

# Hyphenated identity

CONFLICTING CULTURES NOT ONLY CREATED A FAIR AMOUNT OF IDENTITY CRISIS IN YOUNG TANUJA, BUT ALSO GAVE HER THE IDEA FOR HER FIRST BOOK, *BORN CONFUSED* THAT BECAME A RUNAWAY HIT. WITH A FLAIR FOR WRITING, SINGING AND EVERYTHING LYRICAL, AUTHOR TANUJA DESAI HIDIER TALKS ABOUT WHAT MAKES HER TICK

● ARUN VENKATRAMAN

With a Vile Parle-born mother, a Gujarat-born and raised father and a brother raised in Marine Lines, singer, songwriter and author Tanuja Desai Hidier's early life was replete with Indianisms and Indian culture. What makes it stand out, is it was based in Massachusetts, not Mumbai.

While conflicting cultures may have created an identity crisis in young Tanuja, it also gave her the idea for her first book, *Born Confused*, that became a runaway hit. Her writing also owed much to the bookworm she'd been all through her growing up years. "I was always to be found with my nose in a book," recounts Tanuja. "My childhood favourites all have yellowed pages from the bathwater hitting my shoulder and then them. I had shelves upon shelves of books arranged by subject matter: Historical/factual, mystery, witch/ghost/ESP tales, and Enid Blyton."

Tanuja's debut novel *Born Confused* was a landmark success and named the Best Young Adult Book by the American Library Association. But it was the experience of writing it that gave her a bigger rush than the success itself, contends Tanuja. "At the time when I was growing up, there were no people of our particular colour anywhere. On bookshelves, in bands, on TV, even forecasting the weather. Add to that the fact my parents were the first from both sides of the family to immigrate to the USA... So one of the reasons I wrote the book was to fill this void on my childhood shelf: with an exploration of 'brown'," she says.

She also adds that at the time she wrote the book, in 2002, that particular type of cultural confusion — "the hyphenated identity diasporic sort, was likely more prevalent among those who were living outside the country of their cultural origin". "We were first generation Americans. Our parents were, in a sense, the founding mothers and fathers of this iteration of the diaspora. And as we came of age, we had to create a language to express this evolution as well, through literature, music etc." Tanuja says.

While *Born Confused* paved the way for understanding her own identity, it was her more recent work, *Bombay Blues*, that led to an in-depth exploration of it, says Tanuja.

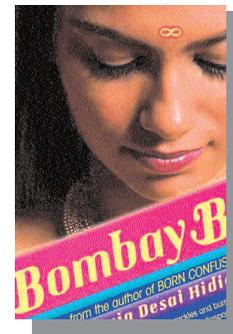
"*Bombay Blues* is my love song to this city I only lived in for couple of years as a baby but which was like a mystery in my blood. My mother and brother were born there; it was the site of my parents' courtship and wedding. *Bombay Blues* is set against the backdrop of the indie/alternative arts scene here and explores in part the dynamics between expat culture (the reverse diaspora) and 'local' culture," she explains.

Over the years, Tanuja has earned several accolades, including a James Jones Literary Prize in 1995 for her story *The Tale of a Two Hearted Tiger*, but literature is only one aspect of her exploration. She also has several successful music albums to her name including *Bombay Spleen* (which accompanied *Bombay Blues*). "For me, they are all part and parcel of the same space: storytelling. In some ways, they're even part of the same evolving story. That said, the element common to all of them that's closest to my heart is the writing process itself," she says.

With her journey having progressed so far, has Tanuja come to terms with her identity? The answer, she says, is complicated. She says, "When I was in India recently for my book/album launch, someone asked me what it felt like to be an NRI writer back in the homeland. It's funny, because I don't feel like one. Really, none of these labels speak to me. I wonder how this question —

"Where are you from?" — so linked to 'Who are you?' — will evolve with the next generation. For example, my daughters are Indo-Franco-American-Belgians born and raised in London."

So more than cultural and geographic elements, it is in writing that Tanuja has found her identity. She says, "I think writing (and I include in that music, film, music videos; any form of storytelling) will likely always be a part of what I do. It does seem natural that the next writing phase would include London, where I've lived for a number of years. And I'd love to write something for children, now that my own are old enough to read. It's difficult to say how long ideas need to gestate. Particularly since this last India trip, though, I can certainly feel a stirring. From my end, I'll just keep cupping that little spark in my hand and see what path it eventually lights up. And do my best to follow it."



**BOMBAY BLUES**  
by  
**TANUJA DESAI HIDIER**  
₹718, pp 560  
Primary and Middle School