

Indian Fiction



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The immigration experience and attempting to preserve Indian culture within the family are frequent themes in Indian fiction. In many of these stories there is a generational culture clash as the second generation grows up and identifies with values in the culture of the new country. Many of these immigrant families in the Indian Diaspora want to arrange marriages for their teenage children with husbands or wives they have never met, back in India. Arranged marriage has been part of Indian culture for centuries and it occurs as a theme both in novels with an Indian setting and those which reflect the immigrant experience.

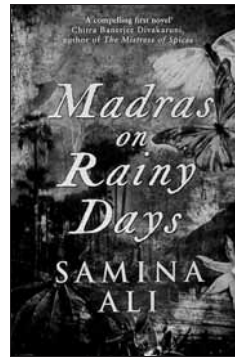
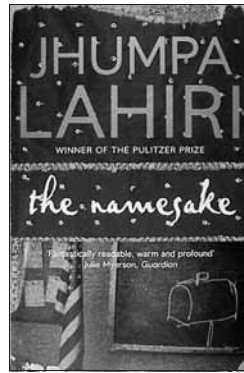
Bali Rai has written two entertaining novels on the generation clash and arranged marriage themes in immigrant families now living in England. In **(Un)arranged marriage** (2001), she writes about Majit's life from age thirteen to seventeen. His alcoholic father is determined that Majit must not disgrace the family by associating with non-Indian people. He tries to find a girl, back in the Punjab, for Majit to marry. Unbeknown to his father, Majit has a girlfriend who is white, and this leads to trouble. **Rani & Sukh** (2004) by the same author, begins in the Punjab in the 1950s, when a secret love affair goes wrong, a girl's lover is killed by her family and she commits suicide. The family feud is continued by the brothers of the two lovers, who now live in London. Children of the feuding families, Rani and Sukh, meet at school and unbeknown to their families, start dating. Rani's father intends finding a suitable husband for her, but meanwhile her relationship with Sukh deepens. When everything comes out into the open, violence ensues and history partially repeats itself. In Tanuya Desai Hidier's teenage novel, **Born confused** (2003), sixteen-year-old Dimple Lala is struggling with identity issues. She has grown up in New Jersey and wants to be more American, like her best friend, whereas her parents want her to fit in with



Indian cultural values. These three novels will appeal especially to teenage readers.

Continuing with these themes is Jhumpa Lahiri's, **Interpreter of maladies** (2000), the short-story collection for which she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. In some of these stories the immigration experience to the United States of America is explored in the lives of the characters. In Lahiri's first novel, **The namesake** (2003), the Gangulis leave Calcutta after their arranged marriage and settle in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Ashoke works at the University. Their son, Gogol, is named after the Russian author. He grows up identifying with American values, hating the strange name he has been burdened with and chafing under the Bengali heritage imposed by his parents. In **Brick lane** (2003), Monica Ali's wonderful first novel, Nazneen accepts her father's arranged marriage with Chanu, an older man. She leaves Bangladesh to live with him in London, where he constrains his wife and later his daughters, with his ideas of Bangladeshi culture. Despite this, Nazneen manages to grow beyond the confines he sets. Samina Ali's, **Madras on rainy days** (2004) is a dark novel on the arranged marriage theme. Layla has grown up in America, but her parents have arranged a marriage for her, with Sameer, an engineer, in Hyderabad. Unbeknown to their families, both she and Sameer have secrets. During the ceremonies leading up to the wedding day, Layla is miscarrying the pregnancy from her secret American boyfriend. After the wedding, Sameer fails to consummate the marriage and his secret emerges. A lighter novel on these themes is Kavita Daswani's **Everything happens for a reason** (2004). In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, **The vine of desire** (2002), the story of Anju and Sudha, begun in **Sister of my heart** (1999), is continued. They are now living in California, where they struggle to adapt to American ways. A young woman who has grown up in London, travels to India to find a true sense of identity in Preethi Nair's **One hundred shades of white** (2003).

The scene changes to South Africa in Rajendra Chetty's **South African Indian writings in English** (2002). Some of these stories recount the Indian immigrant experience of life in South Africa. Praba Moodley's, **The heart knows no colour**

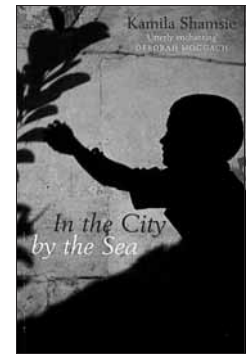
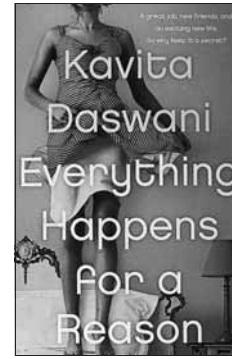


(2003) follows the fortunes of a family from

India, who arrive to work in the sugarcane fields of Natal, South Africa. The daughter, Sita, falls in love with the brother-in-law of the estate owner, but is eventually forced into an arranged marriage by her father.

Dissatisfaction with traditional arranged marriage manifests in Manju Kapur's, **A married woman** (2003). Astha, a dutiful Indian daughter, accepts her parents' choice of husband. However, she suffers under the constraints of the marriage, begins to question everything and makes life-changing choices. Anita Rau Badami's, **Tamarind Mem** (1996), traces the stories of Saroja and her daughter, Kamini. Saroja has spent her married life imprisoned in a loveless marriage arranged by her family.

Apart from the many Indian novels on the immigrant experience there are many set against the rich fabric of life in India. Rohinton Mistry's novels must be amongst the finest of these. **A fine balance** (1996) was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1996 and received enthusiastic reviews in many publications. One of these was by Amanda Craig in the **Literary Review**, March 1996, p.34. 'This is a work of genius. It should be read by everyone who loves books. It is 1975, and Indira Gandhi has declared a State of Internal Emergency. Two tailors, Ishvar and Omprakesh, have been forced from their village to the city. They find work with Dina Dalal, a middle-class widow. With them, coincidentally, is Maneck, Parsee son of an old schoolfriend from the Himalayas who is going to lodge with Dina while studying refrigeration at university. All four lives are to be intimately intertwined, but before this happens the novel traces their past. **A fine balance** is a passionately political novel, at once brilliantly satirical and quietly, agonisingly, humane. Mistry has produced a modern Victorian novel.' Mistry's next novel, **Family matters** (2002), also a wonderful read, follows complexities in the lives of three generations of a family and provides a



picture of Bombay life in the 1990s.

Akhil Sharma's **An obedient father** (2001) is set in the slums of Delhi in 1991 and depicts a society infected with corruption and intolerant cultural attitudes. The setting is Mumbai for the stories in **Love and longing in Bombay** (1997) by Vikram Chandra. These stories of love and longing in the lives of a civil servant, a software company employee, a computer specialist, two society women, a military man and others, reveal aspects of Indian culture. In this author's earlier book, **Red earth and pouring rain** (1995) a dying monkey, a reincarnation of a nineteenth-century poet, who rebelled against British rule, tells stories from India's past.

David Davidar's debut novel, **The house of blue mangoes** (2002) follows the lives of three generations of the Dorai family who live on an estate with blue mango trees. The time-frame for the story begins in the final years of the British Raj and continues up to 1947. This novel depicts a traditional Indian family coping with change against a panoramic historical background. Two novels set against the backdrop of the 1947 partition of India are Kamila Shamsie's **Salt and saffron** (2001) and **What the body remembers** (1999) by Shauna Singh Baldwin. In Shamsie's **In the city by the sea** (2004), political turmoil under a military regime in Pakistan is seen from the perspective of eleven-year-old Hassan, whose uncle is arrested for treason. Anita Rau Badami's **The hero's walk** (2001) traces the lives of members of an ordinary Brahmin family and their shifts in values, during a time of social and political transformation. Vikram Seth's **A suitable boy** (1993), is set in India of the 1950s. It is a saga of four families whose members' lives unfold against the social and historical events of the time. Aspects of Indian culture and life are revealed in Manil Suri's **The death of Vishnu** (2001) which tells the story of the alcoholic Vishnu, a servant in a Bombay apartment block. **The god of small things** (1997), Arundhati Roy's debut novel is set in India

during the 1960s. It tells the story of a family crisis with intertwined political and caste conflict. **The Vintage book of Indian writing 1947-1997** (1997) collects together stories from 32 Indian writers, including Vikram Seth, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, VS Naipaul and Ved Mehta. The selection has been made by Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West. The complex tapestry of India is the background for most of these stories.

This article has focused on a selection of fictional titles by Indian writers, many of which have passed through the writer's hands. New works of fiction continue to be published on themes of the immigration experience, arranged marriages and cultural clash. Many of these titles make memorable reading as do those which reflect past and present-day life in India. The revelation of aspects of Indian life, of cultural attitudes, social traditions, the caste system, political turmoil, corruption and poverty in many of these novels and short stories are endlessly fascinating. The bibliography which follows is a list of the Indian fiction titles in Western Cape Provincial Library stock.

Source

PALS reviews.