

India is developing one of the largest economies in the world, and its social structure is evolving at a surprising pace. But it's not easy for an Indian to be successful in a globalized market. The weight of tradition, original culture, family relationships and interpersonal relations is still very great. And leaving their culture of origin behind does not necessarily make their lives easier

The new Indians of the Diaspora

CULTURE

by Farian Sabahi

What do the novels *Gifted* and *A Good Indian Wife*, which were written by two women who live in the West, have in common with the film *Slumdog Millionaire*? The protagonists are all Indians who are determined to flee from the misery of the subcontinent and become successful in the globalized world. The three contemporary stories eschew exoticism to depict a reality in which tradition and modern life manage to be combined, albeit with some difficulty. And this is the difficulty the authors focus in on.

Nikita Lalwani tells the story of a gifted little girl who has a knack for mathematics, but who

is placed under great stress by her father, a university professor who would like her to shoot to the top of the academic world and is preventing her from living her adolescent life. Anne Cheriau narrates the adventures of an Indian anesthesiologist who has obtained American citizenship, lives in California and rejects his origins. He would like to marry a pretty American woman, but she refuses him (perhaps because of the color of his skin) so he ends up accepting a marriage arranged by his grandfather in India. And in the end, he discovers that arranged marriages are not so bad.

The film *Slumdog Millionaire*, on the other hand, was taken from Swarup Vikas' novel entitled *Q&A*, in which a young man who grew up in the slums of Mumbai gets rich on a TV quiz show, but is arrested because he's

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suspected of cheating. The moral: social redemption is possible but – in reality as in fiction – it does have its price.

We're women like all the others

Anne Cherian was born in Jamshedpur, India. She studied in Bombay and was awarded a master's degree in Journalism and another in Comparative Literature from Berkeley. She lives in Los Angeles and visits India from time to time. A Good Indian Wife is her first novel, published in Italian by Newton Compton. It tells the story of Indian anesthesiologist Neel and his wife Leila, who was chosen by his grandfather, and Caroline, his American lover.

"To please my readers, I chose a strong Indian woman who could handle infidelity. It's a recurrent challenge for many Americans as well; just think of Hillary Clinton, or more recently, Elizabeth Edwards", said Anne Cherian. "In the West, Indian women are often viewed as docile and weak because they accept arranged marriages. But I don't think that's true. I wanted my readers to know how much Indian women are like other women, which is why I avoided emphasizing the exotic side of my characters".

What message do you want to convey?

I want to make people understand that some immigrants, even those who are educated and successful like Neel, feel so inadequate they want to be white, and that arranged marriage are not all that strange. A good husband and a happy marriage are what all women wish for, even Caroline. As Leila said, each of us has some degree of experience with arranged marriages because when you become part of an unfamiliar family, you have to force yourself to make your marriage work.

In your novel, as well as in Nikita Lalwani's, education plays a fundamental role. Why?

There's a long tradition in India which dates back to the Ramayana and Mahabharata epochs. But India is still a relatively poor country, so not everyone

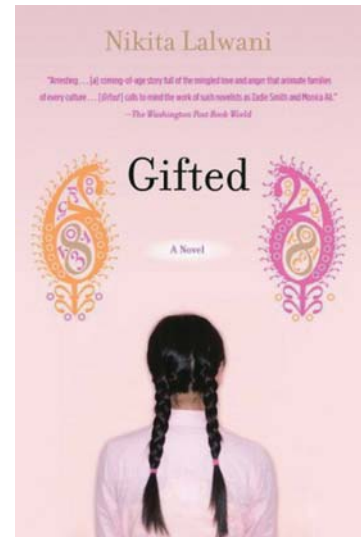
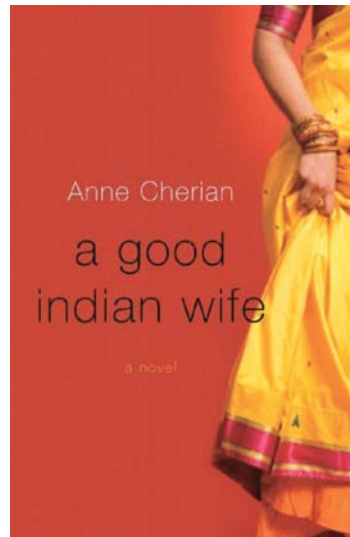


can afford an education, especially in rural areas. Also, over the past fifty years, the population has increased enormously and education – along with profession and marriage – is a way to achieve social status.

What is autobiographical in this novel?

When I write, I have to feel everything my characters feel, so, in a certain sense, my book is completely autobiographical, even though it's obviously a fictitious story that's different from my own. And yet, I'm able to write only what I know about, so both Neel and Leila belong to the Iyengar community, because those are the people I lived with when I grew up in India. Although their

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native city is never mentioned, it's a combination of the various towns where I myself lived.

Why did you leave India for the United States?

To study at the University of Berkeley, which my father had attended in the late 1940s and where my grandfather once taught. It intrigued me for academic and personal reasons. And the decision to set the novel in San Francisco was motivated by the fact that it's where I found work. It wasn't a haphazard decision, also because while I was studying at Berkeley, I met various kinds of immigrants. Some wanted to go back to India as soon as they finished school, others loved the freedom offered by America and wanted to marry someone who was white. My two leading characters are made up, but they embody the peculiarities of those persons I met. I consider Neel to be a new character who's typical of post-colonial novels. He left his culture behind, and that's why he doesn't know the typical customs and practices of arranged marriages and lets himself get trapped in one.

Have you succumbed to the temptation of an arranged marriage, too?

No! I met my husband in the United States and we married for love. However, I knew that if I hadn't made up my mind, my parents would have helped me find the right partner.

How are you bringing up your children? We have two boys, who often travel to India. They know they have Indian blood in their veins, and I make sure they're proud of their cultural heritage. For example, I remind them that Martin Luther King borrowed his ideas from Gandhi and that many religions were born in India.

India is also the cradle of hundreds of languages. What language do you speak at home?

I was brought up speaking English as my native language, and that's what we speak at home.

In the novel *A Good Indian Wife*, you can smell the aromas of Indian cuisine, and Leila uses food as a means of seduction. What kinds of food do you eat in your family?

I cook Indian dishes every week. When I had to spend a year in Japan, I brought a supply of spices with me. My children know you can eat Indian food with your hands, just as the Japanese use chopsticks.

And what about music? Is that another way to maintain your ties with India?

I didn't listen to Indian music while I was growing up. I maintain my ties through my family and friends. I grew up in India and belong to that country. Even today, I still get excited when I see a mango or a guava, but apples mean nothing to me because I didn't eat them when I was little.

A former gifted child

Nikita Lalwani was born in Kota, Rajasthan and grew up in Cardiff. She now lives in London, where she has produced documentaries for the BBC. Published in Italian by Guanda, Gifted is her first novel. It won the Desmond Elliot Prize for Fiction, and the author donated the prize of ten-thousand pounds to the Liberty Human Rights Association.

“Rumi Vasi looked at her watch. She was 10 years, 2 months, 13 days, 2 hours, 42 minutes and 6 seconds old”, wrote Anglo-Indian Nikita Lalwani on one of the first pages of her novel entitled *Gifted*. The main character is a little girl who, like the author herself, is the daughter of Indian immigrants living in Cardiff, Wales.

Rumi is a mathematical genius who has solved Rubik’s cube in 34.63 seconds. She’s been playing with numbers ever since she was little, but spurred by her father Manesh (who teaches the subject at the university), her passion soon turns into an obsession. Instead of playing with other children, she is forced to spend her afternoons in the library doing highly complex exercises.

Unbeknownst to her parents, Rumi devours novels by Lawrence and Pasternak that she finds on the shelves. She even calculates the probability of going home from school together with John Kemble (0.2%), but the odds would be further reduced if the horrendous out-of-style clothes, unlikely hairdos and enor-

mous glasses inflicted by her parents were taken into account.

Education is fundamental to Indians, both those who live in India and those in the Diaspora. “I think it’s associated with an attempt to take control of one’s own destiny”, explained Nikita Lalwani. “In India, it’s a question of numbers. Each person must find his own path amidst an enormous mass of people. In the Diaspora, however, what’s important is the desire to be treated with respect and to maintain a sense of dignity as immigrants in a host country”.

For Indian immigrants, education is a way to combat racism and protect their children from discrimination. Also, children who earn good degrees are a reason for families to be proud, although this novel shows how education can irreparably estrange children from parents who are trying to influence their offspring’s decisions. Rumi’s life is the product of her father’s ambition and her mother’s desires.

On the one hand, the father would want her to shoot straight to the top and go to Oxford at fourteen, in order to show how will can determine destiny, especially in “consumerist and superficial” English society. On the other, her quite conservative mother Shreen would like to raise the perfect Indian child who is free from Western influences and ready to get married to the husband the family would choose. Shreen, observed the author, “...is one of the many ways you can be a woman, and in her case the conflict between old and new and living in the Diaspora causes her anguish at a time when she’s trying to give her daughter a set of guide-

Slumdog Millionaire

With its first showing in Italy on December 4 at the Sottodiciotto Filmfestival – Torino Schermi Giovani, *Slumdog Millionaire* (distributed by Lucky Red, in theaters on December 5) takes former child wonder of British cinema Danny Boyle to modern India, on the heels of Swarup Vikas’s successful novel *Q&A (Le dodici domande* in Italy, published by Guanda). Boyle’s transposition, which was presented at the 2008 Toronto International Film Festival, won the People’s Choice Award and was received with an enthusiastic standing ovation. Heralded as possibly being one of the cinematographic events of the year, the film seeks to repeat the success of *Trainspotting*, the most famous film directed by Boyle, and further demonstrates the remarkable multi-faceted talent of the English director. He’s experimented with different genres in each of his feature-length films (in recent years, he’s tried horror in *28 days later*, comedy in *Millions*, and science fiction in *Sunshine*) and attained the kind of results that only specialists in each field can achieve.

There’s nothing similar to *Slumdog Millionaire* in Boyle’s preceding filmography, which deals with settings and themes that are not only brand-new each time, but also geographically and socially very far apart, thus illustrating his greatness.

Jamal is an eighteen year-old orphan who finds it hard to live, but he gets every question right in the Indian version of the TV quiz show *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, so he’s suspected of being a cheater. His story was shot mainly in the slums of Bombay (with a few episodes in Agra and at the Taj Mahal), in Dharavi (one of India’s largest shantytowns) and in Juhu. In order to capture scenes and atmospheres that are as real as possible, the film was staged in what have become mini-metropolises within a gigantic city with a population of 22 million. It was shot mainly with small, nimble, highly advanced SI-2K digital video cameras that are suited for use in tight areas. And most of the



Bucy Neech

lines to live by". Despite her mother's attempts to show her how to be an Indian girl, Rumi constantly feels out of place because of her "...clumsy gait, thick glasses, inability to bond with others, and the tangled, stringy hair which surrounded her slovenly complexion". What's more, her parents' goals clash with Rumi's desire to lead a life like that of her schoolmates, who dress and do their hair in a certain way, eat certain foods, and fall in love at a certain age. She's a special child, but would desperately like to be normal. The battle between her parents' Indian culture and the British culture in which Rumi lives is inevitable. In the end, the girl is alienated from her

family, whom she feels she's not a part of, and she categorically dissociates herself from them. It's something like what had happened to Sufiah Yusof in real life a few years before. This mathematical prodigy enrolled in Oxford when she was thirteen and ran away in 2000. When she was found by the police in Bournemouth, a town on the English Channel, she blamed her parents for putting too much pressure on her and inflicting physical and emotional abuse on her for fifteen years. The author admits that Rumi and Sufiah have similar stories, and that "...the leading character of my book is a mixture of stories that were inherited, discovered and invented".



Olycom

actors and the young boys who play the main characters when they were young were recruited in the slums. The part of Jamal as an adult was entrusted to Dev Patel, who had starred in the cult series *Skins* broadcast on Channel 4. Latika, Jamal's lost love and an incurable fan of the quiz show (which is actually very popular in India), was played by Freida Pinto, a remarkably beautiful model launched by the Elite Model Agency of India in numerous international advertising campaigns. It was her debut role as a leading character on screen. Prem, the host of the show who is unfriendly to the young contestant of questionable origin, is Anil Kapoor, one of the most famous actors in Hindi cinema and the "bad guy" in many Bollywood blockbusters. The screenplay was written by Simon Beaufoy, who wrote *The Full Monty*, one of Danny Boyle's favorite films.

Danny Boyle (born 1956 in Manchester, Great Britain) attended Thornleigh Salesian College in Bolton. After working in television for around a decade, he directed his first feature-length film called *Shallow Grave* in 1995. But his international reputation was established by his next movie called *Trainspotting* (1996), starring (like the preceding film) Ewan McGregor, with whom Boyle also shot *A Life Less Ordinary* (1997). After the failed *The Beach* (2000), Boyle again achieved success with *28 Days Later* (2002), *Millions* (2004) and *Sunshine* (2007).