to each ‘English’ reference or Indian word and phrase. Some of these are translated while others are not. The translation thus remains somewhat undecided between domestication and foreignisation and though apparently inclined more towards the domestication is arbitrary in its decisions. The most obvious example of the French translation practice of domestication (and exoticisation) is the translation of the title of *Alchemy*.

Within the tradition of French translation of Indian English literature, the translation of the original title is an important issue. Three distinct patterns or trends emerge within the tradition. The original titles are sometimes domesticated in order to make them more familiar (for the French audience) or naturalised reductively and out of context by translating them into correct French. Sometimes, as the translation of the title of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason* into *Les Feux de Bengale* shows, they are foreignised or completely transformed to give them a more exotic flavor by making them more India-specific.

The title of the French translation of *Alchemy*, as a complete transformation of the original, is in keeping with the above-mentioned tradition. Though a correct translation as *L’Alchimie du Désir* is

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89 Rollason, “Problems of translating Indian Writing in English into Spanish, with reference to "A Married Woman" by Manju Kapur (translated as "Una mujer casada" by Dora Sales Salvador),” 13.
possible, the title is translated as *Loin de Chandigarh* (Far away from Chandigarh). The review in *Lire, le magazine littéraire*, points out that “if the French title is exotic, the original title is more realistic and suits the content of the book better” (« [s]i le titre français fait exotique, le titre original, plus réaliste … traduit davantage le contenu du livre »).90 The transformed title is quite poetic in its aura of distance, separation, journeys and memories but also in the unusual consonance of its French pronunciation. Nor is it as unrelated to the story as the review seems to suggest. However, the French title is certainly a far cry from the evocative and apt original and because of its focus on Chandigarh, the place where the narrator and Fizz discover love and passion, is reductively detrimental to the novel’s complex exploration of the multifaceted nature of desire that is not limited to love and passion.

Given the French connection to Chandigarh, an Indian town designed and built by the famous French architect Le Corbusier, the French translation of the original title makes it exotic, more India-specific and familiar for the French audience in one masterful stroke. However, one must accept that the familiarisation and exoticisation of the title, even if it was a marketing strategy as Rollason suggests it usually is,91 can have played only a small part in the success of the novel. Besides, the novel itself refers to this French connection in quite unflattering terms. The narrator thinks of Chandigarh as “a city with no past and no obvious future” (484). Taking a last look at the town he and Fizz are leaving behind for Delhi, he describes Chandigarh as

> [t]hat strange inorganic city created by geometry not need. A city built with protractors, rulers, set squares and dividers rather than passion, emotion, hunger, creativity. The Frenchman who had built it had bleached it of both the practiced sensuality of the French and the earthy lustiness of the Indian.
>
> He had left geometric dwellings. Only time would make it a city. A great deal of time. (138, *Alchemy*)

Thus, the French success of *Alchemy* cannot be explained away in the name of a ‘celebrity’ translator or a marketing gimmick. It has not stemmed from the authorial fame or ‘name’ either. The reviewers’ interest in the extra-textual aspects such as biographical details, Naipaul’s praise and references to the *Tehelka* episode make it obvious that Tejpal is a discovery rather than a known celebrity for the French. And as one review points out, it was through Chandigarh that the French discovered “the Indian novelist Tarun J. Tejpal who turns out to be both an astonishing storyteller

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91 Rollason, “Problems of translating Indian Writing in English into Spanish with reference to "A Married Woman" by Manju Kapur (translated as "Una mujer casada" by Dora Sales Salvador).”
and a fighter” (“le romancier indien Tarun J. Tejpal, qui se révèle à la fois un étonnant conteur et un homme de combat »). 92

The exceptional success of Chandigarh, a translated Indian English text, in France has teased the French reviewers as well and many of them have felt that the explanation lies in Chandigarh’s subject matter.

The erotic sensuality of the novel with its interlacing of past and present narratives of love, passion and sex is too prominent to ignore. The Figaro review voices the question that many must have in their mind; “[i]s it because Tarun Tejpal dares to speak so well about sex that the French adore him?” (« [s]erait-ce parce que Tarun Tejpal ose si bien parler du sexe que les Français l’adorent ? »)93

French reviews describe Chandigarh as “a very erotic novel where sex approaches a feeling of wholeness and freedom” « [u]n livre très érotique, où le sexe est proche d’un sentiment de plénitude et de la liberté ».94 The novel is declared to be “a triumph of sensuality” (« triomphe de sensualité »)95 and “a luxuriant work, which exalts desire as the lord and master” (« [u]ne oeuvre luxuriante, qui exalte le désir comme dieu et maître »).96

Many French reviewers feel that “the erotic descriptions, revelations of carnal secrets” (« descriptions érotiques, dévoilement des secrets charnels »)97 in Chandigarh are the most significant reason for its success in France. According to the Figaro review, the reason (behind Alchemy’s success) is that, “defying the compromises of adulthood and the modern world, [Tejpal] gives us the dreams of the young. He chooses passion over reasonable love. And that is what the French love” (« [a]u nez des compromis de l’âge adulte et du monde moderne, [Tejpal] fait passer les rêves de jeunesse. À l’amour raisonnable, il choisit la passion. Et ça, les Français aiment »).98

However, not all French reviews feel that the novel’s strength lies only in its erotics. Le Nouvel Observateur in fact concludes, “[i]t’s a pity that these 600 pages contain so much about the sexual life of the couple. The author is more interesting when he opens a window on the culture of as diverse and unique a country as India” (« [d]ommage que, sur 600 pages, il y en ait tant sur la vie sexuelle du couple. On préfère l’auteur quand il ouvre les yeux sur la culture d’un pays aussi divers

95 Godfray, “Loin de Chandigarh” de Tarun J. Tejpal Le Livre de Poche.”
97 Godfray, “Loin de Chandigarh” de Tarun J. Tejpal Le Livre de Poche.”
98 Ibid.
Chapter 4: Receptions of *The Alchemy of Desire*

*et singulier que l’Inde ».* 99 Some feel that, in *Chandigarh*, “we follow the incandescent thread of eroticism across recent history” (« *[f]e fil rouge incandescent de l’érotisme nous promène à travers l’histoire récente ») and what captures the imagination is the combination of “the desire that spans the range from physical ecstasy to ecstasy of writing and a direct, first-hand and droll contact with Indian society” (« *le désir qui parcourt... de l’extase physique à la transe de l’écriture, et [c]e contact, direct, vécu, drôle, avec la société indienne »). 100

For the French reviewers, *Alchemy’s* success as *Chandigarh*, i.e. a French translation, seems thus to lie in the exaltation of erotics, sensuality and passion over sensible practicality and (dis)enchancing reality. However, the way that this particular aspect of *Alchemy* gets linked to India by these reviewers or the way that the French reviewers’ reading of the erotics in *Alchemy* is informed by their ‘knowledge about India’ is illuminating.

**Reading India**

*Chandigarh* is described as an erotic novel but also “the apotheosis of a transcendent and spiritual sexuality” (« *[l’]apothéose d’une sexualité transcendent et spirituelle »). 101 The *Lire* review describes the narrator’s quest as “[a] quest to rediscover... the path of pleasure and desire” (« *[u]ne quête pour ... retrouver le chemin de la volupté et du désir ») and admires the way Tejpal portrays “[t]his never-ending and impossible quest for Nirvana” (« *[c]ette quête impossible du Nirvana à perpétuité »). 102 The novel, thus, is considered a perfect portrayal of the eternal quest for Nirvana through bodily pleasure, the quest that in Western imagination is associated with ancient India.

In the reviews of *Chandigarh*, references to the *Kama Sutra* are recurrent. For some, the descriptions of the narrator’s passion for Fizz “are equal to those in the *Kama Sutra*” (« *valent leur pesant de Kama Sutra »)) 103 while for some, these passionate scenes are “scenes from *Kama Sutra*” (« *d]es scènes du Kâma-sutra »). 104 The review in the *Nouvel Observateur* calls *Chandigarh* a “*Kama Sutra* applied to modern India” (« *Kama Sutra appliqué à l’Inde moderne »). 105 This review thus conflates ancient India with present-day India, as many other reviews do in a different manner.

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101 Godfryd, “”Loin de Chandigarh” de Tarun J. Tejpal Le Livre de Poche.”
102 Gaignault, “Karma Sutra.”
105 Fernandez, “Kama-fatras.”
The way in which some French reviews equate the amplitude of the book with the vastness of India, in time, space and size, is striking. The book is likened to a “[v]oyage down the Ganges, long and infinitely pleasurable” or “a fresco that has the flow of… the Ganges” (« une fresque qui a le débit du Gange »). The L’Express review links the vastness of the book to the vastness of its project of narrating “[forty] years of Indian history” (« 40 ans de l’histoire indienne »).

Chandigarh is described repeatedly as “a travelling shot of ‘modern’ India” (« un long travelling sur l’Inde moderne ») or “a real fresco of ‘modern’ India that we discover, as in a road-movie, through amazing landscapes” (« une véritable fresque de l’Inde moderne, que nous découvrirons comme dans un road movie à travers des paysages grandioses ») or “a teeming mural that reflects the turmoil of a seething continent” (« une fresque grouillante où se reflète la légendaire fureur d’un continent survolté »). By ‘modern’, the reviewers obviously mean nothing more than contemporary or present-day, since India is described as “a country deeply in distress because of its neglect of Gandhi’s ideals, torn between a caste-ridden past and high-tech future … brimming with humanity and energy” (« un pays bouleversé par l’abandon des idéaux de Gandhi, tiraillé entre son passé de caste et son futur high-tech … débordant d’humanité et d’énergie ») but also as “the land where the dead are often better off than the living” (« la terre où les morts ont souvent raison des vivants »).

Striking is the vocabulary used to describe Chandigarh as a portrayal of India, caught at the moment when it has one leg in the past and the other poised to enter the future. On the one hand, Chandigarh is an exotic, luxuriant, transcendentally and incandescently erotic painting with the flow and the force of the Ganges. On the other hand it is a mural, or a shot or road movie of the teeming, seething turmoil of ‘modern’ India. This vocabulary suggests a cultural touristic interest in these two Indias.

The double inscription of ‘antiquity and modernity’ seen in the representation of India is also evident in the way Tejpal is referred to. The writer is accorded the aura of a modern ‘warrior-poet’ or a jet-age Indian sage. As a serious journalist, he is “one of the most influential men on the political and media scene in India” (« l’un des hommes les plus influents du paysage politique et médiatique indien

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107 Clavel, “Un fantôme nommé désir.”
108 Flametion, “Loin de Chandigarh; Tarun Tejpal.”
109 Clavel, “Un fantôme nommé désir.”
111 Clavel, “Un roman qui a le débit du Gange.”
113 Clavel, “Un fantôme nommé désir.”
But, he is also described as “a little fakir or sadhu” (« un petit fakir »), a name often used for Mahatma Gandhi, and “a kind of moral conscience of India” (« une espèce de conscience morale en Inde »). He is presented as “radical and controversial even in the way he speaks of sexuality, in the way he does not reduce it to a mere bodily function, and in the way he looks at it without shame (in the Hindu tradition) as a celebration of life, against rigid morality” (« politi et polémique jusque dans sa manière de parler de la sexualité, de ne pas la réduire à une fonction, et de l’envisager sans honte (dans la tradition hindoue) comme une célébration du vivant, contre le rigorisme moral ») Tejpal is someone who “writes with the ink of the third millennium” (« écrit à l’encre du troisième millénaire ») and his writing is also “erotically rooted in Indian culture” (« érotiquement ancrée dans la culture indienne »).

He is “the symbol, vibrant and intensely physical, of an India that breaks with the clichés and prejudices churned out by Bollywood or tourist guidebooks” (« le symbole, vibrant et intensément charnel, d’une Inde qui rompt avec les clichés et les préjugés véhiculés par Bollywood ou les guides touristiques ») and he ‘preaches’ reconciliation between castes, religions (Fizz is Muslim), and, without renouncing the spiritual, glorifies the pleasures of the flesh (« la réconciliation entre les castes, les religions (Fizz est musulmane), et, sans renier le spirituel, fait l’apologie du plaisir de la chair »). He is a priest for whom “[t]he body is the temple” (« [l]e corps est le temple »), “a sorcerer” (« un sorcier ») and also a “pamphleteer … philosopher” (« un pamphlétaire … philosophe »).

As a sage for whom the body is the temple and a modern philosopher, Tejpal remains firmly linked to India. Chandigarh, in its radically free (for an Indian book) portrayal of desire and Tejpal, in his need to make desire the subject of his writing, are, surprisingly, not considered close to the French libertine tradition where the portrayal of desire was a radical statement of one’s beliefs and there was often a politics behind the erotics.

114 Levisalles, “L’Inde est un projet inachevé.”
115 Clavel, “Un roman qui a le débit du Gange.”
117 Morvan, “Loin de Chandigarh” entre politique et Kama Sutra…
118 Flamerton, “Loin de Chandigarh; Tarun Tejpal.”
119 Morvan, “Loin de Chandigarh”, entre politique et Kama Sutra…
120 Flamerton, “Loin de Chandigarh; Tarun Tejpal.”
121 Chevillet, “L’amour de l’Inde.”
122 Koutchoumoff, “Tarun Tejpal, écrivain possédé.”
124 Chevillet, “L’amour de l’Inde.”
Chandigarh does not seem to remind the French, as it might, of Les Liaisons dangereuses.\textsuperscript{125} Choderlos de Laclos’s epistolary novel in the libertine tradition defied the established conventions of aesthetic propriety in its portrayal of the moral depravity of the aristocratic society of the time. It was read both as a licentious novel and as a moral work. It was even seen by some as an early feminist novel.

In spite of the difference in their storylines, narrative techniques, structures and the societies they depict, Alchemy/Chandigarh, through Catherine’s life story, shares many characteristics with Liaisons. Both novels explore the theme of desire and love but also the role power and gender play in sexual relationships. In a way, in both novels, erotic desire is closely linked with or feeds into the act of writing/narrating. Both novels have strong female characters, who ‘learn lessons at the hands of’ or are ‘educated’\textsuperscript{126} by men in different ways and also suffer in different ways. There is a strong current of non-dit in both works which stems from the personal lives and beliefs of their authors and informs these works. Both novels were written when the authors were in a serious tiff with the State,\textsuperscript{127} which however proved to be comparatively more serious for Tejpal than for Laclos.

The libertine message in Chandigarh and Liaisons is ambiguous and, though these novels’ approach is seemingly pro-feminist, the female characters, in both novels, are passive objects of ‘male’ authorial imagination and ‘voice’. As David Coward observes in his introduction to Liaisons,\textsuperscript{128} though libertine in its use of the ‘shock value of eroticism’ to contest social systems by contesting established sexual mores, Liaisons does not sanctify personal freedom achieved by rejecting the social norms or moral codes. The lives of its libertine protagonists, Valmont and La Marquise, end in death and disfigurement respectively. Alchemy, too, as the expression of the authorial desire to push the boundaries of the rigid Indian morality, starts with the bold statement that “sex is the greatest glue between two people” and ends in its negation.

Coward draws attention to the anti-feminism (or rather questions the perceived feminism) of Liaisons where, in the end, the Marquise suffers public humiliation, financial ruin and physical disfigurement while Valmont dies a comparatively honourable death in a duel,\textsuperscript{129} though they are

\textsuperscript{125} Choderlos de Laclos, Les Liaisons Dangereuses (Paris: Livre de poche, 1987).
\textsuperscript{126} In Liaisons education signifies on the one hand, the ‘moral grooming’ which left the women incapable of dealing with rakes and forced them to suffer as guilty and responsible (within the social system of that time) for the ‘sexual depravity’ of which they were victims and on the other hand the ‘sexual education or rather initiation’.
\textsuperscript{127} The tiff with the State was the Tehelka ordeal for Tejpal and criticism against Vauban, a military expert, for Laclos. Tejpal was hounded by the Government and his life was under threat while Laclos was sent away to a post in some political backwater.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., xxiv.
accomplices till they become enemies and both are equally guilty of ruining innocent lives for their own pleasure. In *Alchemy/Chandigarh*, Catherine, though less subtle than the Marquise in her pursuit of desire, comes across as equally self-centered and suffers heavily for her acts. First she loses status and privilege when Sayd dies, then loses Gajsingh to his family, and finally loses her life in the throes of ‘religious’ doubt and guilt for abandoning her own daughter. In contrast, in the end, the narrator, who is as self-centered and obsessed as Catherine in his pursuit of desire, still has the hope that Fizz might come back, and also has his dream of writing a novel.

Can the French failure to comment on this similarity be considered as the indication of a subconscious reluctance to entertain the possibility that a non-French literary text could have the same philosophical concerns (and sophistication) as a French ‘classic’? Or is there a hint of unwillingness to accord a higher status to a text of ‘expression anglaise’ (Anglophone text) by comparing it to a French classic? An unwillingness that is akin to Fredric Jameson’s assertion that “The third-world novel will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce”?130

These suspicions are further substantiated by *Alchemy*’s obvious failure to draw attention to the links between its own exploration of the relation between creativity and sexual desire and the work of French scholars such as Barthes on the erotics or *jouissance* of writing/reading. Differentiating between the reader’s passive pleasure of reading a text and active ecstasy in participating in or performing a text, Barthes describes *jouissance* as the effect of a ‘modern or writerly’ text, which disrupts rather than confirms the reader’s preconceived or pre-existing notions but also invites him/her to enact some of the author’s acts and thereby participate in the (re)production of meaning.131

In French the term *jouissance* means both pleasure and orgasm. In Barthes’s theory of the text, reading becomes an erotic act that Robert Young very wittily calls ‘textasy’ and describes as the “ecstatic loss of the subject [the reader] in a sexual or textual coming”.132 *Alchemy* almost fictionalises Barthes’s concept of *jouissance* as it equates reading to erotic ecstasy, through its portrayal of the narrator’s obsessive fantasies about Catherine, who is dead,133 while reading her diaries, which first seduce and then ravish, or rather violate, him. This, too, however remains

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133 Barthes declares that the author as an institution and real person is dead but within the text he desires for or needs an author-figure just as the author needs him (a reader-figure) – *Le Plaisir du Texte*, 101. Catherine as the author of her diaries fits this description.
unnoticed. *Alchemy* thus remains ‘under-interpreted’ by its French audience while it is over-interpreted by its translator, who removes certain ambiguities that are important to the text.

**Translation as Reading**

The best, or rather worst, example of how translation as a reading or interpretation colonises the original and influences the reception of a text, is the French translation of the last sentence of *Alchemy*. *Alchemy* begins with the declaration that “Love is not the greatest glue between two people. Sex is.” In French, the opening line is translated as « *L'amour n’est pas le ciment le plus fort entre deux êtres. C’est le sexe.* » This, when back-translated, reads as “Love is not the greatest glue between two people. It is Sex.” *Alchemy* ends with “Sex is not the greatest glue between two people. Love …” As we can see, although the first part of this sentence is the exact opposite of the first part of the opening line, the second part remains unfinished in *Alchemy*. But, instead of ending with « *Le sexe n’est pas le ciment le plus fort entre deux êtres. L’amour …* », Chandigarh ends with « *Le sexe n’est pas le ciment le plus fort entre deux êtres. C’est l’amour …* », which in back-translation reads as “Sex is not the greatest glue between two people. It is Love …”

Though the ellipsis is still in place at the end of the French ending, even non-Francophone observers can deduce, on the basis of the translation of the opening line, that the translation of the second part means ‘Love is’, or to be exact, ‘It is Love …’, and that within the linguistic parameters of French the sentence is complete. The French translation thus erases the uncertainty and ambivalence introduced by the unfinished sentence in the original. The ellipsis at the end of Chandigarh becomes superfluous to its reading because of the assertion in the last sentence.

As seen in the discussion on the theme of storytelling, in view of *Alchemy’s* post-modern preoccupation with the workings of the process of storytelling, the significance of the unfinished last line is obvious. Not only does the unfinished ending problematise the credibility of the narrator but it also raises doubts about the veracity of the narrative. The translated ending undermines the original ending by erasing the doubt it casts on the power of Love to be the greatest glue between two people. If the French reviews are right about the reasons for *Alchemy’s* success in France, then *Alchemy/Chandigarh* is loved by the French readers for its preference for passion and love over adult compromises and rationality. The potential of the translated ending to set the tone for such an interpretation of *Alchemy* and its probable role in the elimination of any post-modern reading of *Alchemy’s* theme of storytelling become evident.
The French translation of these lines thus reveals the dangers inherent in translation (as a process), which is at once a reading or interpretation and a mediation between a text from one culture and its audience in a different culture. To be fair, one must acknowledge that the significance of the unfinished line has remained unnoticed even in the Anglophone reception, both Indian and non-Indian, and many have ‘over-read’ the ending as ‘Love is’. However, unlike the original, the French translation takes away the choice of the readers by forcing them to over-interpret, as, I think, the French translator does, and by erasing the possibility of the opposite.

Conclusion

The French translation, if seen as a reception, displays an attitude of half-hearted appropriation which erases many, though not all, differences. However, except for one review that mentions the “often overhasty and botched translation” (« traduction souvent bâclée ») the translation process remains invisible for most review(er)s who, without a reference to it being a translation, praise the dazzling or lyrical prose of Chandigarh. This tendency to consider the translation as a transparent and invisible process has led to the blind spot about the last sentence of Alchemy. This demonstrates the significance and the problematic nature of translation as a reception in itself and as a process of mediation between the original text and the target audience while revealing the dangers inherent in ignoring what happens to texts during their multiple translations and the potential effect of this on the reception of texts.

Though Naipaul’s praise is mentioned in some French reviews, it does not play as significant a role here as it does in the Indian reception. The aspect of the text that plays the most prominent role in the French reception is still the subject matter with its focus on the exploration of erotic and creative desire. It is interesting to see the way in which this exploration or its textual expression is considered as quintessentially Indian and is repeatedly linked with the Kama Sutra, for the west the classical symbol of ancient India, rather than a modern European intellectual tradition such as libertinage; though perhaps not surprising in view of the image of the author that emerges from French reviews. The author, who is part of the simultaneously ancient and (striving to be) modern India he lives in and writes from, is at once a polemic, intellectual, philosopher and modern day Vatsyana.

The vocabulary of frescoes, landscapes, long shots and road movies in French reviews signals a (cultural) touristic or voyeuristic interest given that these frescoes, landscapes or shots are thought to

134 Fernandez, “Kama-fatras.”
135 The sage who wrote the Kama Sutra.
capture India in a compromising position: between its glorious past of erotic sensualism and present day teemingness, which forms a striking contrast with the past. The frequent comparisons of sexual explorations and descriptions in *Alchemy/Chandigarh* to a quest for Nirvana and scenes from the *Kama Sutra* suggest an orientalist reading that links *Chandigarh* to an exotic, erotic, mystical, spiritual India, the land of the *Kama Sutra* and Khajuraho, the land of sensuous sculptures, erotic miniatures and treatises on the art of making love, where transcendence is possible through bodily pleasures. At the same time the references to a teeming, swarming ‘modern’ India torn between past and future, captured and forever frozen in that dual existence, carry hints of the same dark tourism that brings Western tourists to Dharavi, the biggest slum in Mumbai, India and Asia or, if they prefer to ‘enjoy’ India from a safe distance, to movies such as ‘Slumdog Millionnaire’ or novels such as *Midnight’s Children*, *The God of Small Things*, *The White Tiger* or *The Inheritance of Loss*.

In view of this ‘mainstream’ attention to *Alchemy*, the most noticeable feature of the French reception is the scholarly indifference towards *Alchemy*. The questions that come to mind are: Could the reason behind this indifference possibly be *Alchemy*’s commercial and popular success in France, which in addition to the fact that it is an Anglophone text, makes it less ‘highbrow’? Or is *Alchemy*’s failure to garner critical consecration in the Anglophone world because the lack of serious interest in the complexity and literary qualities of the text and the lack of watchwords such as authenticity, hybridity or exoticism that usually crop up in the discussions of Indian English texts are the two characteristics that *Alchemy*’s reception shares across all three readerships.

**Lack of scholarly interest**

In *Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English*, Catherine Innes points to the increased institutional interest in the postcolonial literatures, but also the way “certain values and concepts such as ‘authenticity’, ‘otherness’ and ‘hybridity’ have become embedded in discussions of postcolonial writing” and as a result “the texts that seem to foreground these qualities receive continuing attention”. 136 What Innes does not say but that can be inferred from her observation is that the centrality of certain concerns and issues within the postcolonial perspective and the consequent institutional attention to the texts, which focus on those issues, lead to lack of attention to the texts, which come from the literatures considered postcolonial but do not focus on those issues. This inference is certainly justified and substantiated by the amount of ‘Anglophone’ scholarly interest in *The Inheritance of Loss* and *Interpreter of Maladies*, and the lack of any scholarly interest in *Alchemy*.

Chapter 4: Receptions of The Alchemy of Desire

One of the reasons for the lack of serious interest in Alchemy appears to be a result of the combination of Tejpal’s persona as the Tehelka-man and perception of Alchemy’s subject matter as bold or sensational rather than thought-provoking. It is difficult to say whether Alchemy would have fared better or worse as a literary text if Tejpal had not been who he is but, in view of the predominance of the postcolonial perspective as an approach to Indian English literature and in the literary world, the possibility that Alchemy’s deviation from the central concerns of postcolonial perspective plays a role in this (especially Anglophone and indirectly French) academic neglect cannot be denied.

Alchemy’s deviation from the postcolonial path

Within the postcolonial perspective, Alchemy becomes a postcolonial text by the mere fact of having been written in English by an Indian, that is in the language of the former coloniser by a writer from a former colony. However, as we shall see, Alchemy does not show certain characteristics that postcolonial texts within the Indian English canon display.

The early Indian English texts were shaped by the anticolonial struggle and nationalist sentiment. Alchemy is not a nationalistic novel. In Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things, discussing Indian English texts, Alex Tickell points out that postcolonial writers used bildungsroman as a means of connecting the political with the individual and the progression of the self of the central character to reflect the concerns and struggles of the nation.137 Tickell also observes that because of the disillusionment which followed independence, the contemporary postcolonial texts are ironic reworkings of the national allegory.138 Alchemy is linked to its author’s lived experience and politics but Alchemy’s protagonist is not a symbol of the nation. Alchemy is also not a scathing satire or ironic representation of the link between ‘self’ and ‘nation’, like Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, where the protagonist’s self represents the chaotic fragmentation of nation in the wake of post-Independence disillusionment. Instead, Alchemy is Tejpal’s attempt to delink the personal story from the national or rather to show how slim the intersection between the personal and the national spheres is, though they exist side by side or one within the other. In Alchemy, the only similarity between the protagonist’s and the nation’s story is the souring of the idealistic fervour, as the nation falls from the ideals of tolerance and unity and the narrator, a former journalist, loses interest in the happenings around him.

138 Ibid.
This shift away from the focus on a protagonist linked symbolically to the nation is an important deviation from the postcolonial concerns with identity and power, evident in novels such as *The God of Small Things (TGST)*. As Alex Tickell observes, in *TGST*, small things/individuals and big things/collective are irrevocably linked with each other even if hierarchically (and subversively), and the collective and the established hierarchies or systems such as class, caste, gender do affect or oppress individuals. By contrast, in *Alchemy*, the nation and the individual live their separate lives, that touch only occasionally. The collective or community is rendered ineffective by *Alchemy*’s setting, which is first a big metropolis and then a sparsely populated hamlet, as opposed to the small town/close community setting of *TGST* where the collective intrudes and dominates individual private lives.

The individual in *Alchemy* is not used as a symbol for the nation (as it is in *Midnight’s Children*) nor as a subaltern or a victim of the national narrative (as it is in *TGST*). What happens to the protagonist is also not a ‘colonial Karma’ or effect of colonial rule in a direct manner, even if Bibi Lahori and (the Indian part of) Catherine’s stories belong to that era and do have an effect on the narrator’s self. Religion is also shown to be less of a hurdle than caste is shown to be in *TGST*. The concern of *Alchemy*’s narrative is also not the postcolonial quest for or assertion of identity, or celebration of hybridity. *Alchemy*’s focus is mainly on telling the story of one life and the rest, including the nation, is incidental to that narrative.

Like latter-day Indian English texts, *Alchemy* is not concerned with the effects and legacies of colonisation, the issues of identity or class-caste struggles. Moreover, *Alchemy* also does not show the same attitude to language that the postcolonial perspective expects (or anticipates) from novels which belong to the literatures considered postcolonial. It does not attempt to play with the coloniser’s language or write back to the centre through it. Although in an interview Tejpal has commented on the difficulties in representing the polyphony of India in English and the discrepancies between the Indian reality and the nature of English, his protagonists (the narrator and Fizz) use English rather than Hindi as their natural language. And though Tejpal desires to give voice to the “folksy wisdom of common men of India,” the language very rarely deviates from standard English.

In *Alchemy*, Indianisms, unexplained ‘vernacular’ terms and phrases occur sporadically and most vernacular words or sentences are either preceded or followed by their equivalents in English. For

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139 Ibid.
140 “’Safe books bore me’: Rediff.com India News.”
141 Ibid.
example, on the one hand, the Hindi bhajans\textsuperscript{142} sung by the tea-stall owner in Nahan (25) or Rakshas in Gethia house (120) are only transliterated into English but not explained for the non-Indian readers. This, however, does not hamper the reading of \textit{Alchemy} in any way. On the other hand, the word Santulan comes as the Hindi equivalent that Rakshas uses for what the narrator has already explained as ‘the balance of mind’ (458), and the truck driver’s invocation of God appears in English without a transliteration of the original. (150)

Although these features set \textit{Alchemy} apart within the Indian English canon, \textit{Alchemy} is part of the Indian English canon through its intertextual links with many Indian English texts. However, as the result of the lack of serious scholarly interest, and mainstream Indian reaction to Naipaul’s praise, numerous intertextualities which link \textit{Alchemy} to the Indian English canon remain as yet unexplored. Similarly, no attention is paid to the way it participates in the simultaneous subversion and perpetuation of certain metropolitan stereotypes that postcolonial texts in general and Indian English texts such as \textit{Midnight’s Children} and \textit{TGST} in particular are criticised for.

\textbf{Intertextualities}

\textit{Alchemy} was praised by V.S. Naipaul, as ‘brilliant and original’ which, given Naipaul’s asperity towards India and Indian literature in English, can be read (and, as we have seen in the Indian reception, has been read) as an attempt to set it apart from its predecessors. The very obvious (even if unnoticed) intertextualities between \textit{Alchemy} and some of these very predecessors to a considerable extent invalidate Naipaul’s attempt.

\textit{Alchemy} has passing references to titles of some Indian English texts. For example, Bibi Lahori’s story begins with the sentence “In the dying days of 1947 a long awaited midnight’s evil had come visiting her farmlands” (194), referring to the same midnight as Rushdie’s \textit{Midnight’s Children}, the midnight of 14\textsuperscript{th} August 1947 when divided India became independent. The “million mutinies” that were afoot, and that the narrator and Fizz lived through, is an allusion to Naipaul’s \textit{India: The Million Mutinies} (175).

Some episodes in \textit{Alchemy} have echoes of similar episodes in earlier works. The train full of dead bodies in Bibi Lahori’s story clearly evokes the scene in Khushwant Singh’s \textit{Train to Pakistan} where a train full of corpses arrives from Pakistan.\textsuperscript{143} The narrator’s Gethia house in \textit{Alchemy}, like

\textsuperscript{142} Religious songs
\textsuperscript{143} Tejpal, \textit{The Alchemy of Desire}, 201; Khushwant Singh, \textit{Train to Pakistan} (Orient Blackswan, 2005), 91.
Carignano in Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain*, is ‘a cliff-top house formerly owned by a white owner’. In both novels, while the house is inhabited by the white owner, the whole roof of the cliff-top house is blown off by a gale and falls in the valley below to be carried back by a number of ‘natives’. In *Alchemy*, the narrator hears the story from Rakshas (45) while in *Fire on the Mountain*, Ram Lal, the servant in Carignano, gets to hear it from the postman (6).

Though Tejpal has said that he wanted to represent the polyphony of India without resorting to caricature, which obviously brings Rushdie to mind, *Alchemy* is not free from Rushdian influence. Tejpal, like Rushdie, uses the story-within-a-story technique inherited from the Indian tradition of circular narratives. He also creates compounded words à la Rushdie. For example, Meanqueen, (183) omigod, omifuckingod, ullukapillu, theoneandtruegodbemerciful (151). And *Alchemy* too has a number of references to Bollywood films or songs as do Rushdie’s novels.

*Alchemy*’s five-part physical structure – where each part is titled after a Hindu concept, in each of which the narrator/storyteller tells a story that is linked to the other parts by a ‘main’ narrative – is similar to that of Vikram Chandra’s *Love and Longing in Bombay*. Both novels attempt to explore the relation and/or slippage between the Hindu concepts such as *Satya, Prema, Artha, Kama, Karma (Alchemy)* and *Dharma, Artha, Kama, Shanti, etc. (Love and Longing in Bombay)* and their implementation in real life. This similarity indicates a playful dialogue between the two novels or even a conspiratorial wink between the two authors, given that Tejpal was aware of Chandra’s altercation with the well-known Indian scholar Meenakshi Mukherjee about the title-words in *Love and Longing in Bombay*, as Chandra reports in his article ‘The Cult of Authenticity’. According to Chandra, Mukherjee accused him of using the Sanskrit title words with the intention of signalling an Indianness to the West.

However, the similarities between *TGST* and *Alchemy* go further than all the above and remain equally unnoticed in all reviews including the Indian ones.

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145 “Safe books bore me”: Rediff.com India News.
146 Chandra, “The Cult of Authenticity.”
Chapter 4: Receptions of The Alchemy of Desire

**TGST and Alchemy**

“To never simplify what is complicated or complicate what is simple.”

Arundhati Roy

“I did not want to simplify complex things. I did not want to make simple things seem complex.”

The narrator in *Alchemy* (110)

The link between Tejpal and Roy goes back to the publication of *TGST* in India. Tejpal’s ‘India Ink’ was the Indian publisher of *TGST*. Their friendship is well-known in India. At the end of *Alchemy*, in the Acknowledgements, there is a special mention of those who stood by Tejpal in the wake of the Westgate Exposé by Tehelka, during the days of his battle against the Indian Government, the struggle for survival of Tehelka, the days in which *Alchemy* was written, and Arundhati Roy is one of them. But despite the fame of both these authors and the global hype about *TGST*, the similarities between Arundhati Roy’s *TGST* and Tejpal’s *Alchemy* - quite a few in spite of the huge difference in the storyline, the length of the narrative and relation with the postcolonial tradition of the two texts - have gone largely unnoticed.

In *Arundhati Roy’s ‘The God of Small Things’*, Alex Tickell has discussed at length various aspects of *TGST* - as a text and a phenomenon - such as the social, cultural, political and literary/inter textual contexts of the text, the authorial persona and the critical as well as the popular reception. This comprehensive study is useful in examining the thematic similarities between *TGST* and *Alchemy*.

*Alchemy* and *TGST* both work on the theme of memory and its role in the construction of an identity. *TGST* traces the development of its twin child protagonists in terms of the influence of the memories of certain events in their childhood and the role the community they belong to has played in those events. *Alchemy* looks at the memories of childhood, adolescence and youth through the eyes of an adult narrator. *Alchemy* explores the effect of personal and collective memories, in the form of the narrator’s and the nation’s past, on the narrator’s development as a writer/storyteller. Both works have multiple links with their authors’ own lives and thus also demonstrate the role that memories of lived experiences play in fiction as they feed into and shape the imagination and creativity of a writer.

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148 Tickell, *Arundhati Roy’s “The God of Small Things”*. 
In *TGST*, memories are described as the ‘bleached bones of the story’. As Tickell points out, “memory is central to both character development and plot in *TGST*, but the process of reminiscence is rarely ordered like a conventional narrative, tending instead to be repetitious, digressive and continually triggered by ‘little events, ordinary things.’ *Alchemy* too, as a narrative which has been lived out and is being told, constantly moves between various pasts, presents and futures through alternating narratives. This recurrent juxtaposition of past, present and future allows *Alchemy* to explore the chemistry between memory and story. Like *TGST*, *Alchemy* stretches backward and forward with interlacing of analepses and prolepses. *TGST* ends on the word ‘tomorrow’ but that tomorrow signifies a future which has already been lived and told; *Alchemy* too ends between past and future, on a sentence that is the beginning of a story already lived and told.

In Arundhati Roy’s ‘*The God of Small Things*’ Tickell argues that the narrative of self as allegory of nation in pre-independence literature is satirically reworked by disillusioned postcolonial writers like Rushdie and Roy. According to Tickell, in *TGST* “the tensions between ‘big and small things’ and the obvious failure of political groups such as the communists to represent their constituents adequately, serves to undermine the positive association of self and nation so evident in earlier nationalistic fiction.” *Alchemy* goes even further by severing the link between the self and the nation through its juxtaposition of national and personal, collective and individual narratives that rarely and barely intersect. *Alchemy*’s narrator demonstrates his disillusionment with the nation through the brevity of the accounts of the national and the minutiae of the personal or, to be more specific, the intimate, as if to emphasise which is more significant and worth telling. In *Alchemy*, as in *TGST*, the post-independence political use and abuse of modern and pre-colonial social systems and hierarchies are responsible for many social ills.

Equally significant is the ‘politics of the erotic’ that comes across through *TGST* and *Alchemy*, though it is of a different kind in the two texts. *TGST* wears its politics on its sleeves. At the authorial level, it is an activist’s /rebel’s argument against social structures. Of the various transgressions in *TGST*, Ammu-Velutha’s defiance of caste and class hierarchies or Rahel-Estha’s incestuous love are attempts to voice protest, to assert one’s right to desire/love without, or in defiance of, social sanction (whether as approval or punishment). Transgressions such as the sexual abuse from the older and socially lower class Orangedrinklemondrink man that Estha is the victim of, or the ‘right’
to beat Mammachi that Pappachi as her husband exercises reveal the undercurrent of unequal power relations that exists beneath apparently normal everyday life and beyond or rather before the established class and caste hierarchies.

*Alchemy* portrays similar transgressions of socially sanctioned or accepted love laws through the Sayd - Catherine - Gajsingh trio, and of the religious boundaries through the narrator - Fizz couple. It, too, reveals the vulnerability of children to abuse, irrespective of the social class they belong to, from adults like the ‘uncles’ in the narrator’s father’s club who put their hands up the child narrator’s shorts or force him to put his hands up theirs (206).

However, the politics behind the erotics in *Alchemy* is more personal at the authorial level, more indirect at the textual level and in a way unrelated to the story of the novel. This politics does not come across in the form of a protest by the fictional characters against their social or personal situation within the text. The politics is in the specific way in which *Alchemy* is written, in the way it makes the ‘collective’ secondary to the individual life, and nation ineffective in private life. *Alchemy*’s politics is more a statement of disillusionment and return to ‘first things’ in reaction to the crisis in the personal life of the author. It is an individual’s assertion of the validity of his life - that is not part of the collective and is not concerned with the collective - expressed through the medium of fiction. It is a life that is created in defiance of the power of the state, over which the state has no direct hold or control or right.

Ironically, though Roy and Tejpal are much admired and respected in India for their fight against the social-political ills of Indian society, the Indian objections to Indian English writers might equally be leveled at Roy and Tejpal. They belong to the English-educated elite in India. Their texts make use of ancient Indian culture and their English flaunts the marks of vernaculars in a way that is generally perceived in other Indian English writers as an attempt to lay claims to the authenticity of Indianess with an eye on the Western markets. The difference between the other writers and these two is their image in India as, to borrow Tejpal’s term, professional dissidents. Roy as a political/social activist, her voice raised in an ululation against injustice, Tejpal as the Tehelka-man, a tearer of veils of corruption and a knight in shining armour.

The major difference between these two authors, however, is the extent of serious critical attention accorded to Roy and *TGST* as opposed to Tejpal and *Alchemy*. For example, in keeping with the significance usually accorded to the autobiographical links between author and text and to the
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subversiveness of the text within a postcolonial perspective, the autobiographical and subversive elements in TGST have been discussed in their minutest detail as has the way the subversive elements of the novel also recycle certain stereotypes and exoticsisms about India. By comparison, these aspects of Alchemy are almost totally ignored. Apart from the similarities of profession and occasionally physical appearance between the narrator and the author, Tejpal’s autobiographical links with Alchemy go largely unnoticed\(^\text{153}\) as does the way in which Alchemy, like TGST, simultaneously subverts and feeds into certain stereotypes. \(^\text{154}\)

The autobiographical links between Tejpal and Alchemy

The narrator of Alchemy remains an unnamed ‘I’ throughout the book but there are moments when we, as readers, can see him as Taphen sees him: “with … bloody ponytail hair” (464), as he describes himself. “I had allowed my hair to grow – the hair becoming increasingly washed in grey, the beard black” like “some kind of Far-Eastern monk.” (432-33) He sees himself in the mirror in the bathroom of Fizz’s aunt’s house, where his “flowing beard had uneven splashes of grey, and ponytail hung on lines of silver” (511), an image we see on the Buchet-Chastel website and on the back flap of the dust-jacket of Alchemy, that of Tarun Tejpal.

Apart from this fleeting resemblance in appearance and the obvious similarity of profession and vocation (journalism and writing), there are many autobiographical elements in the book which link this unnamed ‘I’ with the author. Many of the details of the love story between Fizz and the narrator are straight from the author’s own life.\(^\text{155}\) Though Geetan, Tejpal’s wife, does not seem to be a Muslim from her name, the two did meet in Chandigarh. Tejpal spent most of his college years in Chandigarh, enrolled in economics but reading literature in his room. He married Geetan when he was 21 and she was 19. He became a journalist in Delhi in order to secure a job so that he could marry her and, according to Tejpal, just as in Alchemy, journalists were not considered a good match in real life either.

They moved to Delhi where Tejpal became a sub-editor. He, like the narrator, always dreamt of writing one day and destroyed his first manuscript when the publishers asked him to make changes to it. He nursed the ambition for a long time before he actually found the right tone to write and just like the narrator found it at a time of crisis in personal life. The house in Alchemy is his house in Gethia,

\(^{153}\) Except for the interviews/features in The Independent and The Times of India (India) and The Sunday Times Plus (Sri Lanka)

\(^{154}\) In The Postcolonial Exotic (81), Graham Huggan argues that authors like Rushdie and Roy skilfully feed into and subvert the metropolitan perceptions of an ‘othered’ India.

in the foothills of Himalaya, and was owned previously by a white woman about whom nothing is known and the author often wondered.

As seen earlier, the politics of nation versus self in *Alchemy* also makes it a reaction to, and as such part of, the author’s personal experience. Writing *Alchemy*, as acknowledged by Tejpal himself, had become “the center as things spiraled out of control”.\(^{156}\) It was an escape from the horrors and menace in his real life into the privacy, sanity and sanctity of the intimate, untouched by the public. Given what was happening in the author’s life at the time of writing this book, *Alchemy* cannot be understood in isolation as a fiction without paying attention to the personal life of its author. And yet, even though the readers are aware of the context in which Tejpal wrote *Alchemy*, as is obvious from the majority of reviews, it is generally read in isolation from, or rather in parallel with, that context.

This context is perhaps equally relevant to the fact that *Alchemy* is aimed simultaneously at its Indian and Western audience and that it tries to push the rigid boundaries of Indian society and morality while recycling certain stock images of India for the wider metropolitan audience.

In *The Postcolonial Exotic*, Graham Huggan observes that the careers of writers such as Rushdie (and Roy) are built “on opposing while also perpetuating the commodified exoticisms that are endemic to East-West encounter” (73) and that, through their work, these writers simultaneously “capitalise on and critique exoticism” (Preface, xi) or ‘challenge and profit from the consumer need (for exotica)’ (81).\(^{157}\) He argues that

\[\text{[t]he success of writers like Rushdie and, more recently Roy, owes [much] to the skill with which they manipulate commercially viable metropolitan codes. They are conscious that their writing, ostensibly oppositional, is vulnerable to recuperation; in ironically rehearsing a continuing history of imperialist perceptions of an ‘othered’ India (India as available spectacle; as alternating object of horror and fascination; as world of magic, mysteries and wonders; as site of colonial nostalgia; as forbidden space of cross-cultural desire; as romantic tourist goal; and so on), they know that their work might still be used as a means of reconfirming an exoticising imperial gaze.}\]^ {158}

In other words, according to Huggan, these writers simultaneously and knowingly subvert and feed into prevalent stereotypes which appeal to their metropolitan readers. *Alchemy* does this too. However, *Alchemy’s* deviation from the postcolonial path and the resultant scholarly indifference towards it have meant that *Alchemy* and Tejpal have not been subjected to the scrutiny that

\(^{156}\) Gill, “Tarun Tejpal: Secrets and Sensations - The Independent.”

\(^{157}\) Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*.

\(^{158}\) Ibid., 81.
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‘postcolonial’ Indian English texts undergo. As a result, the way in which *Alchemy* participates in this ‘postcolonial’ strategy remains unnoticed and, as we can see from the account of *Alchemy*’s receptions, Tejpal has escaped the criticism that Rushdie and Roy are subjected to.

**Some stereotypes that *Alchemy* simultaneously subverts and feeds into:**

**Woman as a subaltern and sexual object**

As Gayatri Spivak points out in ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ colonised women were doubly colonised by the colonial and the patriarchal systems. Going further, postcolonial feminists argue that despite the increasing number of women writers, postcolonial studies as a field is male-centered in terms of critics and authors (with the obvious exception of Spivak) and postcolonial works by male authors, though subversive of colonial power, continue to present women in ways that perpetuate popular feminine stereotypes.159

*Alchemy*, to a certain extent, subverts the prevalent stereotypes of woman (especially Indian woman) as weak, victim or object of male desire, or mother. The women in *Alchemy* are strong and do not fit into the image of a ‘mother figure’. Bibi Lahori is a matriarch but not motherly. Catherine is a mother who has abandoned her ‘half-Indian’ daughter to save her own reputation. None of the major women characters in *Alchemy* are portrayed as victims or even passive objects of male desire. Fizz, though certainly desirable and desired, is not a passive body possessed or consumed in bed and she even turns into a voyeur through her interviews for Mrs. Khorana. Bibi Lahori, even if thought to feel or know no desire, is an active participant in sexual pleasure and thereby in control over her husband. Catherine is the epitome of assertive female sexuality or desire and the minor characters like Mrs. Khorana (Meanqueen) or Fizz’s friends are hard, brittle feminists. Emily (Catherine’s mother) or Kamla (Gajsingh’s illiterate wife), though passive in submitting their bodies to their husband’s wills, seem to have a hold on their husbands, just as Bibi Lahori does, through those bodies. The only subjugated woman of the novel is the narrator’s mother, whom life with his father has shown to change from a pig-tailed laughing girl into a submissive, silenced woman (*Alchemy*, 207).

Nevertheless, *Alchemy* also feeds into certain feminine stereotypes. The wives in *Alchemy*, except for Catherine who is married to the homosexual prince Sayd, are sexually at the beck and call of their husbands. *Alchemy*’s strong women characters are not allowed voice. Their speech is reported by the narrator and they are described through his perspective. Catherine, whose diaries play such an

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important role in the story, is not allowed a voice. Her writing is described *en passant* as inelegant and full of grammatical errors, and then rewritten and presented by the narrator. The mother in Catherine overrides the lover in her near her end, when she repents having abandoned her daughter. Bibi Lahori and Fizz’s behaviour fits in with the image of an ‘ideal’ Indian wife. Bibi Lahori, who remains calm and practical even as she watches her husband being murdered and takes care of his funeral, calls out his name as she dies. Fizz, whom the narrator does not treat well and almost forces to leave, is willing to come back to see him, even if it remains uncertain whether she will stay at the end.

**Gendering the colonised and the coloniser**

According to postcolonial theory, colonial discourse gendered the colonised subject feminine with its ‘sexual’ vocabulary of penetration and possession. By interpellating the colonised woman as victim or promiscuous and the colonised man as effeminate or hypersexual both were made available to the erotic fantasies of the coloniser.160 The colonised male was at once the object of homoerotic fantasies of the coloniser male and the libidinous fantasies of the coloniser female. As seen above, the original military term subaltern or subordinate gained a new currency with Spivak’s essay ‘Can the subaltern speak?’, where subalterns are the marginalised groups within the colonised society such as women, servants, indigenous people or those of the lower classes.

*Alchemy* connects in an extraordinary manner with the colonial – postcolonial discourse, through various postcolonial and colonial stereotypes, subverting some while feeding into others. The white coloniser, is represented by Catherine (actually an American), who is ‘possessed’ by the colonised male, first in marriage by Sayd and then sexually by Gajsingh, in stark contrast with the gendering that postcolonialism presumes. Sayd (a Muslim aristocrat) as the former coloniser and a homosexual is doubly the symbol of homoerotic colonial desire, which feminised the weak and subjugated male colonised subject. However, these (homo-erotic colonial) fantasies are confused in the Sayd - Gajsingh - Catherine relationship. As Catherine watches Gajsingh in Sayd’s bed, she is attracted to Gajsingh who in turn is aroused by her arousal. It is Gajsingh who possesses Catherine, without even touching her, while Sayd has access to Gajsingh’s body but not mind.

On the one hand, the perception of the control of a coloniser over a colonised is problematised through the Sayd - Gajsingh - Catherine relationship. It is Gajsingh who is shown to be free in body

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and mind as neither Sayd nor Catherine is able to possess him sexually without his will or has any
hold on his mind. He waits for Catherine to take the first step in their relationship and later demands
her presence in Sayd’s room so that he can satisfy Sayd’s demands on him. He is a loyal servant but
not slave and is shown to want no material favours from either master. On the other hand, *Alchemy*
feeds into the ‘objectification’ that the colonised male undergoes, as Gaj singh is the object of desire
of two colonisers, Sayd (a Muslim) and Catherine, and perpetually available to both. He is at once
desexualised and oversexualised.

**Orientalist stereotypes**

*Alchemy* to a certain degree subverts colonial or orientalist attitudes by portraying these from an
occidentalist perspective. For example, the colonial sexual fantasies are portrayed as a lack of
morality. Catherine represents the libidinous Western woman lusting for the darker men and
travelling to the colonies in search of ‘love and desire’; who, for preserving her social position and
freedom to pleasure, can abandon her child. The decadent Western men, traders in search of saleable
exotica, travellers in search of ‘sexual adventures’, connoisseurs of erotica and the treasures from the
East, are represented by John, Catherine’s father.

However, *Alchemy* also feeds into the orientalist stereotype of colonial India. Catherine’s story is
replete with them – the portrayal of Indians as despotic and decadent Nawabs, licentious women or
loyal servants, the portrayal of India as an exotic place of erotic decadence, the land of ancient
treasures, erotic miniatures and opulent palaces, a country of chaotic hierarchies/ anarchies where the
educated-in-Europe aristocracy and officers of the company Raj are the only civilised people.
*Alchemy* also feeds into the neo-orientalist stereotype of a Third-World post-independence India,
through the portrayal of India exclusively as a corrupt, chaotic country fallen from heights of
nationalist idealism of anti-colonial struggles into the pits of religious extremism, social discord and
incompetent, unethical politics.

To Tejpal’s credit though, none of the Indians in *Alchemy*, whether belonging to the educated
Anglophone elite or the vernacular underclass, come across as overwhelmed by the effects of
colonial rule or the burden of hyphenated identities. Even Bibi Lahori, who bears the scars of
partition, a colonial legacy, is free of this burden. The blame and the credit for what has happened or
is happening to India and Indians is squarely theirs. In this sense *Alchemy*’s departure from the
postcolonial tradition is complete and it is truly a novel from post-independence India.
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Looking back at *Alchemy’s* reception, especially the French reception, the responses we see are the responses to the stereotypes that *Alchemy* feeds into. Surprisingly, the obviously exoticist French reception does not provoke the same (or indeed any) reaction as the non-Indian Anglophone reception of postcolonial Indian English texts generally does. The stereotypes in *Alchemy* or the non-Indian responses to them do not seem to cause concern in the ‘at-home’ reception as expected in postcolonial criticism (and is often seen in the case of diasporic Indian English texts). Is this reaction linked to Tejpal’s image and identity as resident writer?

**The right to write India**

It is interesting that in spite of the disheartening image of India that emerges from *Alchemy*, the use of concepts from Hinduism and the focus on erotics, *Alchemy* does not raise concerns about authorial complicity with metropolitan markets or exoticism in the minds of the Indian critics. Considering that diasporic writers are blamed for exoticism for less than this, the question that comes to mind is, whether the authorial persona and identity play a role in this.

Obviously, the question of being an insider/outsider or having the right to write (on) India seems to have become invalid in the case of a writer, whose authenticity and native informant status are incontestable, to his three readerships, by virtue of his being a resident. In fact, as can be seen from descriptions of *Alchemy* as "[the real thing] [a]mid the endless cascade of semi-genuine Indian novels by Indian Americans … a kaleidoscopic first novel by a top Indian journalist, erotically rooted in the country", Tejpal’s identity as a resident Indian English writer seems to place him higher in the hierarchy of authenticity and above the hyphenated identities of diasporic writers.

Equally obviously, Tejpal’s professional integrity places him high in general esteem. His long career as a journalist and editor leaves no doubt as to his knowledge of the underbelly of India. And his personal experience of the might and malice of those in power excuses his desire to scratch the shine from India. The questions of authorial complicity with the metropolitan or economic center and exoticisation should be raised, especially in view of *Alchemy’s* sensational popular success, *Alchemy’s* clever play on stereotypes and the six-figure advance that Tejpal is said to have received for *Alchemy*. But they are not, perhaps in view of Tejpal’s financial problems during the *Tehelka*

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161 The Philadelphia Inquirer review cited on *The Alchemy of Desire* page of Tejpal’s website.
162 Chatterjee, “Madman or Messiah?”
ordeal and his frank statement that the advance “would make him solvent soon” or that he sank some of it into resurrecting *Tehelka*.\(^{163}\)

However, these apparent advantages of Tejpal’s resident identity and public image are also disadvantages as they deflect or drain any possibility of critical attention for *Alchemy*. Because *Alchemy* does not foreground issues of identity, hybridity, migrancy or otherness, because the authenticity of Tejpal’s representation cannot be questioned and his public image silences questions of complicity with the Western markets or exoticism, *Alchemy* seems to be considered irrelevant to the dominant literary and academic debates.

**Conclusion to the chapter**

*Alchemy’s* reception thus involves a combination of the readers’ response to the authorial identity and persona with *Alchemy*’s deviation from the postcolonial path. Tejpal’s professional or public image and persona assured his debut novel an initial interest in the mainstream media. The novel caused sensation because of two factors, one - its adult take on sexuality, desire and erotics, a rare thing in India and not very common in Indian English texts, the other - the rare honour of V.S. Naipaul’s endorsement in the form of a blurb.

The Indian reception is mainly a reaction to Naipaul’s praise, and must be read in view of the history of Naipaul’s fraught relationship with India and Indian English literature. Though *Alchemy*’s subject is risqué, and intentionally so, in the context of present-day India, it has not proved as provocative as the blurb, mainly because of Indian familiarity with Tejpal’s bold image and views on the subject. However, in spite of *Alchemy*’s obvious links to epic narrative, Hindu philosophy and a long tradition of erotic Sanskrit literature in India, the novel has not been read from an Indian philosophical perspective, except by Riemenschneider, who is not Indian but a German Anglophone scholar.

The non-Indian Anglophone reception, though disappointing in its banality for a reception analysis, reveals the extensive reach that any major Indian English text is capable of, and the tortuous and complex path these texts travel within the Anglophone world through sequential publication and distribution. Naipaul’s status as a great writer in the English literary canon has not proved as big a draw card here as one would imagine or as it proved to be in India. *Alchemy*’s non-Indian reception demonstrates how widely Tejpal had become known through the *Tehelka* episode. Obviously,

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Tejpal’s image as the Tehelka-man and Alchemy’s erotic focus are the reasons for which Alchemy is noticed as much as it is. However, these factors do not prove enough to secure Alchemy the attention in the (Indian and non-Indian) Anglophone world that a serious literary work merits.

Alchemy’s unique features are its runaway success and the cult status that it has acquired in France, a rare feat for a translation and almost a first for a translation of an Indian English text. In view of the long tradition of French translations of Indian English texts, the phenomenon seems to perplex even the French. For the French reviewers, the reason behind this success are Alchemy's focus on eroticism and passion that reminds French readers of Kama Sutra and evokes the dream of spiritual transcendence through sex, but the vocabulary of French reviews also reveals a darker touristic interest in present-day ‘Third World’ India caught between the past and the future. However, the French translation, when considered as a form of reception, is problematical in its domesticating and exoticising tendencies. Equally problematic is the voyeuristic vocabulary used to describe India as it appears in Alchemy. Together, the translation and reception proper of Alchemy in France reveal an attitude that is quasi-colonial.

The most striking aspect of Alchemy’s reception, across the three audiences, is the lack of scholarly interest in its literary qualities and complexities. This can be linked to the combination of celebrity author, ‘sensational’ subject and popular success which seem to mark Alchemy as more a beach novel than a literary work, but more than that it can be linked to the absence of postcolonial concerns in Alchemy. Alchemy’s deviation from the postcolonial path, Tejpal’s post-Tehelka authority, and his unquestionable Indian identity have worked together to disarm most of the criticisms that feature routinely in the receptions of postcolonial and diasporic texts.

The result is a lukewarm interest in Alchemy as a literary text, a total disregard for Alchemy’s context and complexity, and the failure to actualise the various readings that it invites. It is obvious that all the distinguishing factors of Alchemy - the extratextual context, the bold maturity of the subject, the perspective and treatment, and even the resident identity of the writer - work to a limited extent in its favour as a novel, make it commercially successful and allow it to escape criticism. However, in combination with Alchemy’s non-conformism to postcolonial traditions and expectations these features prove detrimental to its appreciation as a serious literary work in the Anglophone world.

Given that the postcolonial perspective does not occupy a place of prominence in the French world of literary studies, Alchemy’s anomalous behavior in that respect should not have proved a deterrent
to serious scholarly interest in this world. And yet *Alchemy* is not accorded any serious scholarly interest even in France. The adult treatment of the subject of sexual desire in *Alchemy*, the political dimension of Tejpal’s choice of desire as subject, the strong current of *non-dit* in *Alchemy*, the complexity of its structure and narration or its postmodernist, deconstructionist treatment of Hindu philosophical concepts; nothing seems to have managed to entice the interest that, paradoxically, is accorded to certain Indian English texts, such as *The God of Small Things*, which fall squarely within postcolonial tradition.

This paradoxical French behaviour seems linked to the cultural supremacy of the Anglophone world and the currency and prominence that the postcolonial perspective enjoys in that world within the historical moment chosen for this study, especially as an approach to Indian English literature. Approaching critically noticed Indian English texts from perspectives other than postcolonial allows French critics to be strategically marginal in two different ways. Unlike *Alchemy*, these texts allow French critics to be a part of and remain distinct within what is at present a cutting edge area in literary studies at a global level, at the same time as they offer the opportunity to be daringly different and more worldly or cosmopolitan within the French world. *Alchemy*’s deviation from the postcolonial path has resulted in its neglect by scholars in the Anglophone world. The lack of serious scholarly interest in *Alchemy* in the Anglophone world means that *Alchemy* does not offer the same opportunity to participate in international scholarly debates as the ‘postcolonial’ Indian English texts, which are noticed and privileged by Anglophone critics and institutions.

Whatever the reasons, the effect of the scholarly indifference is impoverishing for *Alchemy*’s reception in all three audiences and reductive to *Alchemy*’s rich literary potential.
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Conclusion

This thesis began by tracing recent developments in the fields of reception studies and postcolonial studies, in the process identifying some of the lacunae in each field and also the potential each has to inform and enrich the other. The introductory chapter observed the way reception studies assume cultural and temporal relativity of literary reception, where texts travel across geographical boundaries into cultures other than the one they represent at historical moments distinct from that of their production.

Pointing out that near-simultaneous multicultural reception of literary texts has become a norm in the globalised world, the introductory chapter argued that this reception takes place in the pre-existing matrix of intercultural relations and that it is shaped by power differentials between cultures producing and receiving literary texts. This chapter emphasised the need to fill the gap in reception studies caused by the neglect of this factor, using the current global interest in postcolonial and migrant or minority literatures and the regularity with which these literatures travel from cultures lower in the existing global hierarchy into cultures higher in that hierarchy to substantiate the argument.

The three central chapters of this thesis analysed and compared the Indian, non-Indian, and French receptions of *The Inheritance of Loss*, *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Alchemy of Desire*, in a way that has not been previously attempted in relation to Indian English literature.

Each chapter began with a close reading of the text in order to demonstrate the thematic and narrative range of that text, thereby directing attention to the need to question the assumption of inherent postcolonialism of Indian English literature. The initial textual analysis indicated the range of readings that are possible in the case of each text and the writers’ awareness of their double i.e. Indian and non-Indian Anglophone audiences. The analysis and comparison of the receptions in the three audiences that followed revealed which of those readings are actualised and which remain unactualised by each, and in certain aspects every, audience. They also drew attention to the heterogeneity of the metropolitan audience and metropolitan receptions.

The example of Indian English literature allowed this thesis to direct attention to the dynamism of literatures considered postcolonial, to the reductive effect of the hegemony of postcolonial perspective as approach to these literatures, and to the need to update many of the prevalent perceptions about these literatures and within the postcolonial field.
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The choice of texts, authors and audiences was determined by the desire to draw attention to the increasing complexity of the field of Indian English literature in terms of production and author profiles, and to nuance the prevalent perceptions about Indian English literature as postcolonial, about Indian English writers as diasporic, and about their intended audience as lying exclusively in the Anglophone Western world.

The inclusion of the French audience, a non-Anglophone metropolitan audience, offered the opportunity to explore the combined effect of the hegemony of English and of interpretive norms within the Anglophone world on non-Anglophone receptions. This inclusion also made it possible to examine the role translation, as a mediating process and as a part of interpretive norms of a particular audience or linguistic community (here French), plays in the reception of texts from a hierarchically lower culture.

Inclusion of the French audience, chosen specially for its peculiar relation with postcolonial theory, made it possible to observe what happens as the hegemonic interpretive norms intersect within an audience with its cultural specificities. It allowed an investigation into how the French reluctance to engage with postcolonial theory as well as the French attitude to Francophone literatures, i.e. their own postcolonial, migrant and minority literature from hierarchically lower cultures, colours their reception of Indian English literature.

In conclusion, the present chapter compares the receptions of *The Inheritance of Loss, Interpreter of Maladies and The Alchemy of Desire* with the intention of answering many of the questions that have shaped this thesis. The chapter will observe the similarities and differences in the texts as products of the same historical moment. It will also discuss the patterns that emerge from the study of the effect of shared historical moment on cross-cultural multicultural reception of these texts and the inflection brought in by cultural specificities of each audience in the form of response to author identities modulated by their physical distance from the culture they represent, power differentials between cultures and the hegemony of the postcolonial perspective.

**The texts**

As seen in the previous three chapters, *The Inheritance of Loss, Interpreter of Maladies and The Alchemy of Desire*, were published within a few years of each other.

*The Inheritance of Loss* deals with the effects of colonisation on the psyche of the colonised, the alienation of the anglicised elite from the Indian masses, the economic and socio-political aftermath
of colonisation in the form of fragmenting, chaotic Indian society, the economically driven migrations of the less skilled labour-force from India and the plight of illegal immigrants in the globalised world. It is written by Kiran Desai, a non-resident Indian writer, and won the Booker Prize.

*Interpreter of Maladies* presents a range of perspectives by using narrative voices of different ages, genders and nationalities and uses India as one of its two settings but remains mainly concerned with the experiences of the Indian American diaspora and in the host culture. It deals with the issues of migrancy, identity and feelings of exile and loss which are central to postcolonial and diasporic literatures but the diaspora in *Interpreter of Maladies*, with one exception, is not directly related to the process or effects of colonisation. This text is written by Jhumpa Lahiri, a second-generation diasporic writer of Indian origin, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

*The Alchemy of Desire* is distinct in its near total departure from postcolonial concerns and issues related to globalisation, which are also the predominant interests in the Anglophone world at present. Instead, it explores the role desire in all its forms plays in human life and the links between erotic desire and creativity, physical desire and love. It remains focussed on the process and the act of storytelling and threads history (of post-independence India) and fiction together through the story of the unravelling of an Indian couple’s passionate love for each other. *The Alchemy of Desire* is written by Tarun Tejpal, a resident Indian writer, and has won the Prix Mille Pages in France.

It is obvious that only *The Inheritance of Loss* fits the prevalent image of Indian English text in its postcolonial concerns and migrant author, while *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Alchemy of Desire* problematise or complicate that image in different ways. Migration in *The Inheritance of Loss* links postcolonial and postglobal concerns, whereas in *Interpreter of Maladies* it marks the break between them. The authors of these two texts, Desai and Lahiri, themselves represent this difference. Desai’s migrant or diasporic status is inflected by the fact that she has chosen not to become a citizen of America where she lives. In Lahiri’s case, the issue of her Indian origin is complicated by the addition of a generation and American citizenship to the distance between her and India. In contrast, *The Alchemy of Desire* is a classic example of what has often been the doubly marginalised category - an Indian English text that has a local and non-postcolonial focus and is written by a resident writer.

In spite of such marked differences in their subject-matter, subject treatments and author profiles, these texts are products of the same historical moment as they are published within the same decade.
Shared historical moment

As discussed in the introductory chapter, cross-cultural reception studies usually compare reception of literary texts across time and culture and the difference in the receptions of a text is assumed to be conditioned by time and culture. In other words, the difference in reception of a text is either the effect of difference in the historical moment of the production and reception of that text or of the difference in culture of its audiences. In cross-cultural reception studies, the shared historical moment, thus, acquires an absolute value in terms of its effect on reception of a text in its own culture at different historical moments or in another culture at a moment different from that of its production.

As demonstrated by the texts above, in the present-day globalised world, texts travel into different cultures as soon as they are published and are available to various audiences almost at the same time i.e. the historical moments of production and reception of these texts happen to be identical. The comparison of receptions of the three texts selected for this study allows us to observe what happens when the effect of the historical moment of reception, common to all audiences, is inflected by cultural specificities of each audience (in the form of a reaction or response to author profiles, hierarchical status of the culture represented by the text, and the hegemony of postcolonial perspective) as they receive texts produced within the same historical moment.

As discussed in the introductory chapter, the shared historical moment of reception is significant in the reception of literary texts in a globalised world, because of the possibility of a homogenised response through the global reach of prevalent hegemonic interpretive strategies such as the postcolonial perspective and resultant neglect of other interpretive approaches. The different audiences introduce the possibility of variations through interpretive strategies specific to an individual audience (such as an immigrant or ethnic minority perspective in America or narratology in France) and of a dialogic interaction between different audiences increasingly aware of each other’s responses. Moreover, the significance of the shared moment of production lies in the possibility of recurrence of certain themes, concerns, historical events, influence of successful predecessors or landmark texts and even intertextualities, dialogue or reaction to each other amongst the texts.
Shared historical moment of production

The effect of being products of the same decade or historical moment is visible in the three texts selected for this study. For example, even though the distant past casts a shadow on the diegetic moments in *The Inheritance of Loss* and *The Alchemy of Desire* or in the story “The Third and Final Continent” in *Interpreter of Maladies*, the three texts focus on roughly the same historical period, beginning a decade or two after Independence. *The Inheritance of Loss* narrates its protagonists’ lives before and during the GNLF movement of the 1980s. The Indian American diaspora in *Interpreter of Maladies* came into existence in the years after 1965, after liberalisation of American immigration policies, and is already in its second generation in *Interpreter of Maladies*. The narrator of *The Alchemy of Desire* is looking back at his life before and after 1987, when he leaves his job to become a writer. (*Alchemy*, 54)

Furthermore, though there is no indication in the collective epitext, especially author interviews, as to whether they do so consciously or purposely, the texts seem to a degree to be in a dialogue with each other. The America in *Interpreter of Maladies* is the land of plenty, peace and opportunity where the migrants’ dreams of good jobs, their own homes and well educated children come true within a generation of arriving there. By contrast, the America in *The Inheritance of Loss* is the land where people come with desperate hope and struggle to survive. The Cook’s son Biju is an illegal immigrant in America. The world of basements in apartment buildings, where he lives, and restaurant kitchens, where he works, is full of people like him. Unlike Lahiri’s diasporians, these people do not pore over telephone directories in search of compatriots, but hide from them for fear that they would ask for help. The narrator of *The Alchemy of Desire* visits America in search of Catherine’s ‘abandoned’ daughter and finds her in a shabby flat, in a food-stained dress and living with a man younger than her. Desai’s America of illegal immigrants, and Tejpal’s America of seedy discoloured rooms and squalid lives respond to and balance or rather counter Lahiri’s America of highly educated, well established elite Indian American migrants.

The religious and ethnic conflicts mentioned in *The Alchemy of Desire* appear in *The Inheritance of Loss* as well, though the focus of each text is on a different conflict. The focus in *The Inheritance of Loss* is on the Gorkha uprising in Kalimpong whereas in *The Alchemy of Desire* the partition of India and conflict in Punjab occupy an important place. The partition, in its second phase as partition of Pakistan, is central to two of Lahiri’s stories, “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” and ‘The Real Durwan’. Lahiri’s Boori ma and Tejpal’s Bibi Lahori are victims of partition, whose pre-partition lives are totally erased and have to be rebuilt as refugees in India, which Bibi Lahori manages to do successfully and Boori ma does not. Boori ma is forced to survive on charity, lives under letterboxes,
sweeps stairs and is thrown out even from there to live a life of destitution and hardships but Bibi Lahori is fiercely independent and able. She acquires a farm, runs and develops the estate and dies wealthy, leaving money for children and grandchildren. It is as if Tejpal is rewriting Boori ma and through her, the image of ‘Indian’ or South Asian woman as a doubly subalternised victim of colonisation and patriarchy.

The decade in which these texts were published is marked by two literary features: one, the predominance of the postcolonial perspective and the other, the presence of Arundhati Roy and *The God of Small Things*. As seen earlier, the texts do not share a postcolonial focus but they do share certain broad characteristics as post-Arundhati Roy texts. For example, all three texts are turned away from Rushdian fantasy and exuberance towards realistic tragi-comedy and in all of them America, rather than England (the former coloniser), represents the west or the superior cultural other. *The Inheritance of Loss* and *The Alchemy of Desire* have close intertextual relations, and *Interpreter of Maladies* is thought, by critics, to have certain thematic similarities with *The God of Small Things*, the landmark text after which they are produced. However, the effect of being received as post-Roy texts and of the presence or absence of postcolonial focus is different in the reception of each text.

**Shared historical moment of reception**

**Shared post-Roy status**

The shadow of Arundhati Roy looms large in the case of *Interpreter of Maladies, The Inheritance of Loss* and *The Alchemy of Desire*, though in different ways. In the Indian and non-Indian Anglophone reception of all three texts, Roy and *TGST* are often mentioned. In Lahiri’s case, some non-Indian critics put them together because of their Indian origin, not differentiating between their resident and diasporic identities. Some diasporic Indian critics think of them together because of the adulation they have received and the gendered exotic other that they represent. These critics feel that Lahiri’s fame is linked with Roy’s as Americans did not want to lag behind the rest of the Anglophone world in putting Indian English literature on a pedestal. Some Indian critics compare Lahiri and Roy based on their gender and origin or because certain similarities are discovered in their work in spite of very obvious differences. As we saw in the chapter on the reception of *Interpreter of Maladies*, some critics refer to these two writers as part of the Indian feminist canon while one argues that both

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1 Karttunen, “A Sociostylistic Perspective on Negatives and the Disnarrated: Lahiri, Roy, Rushdie.”
2 Rajan, “Ethical Responsibility in Intersubjective Spaces: Reading Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* and ‘A Temporary Matter’.”
writers use their racial and individual ‘memories’ to enrich their work and that this is obvious in the autobiographical links between their lives and their works.  

In the French reception, Arundhati Roy’s name is mentioned as another Indian English writer and a famous predecessor in the case of all three authors. It also often appears, in reference to Tejpal whose publishing house, India Ink, published The God of Small Things. However, the quite substantial intertextualities between TGST and Inheritance as well as TGST and Alchemy go unrecognised, or unmentioned, in all three audiences.

This difference in treatment is quite curious, especially in the context of the authorial identities. If the comparison with Arundhati Roy is a mark of recognition of the author’s Indianness, Lahiri as a second-generation migrant is farthest from the resident Roy and yet, it is she who is compared to Roy. As Mukherjee mentions, it is she, like Roy, who is appropriated into an inclusive regional or vernacular canon based on the community that her work focuses on and she is linked to by origin. The difference in the two writers’ identities and the difference it has made to the way they look at India and America matter very little, in all three audiences’ reception, compared to their shared ‘Indian origin’.

If Jhumpa Lahiri gets such attention in spite of the differences of themes, subject and concerns between TGST and Interpreter of Maladies, by virtue of her Indian origin, such attention is denied to the other two writers of the same origin. It is as if the awareness of the differences in domicile in the case of Desai and gender in the case of Tejpal are more effective than their identity as Indian nationals and prevent critics from noticing more obvious and numerous similarities between TGST and Inheritance as well as between TGST and Alchemy. It seems that the reception of these post-Roy texts is closely linked with the author identities but the attention paid to the similarities between these texts and TGST is least in the case of the writers who are officially, i.e. based on their residential status, as Indian as Roy is.

Apart from the presence of Roy, the other, and more important, aspect of the shared historical moment of reception of these texts is the influence of the postcolonial perspective.

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1 Mitra, “An Interpretation of "Interpreter of Maladies"”; Kumar, “Transcending Gender Parochialism in Modern Indian Feminist Fiction”; Sahu, “The Nostalgic Note in their Flute - A Reading of Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri.”
2 Mukherjee, “Fiction in English in a Multi-lingual Society: Location and Perspective.”
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Postcolonial perspective
The effect of the hegemony of the postcolonial perspective as reading approach to Indian English literature is obvious in the reception of the three texts, albeit differently.

The Anglophone reception, Indian as well as non-Indian, of *The Inheritance of Loss* is focussed on the debates and questions which enjoy currency in the field of postcolonial studies. The focus is so exclusive that no attention is paid to the structural and thematic complexity of *The Inheritance of Loss* as a narrative. Its rich intertextual relations with other Indian English texts such as *The God of Small Things* and Anita Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* also remain neglected, in the case of *The God of Small Things* completely by both audiences and in the case of *Fire on the Mountain* by the non-Indian Anglophone audience.

Though *Interpreter of Maladies* is read more often as a South Asian American diasporic text especially by the American and Indian American diaspora scholars, many of these scholars perform a selective postcolonial reading of quite a few stories in *Interpreter of Maladies*. The dominance of the postcolonial approach is most obvious in the rarity of serious and scholarly attention paid, by both Anglophone audiences, to *The Alchemy of Desire*, which though not devoid of postcolonial elements, is not focussed on postcolonial or postglobal themes or concerns. As a result of the general scholarly neglect, its narrative, thematic and structural complexity goes unnoticed. This means, *Alchemy*’s ‘Indian’ and postmodern readings remain unactualised (except in the brief review by Riemenschneider). Its intertextualities with other Indian English texts, especially the postcolonial ones such as *TGST*, remain unexplored. This seems to validate the conviction, expressed in the introductory chapter of this thesis (pg.34), that not only does the hegemony of the postcolonial perspective work in favour of texts which engage with certain issues or express certain concerns but also against the texts which do not.

This is true to some extent even of the French reception. On the one hand, the French reluctance to engage with the postcolonial perspective is most obvious in the case of *The Inheritance of Loss*, a text where postcolonial concerns of identity, the psychological impact of domination by another culture resulting in cultural alienation, migration and loss in the victims occupy a central place but are also linked with globalisation and neo-colonial domination by America. In marked contrast to the Anglophone response, the French reception avoids addressing the postcolonial elements and themes in *The Inheritance of Loss* altogether, focussing instead on the theme of migration linked with globalisation and concentrating on the image of India which emerges from the novel.
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On the other hand, it is the most postcolonial of the three texts, *The Inheritance of Loss*, that receives the maximum ‘serious’ attention in or by French mainstream reviewers (even if not by French scholars); while *Interpreter of Maladies* is almost passed over by the French mainstream and scholarly audience and *The Alchemy of Desire* is not accorded any attention by the French scholarly audience in spite of its phenomenal popular success.

This is significant against the background of the French Reception of *TGST*. *TGST* not only attracted immediate and quite significant scholarly attention in France, French scholars also acknowledged its postcolonial elements while offering a wide range of other-than-postcolonial readings of the text.

This differential French treatment seems to confirm the suspicion voiced in the analysis of the French reception of *The Alchemy of Desire* in this thesis (pg. 218), that postcolonial texts get more scholarly attention because they offer a better opportunity of participation in the ‘cutting-edge’ debates and discussions in the literary world, and of attention and recognition from the international scholarly community. Moreover, approaching these texts from other perspectives lends French scholars an aura of distinction within the world colonised by the postcolonial perspective. At the same time, engaging with the postcolonial field distinguishes them in the French world.

The hegemonic presence of the postcolonial perspective has not homogenised the response to each text in all three audiences. However, the reception in each audience shows certain patterns in their response to Indian English literature. These patterns reveal the subtle influence of the existing power differential between the culture that each audience represents and the culture that Indian English represents for them.

**Effect of cultural hierarchies on reception**

As we saw in the introductory chapter, cross-cultural reception studies have mostly overlooked the role that intercultural relations, in the form of cultural hierarchies or power differential between cultures producing and receiving literary texts, play in the reception of those texts, while Postcolonial studies have, until recently, paid little attention to the reception of postcolonial literatures in former colonising cultures, though these literatures are thought of, or described as, writing back to the colonial centre. The recent studies, which pay attention to reception of literatures considered postcolonial, such as Indian English literature, have remained Anglocentric, and as such, disconnected from the reality of non-Anglophone receptions of these literatures.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

The reception by the Anglophone audience – the metropolitan Anglophone audience that is the assumed intended audience of Indian English literature, as well as the non-metropolitan Anglophone and the ‘resident and diasporic’ Indian audiences that this thesis draws attention to – is informed by the latest debates, concerns and issues within the postcolonial perspective, especially Huggan’s work on the Booker and the postcolonial exotic, as well as in the emerging field of postcolonial eco-criticism with its critique of First World exploitation of Third World art(efacts) for its own aesthetic pleasure and Third World resources for its own material greed.

This brings an enriching breadth and depth to the Anglophone reception as a whole. And yet the focus of reception studies remains on the metropolitan reception, even if to criticise it, as we see in the review of the studies on reception of postcolonial literature, whether Huggan’s or those that build upon it such as Brouillette’s, or those that criticise it such as Innes’s. The non-metropolitan critics, including or especially the Indian critics, display an awareness of the metropolitan mainstream and scholarly reception and are often responding to it, but the reverse is not as often true.

The presence of the French attitude towards their own postcolonial, migrant and/or ethnic minority literatures, that is Francophone literatures, is felt in the French reception of all three texts. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, Francophone literatures, especially those from the French ex-colonies or by writers from migrant communities from the ex-colonies, have remained quite marginal in the French literary canon. Patric Corcoran draws attention to “the still relatively prevalent tendency within French academia, loosely to identify francophone literature as an exotic offshoot of a national literary scene alone capable of generating criteria of taste and value.” Unlike postcolonial literatures, which are even now sometimes referred to as ‘New’ English literatures, Francophone literatures have never acquired the status of French literatures even with the condescending adjective ‘new’. The persistence of a ‘French literature - Francophone literature’ binary shows that Francophone literatures are thought of as literatures written in French or but not as French literatures.

The numerous ‘slips’ in the French mainstream reviews of The Inheritance of Loss, the lack of scholarly attention to Inheritance and Interpreter of Maladies, neglect of the narrative, thematic and structural complexities and postmodern possibilities of The Alchemy of Desire in spite of the ‘cult’ status achieved by its French translation (Loin de Chandigarh) in France, the failure to notice similarities between these texts and Francophone or French texts and the French translation practices

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of transforming the titles and domesticating the texts are the more noticeable aspects of French reception of Indian English literature. When seen against the background of French attitudes towards francophone literatures, these diverse and apparently unconnected aspects acquire meaning and take on significance.

As an Anglophone literature, Indian English literature seems to suffer from the same marginalisation as Francophone literatures. In view of the long tradition of translation of Indian English literature into French, this marginalisation might easily go unnoticed. It gathers significance only when seen in the context of French reception of Francophone literatures and of hierarchical intercultural relations. In this context, such marginalisation becomes an expression of the power differential between the cultures producing the Francophone or postcolonial texts and the receiving French culture.

Graham Huggan’s *The Postcolonial Exotic* describes the First World reception of postcolonial literatures as ‘consumption of an exotic commodity which packages the culturally different other in a reassuringly familiar form’.

Huggan is talking more of public reception than the critical or scholarly reception. In studies of reception of postcolonial literatures such as *The Postcolonial Exotic* (and other studies mentioned in the introduction), while epitext in the form of reviews is analysed as ‘reception proper’, the critics are generally thought of as influences on reception of texts rather than part of the audience.

The present study considers the epitext and the critical reception as much a part of the reception of a text as the public response to it; since like mainstream reviewers, the scholars too are ‘social subjects’ and members of the reading formations, interpretive communities and cultures that they represent or speak for. As such, the easy categorisation by critics of Indian English texts as postcolonial or ethnic minority texts and the neglect of texts, which are not postcolonial in their themes or concerns, display the same tendency to categorise the cultural other, represented by the texts, into knowable and controllable stereotypes.

Such othering and exoticisation also acquire cultural specificity. Where the Anglophone reception fixes Indian English texts into readily available ‘postcolonial and ethnic minority’ slots and neglects texts which do not fit in with these expectations, the French reception marginalises them through lack of serious attention and exoticises them as ‘Indian’.

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6 Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*.  

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For example, the postcolonial readings of *Interpreter of Maladies* in the Anglophone world are outweighed in number by its readings as an ethnic minority text or South Asian American diasporic text. However, either way, the text and the author remain fixed into a hierarchically lower cultural identity. Except for Brada-Williams’s article which looks at *Interpreter of Maladies* as a short story cycle and as such part of the short story cycle genre in American literature, Lahiri’s work is not thought of as part of mainstream American literature. The possibility of American literary influences on Lahiri’s work or of the effects of the lived American reality or historical moment of production that she shares with them remains mostly unconsidered.

The French reception of *Interpreter of Maladies* can only be described as scant. In view of Alex Tickell’s observation about the predominance of narratology as critical mode in French literary studies, this can be ascribed to the non-spectacular, almost bland, style of *Interpreter of Maladies*. However, in the light of the marginality of Francophone and minority literatures and marginalisation of non-European Francophone writers in French literary world, the readiness with which Lahiri is linked with Indian English literature becomes significant, as does the near absence of mainstream and scholarly attention to *Interpreter of Maladies*.

In the Anglophone world, *The Alchemy of Desire* attracts attention as the debut of its celebrity author, to some extent as a bold and risqué novel and also as the rare Indian English novel praised by Naipaul, but its deviation from the postcolonial path (assumed as predetermined for the Indian English texts) has cost it any serious or scholarly attention. The case of *The Alchemy of Desire* is unique in the spectacular success of its French translation (surpassing even the success of the original) that attracts huge mainstream but no scholarly response. This, in the light of the rich narrative, structural and thematic potential of the text, can only be read as ‘critical’ (i.e. by critics) marginalisation, whereas the tendency to exoticise is evident in frequent allusions to *Kama Sutra* and difference between ancient and present-day India, in the reviews.

In reception theory, a reader’s understanding of a literary text is influenced by his/her horizon of expectations. The reader’s horizon of expectations is the “set of expectations established by cultural norms, conventions and presuppositions that inform how a reader understands and evaluates a literary work at any given time.” According to Jauss, a literary text has the power to transform

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readers and society as “the horizon of expectation evoked by the work confirms or transcends the horizon of experience introduced by the recipient.”9

Jauss’s belief in the transformative power of literature, obvious in the second part of his statement, seems to support the postcolonial argument about the power of the colonial texts to convince the colonised of the superiority of the coloniser’s culture and the inferiority of their own culture. It also seems to uphold the postcolonial faith in the subversive power of (postcolonial) texts, which undermine the power of the coloniser’s culture by deterritorialising, appropriating and indigenising his language and reterritorialising it with the experience of the colonised.

In response to Jauss’s statement, Heinz Antor has pointed out, “it is possible that the reader, being confronted with a different horizon, suddenly becomes aware of new aspects and new arguments in favour of his own.”10 The analyses of receptions of the three texts studied here show how right Antor is. When confronted with a text like The Alchemy of Desire, which does something different from the ‘norm’ of the literature that it is supposed to belong to, the First World audiences do not let it transform their horizons, they ‘become aware’ or focus instead on those elements of the text which confirm their expectations, if not of the text, of the culture (and inevitably the nation) that it belongs to.

What Graham Huggan describes as the postcolonial exoticisation of a culturally different ‘other’ through preference for and consumption of a familiarly different, knowable, consumable other by the First World11 is not too different from the European coloniser’s tendency to ‘know’ a culture and ‘other’ it by reading its literatures selectively. The analysis of ‘First World’ receptions, both Anglophone and French, reveal a similar desire to ‘know’ and ‘read’ present day India in the way they accept certain images of India more readily or perceive the authors’ subjective and fictional representation of India as authentic.

This is most obvious in the case of The Inheritance of Loss and The Alchemy of Desire, where India, as a nation, location and everyday reality, occupies a large place. But, even amidst the existential maladies of the Harvard educated diaspora in Interpreter of Maladies the harsh reality of India in “A Real Durwan” and “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” is frequently picked upon. The vocabulary of the

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11 Huggan, The Postcolonial Exotic.
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French epitext is openly exoticising and the French translation practices are almost colonial in their attitude, especially towards *The Inheritance of Loss* and *The Alchemy of Desire*.

The influence of cultural hierarchy between the culture producing the text and the culture receiving it is equally obvious in the way the diasporic writers themselves refrain from showing the host culture and population in negative light or from showing the downside of diasporic experience, focusing more on giving voice to the feeling of exile or uprootedness but not discussing the attitude or behaviour of the host population as its possible cause. It is also visible in the way Indian critics pay more attention to these writers who write from within the metropolitan centre or whose workforegrounds the issues of migrancy and diasporic experience considered universal by the west; rather than resident writers, like Tejpal, whose work does not.

However, intercultural relations and hierarchies exist among the receiving cultures too. The power differential between receiving cultures is at play in the Indian reception of these texts. The Indian reception rarely merits a mention in their non-Indian Anglophone and French receptions, whereas the Indian reception, though not monolithically negative as Rushdie claimed in 1997, is often an explicit reaction to the non-Indian Anglophone reception (sometimes more than it is a response to the texts) but not to the non-Anglophone receptions. This can be seen in the diasporic Indian response to *Interpreter of Maladies* and in the resident reception of the other two texts. Initially this might be a result of the lag induced by process of translation, but even later there is no dialogue between the Indian and the non-Anglophone responses.

In a minor way, the cultural hierarchy among the receiving cultures is also obvious in the negligible effect that the French Prix Mille Pages has on the Anglophone reception of *The Alchemy of Desire* as compared to the effect that the literary awards in the Anglophone world such as the Pulitzer and, a lot more significantly, the Booker have on the French reception of *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Inheritance of Loss*.

The comparison of the receptions of these three texts, thus, demonstrates that in a globalised world, the reception of texts which apparently belong to the same parent literature (in this case Indian English literature) or ‘home’ culture (Indian), and are produced and received at a particular historical moment is not homogenous. It demonstrates that reception of texts can no longer be described in terms of a mono-cultural audience, which is separated from the text either by temporal distance or

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12 Rushdie, “Damme, This Is The Oriental Scene For You.”
geographical boundaries but rather has to be thought of in cross-cultural multicultural and multilingual terms. Also reception of a literary text cannot be studied without taking into consideration the intercultural relations between the culture that produces the text and those that receive it, especially in the case of texts that are thought to belong to cultures lower in global hierarchy and are received in cultures higher in that hierarchy, or in other words, to literatures considered postcolonial and/or ethnic minority.

Further research

Though the focus of this study has remained on Indian English literature and postcolonial literatures, in the globalised and diasporised world, such multicultural cross-cultural reception study across linguistic borders should prove enriching for any literature.

The study of French reception has involved a leap of faith in its focus on Indian English texts from within the last decade but it opens up a path for a comprehensive study of French reception of Indian English literature and of India through Indian English literature in French translation.

At the same time, the similarities in the recent rise to prominence of many Indian English and francophone writers, the way they remain othered into an ethnic identity and the predominence of issues such as exoticism, negative representation of cultures of origin and complicity with the metropolitan readerships in the reception of their work, indicate the way towards a comparative investigation of French reception of Francophone and Indian English texts. They also draw attention to the rich potential of the field of reception of ‘Francophone’ literatures and of ‘postcolonial’ literatures for similar studies.

Another important area of research, within, or rather related to the same field as this thesis, would be a study of the present-day ‘scramble for India (and Indian English literature)’ that reminds one of a similar situation four centuries ago when European nations vied with each other to gain a foothold in India. In view of the dynamism of India as an emerging economy, a labour-rich country and an expanding consumer base that is so attractive to outsourcing companies and multinationals alike, there is a need to pay attention to the role that India plays in the global culture industry - as a consumable cultural product, as the ‘source’ culture for novels like Shantaram, non-fiction like

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13 The race between European colonial powers for the land, labour and other resources of Africa during Europe’s colonial expansion was described as ‘scramble for Africa’. ‘Scramble for Indian English literature’ is one of my conference papers examining similarities between the global phenomenisation of Indian English literature and the economics of European colonisation that the phrase ‘Scramble for Africa’ evokes.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Holy Cow,\textsuperscript{15} or movies like Slumdog Millionaire\textsuperscript{16} and The Darjeeling Limited\textsuperscript{17} and, equally importantly, as a growing market for Booker and Pulitzer winning fiction and other Indian English texts published in the First World or by First World publishing houses.

The current ‘vogue’ of Indian English literature invites more investigation as multinational publishing houses vie to publish the next big novel of established Indian English writers such as The Suitable Girl\textsuperscript{18} by Vikram Seth, pay huge advances to unknown or slightly known Indian English writers in the hope of having discovered (or of creating) the next Arundhati Roy or Arvind Adiga,\textsuperscript{19} and the rush to establish bases in India and to appropriate translation and vernacular literature territory.

\textsuperscript{15} Sarah Macdonald, Holy Cow: An Indian Adventure (New York: Broadway, 2004).
\textsuperscript{16} The 2008 Danny Boyle directed Oscar winning film based on Vikas Swarrop’s novel Q&A(2005).
\textsuperscript{17} The 2007 movie directed by Wes Anderson.
\textsuperscript{18} Vikram Seth’s sequel of The Suitable Boy, due in 2013, has garnered a £1.7 m advance from Hamish (Hamilton imprint of Penguin which also has a branch in India).
\textsuperscript{19} The 2008 Man Booker Prize winner for his debut The White Tiger published by Free Press and Harper Collins India.
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