

## INTERPOLATING SOUTH ASIAN TRANSNATIONAL HERITAGE: ALLEGORY IN SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORIC METROPOLITAN YOUNG ADULT FICTION

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### ABSTRACT

*Young adult books written by western metropolitan authors clearly cater to a western audience: the protagonists, settings and the archetypes of these texts are Eurocentric. Eurocentric concepts and experiences are often assumed to be universal. This could result in the othering of the non-white imaginary within young adult fiction. However, multicultural young adult texts are increasingly available on the global market. This paper investigates a selection of young adult fiction written by authors of the South Asian diaspora to determine whether the use of allegory in the form of cultural myths and folklore drawn from an ancestral cultural repertoire allows these texts to insert themselves into and dismantle the hegemony of metropolitan Eurocentricism in the consciousness of the diasporic South Asian reader. To explore this possibility, the following works of South Asian diasporic metropolitan young adult fiction are analysed: *Dahling If You Luv Me Please Please Smile* (1999) by Rukhsana Khan; *Bindi Babes* by Narindher Dhani (2005); and *Blue Boy* (2009) by Rakesh Satyal. This study focuses on the ways in which the authors of these texts interpolate a South Asian transnational heritage into the setting of the metropolitan public school, especially through the allegorical mode. The ultimate aim of this paper is to demonstrate that the incorporation of South Asian cultural myths and folklore into settings familiar to young adult readers can contribute to generating awareness of the cultural heritage of diasporic youth.*

**Keywords:** Transnationalism, interpolation, young adult, South Asian Diaspora, Eurocentric, allegory, myths, folklore

## **INTRODUCTION**

The predominant theme in the works of most metropolitan diasporic South Asian writers of young adult fiction is the quest for cultural identity. This theme is often developed through a protagonist seeking an identity, not just as an individual who is at the cusp of adulthood but also as the "other" in a white society. These characters encounter and combat a marginalisation and alienation that they experience because they are different from the mainstream. To this end, they typically embark on a search for self-definition and identity. In western metropolitan texts, "the quest story" is often characterised by archetypal mythical characters who embark on perilous journeys in search of something valuable in nature or to vanquish a monster. These patterns, which are Eurocentric in nature, often reverberate in many stories written for young adults in popular young adult metropolitan fiction. This study explores the use of allegory in the form of cultural myths and folklore in South Asian diasporic metropolitan literature for young adults. In these texts, metropolitan diasporic South Asian writers attempt to bridge the gap between the universality of the South Asian experience and the self-definition that young adults seek. The use of cultural mythology and folklore in teenage fiction not only gives these works a metaphysical dimension but also demonstrates that cultural identity is indistinguishable from human experience and that they are necessary components in the construction of a self-identity.

Dominant narratives present stories about the world through a western lens, and it is vital to increase access to stories told from non-western perspectives. Most popular young adult fiction in major bookstores worldwide is written by British or American authors. The characters in these texts are primarily British and American, and the stories have a typical western setting and contain British/American cultural nuances. Mainstream young adult literature has historically depicted protagonists and situations that support and perpetuate the values, beliefs, behaviours and practices of the dominant white culture. The linguistic and cultural elements of these texts are therefore Eurocentric. The characters are typically western, and the settings often are revisionist narrativisations of European mythology and folklore. This could impact the ideological formation and the values of young readers. It could also determine young adults' attitudes towards language, culture and identity. However, reading texts written by writers from one's own culture and being exposed to the cultural aspects of one's ancestral home allows readers to become aware of the interpolation of language, dialect, landscape and other aspects that reveal the intermingling and overlapping of the two cultures and the third space they inhabit. For

most readers whose experiences have been limited to their adopted land and whose homeland is an elusive, distant image, these cultural texts become the means of bringing the ancestral home into a global space. Encountering one's own histories and cultural inheritances through myth and folklore gives a sense of self-worth and pride that helps young people develop a better sense of who they are, especially in a multiculturally diverse world. To explore this thesis, the authors analyse three South Asian diasporic metropolitan texts: *Dahling If You Luv Me Please Please Smile* by Rukhsana Khan, a Pakistani-Canadian writer; *Bindi Babes* by Narindher Dhami, a British-Indian writer; and *Blue Boy* by Rakesh Satyal, an American-Indian young adult author.

*Dahling, If You Luv me Please Please Smile* is centred on a female protagonist, Zainab, a young Canadian Muslim. The story focuses on the problems she faces in her school and at home and her relationship with a controlling older sibling. The only Muslim and one of only two students of Indian ancestry in her class, Zainab struggles to fit in with the rest of her schoolmates, who are primarily Caucasian. Zainab's feelings of marginalisation and her difficulties developing friendships with the mainstream students are enlightening. The book addresses themes of bullying, injustice, seeking approval, teen depression and suicide. Therefore, the book has all the material typical of a young adult text but includes a protagonist and cultural nuances that reflect a South Asian heritage. Though the action occurs in the metropolitan setting of a city in Canada, the book includes the cultural nuances of the protagonist's homeland, Pakistan. Initially, the book appears to be a typical teen novel with all of elements of a good teen read; however, there are many details that reveal the subtle interpolation of a South Asian worldview. Through the depiction of a school play, in which the protagonist plays a significant role, South Asian myths and folklore are interpolated into the narrative space.

The young adult novel *Bindi Babes* is about three sisters, all of whom are young adults living in Britain. Their father is an Indian immigrant from the Punjab, a state in India whose dominant religion is Sikhism. The sisters, Ambarjit (Amber), Geena and Jasveender (Jazz) are popular Indian-British girls with a workaholic father. They are good students who are well-liked by the teachers and the other students. However, they do not receive parental guidance and live a carefree existence, indulging in shopping and fashion. The interpolation of a South Asian Indian consciousness begins when the father's sister arrives from India to assume management of the household. The three girls discover their roots and heritage through their aunt, and the text culminates in a school play in which the girls present aspects of their Sikh religion to a primarily western school audience. The predominant

themes in this text include friendship, relationship breakdowns, interracial friendships, and the importance of preserving the culture and tradition of one's homeland.

Rakesh Satyal's *Blue Boy* shares many similarities with the previous texts: they are all coming of age stories. However, the protagonist of *Blue Boy* is an Indian-American boy whose parents are Indian immigrants. Kiran Sharma does not fit in with his friends, his community or his public school classmates. He grows up feeling rejected by his friends because of his "difference." This feeling of alienation motivates him to learn more about his inherited culture, and as he explores Hindu mythology, he begins to believe that he could actually be the reincarnated Hindu deity Krishna due to their common experiences of being "different." The narrative, with its main theme of discovery and self-acceptance, alternates between seriousness and humour as it details the more serious issues Kiran experiences. Through the painful journey of adolescence, he realises he is different and accepts it. This work includes such themes as the pressure to conform, bullying, pride in one's ethnicity, and the acceptance of a different sexual orientation.

This paper examines how South Asian characters face marginalisation in metropolitan educational spaces and how they eventually learn to embrace their inherited culture and to navigate and merge their Indian and western experiences to create a unique transnational identity. This trajectory will be traced through the South Asian allegories and myths that inform the various school concerts and plays that the protagonists participate in. The purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate that the insertion of cultural history, mythology and folklore into South Asian diasporic metropolitan young adult texts has the power and potential to impart cultural knowledge and create a space for diasporic South Asian readers to experience an enhanced understanding of themselves and their ancestral heritage. In addition, it demonstrates how South Asian diasporic metropolitan texts also disrupt dominant discourses by infiltrating western narrative space with rich South Asian cultural allegories, myths and folklore while informing and educating young readers in an engaging way.

## **READING MYTHS, FOLKLORE AND ARCHETYPES IN ALLEGORY**

Allegory defines aspects of a culture through cultural practices, myths and folklore. Non-mainstream writers are able to interpolate alternative discourses into dominant discourses by inserting rich cultural allegories,

myths and folklore from their own culture into diasporic texts. This creates a venue in which young readers can learn about their rich cultural heritage.

Allegory is important because life in western culture is experienced through the allegories of western discourse. The great allegories of the English literary canon have been influential guides to life and have played a prominent role in the mental development of reading audiences. The allegorical mode brings to surface aspects that are normally found in historical narrative. Historical representations of a culture, its cosmology, values and assumptions are conveyed through allegorical modes in a way that is not confined by history. Metropolitan young adult texts such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis and *The Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling are examples of books that are heavily imbued with biblical allusions and European mythology. These books are saturated with references to European myths and folklore, including the goblins, trolls and centaurs found in the *Harry Potter* series and the White Witch in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, all of which are symbolic allusions and derived from European allegories and mythology.

Similarly, the magical realism in works by authors like Angela Carter combines the mythical with the realistic, using fairy tales to address pertinent social issues. Through magical realism, Carter is able to comment on contemporary concerns through an engaging form. Another writer who uses mythology and magical realism is American author Toni Morrison. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1978) employs many of the tools of magical realism in its realistic portrayals of a normal world and descriptions of humans and society. Non-western readers cannot identify with or relate to any of the allegories in these texts because they depict the cultural and historical specificities of a different world. This paper uncovers how mythology, religious stories, cultural symbols, legends and folklore are weaved into South Asian diasporic metropolitan texts, introducing the rich South Asian cultural traditions of the past into the narratives. The purpose is to determine how interpolation occurs through allegory to potentially create awareness in young diasporic South Asian readers and infiltrate western narrative space. This aim overlaps with the theory that literature reflecting one's own culture is essential to building identitarian affiliations. It is therefore central to how diasporic South Asians negotiate the "dialectic of South Asianness," or in other words, "how South Asianness is experienced and created by those subjects constituted as South Asian across time and space in new homelands." This study also demonstrates how diasporic South Asian young adult literature contributes to forming social consciousness, integrity and agency in growing young adults. The paper also explores the possibility that engaging with texts that represent one's

historical and cultural background could promote a better understanding of one's self and assist in the construction of an ethnic identity, an element missing in mainstream literature for young adults.

By reading texts written by writers from one's own culture and being exposed to the cultural aspects of one's ancestral homeland, the reader also becomes aware of the interpolation of language, dialect, landscape and other aspects that reveal the intermingling and overlapping of the two cultures and the third space they inhabit. For most readers who have never experienced life outside of their adopted homeland and for whom the homeland is an elusive, distant image, these cultural texts become the means of bringing the ancestral home into a global space, making it a site of engagement between the homeland and the youth of the diaspora. In all cultures, children's and young adult literature depict the process of identity formation and individual development. This accentuates the fact that character building in young adults is extremely important as they assist in the formation of values and right emotions and most crucially how maturation is experienced. This will enable the young adult to make right choices and be agentic when they reach adulthood.

Engaging in texts that represent one's own culture is also deeply assuring and assists in the identity and character development of the individual. Books with material content that is familiar, dealing with subject matter that they can relate to and which mirrors many of their own personal dilemmas faced in daily lives would be of great value to this group of young readers. Young adults who come from marginalised communities seldom or never have the opportunity to be able to pick up a book written with a protagonist similar to him/her in terms of culture and the world they belong to. Reading books from one's own culture or other cultures would facilitate ethnic engagement and build a foundation for accepting and embracing diversity. It also provides the reader with a sense of self-worth and pride that helps young persons develop a better sense of who they are, especially in a multicultural, diverse world.

### **PAKISTANI-MUSLIM ALLEGORY: INTERPOLATION OF THE MYTHS AND LEGENDS OF THE MOGHUL DYNASTY IN *DAHLING IF YOU LUV ME PLEASE PLEASE SMILE***

Using the concept of alienation, which describes the hegemonic relationship between the dominant race and the minority, the authors examine how in each of these texts, the narrative almost always begins with the diasporic South Asian protagonist experiencing a feeling of angst caused by the desire

to belong and be accepted by the mainstream. The protagonist is first introduced to the reading audience within the metropolitan space of school. *Dahling* begins with the protagonist recounting her school experience, giving a detailed description of the school, her schoolmates and their current preoccupation with the fashionable jeans brand "Lucky." This introduction emphasises the importance young adults generally place on the need to belong to a "cool" group, to be accepted into the inner circle, which in this case necessitates wearing "Lucky" brand jeans. The introductory passage reads:

Deanford, being a public school, didn't have an official school uniform, but nine out of ten kids wore Lucky jeans. They were easy to spot, because of the little red tag sewn into the seam of the right rear pocket... why would anyone pay that much for a pair of pants? I could just picture people twenty years from now looking back at us and thinking what fools we were forking out that kind of money for something so dumb... But if you wanted to be accepted, no other brand would do (Khan 1999: 2).

The novel begins with a description of the school space, a metropolitan space with western signifiers, such as the name of the school, "Deanford," and the students' craving for "Lucky" brand jeans. These signifiers may cause the reader to anticipate that this text is a typical western text.

The entry point for South Asian interpolation into the metropolitan space is evident in the following:

There was a game the kids played where they tried to rip off each other's tags. If the label wasn't there, it meant you'd bought seconds, not first quality and therefore you hadn't paid the full price. I thought I was okay in my polyester pants. They looked like Lucky's, they had a zipper and pockets and belt loops, they just cost so much less. At least I dressed better than Premini Gupta, the only other "Indian" in the school (Khan 1999: 2).

The first point in which South Asian signifiers are introduced is when the "other" Indian girl is referred; whom we know is Indian based on her name, "Premini Gupta." The phrase "the only other Indian" also informs the reader that the protagonist is Indian. The introduction of the "other" Indian girl is significant because it shows the presence of South Asian young adults in the predominantly white, western space of a school in Canada and therefore

represents the first interpolation of South Asia into a metropolitan space. It also highlights that to belong and be accepted in this metropolitan space, the South Asian young adults must "conform" and dress like the mainstream students. The desire to belong and be accepted into the mainstream is the result of the western hegemony that exists in the metropolitan space, where the dominant culture and its values are seen as the preferred norm. This hegemony creates a sense of alienation and isolation among minorities, as experienced by the diasporic South Asian protagonist in this text. In the post-colonial context, alienation can be understood through the term "unhomeliness," an aspect of hybridity that describes the unsettled feeling of not belonging anywhere because one is "caught in the middle between two worlds." In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha describes a "hybrid location of antagonism, perpetual tension and pregnant chaos" (1994: 44) where one has the desire to belong but is unable to because of the hegemony's non-acceptance. An unhomed person lacks a sense of belonging because he or she is always in between two or more cultures, and as a result, they become displaced. Unhomeness also describes a person who is hybridised but is unable to reconcile the differing elements of their experiences. This results in clashes between the two cultures and traditions at both communal and individual levels. Hybrid individuals may experience trauma and a feeling of anxiety.

After the initial introduction of the protagonist into the metropolitan space, the narrative moves to the domestic space of the protagonist's home, where there is more engagement with South Asian cultures and South Asia is interpolated more thoroughly into the metropolitan and narrative space. In the public space of school, the young adults must negotiate their hybridised identities as Pakistani-Canadians. However, once they enter the domestic realm of home, they are no longer in a western domain but a South Asian-Muslim domain. Although home exists in the western space of a Canadian city, the place is inhabited as a South Asian space.

The introduction to the domestic space begins with a description of home life and an interaction between the protagonist and her older sister:

I slipped into the front hallway. The door creaked loudly. Startling me. I tiptoed down the stairs and sat on the sofa in the TV room. So far so good. Five minutes later, my muscles were just starting to recover from the long walk home when Layla barged in, her hands on her hips, her black eyes flashing. "Did you pray yet?" (Khan 1999: 19).



She was referring to Zuhr prayer. As Muslims, we have to pray five times a day, and Zuhr is the one after lunch (Khan 1999: 19).

This passage introduces Islam into the narrative space, making home the centre of religious practice. Home is clearly the centre where the Pakistani characters can assert their cultural and religious identity. The protagonists' two worlds are represented through the two main spaces she must navigate: the metropolitan space of school and the South Asian space of home. However, the protagonist has the opportunity to merge these opposing worlds in the metropolitan space of school through the school play that she helps direct. She chooses a story from her culture, which prompts her to further research Pakistani allegory. While reading about the glory of the historical Moghul Empire, Zainab encounters the allegory that she decides to use for her play. On the day of the school play, amidst performances of *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Cinderella*, Zainab's team performs a play about a courageous holy man named Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, who dared to defy the tyrannical Moghul emperor Akbar. The story recounts how the holy man worked patiently for many years teaching the people what it meant to be a true Muslim. In this scene, history and allegory merge to bring a Pakistani fable to centre stage, both to entertain and present a more accurate and authentic version of Pakistani South Asian history to a predominantly white audience. Zainab's intent to present an accurate version of Pakistan allegory is captured in the following passage:

It was only after years of sacrifice and struggle that the emperor saw the error of his ways. I only had twenty minutes for the play. Twenty minutes for the Alim to emerge victorious... and another problem was that Jehangir wasn't quite as bad as I wanted him to be. He wasn't evil; just kind of a bully (Khan 1999: 177).

This passage suggests the implications of the interpolation of history and allegory into the imagination of the diasporic young adult. The complexities of ancient history are simplified and made accessible and relevant to the diasporic South Asian youth. Allegory therefore becomes a mode by which history can be interpolated due to "the blurring of the disciplinary distinction between history as a scientific record and literature as a creative construction" (Ashcroft 2001: 104).

In *Dahling*, historical facts commonly read in history textbooks are presented in a simple and engaging form. The writer selects an allegory that

has historical significance and skilfully weaves it into the text. The story is further popularised in a school play. The historical twist, the compelling story line and the didactic message made the play an instant hit with the predominantly western audience. Through the use of allegory, South Asian history and heritage are foregrounded and introduced to a large global reading audience through the interpolation of time and space.

Through the interpolation of Pakistani South Asian allegory, a western space is transformed into a South Asian space as readers are transported to an era of South Asian history. The writer's pride in her cultural heritage is conveyed through the historical and allegorical modes of expression in the text, which are integrated with other young adult-related concerns. Most western young adult texts emphasise western myths and allegories; *Dahling* is a young adult text that presents Eastern/South Asian allegories that many South Asian diasporic young adults can relate to. They may have heard some of these stories, which have been passed down through generations through an oral tradition, but texts like *Dahling* give them the opportunity to read about them in literary texts. Reading about such stories in young adult texts that are produced and marketed through the western publishing system can reinforce cultural connections in diasporic young adult readers and also promote a sense of pride.

For young diasporic readers who have only lived in Canada and have known only Canadian history and the mythologies present within that culture, gaining insight into their ancestral culture can provide new perspective on their cultural background and ethnic identity. Through the interpolation and transformation of western metropolitan spaces, South Asia is brought to the foreground, bridging the gap between the diasporic reader and his/her cultural homeland and exposing a diverse reading audience to South Asia.

### **SIKH ALLEGORY: INTERPOLATION OF SIKH RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL ASPECTS IN *BINDI BABES***

*Bindi Babes* features the Punjabi culture and the Sikh religion, an important South Asian heritage. The characters are transnational young adults who eventually reconcile their opposing cultures and are able to inhabit a more transnational space. The novel begins, like many metropolitan young adult texts, in a western setting. The story takes place at a secondary school in Britain, Coppergate Secondary School. The protagonist who narrates the book is Amber, and she introduces the other characters, her sisters Geena and Jazz. The reader could easily assume that these characters are Caucasian

British characters based on their English names, but the first indication that they are South Asian is gleaned from the following line:

Our story's got something of everything, just like a Bollywood movie. It's got singing, dancing, action, romance, a baddie and three beautiful heroines (Dhami 2005: 1).

The use of "our" opposes the characters to some "other" and underscores the difference between the South Asian British girls and their schoolmates, most of whom are white. This word choice emphasises the separation or dissimilarity between the diasporic South Asian girls, who are in the minority, and the dominant Caucasian British students, who form the majority in the British school system.

The mention of "Bollywood" is the first South Asian element interpolated into the metropolitan space of the school, signalling the entry of South Asian culture into an otherwise seemingly western text. The story proceeds with the three girls "rescuing" Kim, a British Caucasian girl, from the school bully George Botley. Kim is portrayed as a weak person who depends on the three sisters for protection against bullying, yet another common young adult theme. Unlike most western young adult texts, this South Asian young adult text features South Asian protagonists. This "difference" is again emphasised in the following passage:

Everybody loves us. The teachers like us because we work hard, and we're clever, polite and helpful. The other kids like us because we're pretty, popular, funny, and smart. They even have a name for us, The Bindi Babes (Dhami 2005: 13).

The label "Bindi Babes" emphasises their status as "others." The distinctions between "us" and "the other kids" reflect the alienation of diasporic young adults from the mainstream within metropolitan spaces. This alienation is further emphasised by certain traits that seem to be prerequisites for non-white/Caucasian students who want to be accepted and liked by the dominant race. The narrator describes a hegemonic western culture in which the beliefs, values and mores of that culture become the accepted cultural norm for everyone. Therefore, to be liked and accepted by "everyone," one has to be polite, helpful, pretty, smart and so forth. Even if the South Asian protagonists do not seem to express their feelings of otherness in a negative way, the distinct difference between the characters of South Asian descent and the white characters is obvious, underscoring the "unhomeliness" that diasporic persons experience. Therefore, the British metropolitan space is a

space in which the South Asian protagonist does not feel at home because his/her difference is based on an ethnic, religious and cultural background that isolates him/her from the rest.

In this text, as in previous texts, the protagonists find themselves in two separate worlds: the metropolitan and the South Asian. The school clearly becomes the western space in which the girls demonstrate their hybridised British-South Asian identities; the home becomes the South Asian space in which the religion and the culture of the homeland are practiced and upheld.

However, both these spaces again merge within the metropolitan space of the school when the protagonists do a presentation on their ancestral religion and culture during the school concert. The young protagonists turn to their religious history and cultural symbols when asked to deliver a presentation on Sikhism for the school concert, and they develop a presentation idea that has deep cultural and historical significance. The objective of the concert is to display the six major religions of the world through words, music and a specially painted backdrop. Using a large scenic backdrop of the golden temple (the holy Sikh temple in Punjab) and music representative of the Sikh religion and culture, the girls shared their religion and culture with a predominantly Caucasian-British audience.

In almost all the young adult texts analysed in this study, the protagonists are given a task/project that inspires them to research the history, culture and allegories of their homelands. The information that they gather builds a repository of knowledge and insight into their culture. In this way, the information they learn about their history and ancestry are interpolated into their imaginations and produce transformation. The text also creates space for historical and cultural presentations to be shared with a larger audience using the medium of either plays or presentations that are staged in the protagonists' school halls. Readers of *Bindi Babes*, especially those who practice the Sikh religion, can identify with the symbol of the golden temple, a sacred place where Sikhs perform their religious obligations at least once in their lifetime. The Golden Temple is also known as the "Harmandir Sahib," which literally means The Temple of God. The Sikhs' holy text, the Guru Granth Sahib (the holy book) is always present inside the Gurdwara.

Aspects of the Sikh religion and culture are brought into the narrative space and are encountered not only by readers who share this heritage but also by a larger audience of readers who engage with these texts. The Golden Temple, a cultural symbol important for the Sikh community all over the world, is brought to the forefront in this young adult text. Diasporic writers use narrative strategies to re-inscribe the history of the ancestral

homeland and introduce historical representations and cultures from a time and space that otherwise might never be encountered. Through an important cultural symbol, the Sikh community's religious and cultural values gain recognition as they are interpolated into metropolitan and narrative spaces. The symbol also defines what people with a shared ancestry and history have in common in terms of a cultural identity. As Ashcroft suggests, history as a record can serve a larger purpose in the development of self-determination and cultural empowerment.

Readers from all backgrounds can learn more about world cultures by engaging with texts that provide facts and information about cultures that have long been relegated to the periphery.

Though the details of the sisters' presentation at the school concert were not given in the text, it is significant that such an event was held in a British school. The religious history of Sikhism is interpolated into western metropolitan culture through the narrative space of a literary text. Diasporic young adults of Punjabi heritage can identify with the religious and cultural aspects of the text and enrich their knowledge of their religion through engagement with literature.

### **HINDU ALLEGORY: INTERPOLATION OF MYTHS FROM THE HINDU EPICS MAHABHARATA AND RAMAYANA IN *BLUE BOY***

In *Blue Boy*, the protagonist Kiran's story begins at Martin Van Buren Elementary School, a place he refers to as a "social jungle." Being a minority and an "odd" boy who prefers playing with dolls and dancing ballet to more masculine sports, he becomes the target of practical jokes and teasing. Martin Van Buren Elementary is a predominantly white school in Cincinnati. Ethnic young adults may confront more difficulties at school than the average teenager due to their difference, and this is a theme that is repeated throughout the diasporic young adult texts reviewed thus far. The space in question is the metropolitan space of school, and the author provides insight into schoolyard politics. The protagonist's sense of alienation from the rest of the class is evident in the following passage. Kiran walks into the classroom to find Barbie stickers plastered on his desk. He immediately knows this must have been the prank played by the two meanest girls in the school.

Sarah Turner and Melissa Jenkins—elementary school wenches of the worst degree.

We sit in class now, and the giggles happening behind me between the two of them—who of course sit side by side—are maddening. This morning, I walked into the classroom, hung up my neon orange coat on my usual hook in the back, and sat down to find my desk plastered with Barbie stickers... I tried my hardest to scratch them off. Sarah and Melissa giggle and giggle [...] (Satyal 2009: 19).

His classmates' teasing and the taunting is prompted by the fact that the protagonist is different, not only because he belongs to the minority South Asian community in a predominantly white neighbourhood but because of his peculiar predilections and behaviours. He becomes the target of merciless tormenting and bullying, a concern that is a common young adults theme. Kiran's friends are relentless in their teasing:

Maybe you can sing us some Whitney Houston at the talent show. Sarah whispers from behind me... I think of Whitney and how beautiful she is, how poised and how revered... and if Whitney is just a pop-star, a mere mortal, then what does it take to be Krishna, the most beautiful of gods? I dig a thumb-nail deep into the dirt collecting stickiness and I wonder what I can do to ensure that I'm never whispered about again (Satyal 2009: 20).

In addition to the deep sense of alienation that the protagonist experiences, the passage also shows how the metropolitan space of school, Van Buren Elementary School in the American mid-west, is infiltrated by a South Asian young adult with immigrant Indian parents. The protagonist's musings bring his South Asian culture into that space, as manifested by his reverence for the Hindu deity Krishna. The Indian cosmology is interpolated into the western and the narrative space when the protagonist inserts his non-western consciousness into this space. However, the domestic space of home is clearly a South Asian space where the family practices the culture of the homeland. As in the previous texts, the protagonist attempts to merge these worlds into one at the metropolitan western site of the school during a school concert in which he performs a dance that incorporates both western ballet and Indian classical dance.

There are many references in the narration to Indian history and culture. The story line is teeming with the complex historiography of Hindu religion and its deities. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are mentioned

in various parts of the novel, and Kiran spends hours in the library researching Hinduism, a subject he is intrigued by and passionate about.

*Blue Boy's* protagonist, who is an outcaste in the eyes of the people around him, finds strength in his own convictions and in his unwavering belief in the artistic culture of his homeland. As he reads the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, ancient Indian epics:

I discover that Vishnu has ten incarnations—from a bull to a tortoise to a lion to even a powerful midget. But it is Krishna who is the most memorable of these figures, even more memorable than Rama, the hero of Ramayana, Krishna beats Rama because of all his talents—his flute playing, his ability to charm cow-herdresses, and of course his skin (Satyal 2009: 102).

Kiran finds an affinity with the religious story he has heard in the Indian version of "Sunday School" and dwells on the thought that he could be the reincarnation of the blue skinned deity Krishna who was also seen as "different" because of the colour of his skin. Kiran sets himself a task, pouring over books on Hinduism to learn more about the Hindu deities, especially his idol, the blue toned, music loving "God Krishna" whom he sees his own reflection in.

Fuelled by the idea that being different has its own advantages, he hero-worships Krishna and decides to emulate him. Inspired by his new icon, he plods through religious books in the Eastern Religions section of the library and selects a book entitled *A Journey Through Hinduism*.

I flip to the index and look up "Krishna." There are several entries. I hum excitedly and flip to the section that seems the longest. A beautiful portrait of Krishna playing the flute greets me. Instinctively, my hand reaches up to my hair to fix it, as if this picture is the master bathroom mirror. I sense a slight wink of a blue-lidded eye as I begin to pore over the information inside (Satyal 2009: 101).

The lotus-eyed, dark skinned Krishna is the complete and perfect man of Indian mythological tradition. He was the eighth incarnation of Vishnu, the Preserver of the Universe, and took a human form to redeem mankind from evil forces. Physically, Krishna was irresistibly appealing, and ancient texts dwell at length on his exceptionally alluring countenance: a blue complexion soft as the monsoon cloud, shining locks of black hair framing a

beautifully chiselled face, large lotus-like eyes, wildflower garlands around his neck, a yellow garment (pitambara) draped around his body, a crown of peacock feathers on his head, and a smile playing on his lips. It is his beauty that allows Krishna, the cosmic musician, to woo the gopis (cowherd girls) with his tunes. Krishna's flute was so powerful that its music embodied the energy of the cosmos. According to the myth, "real love is transcendental and spiritual. Krishna consciousness means to be serious and determined to transcend the material attraction between man and woman in order to become attracted to the lotus feet of Radha and Krishn" (Miller 1975: 655–671).

Kiran constructs an identity based on the blue skinned deity, who he discovers has many similarities with himself. He observes that Krishna is different from the other deities because of his blue skin tone, that he embodies both the feminine and masculine, enjoys music and dance and is always dressed in elaborate, colourful outfits. For a young reader, this obsession could be viewed as humorous and merely the figment of a child's imagination. Upon reading about his favourite deity, he learns about the reincarnation that is yet to happen and is convinced it could be him.

Through the allegory of Krishna, the writer is able to interpolate Indian religious and cultural aspects into the literary text, transforming complex cultural specificities into simple yet sophisticated forms, incorporating values, assumptions and a South Asian worldview. By interpolating allegory/stories from the homeland into a narrative for young adults, the culture of the homeland comes to be known to those who are distanced from it. Through literature, their cultural heritage will always be accessible to the diasporic young readers who have the same ancestral background, even if they have never been to their homeland. Through the interpolation of time and space, ancient myths and allegory are immortalised in a text that becomes transnational as it reaches a wider reading audience of young adults from across the globe.

As in the previous novel, the protagonist also prepares a performance for the annual school talent show. Kiran makes an elaborate costume, "a conglomerate of all the garments that I've seen the gods and goddesses wear in those paintings, there is something of Lakshmi and Saraswati's saris in the way that the shirt falls..." (Satyal 2009: 242).

The costume that he painstakingly prepares is a reflection of a rich South Asian heritage, inspired by an ancient religion, Hinduism. South Asian history and aspects of the Hindu cosmology are brought to the centre stage of the metropolitan space and are foregrounded in western narrative spaces as they reach a wide global audience.



During his performance, Kiran wears an elaborate Indian costume to represent the deity Krishna in his full glory and splendour. The stage is transformed as he performs a medieval Indian classical dance of the Indian deity Krishna, interpolating South Asian culture into the western space of Van Buren Elementary School in Cincinnati.

The narrative of *Blue Boy* can be explained by what Ashcroft calls the conceptual shift from spatiality to "place-ness," "which is a shift from empty space to a human, social space which gains its material and ideological identity through the practice of inhabiting" (Ashcroft 2001: 158).

The narrative space of the text is interpolated when South Asian culture, religion and history become transnational and globally accessible through a literary medium.

### **THE IMPACT OF THE INTERPOLATION OF ALLEGORY ON HABITATION AND HORIZON TO CREATE A TRANSNATIONAL HABITATION**

The interpolation of a South Asian consciousness through history and allegory blurs the boundaries of metropolitan and South Asian spaces, causing them to merge and become transnational.

Transnational habitation occurs when the diasporic characters in the text are able to merge both of their cultural inheritances, as exemplified in the situations in which they are able to accept and welcome their South Asian heritage within a metropolitan space. They demonstrate that they can be comfortable in the dual worlds they inhabit as they learn to straddle and embrace both. It is important to understand the concept of transnationalism in a context in which diasporic people learn to metaphorically cross borders and inhabit multiple spaces. By embracing the third space, the protagonist becomes a hybrid individual who is the product of both of the worlds he/she inhabits.

The school performances that the characters in all three texts perform in are significant examples of transnational habitation because they depict the merging of both the metropolitan and South Asian spaces. In *Dahling*, the history and mythology of ancient India are re-inscribed to suit a modern and primarily western audience, facilitating the interpolation of South Asian history and space into the western space of Deanford Middle School, Canada. The primarily Caucasian audience is presented with the opportunity to learn about South Asian culture through the presentation of the history of India and the Moghul heroes of the past. By acting out the play using elaborate traditional South Asian costumes and props that bespeak the

ornate richness of Indian history, South Asian culture permeates into the western space of a middle school in Canada. These performances effectively blend and blur South Asian and Canadian spaces into a mutually constituted transnational space.

In *Bindi Babes*, history and the religion of the ancestral homeland are brought into the western space of Coppergate Secondary School's concert hall. South Asian culture and religion is interpolated into the metropolitan space, transforming it into a transnational global space. The performance demonstrates how diasporic young adults can inhabit a unique third space, a transnational space, which is created by merging the two worlds they have inherited. The school concert is therefore significant because it demonstrates the way in which South Asian heritage is interpolated into the young adult text, into narrative space and eventually into the subconscious minds of the young diasporic reader.

In the third text, *Blue Boy*, Kiran is forced to turn inward and live in a world of imagination, which manifests in his interest in art and music. In this carefully constructed place he has created, he turns to the Hindu deity Krishna, whom he idolises and wishes to emulate. What emerges is a hybrid culture he creates himself, visible in the outfit, accessories and props he selects for his solo performance at the school talent show. He channels all of his frustration into creative art to wreak vengeance on his adversaries through his performance, which combines dance movements from ballet and "kathak" (an ancient Indian dance) performed to contemporary music from the film *Flashdance*.

Through a shift in perspective and horizon, Kiran is able to combine his ancestral home culture, specifically elements of his religion, with contemporary western music and dance to create and present for global engagement a performance that merges three different worlds into one. Kiran's experience demonstrates that the diasporic person who inhabits the space that emerges between the local and global is able to interpolate his physical home into the elements of his original home and create a space of his own that truly reflects his multiplicity.

All of this suggests that for the diasporic person, "home" is a mental construct, a repertoire of cultural resources that can be re-imagined and become a place to make meaningful connections. Young adults almost always seem to have conflicts about their personal identities. Diasporic young adults' experiences are more complex because they are constantly living in two opposing cultures. They encounter western influence outside the sphere of home in school, play areas, libraries, malls and eateries. Once in their homes, however, or when in the company of members of the same ethnicity, they are participating in the home culture, including traditions,

daily practices, food, music and other social conventions. However, most teens tend to experience difficulty as they confront this duality of being in a hybridised space, unsure which side they should affiliate with.

By inhabiting western spaces, their identity, culture and lifestyle are interpolated by western influences; by bringing South Asian realities into western spaces, these western spaces are interpolated. Similarly, India is transformed because the homeland space will never be the same. "Home" is wherever the diasporic young adult goes because she carries her home in her mind. Through spatial possibilities, these young adults can have both the homes they yearn for and the benefits of straddling two worlds. Transnational habitation occurs when the South Asian protagonist is able to integrate both influences into his/her transnational life.

## **CONCLUSION**

While young adult literature does not depict complex situations, the interpolation of allegory/myth into narratives for diasporic young adults has immense potential to transform complex cultural specificities into simple forms that incorporate the values, assumptions and the worldview of the ancestral homeland. Interpolation as a transformation strategy can be an effective tool for creating transnational identities, though ethnic and cultural negotiations are complex and difficult.

The protagonists in the young adult texts reviewed in this study are able to reconnect with their cultural homelands and negotiate the various spaces they inhabit. Although they inhabit a western space, they are still able to connect with their cultural origins, which helps them to recreate that special place called "home" in any space they find themselves in. When young readers engage with texts that express this fluidity that connects people, places, spaces and times, they are able to rearticulate unfamiliar locations in a new context, revisit histories, and reconnect with their cultural roots, which is essential for ethnic identity development.

Finally, as authors, educators, editors and publishers, we have to continue to engage with cultural diversity. Books that reflect an engagement with cultural contexts open the minds of young readers and aid their development. As Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie has stated, "The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasises how we are different rather than how we are similar" (Adichie 2009). This powerful statement reaffirms that there can never be absolutes and that it is vital for

us to have access to more stories about our world told from western and non-western perspectives.

## NOTES

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