Narrating "Dark" India in *Londonstani* and *The White Tiger*: Sustaining Identity in the Diaspora

Robbie B. H. Goh

DOI: 10.1177/0021989411404995

The online version of this article can be found at: http://jcl.sagepub.com/content/46/2/327

Published by:

http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://jcl.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://jcl.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

>> Version of Record - Jun 27, 2011

What is This?
Narrating “Dark” India in Londonstani and The White Tiger: Sustaining Identity in the Diaspora

Robbie B. H. Goh
National University of Singapore

Abstract
In Indian Anglophone writing up to about the 1990s, a romantic narrative strand, working in parallel with a metafictional “encyclopaedic” form in other texts of the period, reflects a more hopeful and positive attitude towards Indian society, and an implicit confidence in its potential redemption. Many later works by Indian diasporic writers show a much more negative and critical attitude to India, catalysed by persisting socio-political problems such as corruption and communal violence. This “dark turn” in Indian Anglophone writing is very clearly seen in works such as Aravind Adiga’s The White Tiger and Gautam Malkani’s Londonstani, which seem to allow little or no possibility for India’s social problems to be resolved, and indeed make that irresolvable violence and confusion their particular theme. Yet in a way this “dark” India ironically becomes the means of a distinct cultural focus, a narrative mode of engagement with the homeland that, irrespective of its negative social view, is a means of sustaining cultural identity within the homogenizing and deterritorializing forces of globalization.

Keywords
Aravind Adiga, The White Tiger, Gautam Malkani, Londonstani, diasporic literature, cultural-religious identity
Re-Inventing “India”: Selectivity, “Encyclopaedic” Forms, and Romances of the “Multitude”

Diasporic longing and nostalgia for the homeland, and for everything associated with it, is always a mediated affair, filtered through the passage of time (between migration and imaginative return), through generational voices and their biases, the representations of cultural discourses in media and literature, and subjective emotional attitudes and responses. India is certainly no exception, and indeed may be symbolically overdetermined both by its own cultural history and the interaction of that culture with the long regime of British colonialism. Ralph Crane, while maintaining that “the literary works of both British and Indian novelists can tell us a great deal about the history of India”, also avers that “every novelist who has written about India has re-invented that country”.1 The nationalist histories and official discourses written in the era of the decolonization and independence of India in the mid-twentieth century onwards, no more or less than the literary and other cultural productions of that era, relied on selective inclusion to create the desired images of the newly-independent nation and its culture.2

One essentially romantic response to the problem of re-inventing India is selectivity, which in public discourses takes the obvious role of highlighting socio-political positives while downplaying or ignoring negatives, but takes more complex forms in fictional discourses. These include the creation of an “exalted” human subject (such as Mahatma Gandhi) through an “overwhelming present tense” that narrows the historical time frame to exclude the painful binary of colonialism and independence; a spatial localization (especially rural ones, such as in Narayan’s Malgudi novels) that romanticizes an “authentic” locale representative of the national character; or the intense focus on and replaying of a particular historical moment (of which Partition is the most striking example), thus “[holding] on to what memory insists on relinquishing”.3

Forms of affirmation can be overtly romantic”, as for example in Anita Desai’s *The Village by the Sea*, in which a potentially tragic situation – a familiar rural Indian scenario of poverty, sickness, a drunken and abusive father, and helpless children left to fend for themselves and their family – reaches a happy resolution at the end, with the recovery of the mother and the father’s repentant rehabilitation. Desai’s vision is a fundamentally humanist one, summed up in the boy protagonist Hari’s unwitting insight, “we have to change too, we shall have to become different as well”.4 The overt hope in human nature is appropriate to the child-like naïveté Desai crafts in this novel, yet it is not too distant from the slightly more ironic brand of humanist hope offered in R.K. Narayan’s novels. Raju in *The Guide* – a selfish, exploitative conman whose antics lead him from adultery...
to Svengali-like impresario to convict to pseudo-“Swami” preying on gullible villagers for food – finds redemption of a sort when he agrees to fast in an attempt to bring relief from drought for the villagers of Mangal. Although he is placed in a false position due to his own trickery, that situation provokes him into doing the right thing:

For the first time in his life he was making an earnest effort, for the first time he was learning the thrill of full application, outside money and love; for the first time he was doing a thing in which he was not personally interested.5

That belief in human nature is what fuels a hope for the Indian socius – if not the people of India as a whole (too fractious, too caste-bound, too numerous), then the symbolic micro-community of the village or district. Some glimmer of hope is arguably found even in tragic situations: Indra Sinha’s Animal’s People deals with the depressing subject of the aftermath of a Bhopal-like disaster in the city of Khaufpur, and features a protagonist called “animal” because his deformity (incurred as a result of the industrial accident) causes him to move about on all fours. Despite the misery around him, the loss of loved ones, the continuing prevarications of the American “kampani” responsible for all this, and the widespread poverty and oppression, the novel affirms the strength of the human spirit in Animal’s continued resilience, and the communal spirit in the friendships and acts of kindness which are all the more remarkable because of the milieu in which they are found. As Animal’s narrative – dictated into a tape recorder at a journalist’s instigation – draws to an end, it becomes the figure for a communal multivocality which symbolises life and hope:

When I started speaking, when I heard dead Aliya’s voice calling, it was like she and the others who are no more came back to be with me. My dear ones, heroes of my heart. Eyes, I can’t tell you how I miss them, until I die this wound will never heal. They’ve been here through every minute of this telling. Ma’s here with me now, sitting smiling she’s, calling me son. Let me clear my eyes of dust and rainbow. Yes, I can see her. “We’ll meet in paradise,” she says. I know that one day I will meet her there.6

Such “communal” imaginings might well be part of what Spivak calls a “subaltern or peasant consciousness”, aligned with a popular movement towards “independence”, even as she warns that this may be a “cathexis of the elite” and “never fully recoverable” – a caveat that is certainly important when dealing with imaginative representations.7

In narratological contrast to this romance of selectivity, but with a similar ideological impulse, is the narrative of (utter) inclusivity, a playful attempt to reduce disparate particulars (histories, events, political positions, personalities) to a similar metafictional level. This expansive magic-realist form can be seen as a project of re-writing national history and trauma
as a larger “world” event, thus moving beyond the stifling impasse of the third-world nation’s colonial legacies and developmental problems. It is probably best exemplified in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, but is also seen in novels like Vikram Chandra’s *Red Earth and Pouring Rain*, and the more metafictional among Amitav Ghosh’s works like *The Calcutta Chromosome* and *The Circle of Reason*. While it may seem strange to see magic realist forms as part of the narrative romance of the nation, Stephen Slemon observes that the magic realism that was written in South America and the West Indies in the 1960s and 1970s was really a narrative form dedicated to “resistance toward the imperial centre and to its totalizing systems of generic classification”. Pluralism – of voices, perspectives, details, authorities, narrative strands – thus functions in anti-imperial ways, to suggest the ascendance of the riot of colours and details associated with the communal multitude, over the restrictive and taxonomic control of the powers-that-be. *Midnight’s Children* might be seen as using narrative “apparitions, phantasms, mirages, sleight-of-hand, the seeming form of things” to contest historical and political imperatives, casting them down into an “annihilating whirlpool” of multiple voices and stories – the voices of the Indian “multitudes”. Similarly, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* seeks to re-write India’s tumultuous history (the core of which is the colonial conquest of India at the end of the Mughal empire, but extending into the continued racism and communal problems of the present day) with the communal voices of “all our fathers and mothers and their enemies, all together now”. Instead of the selective romance of the particular rural community, as in Narayan’s people of Malgudi, this is the romance of possibility, of hope in the inclusive richness of the multitude and the stories it embodies, which symbolically also contain “the past, every moment of the present, and all the future”. Chandra’s novel ends its epic and yet “fissiparous” account of India’s tumultuous history with the prospect of another round of story-telling: “Then we will sit in circles and circles, saying, bless us, Ganesha; be with us, friend Hanuman; Yama, you old fraud, you can listen if you want; and saying this we will start all over again.” Storytelling, the ultimate act of communal bonding, is contrasted with the war, rapacity and (physical, psychological and symbolic) violence of India’s history, and is thus also the hope of being able to “start over again”. The novel’s “hope and challenge” consists in “[refusing] the authority of any final frame”, thus troubling “the linear, progressive narratives of nation-states and global modernisation”. We can see such novels as a late, postcolonial development of what Edward Said saw as a “new encyclopaedic form”, precipitated by the crisis of European modernity, and characterized by “circularity of structure, inclusive and open at the same time,” by “novelty” and “irony”. The Indian Anglophone romance of the nation is a construct of the communal
“multitude” as an answer to that crisis, at the same time the inheritance of European modernist gloom as well as a repudiation of it from the hopeful perspective of a non-European positioning. Hopefulness – either in selective romances or in magic-realist inclusivity – does not mean that these narratives gloss over negative aspects of Indian life and society. Indeed, they are particularly intent on exposing oppressive power and social injustice, which in the main take the form of corrupt politicians, racism, colonial legacies, taxonomic systems and religious extremism. However, they do tend to create narrative forms which, if they do not always affirm the strengths of Indian society, do allow life to go on despite suffering and tragedy, with implicit hope for the future.

The “Dark” Turn of Indian Anglophone Literature: Younger Writers and the View from a Distance

A quite different temper emerges in some more recent Indian English writing and writers, particularly in writers with stronger overseas links, with highly transnational careers, and thus with a much looser personal connection to India. In these writers, Indian Anglophone fiction takes as it were a “dark” turn, in which the usual themes (corruption, social injustice, communalism and factionalism) are worked out, but without the accompanying affection for characters and human nature, and the hope for the redemption of the community, that is seen in the older generation of writers in English.

While it is difficult and probably arbitrary to assign a specific date for this turn in mood in Indian Anglophone literature, we might take the 1990s as its beginning, and a figure like Arundhati Roy as symptomatic of the attitudinal tensions evident in this process of transition. In 1997 Roy won the Booker Prize for The God of Small Things – certainly a dark and no-holds-barred look at hypocrisy and social injustice in a small community of Syrian Orthodox Christians in Kerala, but one which is highly sympathetic and even affectionate towards its main characters, and even holds out some poignant hope in the love affair between a “caste Christian” woman and an untouchable Hindu man. That hope – despite absolute caste prejudices, religious hypocrisy, a corrupt police force, the self-interestedness of the members of the Kerala Marxist party, murder, family dysfunction and even incest – is reinforced not just by moments of tenderness and lyrical beauty in the narrative, but also by its chronological shifts which end the novel with a scene between the lovers, even though the man Velutha dies at the hands of the police earlier on. The romantic union of the inter-caste and inter-religious couple, presented in this way, is a hope for unity and for a better “tomorrow” (the last word the lovers say to each other, and the last word in the novel), which brings
it into partial alignment with the Indian Anglophone romance, despite its generally sombre mood.

However, after winning the Booker, Roy effectively gives up writing fiction, and becomes an outspoken activist on causes such as “Nuclear Bombs, Big Dams, Corporate Globalization and the rising threat of communal Hindu fascism”, in the process acquiring the reputation of an “anti-nationalist”. Roy’s change of career is denoted by the move from the communal perspective of God of Small Things – one which still permits a measure of affection and hope – to a national perspective on India’s continuing socio-political woes, which is also a perspective transcending narrow nationalism, looking critically at the nation from a position outside of it. It is from this critically detached position that Roy is able to condemn the “present Indian government’s fascist policies which, apart from the perpetration of State terrorism in the valley of Kashmir (in the name of fighting terrorism), have also turned a blind eye to the recent state-supervised pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat”. As Roy’s non-fictional discourse shows, much of the change in her career and mode of intervention can be traced to a dissatisfaction with India’s perpetuating socio-political woes, part of which are due to the rate and manner of India’s development, and part to the BJP’s communal politics which began with its control of the nation from 1998-2004, and which have continued in certain states such as Gujarat and Karnataka (whose Chief Ministers are from the BJP), most spectacularly in the Godhra incident of 2002 to which Roy alludes. Like Roy, other liberal and highly-educated Indians, including many in the diaspora, have become increasingly frustrated and increasingly critical of the Indian socio-political condition, their sense of a systemic problem in India overwhelming any sense of optimism and any willingness to romanticize localized events and personalities.

This dark turn is by no means a simple and obvious event, and certainly it is possible to see some earlier Indian Anglophone writing (such as Rohinton Mistry’s Such a Long Journey, or Rushdie’s The Moor’s Last Sigh) as anticipating it, even as it is possible to see some later writing (for example Vikas Swarup’s Q & A, with its spectacular romance ending) as perpetuating elements of the romanticizing themes popular in earlier fiction. Also, no clear chronology or cut-off date can be precisely defined in a field as symbolically rich and dependent on interpretation as fictional representation. Nevertheless, the “dark” thematic trend in both literary and non-fictional discourses (web pages and postings, media coverage, internet chat sites) is a discernible one. It is certainly very evident in some of the works of Indian diasporic writers published late in the “noughties”, such as Aravind Adiga’s The White Tiger and Between the Assassinations, David Davidar’s The Solitude of Emperors and Gautam Malkani’s Londonstani. Even Vikram Chandra’s playful magic realist take on India’s past in his
Narrating “Dark” India in Londonstani and The White Tiger

1995 Red Earth and Pouring Rain, gives way to a much darker vision in his 2006 Sacred Games. “Darkness” is not merely an impressionistic term, but is actually used as a symbol of India’s social condition, whose malignity manifests itself in individual characters as a moral darkness, a propensity for cruelty and betrayal that appears (in the individual) to be almost essentialist in its inexplicability. Yet the novels are careful to contextualize individual evil within the inexorable influence of India’s social conditions. The recurring motif for this is the crime and/or terror syndicate, the central figure, the unrepentant vicious thug.

Adiga’s White Tiger, winner of the 2008 Man Booker Prize, has been called a “black comedy”, marked by “an invincible sense of disillusionment and cynicism, with little or no hope of escape or change available to the protagonists,” and with a strong “sense of fatalism” pervading the text.17 The novel employs an epistolary form – the story is told as a series of letters which the protagonist, Balram, purports to write to the Chinese Premier – and a relatively simple time-frame in which Balram recollects his early life and deeds from the security of his new identity as a successful businessman. Apart from these narrative devices, the novel is a very direct account, appropriate for one narrated by a rural uneducated (if sly) villager, with little by way of philosophical or moral reflection, deep symbolism or great psychological insight into Balram or human nature – although of course the reader is invited to make such reflections and insights precisely because of Balram’s narrative shortcomings.

What characterizes the narrative is the chilling frankness and simplicity with which Balram recounts his career of poverty and oppression, desperation and finally murder of his employer and theft of the fortune that sets him up in his successful business. He describes himself early in the novel in the derogatory terms his former employer uses on him – a “half-baked Indian”, with little education because “we were never allowed to complete our schooling”.18 Appropriately enough, he continually expresses himself and describes his country’s social condition “bluntly”, even to the point of crudeness with his tag phrase “what a fucking joke!” inherited from his employer’s wife Pinky. Yet he also rises to become “one of [Bangalore’s] most successful (though probably least known) businessmen”, which prompts him to dare to compose his letters to reveal to the Chinese Premier “the truth about Bangalore” (pp.2, 4). It is the contradictory nature of Balram – rural yokel who becomes savvy businessman, uneducated and ignorant and yet also representing India’s entrepreneurial “tomorrow” (the locale of Bangalore, one of India’s wealthy and fast-developing high-tech hubs, is significant), simple and yet also capable of treacherous cunning, and above all aware of his ruthless betrayals, yet completely unrepentant – which primarily sustains the reader’s interest in the novel. Adiga creates a protagonist who, in his social background could well be India’s Everyman,
but if so, his inner workings and career suggest the deep moral malaise which lies at the heart of modern India.

It is Balram who establishes the view of India as “darkness” – a view which pervades the novel, and which has the more validity because of his position as India’s Everyman, its “blunt” spokesperson. As Balram explains to Premier Wen,

[...] India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off. But the river brings darkness to India – the black river.

Which black river am I talking of – which river of Death, whose banks are full of rich, dark, sticky mud whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it?

Why, I am talking of Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth. Everywhere this river flows, that area is the Darkness. (p.12)

Balram’s description indicts what has often been called the “Hindu heartland” of India, the northern states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar through which the sacred Ganges flows, and where are found most of the holiest Hindu sites. In so doing, he essentially refutes the whole notion of India as Hindu nation, and “Hindutva” as its way of life, which is propagated by Hindu Right parties like the BJP and Shiv Sena, and endorsed by like-minded individuals and organizations throughout the Indian diaspora.

This refutation of Hinduism – its pantheon, beliefs and rituals, its caste system – is crucial to Balram’s story of his rise from poverty and oppression through ruthless self-interestedness. He blames Hinduism for the oppression of the poor and the retardation of social progress in India, beginning with the pantheon itself, which (together with the Muslim and Christian Gods) imposes “36,000,004 divine arses” for supplicants like Balram to kiss (p.6). He also rebels against the doctrines of servitude that he sees enshrined in Hinduism and its narratives:

[...] Do you know about Hanuman, sir? He was the faithful servant of the god Rama, and we worship him in our temples because he is a shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion.

These are the kinds of gods they have foisted on us, Mr Jiabao. Understand, now, how hard it is for a man to win his freedom in India. (p.16)

He later sees his work as driver for his rich master Ashok and his wife Pinky as the embodiment of that sacred story: “She would sit in the back, and the two of them would talk, and I would drive them wherever they wanted, as faithfully as the servant-god Hanuman carried about his master and mistress, Ram and Sita” (p.38). Linked to the deterministic nature of Hindu life is the whole caste system: Balram explains that his caste-based
name (“Halwai […] sweet-maker”) is effectively “my destiny. Everyone in the Darkness who hears that name knows all about me at once” (p.53).

Hindu life is not the only thing that Balram critiques, of course; he also exposes the prevalent corruption and economic exploitation in his society. He acknowledges that Hinduism may once have ordered Indian society of yore like “a clean well kept, orderly zoo”, and it was “those politicians in Delhi” who opened the cages after independence, so that “those [animals] that were the most ferocious, the hungriest, had eaten everyone else up, and grown big bellies” (pp.53, 54). Hinduism and the caste system now work as a corollary to a kind of economic free-for-all, reinforcing socio-economic inequality and Darwinian survival at all cost with notions of social place and “destiny”:

To sum up – in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies.

And only two destinies: eat – or get eaten up. (p.54)

Corruption is rampant in the novel, and part of the socio-economic problem that prevents the ordinary Indian like Balram from rising out of abject poverty. Balram castigates the “guilty conscience of the government of India”, has a schoolteacher who steals the children’s lunch money because he is not paid his government salary, loses his father to TB at a government hospital because the doctor paid for the sinecure and does not bother to turn up, and himself participates in little and big acts of dishonesty and cheating (pp.16, 28, 42).

Balram’s crimes, horrendous as they are – he murders and robs his employer, knowing full well the vicious retribution that will fall on his own family back in the village, and runs away to Bangalore where he uses the money to set up a transportation business, in the process bribing the police to put his competitors out of business and cover up a death caused by one of his drivers – are mitigated (if not fully exonerated) by the narrative, which presents his actions as largely the effect of the society in which he lives. As narrator, Balram clearly sets himself up as victim of his society and circumstances, carefully delineating his victimization and exploitation by those around him: for example, his murdering Ashok – is set up as a consequence of Ashok’s family’s attempt to make him the fall guy for Pinky’s hit-and-run accident, and Balram is only saved from a prison sentence by the callousness of a society that cannot be bothered with the death of yet another poor street person. He dates the beginning of his revolt against his employers – cheating them in petty ways, using their car to pick up paying passengers, finally the plot to murder and steal Ashok’s money – to the period of the aftermath of their coercion of a signed confession out of him: “The more I stole from him, the more
I realised how much he had stolen from me” (p.196). Even his effective consignment of his grandmother Kusum and other extended family members to death, through the retaliation that Ashok’s family later inflicts on them, is justified by Kusum’s passive-aggressive bullying, and the family’s ceaseless exploitation of his earnings, even as they exploited his father before him, and continue to exploit his brother Kishan.

Balram does have moments of self-doubt and self-recrimination, but the colour imagery that is used confirms the fact that his evil is a product of the evil into which he was born, the “darkness” of India: looking absently at the black water being sluiced out of a tea-shop as it is being cleaned, while plotting the murder and contemplating its consequences, “a voice inside me said, ‘But your heart has become even blacker than that’” (p.227). The sheer catalogue of social evils that Balram has to negotiate, from childhood upwards, tends to lend moral weight to the unrepentant declaration he makes near the end of the novel:

[...] I’ll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master’s throat.

I’ll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute, what it means not to be a servant. (p.276; italics in original)

Thus the protracted narrative legerdemain of the novel makes it seem as if Balram’s morality (or lack thereof) is on trial, when actually it is India’s that is being judged. Balram’s quasi-confession turns out to be that of India. Ironically, even his elitist and wealthy employers use the metaphor of “the Darkness”: “Sometimes these people from the Darkness are so stupid”, Ashok declares, endorsing Balram’s social analysis, even as he also unconsciously indicts the role that his exploitative and indifferent social class plays in perpetuating the “Darkness” (p.229).

The novel’s spatial symbolism also reinforces this isolation and demarcation of India. The symbolic map of India that Balram sketches early in the novel – an India of “light” and wealth in the coastal regions, and an India of “darkness” in the Gangetic Hindu heartland – is a cultural-economic geography which attributes India’s past and continuing prosperity in certain of its regions to its contact with foreign sources via oceanic trade. Like much of the social depiction in the novel, there is more than a grain of truth in it: many of the richer and better-developed regions of India today, such as parts of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra and West Bengal states, are coastal areas which have long had economic and cultural contact with the outside world, while many of the poorest and least well-developed states in India today (such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh) are indeed the rural areas of the Hindu heartland. There are obviously exceptions to this rule, such as Orissa which is a relatively under-developed coastal state, but it is sufficiently accurate to support the
novel’s depiction of Balram’s move from rural Bihar to bustling Bangalore in Karnataka state (not a coastal city, but one nevertheless heavily fed by foreign investments and ideas) as a move from “darkness” to “light”, oppressive traditionalism to liberal modernity.

This spatialization ties India’s hope for modernization and economic progress to its transnational connections (in contrast to romantic nationalism’s locating the nation’s hope in the rural community), even as it explicitly and excruciatingly ties its many social problems to socio-religious traditionalism. The figure of Ashok’s American-born Indian wife, Pinky, reinforces this alignment. Her outsider perspective, and her catchphrase response to things Indian – “What a fucking joke!” – which Balram adopts, repeatedly highlight the crises in Indian society, and prompt a similarly critical response in the reader. Although it is she who knocks down the street person, she insists on going back to help the victim, and strongly objects to her in-laws’ plan to make Balram take the blame for her accident. This act of injustice proves to be the last straw for her, making her leave Ashok and return to America. Balram’s assessment of her – “who would have thought...that of this whole family, the lady with the short skirt would be the one with a conscience?” (p.153) – sounds characteristically earthy, but significantly ties Pinky’s moral position to the crucial spatial distinction made elsewhere in the novel. America, with its permissiveness in language, dress and opinions (especially for women) that are anathema to traditional Indian society, also provides the only member of the novel’s middle class who has a conscience and some degree of sympathy for India’s downtrodden such as Balram.

Pinky’s desertion of her husband thus also symbolises the diasporic Indian’s renunciation of India – a critical symbolic response, in light of the Indian government’s recent ambitious plans to woo the diaspora to invest in various ways in India. This symbolic rejection of India is hardly unique: Abhay’s White American girlfriend Amanda, in Chandra’s Red Earth and Pouring Rain, also rejects India and life there with him, but this comes from racial-cultural difference and does not stop Abhay and the novel from imagining a positive Indian community independent of Western approval or input. In contrast, Pinky’s position is that of a desi, albeit an Americanized one, and her disgust with India and the morality of her rich husband’s family is far more damning, as the response of both an outsider and insider. If Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children is an attempt to write India and Indian characters into a narratologically sophisticated and thematically expansive “world novel”, Adiga’s White Tiger in contrast cuts India off from the larger international world and its values, placing it in a kind of moral quarantine.

From a novel set in India, written by a cosmopolitan Indian who was born in India and is based in Mumbai, to one which is set in part of the

Downloaded from jcl.sagepub.com at UNIV OF NATAL LIBRARY on May 2, 2012
Indian diaspora (London), written by an Indian who was born and lives in England: Gautam Malkani’s Londonstani can be seen as a reinforcement of this estrangement from the Indian homeland and all that it represents, now seen from the perspective of the PIO (Person of Indian Origin) writer and his (equally PIO) characters. If The White Tiger is the confession of a thief and murderer and also the confession of the society that drives him to it, Londonstani is the story of what happens to a younger generation of desis caught between traditionalism and change, ethnicity and assimilation. The result is in many ways similar to Balram’s career: it involves crime, violence, deception, informed by a core of deep cynicism that precludes romantic optimism about Indian culture.

The narrator of Londonstani, Jas, and his three “rudeboy” (Asian hooligans or gang member) friends Hardjit, Ravi and Amit, roam through London (in what is perhaps a nod to Anthony Burgess’s gang of four delinquents in A Clockwork Orange) aimlessly getting into fights with Muslims and goras (white people) while pursuing their stolen cellphone business and doing whatever it takes to project a front of “rudeboy authenticity”. This necessitates living a kind of double-life, in which the boys put up a front of Asian politeness and respect in front of their families, while committing their atrocities in the name of street “respect” outside of their homes. The novel opens with the gang’s enforcer, Hardjit, beating a white boy bloody on the pretext that the boy has called him a “Paki”, while the other three boys cheer him on. In between bouts of beating, the gang explains to the victim the confusing rules of rudeboy terminology:

 [...] none a us got a mum n dad wat actually come from Pakistan, innit. So don’t u b tellin any a us Pakis dat we b Pakis like our Paki bredren from Pakistan, u get me....

It ain’t necessary for u 2 b a Pakistani to call a Pakistani a Paki, Hardjit explains, - or for u 2 call any Paki a Paki for dat matter. But u gots 2 b call’d a Paki yourself. (p.6)

In the next chapter, they are baiting a “coconut”, someone they identify as a “gorafied desi” (an Indian with English manners and appearance) on the basis of his car and clothing, accusing him of being “embarass’d to b a desi” (pp.21, 22). Later in the novel, Hardjit has his “big fight” with a Muslim boy Tariq, which is intended to “teach Tariq a lesson or two for going out with a Sikh girl an then tryin to convert her to Islam” (p.80).

These confrontations, and the “lessons” they contain, are the triangulation points through which the desi rudeboys seek to locate their identity. While according to their rules it is permissible to be identified as a “Paki” by someone else who might be called a “Paki” (basically a South Asian), it is absolutely essential to maintain one’s distinct difference from both goras and “gorafied desis”. Yet on the other hand, the inclusive category
of “Pakis” breaks down when matters of honour (essentially to do with the control of women’s freedom of choice in respect of dating and religion) are involved: there, the Muslim-Hindu (or Sikh, in Hardjit’s case), Pakistan-India distinction becomes acute. Things become even more confusing when the boys attempt to define their identity in relation to their parents and families. As Jas puts it, “there in’t no point trying to talk to your mum or dad bout religion, innit. They don’t know jack bout religion” (p.81). Paradoxically, it is the children who have become the repositories and guardians of a hardline religious position, and the parents who have become syncretically lax. Hardjit’s (Sikh) mother “always sends out Christmas cards with a picture a the Nativity on them”, and “puts up a plastic Christmas tree with an angel on the top, right next to the Buddha statue they got in their living room” (pp.79-80). Hardjit’s parents keep “their copy a the Guru Granth Sahib on a table”, and hang “their pictures a various Sikh Gurus on the landing walls outside,” but they “even got a couple a Hindu Gods too. Usually you only got Hindus who’ll blend their religion with Sikhism but Hardjit’s mum an dad were one a the few Sikh families who blended back (p.51).

Similarly, Amit and his brother Arun “hated their mum’s definition a Hinduism”, which consists largely of having “high-society satsang guests” over to their house to sing “all the usual bhajans”, but really to “reserve their parkin space in Heaven by leavin their last-year’s-model hatchback at home an pullin up in their husband’s Benz, Beemer or Audi instead”, and to admire each other’s jewellery and mouth sentiments like “God will reward you for your gold” (pp.81-3). Of course, the rudeboys’ own brand of religion(s) can hardly be called pure or orthodox, although they certainly pursue it with a greater degree of zeal than their parents. Hardjit is convinced that Sikhism largely consists of being “the warriors of Hinduism ... like the SAS but in a religious way”; although he does not wear a turban, he carries other religious objects like the Karha (bracelet), which he likes to use sacrilegiously “like some badass knuckleduster” in fights (pp.9, 81). Jas’ loyalty to his friends and their interpretation of Hindu identity does not stop him from breaking the code by going out with an attractive Muslim girl, Samira.

The fact is that all the Indian characters in this novel, of different generations and religious persuasions, exhibit contradictions and confusions in their religious identities and their interpretation of desi-ness. Despite Hardjit’s criticism of his parents’ brand of Sikhism, his own notion of a Sikh-Hindu alliance and his willing championing of Hindu causes cuts across the troubled history of Sikh-Hindu violence in India and the heartland attachment of many Sikhs. Arun’s mother is happy to translate Hinduism liberally as the obligation to pursue material success and to show it off to others, but with regard to Arun’s marriage to a lower-caste...
girl, expects tradition (including the bride’s family’s deference to Arun’s Brahmin caste) to be followed to the full. Arun himself is torn between following tradition in his marriage and showing “respect [for] our elders” on the one hand, and the dictates of his “happiness” in respect of his marriage and his relationship with Reena on the other (pp.264-5) – a tension which is so unbearable that he ends up committing suicide. All the rudeboys are zealous about speaking Hindi and “Panjabi”, and even some Urdu, but primarily as a means to “keep shit secret from goras” and even from “mums an dads”, rather than from any sense of ethnic and linguistic authenticity or respect for one’s culture (p.69). The character who embodies the most contradictions in his identity is of course Jas himself, the gora intent on passing himself off as desi, who denies his own name (Jason Bartholomew-Cliveden) by shortening it to the desi-sounding Jas, avoids his parents and other goras, learns Hindi and Panjabi and Urdu and speaks sententiously about desi religious and cultural matters. Yet he is also the spokesperson of a rational modern thinking that rejects desi traditionalism, justifies his dating a Muslim girl despite his allegiance to his Sikh and Hindu “brethren”, debunks caste-thinking and blind respect for elders and instigates Arun to stand up to his mother. He is thus the catalyst for much of the violence and suffering in the novel, including Arun’s suicide, the burglary and arson at his father’s warehouse, and his own beating and ostracism from the gang. Ironically, the narrator and protagonist who would lead his friends out of the blindness of unthinking obedience to parents and traditions, is himself blinded by his attempt at cultural-ethnic passing, his self-deception about his real identity which is only revealed by his father at the end of the novel.

Londonstani has a very different narrative to The White Tiger: it is chronologically linear with hints of the boy’s adventure story or Bildungsroman, relishes (again bearing comparison with A Clockwork Orange) the linguistic play of its protagonists, is full of teenage hormonal posturing and sentiments and employs rather sensationalistic revelations (for example the fact that Jas is white, that the funeral he describes in such lengthy details is actually Arun’s). In contrast, The White Tiger’s retrospective epistolary narrative largely abides by the “blunt” tone and manner that Balram promises near the beginning of the novel, and reveals its most brutal facts and events (even Balram’s contemplation of his possible capture and punishment) with a kind of matter-of-factness. While Balram is a generally reliable narrator who does not even justify his own crimes, Jas is an unreliable narrator in his concealment of facts, especially the fundamental fact of his whiteness. The difference between the two novels is exacerbated by the fact that The White Tiger is set in India, and makes the socio-economic divide and the oppression of the
rural poor the core of its thematic structure, whereas Londonstani deals with the diasporic middle-class.

Yet despite these differences, there are deep ideological similarities between the two novels, stemming from their similar attitude to “India” (the country, as a symbol and repository of desi identity) and the problems associated with it. Both novels see crime and violence as consequences of the individual’s struggle with the force of Indian culture and traditions. Despite the differences in setting, both novels have similar spatial orientations: The White Tiger has Balram physically leaving the “darkness” in the Indian heartland for the “light” of MNC-influenced Bangalore, and Pinky leaving India and Ashok for America. It may or may not be thematically significant that Balram does not actually leave India, although his wanted status and limited resources (his stolen 700,000 rupees would not get him very far in America or any of the other countries favoured by diasporic Indians) account for his choosing a place like Bangalore as the next best thing to physically leaving India. In this sense, it is as spatially diasporic and extra-Indian as Londonstani, none of whose characters so much as visit India, with the exception of the minor figure Reena, whose visit is mentioned in passing, and which occasions the final fight between Arun’s modern liberalism and his mother’s cultural traditionalism that leads to his suicide.

What emerges from the confused ethnic-cultural identities of the different characters in Londonstani is not only a sense of the fragile malleability and tense plurality of diasporic identity, but also the highly problematic role played by India’s cultural legacy and influence – particularly its (simultaneously conservative and divisive) socio-religious aspects. Balram attributes the poverty and oppression in the Indian “darkness” to the social constraints largely created and reinforced by Hindu beliefs such as mythologies of subservience, the confusing effect of the pantheon, and caste-thinking; his extreme response (murder and betrayal) highlights his desperation and thus the effect of that religious culture on the Indian underclass. The Londonstani rudeboys can be seen as engaging in a confused hyper-performance of ethnicity – one inextricably bound to violence, and leading to betrayals and the death of Arun – again as a consequence of received and mangled ideas of ethnic-religious identity.

Within this similar ideological positioning – what we might term the narrative and positioning of “judgemental estrangement” in the Indian diaspora – the two novels show two different approaches and possibilities. While The White Tiger is clearly denunciatory and dismissive, Londonstani exhibits a certain longing and desire on the part of diasporic Indians for India and its cultural heritage. Yet this narrative strategy may be more judgemental and estranged even than that of The White Tiger. Cultural
longing takes the most negative forms (Arun’s mother’s blind and intolerant caste prejudices, Hardjit’s violent performance of his brand of Sikhism, the rudeboy’s aggressive pose of ethnic authenticity, a confining and over-protective purdah mentality towards women, Jas’ extreme case of passing as desi), even as it gradually loses elements of authenticity and fidelity (as seen in the religious syncretism and laxness of Hardjit’s and Samira’s parents, the materialistic and snobbish Hinduism of Arun’s mother, the often comic mixture of English and Hindi used by the older generation).

If Londonstani is a novel of diasporic crisis, and if this is a crisis caused by an inability to hold on to what is authentically benevolent in Indian culture, it is also very much a crisis caused by the inability to let go of that which is damaging in that culture.

“India,” Narrative, Transnationalism, and the Sustainability of Cultures

Nyla Ali Khan, developing an idea expounded by Arjun Appadurai, notes that “transnational politics often lead to cultural and religious fanaticism”, and that this centres around issues of the “authentic” and the “demonic”.

In another context, Sam George notices a discernible trend of third-generation diasporic Indians expressing a greater degree of attachment to India – yet one that is separated by space and time, and often without a clear sense of what “India” is or means.

Novels like The White Tiger and Londonstani are narratological expressions of this later diasporic obsession with India. In the imaginings of Adiga and Malkani, India is both a compelling and powerful idea as well as false construct expressed as outdated and oppressive traditionalism. These novels are thus articulations of a later-generation diasporic response to the homeland: no longer naïve longing and nostalgia, nor unreflecting syncretism and assimilation, this response represents an acute consciousness of India’s important influence on diasporic identity, yet also an awareness of its perpetuating problems. To this category we can add other Indian Anglophone novels written in the “noughties” and which express a similar position of judgemental estrangement or detachment from India and its problems: apart from the two discussed at length in this essay, these include (to varying degrees, and emphasizing different cultural aspects) Manju Kapur’s The Immigrant, David Davidar’s The Solitude of Emperors, Vikram Chandra’s Sacred Games, Urmila Deshpande’s Kashmir Blues, and to a certain extent Adiga’s story collection-cum fragmentary novel Between the Assassinations.

That these novels represent a sea change from postcolonial and subaltern constructions of a hopeful communal India, can perhaps be best seen in the metaphor of “darkness”, used explicitly and repeatedly in The White Tiger, and implicitly in Londonstani’s tropes of blindness, concealment, self-deception and delusion. As scholars of colonial discourse
Narrating “Dark” India in Londonstani and The White Tiger

such as Edward Said and Paul Brown observe of European writers from Shakespeare to Conrad, “darkness” is used to denote white Europe’s qualitative difference from irremediable, savage and (implicitly or explicitly) native man. Shakespeare’s figure of the native as “this thing of darkness” – dehumanized and wild – in The Tempest, is reinforced centuries later with Kurtz’s summation of the dark heart of Africa (but also, by this stage in history, the exploitative heart of colonial Europe) in Heart of Darkness as “The Horror”, beyond language and reason, and thus again beyond civilization’s redemptive force. Consciously or not, the literature of diasporic judgement employs the same image on its own homeland, its cultural heartland. Clearly it is a cultural turn that must be provoked by considerable frustration and sadness over the continuing state of certain social aspects of India, by the shame and outrage that the diaspora shares with the global community at shocking recent events such as the Godhra and Babri Mosque episodes. Yet paradoxically, this darkness provides one kind of trajectory for cultural sustainability in the desi diaspora: a trajectory that, for all its problematic nature, does have in its favour a local and vernacular knowledge or engagement (even a passionate commitment), which thus resists a full assimilation into an undifferentiated “world culture”. This “thing of darkness” (to borrow Prospero’s phrasing), the diasporic Indian consciousness cannot help but “acknowledge mine” – yet to acknowledge it as “mine”, is in some sense nevertheless to mark out a cultural territory of one’s own against the most powerful deterritorializing effects of globalization.

NOTES

My thanks to Larissa Lai, who first called my attention to Londonstani and whose comments about the novel intrigued me enough to get me to read and start thinking about it. Thanks are also due to JCL’s two readers of the original manuscript of this essay, who made invaluable suggestions for revision.

8 Crane, *Inventing India*, pp.171, 188.
12 *ibid*.
16 *ibid*.
19 Crane, *Inventing India*, p.188.