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# Women's Voices: The Presentation of Women in the Contemporary Fiction of South Asian Women.

**Lisa Lau Ee Jia**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.**

**Department of Geography**
**University of Durham**
**September 2002**

2 1 MAY 2003

## Abstract

This thesis contains a detailed study of the genre of contemporary South Asian women's writings in English. It is still a relatively young literary subculture, and thus the majority of the works here discussed are those produced from the 1980s onwards. The study takes into account the postcolonial legacy of a culturally, racially and religiously diverse South Asia as well as the current social changes and upheavals in the region. The study encompasses the works of those writing both from within and without South Asia, noting the different social patterns emerging as a result of the geographical locations of the authors.

The research primarily investigates issues pertinent to these writers; as *women* writers, as *South Asian* writers, as *South Asian women* writers, and as South Asian women writers *writing in English*. One key issue is the negotiation by these writers between the English language and the South Asian reality. Because it is literature written by the women of a traditionally proudly patriarchal society where the position of women has mostly been one of subservience, another form of negotiation in the literature is that between the centre and the periphery, the Self and the Other. In the course of this study, it will be seen that South Asian women writers have carved out a space for themselves on the literary scene, and staked an intellectual, literary and emotional territory of their own.

The thesis focuses in particular on the representation of women, within the genre as well as in other contexts. Their literature creates images and identities of and for South Asia, South Asians, and South Asian women. The diasporic writers in particular play a vital role in the promotion and distribution of these images. The research also considers how readers respond to this literature and how publishers market the same.

# Declaration

**I declare that this thesis, which I submit for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Durham, UK, is my own work and is not substantially the same as any which has previously been submitted for a degree at this or at any other university.**

**Lisa Lau Ee Jia**
**University of Durham**
**September 2002**

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## Acknowledgements

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***I see what was, and is, and will abide***
***Still glides the stream, and shall forever glide;***
***The form remains, the function never dies;***
***While we, the brave, the mighty, and the wise,***
***We men, who in our morn of youth defied***
***The elements, must vanish; - be it so!***
***Enough if something from our hands have the power***
***To live, and act, and serve the future hour;***
***And if, as tow'rd the silent tomb we go,***
***Through love, through hope, and faith's transcendent dower,***
***We feel that we are greater than we know.***

W. Wordsworth, "Afterthought" (1820) lines 4-14

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# INTRODUCTION

***"It is presumed that the literary work is a form of communication, for it impinges upon the world, upon prevailing social structure, and upon existing literatures."***

*-Wolfgang Iser-*

## Signpost

This chapter will introduce the conceptual approach of the thesis in four sections. The first briefly observes the history and influences that post-colonialism has had on language and literature, particularly with regard to South Asia.[1] The next section turns its attention to the effects post-colonialism has had on the early literature written in English by South Asians. This leads us to a consideration of the inheritance of contemporary South Asian women writers in historical, social, and literary terms. The fourth section is perhaps the most important section, outlining as it does some of the weighty problems and obstacles that confront the South Asian women authors of this age, writing and publishing locally and globally in the twenty-first century. This chapter concludes with an outline of the structure of the thesis in its six subsequent chapters.

## Post-colonialism

To take a leaf out of Derek Gregory's book[2], we live in a "colonial present", in a world where although power has been repeatedly redefined, the powerful continue to impose on the powerless. However, with the recognition that it is a colonial present rather than a colonial past, with the understanding that subalterns are unable to articulate their position, controversy now surrounds the world information order. There is a growing concern that the production of knowledge, information, and media images are unevenly

[1] South Asia is a geographical denotation of seven countries - Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka - as well as a political construct.
[2] This volume of essays entitled The Colonial Present will be published by Blackwell Publishers.

distributed.[3] Because it is important to acknowledge this problem of representation, this research on South Asian women's literature will analyse not only the literature which is accepted as the canon and informs South Asian culture, but also who creates this literature and where from, how it is selected for publication and dissemination, and how it is read and received. "In focusing largely on literary texts, we seek to acknowledge and highlight the importance of literary works in global transcommunication and in the production of cultural representations."[4]

The political, economic, and social effects of post-colonialism are many and varied, but this research is primarily concerned with the literary impact of post-colonialism on South Asian writers, and in particular, South Asian women writers. As it has been repeatedly pointed out, the "post" in post-colonialism does not indicate a period after colonisation or after independence. Equally, colonialism does not end with the achieving of independence, and as Gregory notes, colonialism is still present to this day.

Post-colonial literature is understood to be a response or a reaction to colonisation because post-colonialism (which begins at the start of the colonisation) is understood to be a "discourse of oppositionality".[5] Post-colonial literature began long before Independence looked imminent. However, the earliest of post-colonial writers in the languages of the colonisers or imperialists generally began with a mimicry of writings by the colonisers, an attempt on the part of apprehensive new writers to associate themselves both with the culture of the ruling class as well as with the powerful, established, literary canon. However, these early literary attempts changed drastically in style, tone and ideology and soon post colonialist literature began to be associated with deconstruction.

With independence and decolonisation came the deconstruction of the notion of universality which had for so long held the colonies in its grip. Deconstruction has since

[3] Edward Said, Reflections on Exile and Other Essays (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001) 208-09.
[4] Amal Amireh, and Lisa Suhair Majaj eds., Going Global. The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers (New York: Garland, 2000) 14.
[5] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., The Post-colonial Studies Reader (London: Routledge, 1995).

been celebrated as one of the defining characteristics of post-colonial literature. Questions were raised about the centrality and canonisation of the colonisers' discourses, the authority of master narratives was challenged, new identities were proposed, and self-redefinition and re-naming sprang into prominence. According to Chinua Achebe, "The universal myth...denigrates the post-colonial text on the basis that 'European' equals 'universal'".[6] There was immense awareness of (and resentment towards) the divide between the coloniser and the colonised, the centre and the periphery, the Self and Other.

Interestingly, the rise of post-colonialism coincided with the rise of post-modernism. Simon During has outlined how post-modernism ran parallel to post-colonialism in that both modes of thought promoted the decentering of narrative and discourse, emphasised the need to move away from the notion of the universality of the European culture and thought, and used similar tools in the "deconstruction of the master's house".[7] During pointed out that there was danger in such a parallel, "The concept of post-modernity has been pointed out in terms which more or less intentionally wipe out the possibility of post-colonial identity."[8] The reason for this as During explained, was that post-modernism regarded the Other as never being able to speak for itself as the Other, and moreover, post-modern thought refused to turn the Other into the Same. The implications of post-modernism on writing strategies was therefore not conducive to the work of representation in literary form which is an important part of the post-colonial response in writing. Post-modern concepts undermined the post-colonialist struggle, which is precisely the struggle to articulate the Other, and in many cases, to articulate the Other in the imperial language.

Given the intention or mission of articulating the Other, post-colonial literature was unsurprisingly rife with undercurrents of tension; there was the tension of uncertainty of authenticity, the tension of writing as representatives, the tension involved in the creation of

[6] Ibid.
[7] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour eds., Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua. (New York: Kitchen Table, 1983).
[8] Simon During, "Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today." eds., Ashcroft, The Post-colonial Studies Reader 125.

new definitions of nationalism. Perhaps the sum total of all these tensions resulted in the tension of ambiguity of identity. Emerging authors frequently found their loyalties, patriotism, understanding, and representation of their culture questioned or even challenged, whatever the literary quality of their work.

In the words of Edward Said, "imperialism is an act of geographical violence."[9] Said went on to note that a cultural and ideological war was waged against imperialism, and cultural resistance and literary deconstruction were weapons in this war. It is of tremendous interest to this research to examine how these weapons were wielded. Broadly speaking, literary decolonisation and decentering took two forms – subversion and rejection. The latter form was fairly straightforward. It rejected the reality and perceptions of the coloniser, attempted to reject the language and labels of the coloniser, and sought a cultural purity, free of the "contamination" of imperialism and colonisation. For instance, Ngugi wa Thiong'o sought to disassociate Kenyan languages (such as Gikuyu) from negative connotations and to restore them to a place of significance in Kenyan society. Thiong'o was an advocate of the rebuilding of national identity through the use of the mother tongue and an outright rejection of the coloniser's language in order to rediscover the displaced original identity, an identity displaced by the imposition of an alien language. It was a rejection not only of the rhetoric and implicit power of language, but also of the power behind language.[10] A choice of language has been seen to be a choice of identity.

However, this search for cultural purity, the attempt to uncover in the past an intact heritage from which an identity could be derived for the present and future, seemed to the majority of writers a nostalgic and impractical exercise. The majority of writers acknowledged the hybridity of their identity, the impossibility of binary categories and monolithic models, and contended that the influences of post-colonialism were undeniable and irreversible. The majority of writers not only recognised the interwoven and international influences acting upon them, but also welcomed this hybridity as a strength,

[9] Edward Said, Culture and Imperialism (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993).
[10] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "The Language of African Literature." eds., Ashcroft, The Post-colonial Studies Reader 285-90.

welcoming their mixed identities as an enrichment and expansion of horizons. The process of colonisation was understood as being a two way process, "The postcolonial predicament.....constituted by an interconnected series of religious, political and social dilemmas that are global in their scope."[11] Moreover, far from outright rejection of the colonisers' language, a command and mastery over the coloniser's language was also regarded as an advantage, an opening of avenues and opportunities.

The resistance of post-colonial writers to the imperial powers took the form of subversion. Language has ever been the "fundamental site of struggle"[12] and the tools of subversion were to be found in the use of language – the coloniser's language. Tools of subversion included mimicry and parody, and as Bhabha notes, "To the extent to which discourse is a form of defensive warfare, then mimicry marks those moments of civil disobedience....."[13]

Post-colonialist writers sought a way to use the language of the colonisers without necessarily imparting the traditions and ideologies of the West. For the elite who had been educated in the language of the coloniser, there was the double edged situation of being fluent enough to "write back to the empire", while seeking to display nationalistic loyalties and reconstruct ethnic identities through the use of the coloniser's language. As Gairola had pointed out, it is a great irony that "readers and critics alike must access and interact with the English Language, the imperial tongue of many post colonial nations, to write about its hegemonizing force on a global level."[14] However, a mastery over the coloniser's language affords writers the power to rewrite history, to re-tell tales, to de-mythify.

Colonialist writing has been deemed exploitative literature because of its habitual representation of a world which is chaotic, uncivilised and even evil, until domesticated by

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[11] Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter Van der Veer, eds., Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament (New Delhi: Oxford UP,1994) 3.
[12] Ashcroft.
[13] Homi Bhabha, "Signs taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi." Critical Inquiry 12 (1985): 144-65.
[14] Rahul Krishna Gairola, "Western Experience: Education and 'Third World Women' in the Fictions of Tsitsi Dangarembga and Meena Alexandra." Jouvert Online. 6 Feb. 2001.

Europeans or Western civilisations.[15] This polarisation has since been consistently refuted and eroded as far as possible by deconstruction. It would be useful to conclude this section with a brief analysis of some of the successful techniques of deconstruction and reconstruction in literary works. A celebrated example of counter discursive writing is Jean Rhys' novella, Wide Sargasso Sea. This work constitutes a retelling of an established novel in the canon of English Literature.

Rhys' novella is a post-colonialist text in direct reaction to Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre. Jane Eyre was told from the point of view of an English governess who eventually married her employer, Mr Rochester, when he was finally free from his Creole wife, Bertha, at her death. Wide Sargasso Sea tells the same tale from Bertha's point of view and does not exonerate Mr Rochester from moral blame. This deconstruction involves not only a rewriting, but also a re-reading. It inverts the concept of the bestial native (although white Creoles were regarded more as outcasts than natives in their land), and portrays the victimisation of the native at the hands of the imperialist and the imperialist culture. Significantly, Rhys also re-names her heroine (whom we first met in Jane Eyre as Bertha), by recounting that Bertha was the name imposed on Antoinette by her English husband, Mr Rochester. There is some slight irony in this because although the idea of re-naming had heretofore been the domain of the imperialists, (language exerting its power over identity and reality), it is actually Rhys who re-names Charlotte Bronte's heroine, displaying yet another strategy of subversion.

## The Effect of Post-colonialism on South Asian Literature

In their attempt to express cultures and circumstances in a language alien to their country, writers have found themselves in a process of negotiation. Post-colonial texts have long been engaged in the negotiation of literary space between the textual, written language, and the language of their experiences and lives. As Mukherjee explained in the case of Indian writers writing in English, "The Indo-Anglian novelist thus faces a curious

[15] Abdul E. Jan Mohammed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory." Eds., Ashcroft, The Post-colonial

predicament. He [sic] is using the language and form of the English novelist, but he has to operate within a totally different frame of reference."[16] This predicament has led to many experimental forms of writings, engaged on this process of negotiation. The experiments have been in the form of direct translation of proverbs, in the employment of clichés, in resorting to archaic English, and in the deliberate inclusion of non-English words, just to name a few. Not all of these experiments have been successful, but there were some authors who managed to find a voice both authentic and multi-cultural.[17]

In the post-colonial search for an authentic voice, the submerged language surfaced for attention, a language which had been derided and dismissed as a dialect, or inferior, or simply as the language of the uneducated. Edward Kamau Brathwaite argued for the concept of "nation language", a term which sought to uphold the dignity of a language which had been evolved to express very different aspects and experiences of cultures and lifestyles, attempting to distance itself from derogatory connotations.[18] For example, just as African Americans have evolved a new type of English through their particular usage and variation of English, which has come to be called 'Ebonics', it is also the case that on the Indian subcontinent, there is also a particular usage of English peculiar to the people of this region. This new English has occasionally been known by the unofficial and unlovely title, "Hinglish".[19]

Unlike in a number of other ex-colonies, English was not rejected as a medium of communication to any great extent in the Indian Sub-continent. South Asian English readers were introduced to a new genre when they encountered the novel, and this form was

Studies Reader 18.

[16] Meenakshi Mukherjee, The Twice Born Fiction. Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English (New Delhi: Heinemann Educational, 1971) 29.

[17] Please refer to Chapter 3, Notions of Identity, pg 141, for further discussion on notions of tradition and modernity within the postcolonial context.

[18] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, "Nation Language." History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry (London: Beacon, 1984).

[19] This term, which combines the words "Hindi" and "English" is perhaps unrepresentative as many non-Hindi speakers in South Asia have also contributed to the negotiating of the types of English which are currently used in South Asia.

subsequently adopted for use in bhasha.[20] The earliest Indian novels which were written in bhasha were written in Bengali. Bengal was in fact the first region to produce literature in English written by South Asians, which is unsurprising given the fact that Bengal was one of the first regions in India to encounter British influence. For the early Indian novelists writing in English, it was a case of writing in a language which was not their first language, and perhaps not even the natural expression of these writers. English was without doubt the language of the elite and of the ruling classes, ".....English is the asset enjoyed by the English-speaking upper classes and the lack of it is a handicap suffered by the rest, traditionally known as the masses. It has thus constituted the most visible divide between the ruling classes and the ruled."[21] Writing in English was clearly politically charged with nuances, and although the status of English in South Asia has changed over time, writing in English still continues to be a point of provocation for some, and is still regarded as politically loaded.

The first experiments of Indians writing novels in English were not deemed to be notably successful. Some early attempts by Indo-Anglian novelists were received with scepticism and even pessimism,

> "To be original in an acquired language is hardly feasible."[22] It was observed by an early Bengali novelist who wrote both in Bengali and in English, that ".....we ourselves created another [obstacle] by our attitude towards writing in English. As soon as we began to employ it for other ends than the utilitarian, we became ambitious in the wrong way, and what was worse, self-conscious in a very callow fashion. To write fine English became a more important end with us than communication."[23]

[20] Bhasha refers to the modern languages of India other than English. This generic term is borrowed for usage from G.N.Devy, After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1993).
[21] Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, The Lie of the Land. English Literary Studies in India (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992) 15.
[22] Quote from Aurobindo Ghosh. Taken from Meenakshi Mukherjee, The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2000) 34.
[23] Nirad Chaudhuri, The Eye of the Beholder. Indian Writing in English ed. Maggie Butcher. (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1983) 14.

However, this is not the sole reason that Indian novels in English in the nineteenth century and in the early part of the twentieth century have largely gone unnoticed and have fallen into relative obscurity.

Meenakshi Mukherjee is one of the select few critics to have delved deeply into the history of the development of literature written in English by Indians. In The Perishable Empire, Mukherjee argues that the reason for the lack of recognition for early Indian English novels was not because of inferior quality nor even because there were few written, but primarily because they were not canonised and were thus "denied literary, historical and even archival value".[24] Mukherjee also notes that another stumbling block for these Indian writers beginning to write in English was that they were unsure as to who would constitute their audience. It had, of course, to be an English-reading audience, but the writer could not be sure where his/her readers would be situated geographically, and consequently, what their cultural experiences may have been. It would therefore be difficult for a writer to know/guess which images, symbols, nuances, and cultural and linguistic codes would be comprehensible and meaningful to his/her readers.

South Asian writers had perforce from the very beginning, to write with an eye on their potential audience, a diverse audience. This in turn affected their choice of form and content. The reception to the literature which plays a role in the shaping of the literature should not be underestimated and will be given due attention in the thesis. Moreover, as Said points out, there are "reverse flows" taking place (from periphery to centre as much as vice versa). As Amireh and Majaj argue, "in the process of moving across national/cultural boundaries, [Third World Women's texts] are transformed by the reception context, their meanings reproduced and reshaped to fit local agendas."[25] This leads to what Said calls the politics of exclusion and inclusion, leading to the potential problem of South Asian women's literature being pigeonholed and localised.

[24] Mukherjee, Perishable Empire 13.
[25] Amireh 3.

Furthermore, writing in English was quite an obstacle for a South Asian writer because this meant the writer could not rely on or take for granted certain degrees of common understanding. Since English was the language of the colonisers, it does not lend itself to any regional identity. The consequence of a lack of regional identity meant that the Indian writer in English, for example, would be inclined to stress issues which were broad enough to be considered Indian (as opposed to being considered Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi, etc) or else select themes which they hoped would carry the same validity anywhere in India. However, such themes are few, and given the many regional variations in customs, social practices, values, and social structures across India and indeed, across South Asia, this solution was not an adequate one. The problem of regional differences is exacerbated by the fact that contemporary South Asian writers are not necessarily based in South Asia and, in fact, include a large number of diasporic writers. Many of these diasporic authors also seek to affiliate themselves to the genre of South Asian literature in English. It will be discussed further on in the thesis how their success in this endeavour has somewhat overwhelmed the literary subculture.

Mukherjee has contended that such fears on the part of Indo-Anglian writers may lead them to write with the dangerous tendency to homogenisation and to "an essentializing of India, a certain flattening out of the complicated and conflicting contours....."[26] The problem is augmented by the fact that writers and readers may not have experienced similar worlds nor yet similar circumstances and cultures. Where literary connotations and linguistic nuances are usually used to convey, suggest and represent, literature in English by South Asians had to "explain rather than imply"[27] and thus loses the possibility of containing nuances of meanings in details of dress, mannerism, gestures, and speech patterns.

Nevertheless, despite the unpromising beginning and the many problems faced by post-colonial South Asian writers who wished to write in English, this branch of literature has managed not only to thrive, but to flourish. There were many advantages to writing in

[26] Mukherjee, Perishable Empire 170.
[27] Mukherjee, Twice Born 25.

English. English is the language which united a South Asia of many languages, which previously had no single unifying language. It was also a language of regional neutrality. Braj B. Kachru made the case for the importance of English as a 'neutral' language in the sense that it is a language unburdened with local religious and ethnic markers although it carries the social implications of an external language.[28] It therefore could be used for referential meaning without the fear of trailing cultural connotations in its wake. "Lexicalization from English is particularly preferred in the contexts of kinship, taboo items, science and technology, or in discussing sex organs and death."[29]

In the Indian Sub-continent, English was so well integrated and so readily adopted that it has been "Indianised". From being regarded as a foreign and alien language, English has been widely accepted as one of the languages of South Asia. It has long since been integrated into the culture and has subsequently been evolving in order to cope with a South Asian reality and set of values. Be that as it may, the usage of English in South Asia continues to be highly politicised. As has already been mentioned earlier in this section, English continues to be the language of the elite. The usage of English may be widespread in the Indian-subcontinent, but it is by no means easily accessible to the non-urban, lower-class majority. Nevertheless, English undeniably has a special position and role in South Asia. In Salman Rushdie's view, "English has become an Indian language."[30] In fact, as the Indian author Padmanabhan observed, like herself, there are "Indian citizens who speak no Indian language other than English."[31] However, Mishra cautions that "like the phenomenon of modernity itself, English possesses a double edged sword in India [and in South Asia] – possessing the potential for a liberatory future while at present creating and abetting the production and reproduction of a hierarchical world."[32]

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[28] Braj B. Kachru, The Alchemy of English: The Spread, Functions and Models of Non-Native Englishes (Oxford: Pergamon, 1986).
[29] Ibid.
[30] Salman Rushdie, "India and World Literature." Aug. 1979. Frontline. Online. 9 Feb. 2000.
[31] Manjula Padmanabhan, "Marginalia." 14 Jan. 2002. The Week Online. 12 Apr. 2002.
[32] Pramod K. Mishra, "English Language, Postcolonial Subjectivity, and Globalisation in India." Ariel 31.1-2 (2000): 383-410.

Although English may be regarded as having become an Indian language and is also widely used in the other South Asian countries, South Asian writers continue to find that this recurring question unfailingly posed to them: "Why write in English?" There are three obvious reasons as to why contemporary South Asian writers choose to write in English. Firstly, it may simply be a personal preference. This implies an ease and familiarity with the language, and indeed, some of the authors consider English as much their language as any of the other languages of the subcontinent. As mentioned above, some South Asian writers of the elite classes may even consider English as their first language. Undoubtedly, having been part of the British Empire provides a large part of the answer, enabling as it did access to education in English (for the elite) and the widespread use of English on the subcontinent. The controversy exists in South Asia over the writing of English novels and short stories by South Asian writers because these writers have made a conscious choice to write and express themselves in English. To those who oppose their use of English, the English language is still regarded as the language of the colonisers, a continuing threat to their own languages and mother tongues, as well as a language which excludes the majority of the population who have no access to being educated in this language.

Secondly, the neutrality of English as a language – as mentioned above – affords the writer a certain degree of freedom which his or her mother tongue does not. "I have this favourite thesis that of the 1001 taboos, the greatest inhibiting factor for a woman writer is her mother tongue."[33] For diasporic writers, it may just be easier to write of their diasporic experiences in English rather than in bhasha. The confusion of identities and the tugs of loyalties may be more easily expressed and discussed with the help of the neutrality of the English language.

This neutrality which offers authorial freedom also offers South Asian women writers the relative freedom to portray South Asia in a negative light. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for South Asian writers to be taken to task for writing novels/stories deemed to be damaging to the image of their society. This may be most easily understood in a

diasporic context where as Bharati Mukherjee had pointed out, there are those who are anxious to present a certain image in the eyes of the Western world. However, as Arundhati Roy discovered, even an Indian writer in India could find herself confronted with the accusation of debasing her society. In India, Roy is perceived to have portrayed India negatively to the world. Despite being celebrated by the Western literary world, Roy had faced charges of obscenity and in India, The God of Small Things provoked a strong angry backlash against the author. In an interview, Roy herself claimed that "The vernacular press in India dealt with this [her novel] with viciousness."[34] It is a matter for conjecture whether or not it would have been even more severely dealt with if Roy had written in Malayalam (her native tongue), although judging by the local reception, this surmise would not be too far-fetched.

Generally speaking, physical accessibility of texts is a pre-requisite to an international readership. By writing in English, it is possible for South Asian writers to reach a larger audience than otherwise likely. (Even recourse to translation may not permit a work to be quite as accessible.) This third reason South Asian writers may have for choosing to make English their medium of communication may well be a partly commercial one.

To a very large extent, South Asian literature in English is published by Western and international publishers; for example, Virago, Random House, Women's Press, Doubleday, Harper-Collins, Vintage, Faber & Faber. (Penguin is an example of a publishing house which also has branches in South Asia.) Publishing houses in the South Asian region itself are generally unable to bid as highly as the international publishing houses for publication rights.[35] This would certainly be an incentive to some writers to be published by international publishers, and thus, to write in English. However, this is not to

[33] Nabaneeta Dev Sen, "Man, Woman and Fiction." Women in Fiction and Fiction by Women. eds., C. D. Narasimhaiah and C. N. Srinath. (Mysore: Mysore-Dhvunyaloka, 1986).
[34] Prakitri Pryce, "Roy Runs Riot." Sunday Chronicle 5 October 1997.
[35] A classic example of this is Arundhati Roy's Booker Prize winning debut novel, which she estimated would have received an advance of approximately 5000 rupees from an Indian publisher, and the rights for which Random House eventually paid Roy the sum of half a million pounds, or 35 million rupees. (Roy chose Random House over another publishing house which offered her $150,000 more.)

say that any and all South Asian writers who publish abroad instantly shoot to fame and wealth – indeed, only a very small proportion of writers whose books are published receive global attention, are widely sold and read, translated into other languages, and which eventually become immensely profitable.

Apart from these three reasons discussed above, there could be any number of other reasons that encourage South Asian women writers to write in English. This choice does, however, throw open a number of questions such as how South Asian women writers reconcile their experiences of South Asia with expressing this set of experiences in a Western language; how sentiments and situations are to be reflected and recorded accurately without exoticisation; and how the poorer sections of society are to be portrayed and represented in a language which they do not even comprehend. Nevertheless, even with all these potential pitfalls and stumbling blocks, more and more South Asian women are writing literature in English.

With the wide spread usage of English in the region, South Asian writing in English has become a recognised branch of literature, not only in South Asia, but also in the Western world. Before concluding this section, it is of interest to turn our attention to the heated debate over just what this new and increasingly popular genre ought to be called. Suggestions of Post-colonial Literature, Commonwealth Literature, Indo-Anglian Literature, Anglo-Indian Literature, Indic Fiction, Indian-English Literature, India-English Literature, and a number of other names, have one and all had their advocates and adversaries, mostly on account of how to accurately represent this literature without coming under the undesirable shadow of colonisation.

Amitav Ghosh, for example, strongly objected to the classification of his work under the term "Commonwealth Literature" because he said it "anchors an area of contemporary writing not within the realities of the present day, nor within the possibilities of the future, but rather within a disputed aspect of the past.....as a literary or cultural grouping, however, it seems to me that "the Commonwealth" can only be a

misnomer.....”[36] Iyengar had bestowed the term “Indo-Anglian literature” on original creative writing in English by Indians, and this term has been used by Mukherjee and others, but it fails to include the literary output from the other South Asian countries other than India. To call it ‘literature written in English’ would undoubtedly circumvent the debatable political-incorrectness of the other names, but this is unfortunately an unwieldy title. I have therefore chosen to refer to it as South Asian Literature. This name, however, is also not without its pitfalls. Already ‘Literature in English’ from India has dominated this research, due to the inaccessibility or shortage of material from Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The dominance of the research by Indian women writers is a fairly accurate reflection of their domination of the literary scene.

## The Inheritance of Contemporary South Asian Women Writers

“Today a woman writing is a woman fighting. For truth, for honesty, freedom, even if not for equality.”[37] For South Asian women writing today, this may well still be true, since historically, writing in English was a remarkable phenomenon because “knowledge of English was a gender-specific skill”.[38] This was true of nineteenth century India because women’s education, although promoted, was provided in bhasha. It is still partially true today and it continues to be the case that it is still the privileged minority of South Asian women who have access to education in English. Literature in English by South Asians was thus pioneered exclusively by the men.

For decades, male literary giants of South Asian origin had quite eclipsed the modest contributions of the women writers. Authors such as V.S. Naipaul, R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, and others were globally celebrated, but comparatively speaking, the women writers of South Asian were largely unknown. South Asian Literature written in English had consisted of a largely male-dominated canon up till the 1960s and 1970s, when a very few, but fairly distinctive women’s voices began to make themselves heard. Anita

[36] Amitav Ghosh, “Amitav Ghosh & the 2001 Commonwealth Writers Prize. Tracking the Controversy.” 18 Mar. 2001. AmitavGhosh.Com Online. 20 Mar. 2001.
[37] Dev Sen.

Desai, Attia Hosain, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, and several others began to write and publish novels which displayed a remarkable mastery of the English language, written with fluency and sophistication, expressing their ideas in polished, standard, received English. Their subject matter was not the subject matter of their male counterparts, nor yet of their colonisers, but of issues which they felt were pertinent to them as women, as South Asian women, and as South Asian women writers.

South Asian women writers have contributed significantly to the evolution of English in South Asian Literature. Undoubtedly, the male pioneers of South Asian Literature have also made huge contributions to the development of this young branch of literature, but South Asian women are in the unique position of having been "doubly colonised". Their contributions are particularly valuable as contributions from those who have twice been forced into the role as "the Other", first as the colonised, and then as women. Having been 'doubly Othered', South Asian women writers are therefore inclined to avail themselves of the literary strategies of subversion, deconstruction, and reconstruction in order to break their silence, retell tales, and recount their point of view. "At every stage, the woman writer had to negotiate patriarchy in complex and often circuitous ways."[39]

As mentioned above, the women writers of the 1960s and 1970s (and these were few and far between), wrote in standard English, displaying an ease and familiarity with the language, but were relatively conventional and un-experimental in style. Their concerns were largely women's concerns (in terms of home spaces, domestic social circles, and private identities), but their stories were generally set against a larger background. The pioneering South Asian women writers were acutely aware of the political climate and on-going political upheavals, especially those brought about as a result of Partition. In their novels, they reflected these changes in the abruptly and drastically changed social circumstances for the women. For instance, Attia Hosain's 1961 novel, Sunlight on a

[38] Mukherjee, Perishable Empire 14.
[39] Indira Chowdhury, "Mothering in the Time of Motherlessness." Modern Critical Theory Group 21.3 (1998): 308-22.

Broken Column, depicts a young Muslim girl emerging from the state of "purdah" and growing up with the household tensions of impending Partition. Hosain's protagonist had to negotiate her way through the clash of lifestyles offered to her as well as the clash of value systems. The juxtapositioning of the modern with the traditional is a theme which continues to hold centre stage in the contemporary novels of South Asian women published today.

Chatterjee notes there has been a marked shift in theme and concern in the content and material of South Asian women writers, "The novel by Indian women writers makes an extremely significant leap forward as 1970 rolled around: the self...becomes in the novels between 1971-1980, the sole preoccupation of the writer."[40] No longer is the wider background of political issues uppermost in their minds – their writings have turned to the analysis of women's needs, thoughts, and thought patterns. The women writers are the products of post-colonialism, of Independence, and of their predecessors, but they are women more concerned with personal matters of identity, articulation, societal roles, limitations, expectations and traditions, than the concept of nationhood or regional politics. Rege points to a troubled relationship between (Indian) women and nation, and notes that there is a "withdrawal from the public sphere" in the post-independence Indian novels.[41] (Sri Lankan women writers such as Jean Arasanayagam are the exception and do continue to portray their novels against the wider political background of the civil war and the threat of the terrorists, taking into careful account the influences of politics on the daily lives of ordinary people.)

Anita Desai was one of the first of this cohort of novelists to produce detailed depictions of the internal workings of the minds of South Asian women, a concern which had heretofore been overlooked by many writers. Desai's Cry The Peacock, first published in 1980, was a landmark novel with its careful construction of the real and imagined fears and horrors which plagued Maya[42], the protagonist. It drew attention to the mental world of

[40] Chandra Chatterjee, The World Within. A Study of Novels in English by Indian Women (1950-1980) (New Delhi: Radha, 1996).
[41] Josna Rege, "Codes in Conflict: Post-independence Alienation in Anita Desai's Early Novels." Journal of Gender Studies 5.3 (1996): 317-28.
[42] The name 'Maya' could mean 'illusion'.

South Asian women and was influential in setting the precedent for the next two decades of South Asian women's literature. "The serious Indo-Anglian novelist no longer seems interested in simply documenting or hopefully improving the country, but in trying to depict the individual's groping towards self-realisation."[43]

This shift in concerns is somewhat in keeping with the phases of development of a literary subculture as outlined by Elaine Showalter.[44] Showalter had outlined three phases of developing literatures, but it would be unsuitable to view the effects of postcoloniality on South Asian writers simply as chronological states. Postcoloniality is an inescapable legacy rather than any particular stage in a development of writing, and although Showalter's outline is of some use in tracing patterns of literary developments, the phases she marks out are inclined to be characteristics or propensities rather than stages, where South Asian women's writings are concerned.

The first phase was what Showalter called a 'feminine phase', where women writers wrote portraying their protagonists as heroines and ideal women, characters who were prepared to endlessly suffer, sacrifice, and endure for some greater good of their families or communities. One example of such a heroine would be Kamala Markandaya's Rukmani in Nectar in a Sieve (1956), which portrayed a village woman living on the border of extreme poverty and starvation, but remaining a nurturing mother and wife, working tirelessly for the good of her family. Such heroines, however, are relatively rare in South Asian women's writing. Most self-sacrificing characters are usually secondary characters, indicating that although the writers do reflect the existence and expectations of such women in the tapestry of their social circle, it is not such characters whom they would choose to be their protagonists or heroines.

The second stage was the 'feminist phase', where the emphasis would be on the protest against dominance, the patriarchal order, the existing system of values, and on the

[43] Mukherjee, Twice Born 23.
[44] Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing (Princeton N.J.: Princeton UP, 1977).

demand for more status, recognition, freedom, and rights for women. Linda Hutcheon drew attention to the way feminism points to the underlying patriarchal inclinations of both post-modernist and post-colonialist thought.[45] In this phase, women writers did begin to challenge the hidden or covert authorities which had governed them for centuries. This feminist phase was indeed taken up strongly and reflectively by a large number of South Asian women writers; Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Rama Mehta just to name but a few. (Some well-known figures like Namita Gokhale and Shoba De have been seen to be taking this approach to the extent of exploiting the genre. Sharad Srivastava has even identified some of their writings as 'aberrations' to the literature.[46])

In this important second phase of development, South Asian novelists soon found that their novels must differ from the traditions of the Western novel which had up till then, been their model. Traditionally, Western novels portray protagonists who are able to control their lives and destinies, who grow and develop as individuals. Most South Asians, however, have been bound to the destinies they were born to, have little autonomous choice in marriage partners, place of abode, and career. The rights of the individual are customarily sacrificed for the good of the family or community, and the individual is seen as part of a whole, and not an autonomous entity. Duty is prioritised over personal fulfilment, and this aspect of a South Asian reality had to be incorporated into the genre.

However, South Asian reality is not a static situation but one which shifts and changes. In India for example, economic forces have created a growing middle class and consequently, many commercial products are now targeted particularly at urban women customers. As Patricia Jeffrey explains,

> "Women are being wooed as privileged consumers, urged to spend money on themselves for an endless flow of nondurable goods that undercut the traditional domestic values of the self-effacing woman who lives not for herself but for her family. A rather aggressive new consumerist individualism is generated, and a new identity fashioned. Significantly, the new Hindu upper-caste, upper-class woman

[45] Linda Hutcheon, "Circling the Downspout of Empire." eds., Ashcroft, The Post-colonial Studies Reader 130-36.

[46] Sharad Srivastava, The 'New' Woman in Indian English Fiction (New Delhi: Creative, 1996).

> now has the ability to respond independently to the seductive calls of the advertising culture, since she is often educated and employed."[47]

This trend does permeate the contemporary novels of South Asian women, and notably, the contemporary writings do portray financially independent middle-class women who are torn between an ingrained sense of loyalty to family and a growing desire to fulfil their own desires because they have the economic power to do so.[48] Thapan opines that such women are in an "ambivalent state....simultaneously a part of the tradition, rituals and customary practices, and yet she experiences the more contemporary world through both the education she receives, the diverse images and texts presented by the visual and print media and the peer culture she is part of."[49] Thus these privileged women find themselves in a transitory, paradoxical position, a position where they have to create their own answers because traditional norms appear to confuse more than clarify.

This situation brings the two forces of tradition and modernity into conflict once more and much of South Asians women's literature describes and reflects the social and cultural balancing act performed by the middle class South Asian women of today. It is an especially delicate balance because South Asian women are still expected to be keepers of their cultures, even as they wish to respond to the opportunities to escape some of the traditional restrictions long imposed on them by that same culture they are upholding, preserving and defending. The resultant tension from the pull of these two forces is a recurrent topic in the diasporic writings where the binaries of east and west are set up to correspond to tradition and modernity, respectively. In the writings of women in South Asia, these two forces are more likely to be presented as tradition versus the changing times. There is a definite difference in the handling of similar themes from the writers writing in South Asia and those writing from beyond. This difference in approach, subject matter, and attitude will be the focus of more analysis in the course of the thesis.

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[47] Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu, eds., Appropriating Gender. Women's Activism and Politicised Religion in South Asia (New York: Routledge, 1998) 103.

[48] A example of a novel which has this issue as its central theme is Anita Nair's Ladies Coupe, published in 2002.

[49] Meenakshi Thapan, "Adolescent, Embodiment and Gender Identity in Contemporary India: Elite Women in a Changing Society." Women's Studies International Forum 24.2 (2001): 359-71.

The third and last phase is that of self-discovery, the quest for freedom now being turned inwards. (Showalter had explained that the phases can and do overlap.) The works of South Asian women writers follow this pattern and the novels are increasingly introspective, open-ended, and questioning. Issues are no longer black and white, answers are neither stereotypical nor easy to find, and there are fewer obvious villains. Men are no longer seen as the enemy, but the society, the norms, the customs and traditions, continue to be regarded as fettering or at least hampering the growth and development of women. A new order seems to be emerging with the rapid changes of women's' economic circumstances, the disintegration of large joint-families, and the migration from rural to urban areas. Female protagonists are seen to be in search of self-fulfilment, order, meaning and security amidst the confusions and uncertainties of their new conditions. Many of the women writers have also shown increasing interest and concern with their maternal lineage and the significance of the roles played by the female members of their families. (This may well have been in part due to the rise of feminism in South Asia. This is also the literary trend of emerging women writers, such as the African-American women writers who make conscious and concerted efforts to trace their maternal ancestry.[50])

With the rise of the middle class, South Asian women writers are no longer solely from the elite. Moreover, with the increasing number of diasporic South Asian women writers, there has been another shift in themes and concerns of the literature, and also in the writing styles. For many diasporic writers, English could well be their first language, and the writers of the 1980s and 1990s have been notably far bolder and more experimental in both style and form, and in their use of English. Claiming English as their mother tongues, writers like Arundhati Roy[51] have found new and innovative ways of using the language to signify and code. Others, like Githa Hariharan[52], have exploited the flexibility of the novel form to manipulate time and chronology, deconstruct legends and myths, and re-tell tales.

[50] An early example of this would be Alice Walker's In Search of Our Mother's Gardens.
[51] Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things (London: Flamingo-Harper Collins, 1997).
[52] Githa Hariharan, The Thousand Faces of Night (London: Women's Press, 1996).

To briefly recapitulate, the first stage of post-colonial writing was a writing *back* to the empire, a process of deconstructing the authority of the colonisers and creating a new identity. The next phase was a writing *from* the Empire, as more and more diasporic writers travelled or migrated to various countries and cities of their ex-colonisers, and appropriating the language, wrote from beyond their home countries. South Asian women writers of today writing from within their home countries neither *write back to* nor *from* the Empire – they appear to write with a considerable degree of *disregard for* the Empire. This then, is their inheritance. As Naipaul had said, "…..this thing about colonialism. This thing about gender oppression, the word oppression wearies me. I don't know why, I think it is because banality irritates me."[53] South Asian writers of this age genuinely do not appear to perceive themselves as being constricted by or under the shadow of colonialism. These writers have inherited the legacy of post-colonial literature without feeling obliged to perform the ritual genuflection at the altar of post-colonialism. However, as Derek Gregory reminds us, we live in a colonial present rather than a colonial past. South Asian women writers may feel they are no longer under the shadow of a British Raj, but the effects of cultural colonisation have yet to be fully reckoned with.

It is also of interest to note that the *mutuality* of the process of post-colonialism has been more noticeable with the increased exchange of influences between the East and the West. (As much as India may be Westernised, the Western world is also being Indianised.[54]) "It is simplistic to imagine an active First World unilaterally forcing its products on a passive Third World…..there are powerful reverse currents as a number of Third World Countries (Mexico, Brazil, India, Egypt) dominate their own markets and even become cultural exporters."[55]

South Asian writers of today find themselves at a very crucial juncture in time. Firstly, there is the negotiable identity of what it means to be Indian (for Indian writers), a concept which is still hybrid, nebulous, regionally influenced, and politically rather than

[53] V.S. Naipaul, "Naipaul's Anger at Indian Writers." 22 Feb. 2002. BBC Online. 23 Feb. 2002.
[54] An example of this Indianisation of the West is the current fashionability of Bollywood.

socially constructed. (Many Indians identify themselves by region rather than as Indians, and may even view other Indians as foreign.) The problem of identity is even more thorny and tangled for the diasporic South Asians. Next, there is the constant charge of being under the influence of cosmopolitanism, of rejecting the local or ethnic culture for Eurocentric, Americanised or Western ideals, and perhaps consequently, prioritising the needs of individual over that of the community. There is also tension over the choice of language one writes in, and the exposure of the internal problems of South Asia to Western and global scrutiny. For South Asian women writers, the negotiation is not only with language, but also a negotiation of a space for women writers, to write, rewrite, re-define, re-name, and re-invent, in a traditionally and proudly patriarchal society and culture. "Living as we did – on the edge – we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from outside and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the centre as well as the margin. We understood both….."[56]

## Problems with the Inheritance

It has often been said that although there has been a rapid increase in the number of South Asian women writers in the last two decades, there has been a notable shortage of serious literary criticism dealing with this increase. This shortage of academic attention suggests that this literature is still beyond the periphery of mainstream literature. Another possible reason for this shortage is that the study of South Asian literature involves the problem of defining what constitutes South Asian and what does not. Even the term "Indian" is becoming increasingly complex in definition. As Rushdie put it, "The word 'Indian' is getting to be a pretty scattered concept. Indian writers in England include political exiles, first-generation migrants, affluent expatriates whose residence here is frequently temporary, naturalised Britons, and people born here who may never have laid eyes on the subcontinent."[57] Clearly, it is not only difficult to define Indians, but also

[55] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Unthinking Eurocentricism: Multiculturalism and the Media (New York: Routledge, 1994) 31.
[56] bell hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre (Boston: South End, 1984).
[57] Salman Rushdie, The Eye of the Beholder. Indian Writing in English ed. Maggie Butcher. (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1983) 80.

impossible to expect that such a range of people with such vastly differing experiences and circumstances would fit comfortably into the same classification or category. It has already been noted that Indians may well regard one another as foreigners, and many Indians identify themselves regionally rather than nationally. This also applies to South Asians, who may not regard themselves as having much in common with other South Asians, "South Asians, whether they live in their homelands or abroad, therefore usually see themselves in national, linguistic, or religious terms. They do not naturally think of themselves as South Asians, and feel that the term "South Asia" is a purely political construct."[58]

There are, however, those who regard the diversity and regional variations in a positive light. Shashi Tharoor is one example of these advocates, "If America is a melting pot, then to me India is a thali, a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls. Each tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next, but they belong together on the same plate, and they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast."[59] Tharoor's metaphor rather contradicts the notion of hybridity, implying that the diasporic South Asians who are thought to have assimilated elements of East and West in a hybrid blend, may not actually have found the fusion so easily reconcilable.

It is fair to say that most diasporic South Asians still continue to identify themselves as South Asians even as they take on the nationality of the host country. In USA for example, they would usually be called "Asian-American," the hyphen indicating the duality (as opposed to fusion) of their identity. However, there are exceptions, such as in the case of the author Bharati Mukherjee. Born a Hindu Brahmin in East Bengal, Mukherjee arrived in Iowa for further education, married an America of Canadian origin, and stayed on thereafter in Canada and America. She rejects the term "Asian-American" describing herself as "American". She rejects equally the charges of race treachery levelled at her by "India-born academics on U.S. campuses who have appointed themselves guardians of the

[58] Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth, eds., A Part, Yet Apart. South Asians in Asian America (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998) 2.
[59] Brian Oubre, "Shashi Tharoor." 17 Aug. 1998. Emory University Online. 25 Jun. 2001.

'purity' of ethnic cultures."[60] Mukherjee's stance is relatively unusual. The majority of diasporic South Asians cling to the dual (and hyphenated) identity of "Asian" and "American" because it indicates their pride in both, whereas Mukherjee argues that the term "American" should encompass all races and all identities within the melting pot of America.

Mukherjee's disdainful portrayal of "India-born academics on U.S. campuses" hints at a holier-than-thou attitude on the part of some members of the diaspora, which in turn suggests there is a concept of varying degrees of 'South Asian-ness'. This in turn implies that apart from ethnic origins, there exists some independent criteria for 'being South Asian', or even that 'South Asian-ness' is a state which can be aspired towards. South Asian-ness may have become a stylised identity, a selected number of characteristics isolated into an abstraction, which is then posited as the distilled essence of being South Asian. Shukla illustrates the boundaries drawn around the Indian identity in an article by about the manipulative and highly selective presentation of India in the 1991 Cultural Festival of India held in USA. Shukla contends that there exists "makers of ethnicities", and she borrows the term "ethnicity entrepreneurs"[61] to describe how this group "reserve the nation of India and the identity of 'Indian' for themselves; they establish authority and control over this narrative, and in an act of discursive violence, repress any possible competing discussions of identity…."[62] These ethnicity entrepreneurs neglect and negate the diversity and complexity of South Asia, muddying the waters of accurate and authentic representation. The holy grail of a "South Asian identity" therefore continues, especially so for the diasporic South Asians, and will therefore be a focal theme in this research.

Apart from the problem of conceptualisations, definitions and terminology, another tremendous concern is that the positive response of the Western world to South Asian writers, and in particular to the *women* writers, may be either misguided or misplaced. Gayatri Spivak contends that South Asian women writers continue to face the problem of

[60] Bharati Mukherjee, "American Dreamer." Feb. 1997. MoJo Online. 7 Apr. 2002.
[61] Philip Kasinitz, Carribean New York (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989).

benevolent imperialism, of being applauded simply for having written at all, and not for the quality of their work. Similarly, South Asian women writers were being listened to because of whom they were and not what they had to say. Spivak pointed out that by making an individual a representative of their race/religion/nation, it was actually distancing that individual from the group represented by differentiating the individual from the group. Uma Narayan is another of the many critics who has pointed out the possible pitfalls for South Asian writers who set themselves up, or are set up by others, as "emissaries", "mirrors" or "the authentic insiders".[63]

Setting up an author as an emissary of a race or culture is something which happens perhaps more often than it should, and it then involves all sorts of problematic issues such as to the authenticity of the portrayal by the author, the degree of representation the author is able to provide, and the limitations of the author's class, caste, and position in society. The positioning of an author as emissary or spokesperson is a fallacy to begin with, but it does appear a very common presupposition on the part of readers who appear to believe that by discussing and portraying racial and cultural issues, the author sets him/herself up as the authority on the subject as well as the representative voice of the people discussed and portrayed. The fact that South Asian women writers are inclined to depict South Asian women characters further lends weight to the erroneous notion that due to their personal identities and experiences, they therefore represent South Asian women as a whole. The tension between the authors writing as autonomous artists and the readers assuming they are speaking on behalf of others is explored more fully in the thesis.

South Asian women writers have reported that it is all too often assumed their writings reflect their personal lives. While many do draw upon personal experiences for material, they justly resent the foisting of personal interpretations on their writings. They equally resent the intertwining of their public image with their domestic realities. Women writers from all cultures and races have contended that they are regarded as 'women

[62] Sandhya Shukla, "Building Diaspora and Nation: The 1991 'Cultural Festival of India'." Cultural Studies 11.2 (1997): 296-315.

writers' and not simply as writers. Moreover, "serious writing by women is invariably regarded as feminist writing."[64]

South Asian women writers are also in danger of "tokenisation", and of being forced into the roles of representation (of Third World writers, of Indian writers, of post-colonial writers), rather than being recognised as individual authors in their own right. Spivak further contended that a South Asian woman may well be invited to speak at a gathering of Western people to "salve their consciences"[65], simply another item to tick off the agenda as satisfactorily completed.

Some South Asian women writers are also widely known as political activists and/or social workers. (Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, and Bapsi Sidhwa are examples of such.) Some have used their literary fame and reach to promote their political or social works, but few, if any, claim to be the voice of the people, to represent or to speak for a society. During interviews, South Asian women writers often admit to using the circumstances they know best, i.e. the situation immediately around them, as sources and materials for their writing, and they readily agree that they write depicting what they observe, but most deny that they write as representatives. Nevertheless, it is still all too often the case that South Asian women writers are regarded as representatives, and consequently, their writings are regarded as truthful reports or comprehensive portrayals, novels of realism. While this appears a flattering view, it is in reality an erroneous one, and moreover, one which severely limits the artistic license and experimental efforts of South Asian women writers who have been made conscious of the pedestal they have not been permitted to step off. (The unwritten consequence of stepping off the pedestal is to be condemned as being inaccurate.)

[63] Uma Narayan, Dislocating Cultures. Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism (New York: Routledge, 1997).
[64] Shashi Deshpande, "The Dilemma of the Woman Writer." eds., Narasimhaiah, Women in Fiction.
[65] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The Post-colonial Critic. Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues eds., Sarah Harasym. (New York: Routledge, 1990).

There is also concern over the question of why South Asian women writers may occupy this pedestal, and South Asian literature may be so welcomed in the Western world, and yet receive negative or lukewarm receptions in South Asia. Orientalism may be one explanation, but another possible reason may well be that what is commonplace as an observation in India, for example, may be to a reader ignorant of Indian ways, a piece of writing which is particularly perceptive, or extraordinarily insightful. It may be that novelty and difference is the charm of the literature to a western readership, which would of course fail to have quite the same effect on South Asian readers. In those cases where South Asian countries have been portrayed negatively in the writing, the reception to such a portrayal on the part of Western readers may be simply one of fascination, whereas it may well provoke anger and indignation from readers from those countries.

The writings of diasporic authors have apparently been welcomed with open arms in the English-reading West. Its popularity may be due to the dual appeal of the writings, which enable other immigrants to identify with it, and which attempt to explain South Asians to the Western world. This, however, is an exercise fraught with faultlines. Tensions naturally arise as to how authentically the culture is being portrayed by a people who are themselves at a distance from the 'homeland', how home is understood and what or where diasporic South Asians regard as 'home', and who would be qualified to be the 'authentic insider'. These are questions which are apparently only asked by South Asians in South Asia, and by some of the diasporic South Asians, and only very rarely, by the non-South Asian Western audience. These are also questions which will be examined in the course of the thesis.

Rukmini Nair is one of the critics who have put forward a number of possible reasons for the differences of reception in South Asia and in the West.[66] Nair suggests that feelings of guilt on the part of the West for their roles in imperialism may have influenced their readiness to praise even mediocre work emerging from the subcontinent. Moreover, because the emergence of South Asian women writers on the literary scene has been recent,

[66] Debashish Mukerji, "And Never the Twain Shall Meet." 16 Apr. 2000. The Week Online. 1 Sep. 2000.

it may be merely "the flavour of the moment" which accounts for their current popularity. Nair also mentions a more insidious reason which may account for the warm reception contemporary South Asian women's literature is enjoying in the Western world. It could be because this new literature currently occupies so small a space on the literary scene that it does not come into direct competition with the Western literature, and thus can safely be applauded without being a threat or a rival to Western literature. These are all possible workings of benevolent imperialism, and far from elevating the literature of South Asian writers, it belittles the efforts of the writers and damages the quality of critiques and of literature.

Worrying as these charges levelled by Nair are, there are still more serious problems for South Asian literature than benevolent imperialism. It has been observed that there is a singularly limited number of themes which the majority of the South Asian women novelists writing in this day and age seem not only to repeatedly address, but also to adhere to. These themes are few in number, but appear to predominate and are dwelt on at great length, often to the exclusion of other possible themes. For example, the majority of contemporary South Asian women's novels do not discuss or reflect the political background or political workings of the region and country, which the earlier writings of the 1960s did. Instead, the themes which are discussed are mostly, notably, and apparently deliberately domestic, pertaining to relationships, marriage, childhood, family, tradition, food, and home. There is also a strong undercurrent of victimhood, and many a mention is made of dowries, forced marriages, widowhood, and the lowly position of women in a highly patriarchal society.

This is doubly curious given that South Asia is a region which has had a volatile political history, and continues to be relatively unstable. Partition is often mentioned or used as a background to the plot of novels, but is usually discussed in terms of its effects on women or families, rather than in political terms. Bapsi Sidhwa's Cracking India is one of the pioneering works by South Asian women novelists which explored the multiple effects Partition had on the women, women of different classes, ethnicities and religions. Ambreen

Hai regards Cracking India as being amongst the first of a new wave to address the events of this bi-national trauma,[67] but there seems to have been no successor to Sidhwa, and the contemporary novels by South Asian women writers only mention Partition as historical background in their stories.

Moreover, it is also somewhat curious that given the immense regional diversities of South Asia, this diversity is seldom the focus of the literature. Diasporic authors in particular appear more apt to employ broad brushstrokes to portray differences between the East and West rather than within the region. It is not possible to determine the regional diversity of the readership of this literature, but it is notable that as a theme, regional diversity has heretofore not been granted much prominence in the texts. This thesis does not aim to deal directly with the globalised, sociological position of South Asians; it concerns itself with the literature and published works of South Asian women writers; but it could perhaps be said that this omission (of in-depth discussion of regional diversity on the part of authors) requires redressing.

The fact that so many South Asian women novelists appear to be concerned with portraying the same themes makes them an easily recognisable new group of writers on the global literary scene. However, it does ironically limit their scope, because having built up an image of what South Asian novels contain, there is now a expectation amongst readers that this genre *must* feature such themes and no others, and there is an increasing danger of South Asian literature becoming a stereotyped literature. There seems little doubt that it was not entirely coincidental that so many women writers from one part of the world should all choose to write on the same themes. It is likely that having found one successful formula, so to speak, others have leapt on the bandwagon and cashed in on the fact that these are the themes which excite interest and sympathy from western readers, and which have unfortunately gradually come to define South Asian women's writings. There are Indian critics who maintain that "because much of the recent Indian English fiction fits in with the West's preconceived notions of India, that so much praise is lavished on it by Western

[67] Ambreen Hai, "Border Work, Border Trouble: Postcolonial Feminism and the Ayah in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India*." Modern Fiction Studies 46.2 (2000): 379-426.

critics."[68] Pandering to stereotypes and preconceived notions may indeed be the intention of opportunistic South Asian writers, both writing from within and without South Asia who exploit (and thus worsen) the situation by exoticising themselves, deliberately trading on histrionic differences between East and West, as well as sensationalising aspects of South Asian culture for commercial purposes. It is therefore of particular interest to study how the emerging debut writers negotiate their way through the stereotypes and limitation of themes to find their niches in this body of writing. It is a very serious question as to how South Asian women writers negotiate their way around the limitation of themes and yet remain within the currently recognised boundaries of the genre.

South Asian critics have been guarded in their praise of the popularity of this new literature in the western world because there has always been a strong suspicion on their part that some authors are merely writing what they estimate the Western world wishes to hear, or read, and are prepared to present this lopsided picture in return for fame and financial reward, "Our Indian English writers give the West what it wants."[69] Suroor, a literary critic of The Hindu further suggests that the limitation in terms of themes in South Asian women's writings is partly due to the encouragement and influence of the Western world which wishes to continue keeping South Asian literature in certain categories, "The West does not want our writers to tackle the big, universal themes, but to stick to the tried and tested: Partition, arranged marriages, spirituality, caste and communal strife, exotica in general. And our writers oblige."[70] As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, South Asian women writers are not exempt from the politics of exclusion and inclusion which localises their work. Even 'authentic insiders' and 'emissaries' are susceptible to the wider global forces which shape the canon in this colonial present.

The influence of the West is reinforced by the fact the many of the publishing houses which publish South Asian Literature are Western publishing houses. The role of the publishers cannot be overlooked in its shaping of the canon of South Asian Literature and

[68] Quote from Hasan Suroor. Mukerji.
[69] Mukerji.
[70] Ibid.

will therefore be discussed at greater length in the thesis. Publishers do play a major role in shaping the genre, but it is also their responsibility to ensure that this body of literature stakes and occupies its space as a literary subculture in the huge range of books written in English. How the literature is marketed may also be a point of contention as stereotypes appear to simultaneously exploit the literature and culture but make a literary product more easily marketable.

This research will also argue that South Asian women writers may be damaging their image and the image of their culture as much as they seek to represent it. "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation."[71] Having seized the power of speech (and writing) in English, do South Asian women succumb to the temptation of restaging orientalism? Mohanty argues that there is a similarity of assumptions about Third World Women; the texts which she studies define women as victims of male violence, the colonial process, the Arab familial system, the economic development process, and the Islamic code. All these define women primarily in terms of their object status and even benevolently motivated objectification needs to be challenged.[72] It is true that many South Asian women writers do create texts which define women as victims, generally of patriarchy, the cultural conventions, and of economic circumstances. By Mohanty's argument, South Asian women writers would be objectifying women by this victim-fixation, even as these same writers are attempting to combat objectification. In this problem of representation, "Barthes offers important – if elliptical – warnings of how it is that writings that seek to critique the content of Orientalism all too easily end up replicating its forms."[73]

With all these obstacles, South Asian women writers are nevertheless increasingly prolific and visible. The novelists of today still face some of the same problems which the earliest South Asian novelists encountered, such as the problem of finding common ground

[71] Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (London: Paladin, 1972) 13.
[72] Chantra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., Cartographies of Struggle. Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991) 57.
[73] Joanna P. Sharp, "Writing Travel/Travelling Writing: Roland Barthes Detours the Orient." Environment and Planning D: Society and Space 20 (2002): 155-166.

that all South Asian women, with their variety of experiences, can identify with, without homogenising the region, or creating monolithic images of their culture. Although English has been accepted as one of South Asia's languages, there is still the challenge of using this language to express elements of the culture which do not lend themselves easily to articulation and expression in English. South Asian women writers of this age have to struggle against the very markers or tokens which have afforded them recognition and acceptance, but which are also ironically functioning as limitations and restrictions on their art and on their genre. A complex inheritance and troubled literary history which manifests both as blessings and burdens is what contemporary South Asian women writers may claim as uniquely theirs.

There is yet one other problem concerning this literature which should be included for mention, and that is the problem of studying these texts within the context of the social sciences. This is less a problem which confronts the authors, and more an issue with which the researcher is obliged to engage. As Joanne Sharp observed, geographers of the past had viewed Literature as a relatively unproblematic resource, using Literature to carry out certain limited roles, employing it as a cultural medium to discuss society, and sometimes, as indices of social processes. Some geographers had only used Literature to restate and confirm what was already known, and to provide "a feel" of a situation. Sharp points out that the lack of dialogue between Literature and Geography had limited the relationship between the two, and Literature had been reduced to being a source of data on society and/or culture, "Literature is assigned second-class status as a source of information."[74]

However, with the cultural turn of the Social Sciences, Literature has been viewed as having increasingly more to offer – it has the ability to challenge the conventional, through form as well as content. When Derek Gregory discussed the colonial gaze he pointed out that Orientalism partly lay in seeking to understand, decode, and unpack a different culture according to and employing imperialist ideology, tools, equipment. In Scripting Egypt, Gregory noted that Egypt was constructed as "a *legible* space whose

[74] Joanne P. Sharp, "Towards a Critical Analysis of Fictive Geographies." Area 32.3 (2000): 327-334.

cultural inscriptions, however faint or obscure, could be deciphered by the educated reader."[75] This presupposition necessarily shapes and limits the interpretation and understanding, *creating* the interpretation of the land. Therefore, an analysis of the tools is of great interest as the tools themselves are limitations to and influencing forces in the understanding and perception of other cultures. Literature analyses the (occasionally insidious) use of words, vocabulary and terminology, noting the power of words not only to record but to alter, revise, permute, even create, "for the world is as much produced by the words we use as it is reflected by them."[76]

Comparative Literature in particular has much to offer not only in its (fictional and highly selective but often accurate) record and reflection of society at certain given geographical and historical co-ordinates, but in its ability to highlight opaque and even obscure social phenomena. Sharp argues for three methods of employing Literature within the Social Sciences; first, to listen to the "voice" of the text, second, to be attentive to the context of writing, and last, to consider the reception of the fiction. Each of these methods will be employed in the course of the research, with Chapter One paying particular attention to the language and linguistics of South Asian women's literature, Chapters Two and Three discussing the influences of gender and geographical location on the authors, Chapter Four discussing the reader responses to this particular literature, and Chapter Five investigating the shaping of these responses on the part of the publishers. This third method outlined by Sharp is of particular importance, especially in the light of the fact that Literature has been viewed as "a product in the circuits of culture", and as Thrift describes it, as a "process of cultural creation of which the writing of Literature is a part"[77]. The role of Literature within the Social Sciences is a unique one, using as it does, poetics to encode and debate sets of politics.

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[75] James Duncan and Derek Gregory, eds. "Scripting Egypt: Orientalism and the Cultures of Travel." Writes of Passage. Reading Travel Writing. (London: Routledge, 1999) 115.
[76] Trevor Barnes and Derek Gregory, eds. Reading Human Geography. The Poetics and Politics of Inquiry. (London: Arnold, 1997) 138.
[77] N. Thrift, "Literature, the Production of Culture, and the Politics of Place." Antipode 15 (1983): 12-24.

Much has already been said about the positionality of the South Asian women writers, in terms of their postcolonial inheritance, their role as representatives, their writings constituting a literary sub-culture of mainstream literature in English; perhaps it is both timely and expedient to turn to a very brief consideration of the positionality of the researcher.

**Positioning Oneself**

As much as this research seeks to understand the influence of the geographical locations of the authors on their writings, it must also acknowledge the myriad geographical, historical and social influences which comprise the positionality of the researcher. Although my studies are focused on South Asian authors, I myself am from South-East Asia. The first eighteen years of my life have been spent in Malaysia, and as a member of a minority race in a largely patriarchal society. It is a society where during the decades succeeding independence, rapid economic changes have also brought swift modifications in social norms. My academic interest in the position of those on the margins and on the periphery may have at least in part been informed and/or inspired by my personal experiences.

My interest in the diaspora is similarly poised between the academic and the personal. I am a Malaysian of Chinese descent; Malay is my national language, and Chinese my mother tongue. Having several languages in my consciousness is perhaps one of the factors which sensitises me to words, to the arrangement of words, to the underlying and often subtle nuances in language, and to the unwritten implications within languages and cultures.

Being a female researcher has enabled me to gain access to women's groups and women's internet chat-rooms, which would otherwise have been off-limits to a truthful male researcher. Having studied English literature and African American women's literature, I am particularly interested in comparative, cross-cultural and diasporic

literatures, which I find much scope for exploring in South Asian women's literature. My thesis incorporates a study of reader responses, taking into account these writings as books, not merely as texts, regarding it as necessary to investigate the impact of these books and texts on their readers. Another reason for the study of reader responses is that it enables me as a researcher to be consciously more reflexive about my own subjectivity.

However, the interpretation of this literature is ineluctably personal to some degree, and even necessarily subjective at certain levels because differing interpretations must result from differing positionalities and individualities. Viewing fictive literature as providing a universal way of seeing the world would be perilously close to being in the nature of a truth claim, a monolithic interpretation of the literature, which would fail to take into account the positionalities of readers and their consequent range of possible responses, and also the fact a literary text does not exist in isolation; rather, in many senses, a literary text constitutes a cultural product as has been established within the Social Sciences. Any assumption of there being either a single correct or even an exhaustive reading would be a misguided and injuriously constrictive one. Language will necessarily resonate differently to each reader, different interpretations will be placed on the connotations and imagery employed, and responses and identification will vary tremendously. It would therefore be highly unlikely that my reading of the literature could completely coincide with the reading of this same literature by a seventy-year old Gujarati man, for example.

It could even be said that much of contemporary South Asian women's writings in English, in particular the diasporic South Asian literature, may even alienate certain sections of South Asian society, given the immense diversity of South Asian culture. However, the role of the geographer is "to examine how the images produced in literature create certain forms of class, national or gendered consciousness.....to understand these texts as part of social process, and so be aware of the power dynamics involved in the different voices raised."[78] It is with this consciousness that the research has been carried out and in this same spirit that the thesis has been written. No interpretation of the literature can

[78] Sharp. "Fictive Geographies" 328, 333.

be complete or absolute, but the empirical methods of this research have yielded significant insights and cognizance.

The following section in this introduction chapter contains a very brief sketch of the structure and content of the rest of the thesis.

**Routes**

In this thesis, thirty-seven novels and short story collections have been chosen for formal textual interpretation, selected from a body of contemporary literature in English by South Asian women writers, spanning a period of five decades. They were selected for a number of reasons; some are highly illustrative of certain aspects of South Asian society, some are representative of certain styles and tendencies, some are widely read, some are landmark pieces of writing, and some have contributed significantly to the genre. [79]

"Women have a history of reading and writing in the interstices of masculine culture, moving between use of the dominant language and form of expression and specific versions of experience based on their marginality."[80] It appears that being doubly colonised is a double-edged situation for South Asian women. Inhabiting marginal spaces may free women (to a greater extent though never entirely) from the problem of replicating Orientalism, but writing from such interstices requires a struggle for identity and recognition.

The negotiation of language both in terms of the patriarchal world in which South Asian women find themselves inhabiting, as well as in linguistic terms, is explored in the first chapter. Each writer has to deal with the problem of her postcolonial legacy in her own way. To examine this in greater depth and detail, the chapter contains an analysis of style, structure and language employed by the South Asian women writers. A consideration of the

[79] A full list of the literature can be found in Appendix 1.
[80] Caren Kaplan, "Deterritorializations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile in Western Feminist Discourse." Cultural Critique 6 (1987) : 187.

style of South Asian women writers will also take into account the use of the vernacular, the extent to which the authors are influenced by second language interference, and the literary devices with which the authors consciously and sub-consciously flavour and even exoticise their writings. It also discusses the effectiveness of these literary experiments and strategies in conveying and articulating a world of South Asian experiences in the English Language. This chapter discusses the development of the novel as a literary form in South Asia, the use of mythologies, the symbolism of food, and the role of the storyteller.

Having discussed *how* the contemporary South Asian women writers are articulating themselves, the next chapter turns to an analysis of the recurrent themes in their writings. As may be expected, personal relationships is a key issue and in the course of examining relationships, the writers discuss South Asian women's approach to introspection, realising that South Asian women consistently define themselves in relation to their family and community, and rarely in terms of ability, ambition, and attitude. In analysing the literary presentation of women, victimhood is found to be the most widespread portrayal of South Asian women by South Asian women, and the reasons and extent of this portrayal is explored in this chapter and also from various other angles in the subsequent chapters. The position of South Asian women in their communities is therefore the focus of this second chapter. South Asian women's positionality in terms of the physical domestic spaces within their homes is studied in terms of its symbolism as well as in practical terms, taking into consideration that for South Asian women, the notion of home and the power balances within the home have a great influence on their notion of identity and social status. The oeuvre of one particular author enables the tracing and observation of the changes in the positionality of South Asian women over time.

The issue of identity resurfaces in the next chapter, but with a shift in focus; it is observed that identity is defined differently by South Asian women writers writing from within and from without South Asia. "The South Asian diaspora looks to the sub-continent as an anchor for identity formation, however mythical and uncomfortable….."[81] The

[81] Gargi Bhattacharyya, Tales of Dark-skinned Women (London: UCL, 1998) 237.

concerns and the formulation of identities of these two sets of writers are juxtaposed in Chapter Three. The writers from within South Asia are, generally speaking, writers who provide portrayals of changing times in their countries, in terms of the effects of globalisation and the changes in political and economic terms for their countries, which in turn filter through to affect their lives. They record the consequent changes taking place in their cultures and observe the changing degrees of liberties and responsibilities available to and expected of women. Diasporic writers on the other hand, seem more inclined to deal with issues of duality of identity due to very abrupt changes in their personal lives. These changes, brought on by moving several thousand miles away from South Asia, are discussed in terms of the consequent coping with the conservative traditional nucleus of the family, and the daily encounters with Western values and influences of their new country. Alongside the issue of identity, the issue of representation is also addressed, and the extent to which South Asian authors act as or are cast into the roles of representatives is explored in Chapter Three.

The issue of representation is further developed in the next chapter which turns to a study of the roles of South Asian woman writers as perceived by their audience. Through the study of reader responses, Chapter Four investigates the extent to which these writers are expected to be race and gender representatives, both to the Western world and to the diasporic South Asians. There is resulting tension between the artistic autonomy of the authors and the expectation that they will take on the position of emissaries. The English-reading audiences for whom they write is still a highly diverse audience in terms of cultural norms and expectations, inclusive of South Asians and non-South Asian readers, and this in turn gives rise to the difficulty in choosing a suitable level on which to explain and relate the stories. The reception to these writings is therefore quite diverse, and it is of interest to analyse the degree to which the author is expected to write 'truthfully'. (Reader response in this chapter is studied via the Internet, therefore taking into account also the nature and identity of cyberspace communities.)

Following on from reader responses, Chapter Five turns to a study of how the literature is marketed to its audience, which is also instrumental in shaping reader expectations. The role of publishers as gatekeepers to the genre is discussed in this chapter. Because writings exist as books and not only as texts, the presentation of the tangible corporeal book should not be neglected. This chapter contains a discussion of the jackets of contemporary novels by South Asian women writers to discover the extent to which stereotypes and cultural coding is used to mark and market the literature. The thesis concludes with a short study of the most recent publications on the South Asian women's literary scene, observing the most current trends of this literature and noting its growth and development.

# CHAPTER ONE: LANGUAGE AND REALITY

***"There is easy reading. And there is literature."***

*-Anon-*

## Signpost

Given the intertwining of politics and poetics in the novel, which has been referred to as "an incorporating quasi-encyclopaedic cultural form,"[1] the stylistic changes and innovations introduced by South Asian women writers to the body of literature written in English could well reflect and impact upon the changing social order being depicted. This chapter will begin with a sketch of the emergence and development of the novelistic genre in South Asia, drawing particularly upon the work of Meenakshi Mukherjee, which comprises one of the most comprehensive and analytical accounts of South Asians writing novels in English. It will trace the short history of this branch of literature, noting the influences which have guided the direction of its development.

The following section will then go on to describe some of the problems observed to be peculiar to the analysis of this cross-cultural literature, and examine some of the literary and linguistic experiments carried out by contemporary authors to address, surmount or circumvent those problems. These experiments have primarily been in diction and syntax, although there have been other forms of literary experiments which are also examined in this section. Next there is a study of the outlines and illustrations of narrative devices, which contribute to the analysis of the ways in which South Asian women writers have adopted the novelistic genre for their needs and expressions.

The penultimate section studies the roles and uses of mythology in South Asian women's writings of today, and of the continuing influence of mythologies on the attitudes of South Asians towards women. This chapter seeks to both interpret the stylistic devices and evaluate the degree to which these structural innovations succeed in

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[1] Edward Said, Culturalism and Imperialism (London: Chatto&Windus, 1993) 84.

reconciling form to its material, in producing a writing which is simultaneously distinctively South Asian in identity and also adept in conveying the reality of this hybrid and complex identity in English prose.

## The Rise of the Novel in South Asia

Like the rabbit to Australia, the novel to South Asia is an imported latecomer which has flourished in its new habitat. The novel is not an art form intrinsic in the South Asian literary tradition, and the novel written in English is an even younger branch of its literature. As for the novel written in English by South Asian *women* writers, this represents a very recent development on the South Asian English literary scene. The recent phenomenon of South Asian women writers producing novels which have exploded onto the literary scene and have been prominent in the public eye, is in part thanks to the celebrity status of several women writers who have recently won prestigious and high-profile international literary awards. Its male writers have long been celebrated by the literary world, with Rabindranath Tagore winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 and V.S. Naipaul winning the same in 2001, and Salman Rushdie and Michael Ondaatje winning the Booker Prize (in 1981 for Midnight's Children and in 1992 for The English Patient respectively). South Asian male writers have also featured amongst Commonwealth Prize Winners, the ones of the last decade include Rohinton Mistry (in 1992 for Such a Long Journey, and again in 1996 for A Fine Balance) and Vikram Seth (in 1994 for A Suitable Boy). Joining this prestigious list of writers have been Arundhati Roy, winner of the 1997 Booker Prize with The God of Small Things, and Jhumpa Lahiri, winner of the 1999 Pulitzer Prize with her collection of short stories, Interpreter of Maladies.[2]

The publicity of the successes of Roy and Lahiri on both sides of the Atlantic has brought world recognition for South Asian women writers and encouraged aspiring writers who are currently more prolifically published than ever before in the history of the genre. South Asian women's writings have become more popular and widespread as a consequence. However, the likes of Mukherjee, Spivak, Seshadri and other critics have already voiced growing concerns that serious literary criticism is still painfully

[2] The only previous woman writer based in South Asia to win the Booker Prize is Ruth Prawer Jhabvala in 1975 for Heat and Dust; Arundhati Roy is the first *South Asian woman* to win the Booker Prize.

inadequate both in quantity and quality in this young but rapidly growing branch of literature. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this lack of serious literary criticism may partly be due to the fact that this literary subculture has yet to be accepted into mainstream Western literature, but it may also partly be because the novel is an adopted form in South Asian Literature.

The Western novel has mainly been rooted in the concern over an individual's situation or experience in a certain or particular given time and place. Many literary genres such as poetry and verse, epics and mythologies, religious writings, and oral literatures, have long been developed to very high art forms in South Asia, but the novel was a distinctly foreign and even alien genre. It was alien in two fundamentals.

First, as has been mentioned already in the Introduction, a central underlying assumption of the classic Western novel is that it will contain an individual or individuals playing his or her role(s) in a specific place and at a specific point in human history. It also usually supposes that the individuals would be either coping with significant social changes or making significant social changes in their lives. The novel depicts and comments upon change – which is one of its most basic themes – as opposed to continuity. In this, the novel form was eminently suitable to writers who wished to depict the changes that were crowding thick and fast into urban and industrialised parts of South Asia, and it also was the perfect medium in which to record and detail the many and drastic social changes taking place as a result of the economical and political policies which were being implemented.

The second characteristic alien to South Asian literary shores is the importance of the individual transcending or escaping the constrains of his community, the notion not of the hero (for heroes are plentiful in South Asian epics), but of the *protagonist.* It has been argued by Mukherjee that where the Western protagonist is an individual free to seek his or her destiny and make his or her choices, the tradition-bound South Asian cultures leaves its people far less freedom of choice, (for its women in particular,) mapping or chartering their lives according to the dictates of culture, patriarchy and tradition, to a large and encompassing degree. Moreover, Hinduism and Buddhism, which are widely practised in South Asia contain the concepts of destiny, reincarnation, and one's present life being the product of past lives, which is then portrayed by writers

as a possible tendency (in terms of attitude and culture) of many South Asians to a certain passivity, resignation and acceptance. (In so doing, the writers may be reinforcing the stereotypes of Orientalism.)

Characters in South Asian writings are therefore far less likely to be in the mould of the hero single-handedly charting his course in life and being the master of his fate and captain of his soul, defying the norms of his community in the process. Characters in South Asian novels are portrayed to be deeply embedded in their community, often seen to be wrestling with multiples ties of duty, tradition, expectations and familial claims, and their own culturally instilled passivity. This, of course, is in stark contrast to "the classical *Bildungsroman*[3] plot [which] posits 'happiness' as the highest value."[4]

According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, "It is ... impossible to write a good novel today that remains suspended out of time and space; it must have a definite location in the temporal and spatial reality."[5] Mukherjee further contends that the late development of prose fiction in Indian literature is related to the late emergence of historical sense amongst Indians.[6] Whether or not it would be *impossible* to write a good novel irrespective of time and place may be open to debate, but it is true that as an art form, the novel only began in earnest in India in the 1920s. The first novels were written in Bengali, and Mukherjee suggests that this may be because Bengal was the first region to have close contact with the British. (Bengal is also a region rich in its own literary tradition.) The very first Indian novel to be written in English was by Bankim in 1864, entitled Rajmohan's Wife. This novel has been described as a "dud" by Rushdie and similarly by other critics, and Bankim himself reverted to writing in Bengali (with far more literary success) after his single attempt at writing a novel in English. According to Rushdie, for a further seventy years after Rajmohan's Wife, no English fiction of any

[3] Franco Moretti, The Way of the World. The *Bildungsroman* in European Culture (London: Verson, 1987). According to Franco Moretti, *Bildungsroman* is the form which will dominate or make possible the Golden Century of Western narrative.
[4] Moretti 3.
[5] Meenakshi Mukherjee, The Twice Born Fiction. Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English (New Delhi: Heinemann Educational, 1971) 18.
[6] Ibid.

remarkable quality was produced in India until "the literary stimulus offered by the English language gave rise to the Indian novel in English in the Thirties…"[7]

Meenakshi Mukerjee suggests that it may be no coincidence that the novel in English emerged in India in the 1930s, the decade just prior to Independence, when "there was an urgency to foreground the idea of a composite nation."[8] In the 1950s and 1960s, it was unsurprising that many, if not most, of the novels reflected the political upheavals of the age. The few women novelists of the time – Anita Desai, Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, and Nayantara Sahgal, for example – wrote novels strongly threaded with political consciousness. The best of the pioneering South Asian women writers wrote in polished prose and fluent, standardized English. (At the other end of the spectrum, there was prose which was stiff, self-conscious, imitative, heavy-handed, and cliché-ridden.) The women writers of the Fifties and Sixties were the few who had access to English education and publication opportunities due to family or social connections. The majority of these women authors could be classified as members of the elite; a relatively privileged class and/or caste who had the luxury of social or family support, adequate financial resources, and leisure time in which to write – they had Virginia Woolf's proverbial "room of one's own".

The 1970s were, in Mukherjee's opinion, a barren decade except for the writings of Shashi Deshpande, and it was not until Rushdie's Midnight's Children burst upon the literary scene in 1981 that there once more emerged a profusion of liveliness in South Asian Literature in English. "Prose writing…..created in this period by Indian writers writing in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 "official languages" of India…..in the 1980s and 1990s, the flow of good writing has become a flood."[9] In the 1980s, there was a rapid increase of publications by women writers in certain parts of South Asia, and this was probably in part due to the increased opportunities for education and employment, especially for women of the middle classes, an economically as well as socially defined class which was swiftly expanding.

[7] Usha Bande, Victim Consciousness in Indian-English Novel (Jalandhar, India: ABS, 1997).
[8] Meenakshi Mukherjee, The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2000) 174.

By this point, a significant change in the genre had occurred. In the Fifties, authors may have displayed an inclination to idealise protagonists, acutely aware that many of their readers would be Western ones, consciously or sub-consciously writing to portray "the authentic" character, and also the most virtuous. These writers of the 1980s were of the new generation brought up in a post-Independence Indian-subcontinent. Authors were now choosing the man-on-the-road, the ordinary character, the everyday, middle-class protagonist, as their subject. To be sure, some like Githa Mehta still wrote novels like Raj, claiming to tell a tale of a princess and her extraordinary life, but the vast majority of writers had turned to depicting a social reality likely to be shared by millions of others.

The protagonists of these writings faced a common and central problem of seeking individual fulfilment in a culture which had traditionally proudly prioritised the welfare of the community over that of the individual. While this has much to do with the changed and changing readership, and consequently with whom the readers can identify, it also represents the third phase predicted by Showalter[10] – that of self-discovery, the quest for freedom now being turned inwards. The works of South Asian women writers follow this pattern and the novels are increasingly introspective, open-ended, and questioning. Issues are no longer black and white, answers are neither stereotypical nor easy to find, and there are fewer obvious villains. Men are no longer seen as the enemy, but society, norms, customs and traditions, continue to be regarded as hampering the growth and development of women. A new order seems to be emerging with the rapid changes of women's economic circumstances, the disintegration of large joint-families, and the migration from rural to urban areas. Female protagonists are seen to be in search of self-fulfilment, order, meaning and security amidst the confusions and uncertainties of their new conditions. No longer do authors look to larger-than-life characters and extraordinary scenarios to write about; they have chosen to draw their material from the known, the familiar, and the immediate. However, although it is understandable that these changes and the subsequent immediate effects on their lives may be uppermost in the minds of South

[9] Salman Rushdie, "India and World Literature." Frontline. August 1979. Online. 9 February 2000.
[10] The three broad phases of development undergone by a literary subculture as outlined by Elaine Showalter as discussed in the fourth section of the Introduction.

Asian women writers, there is a curious lack of attention to politics and the effect that may be having on the lives of women in the subcontinent.

H.C. Harrex had noted that "the early Indian fiction in English may not have been innovative in form and technique, but it certainly was rich in its wide variety of themes", which he then divided into six categories: protest, reform and proletarian progressivism; India's modern destiny; social change and cultural transformation; regional and communal identities; the East-West encounter; questioning affirmation of tradition.[11] Ironically, the contemporary South Asian women writers of today are not drawing on such a wide variety of themes, and of the six broad themes outlined by Harrex, only half are still being actively discussed. If Harrex were to comment on contemporary Indian fiction in English today, it is unlikely that he would be able to praise it for a "wide variety of themes". Protest, the destiny of India, regional and communal identities, and generally speaking, politically inclined topics, are largely avoided or neglected by South Asian women writers of today. On the other hand, there is a definite focusing and prioritising of the East-West encounter and the mutually influencing factors; much is being written about the yielding of tradition to the demands of modernity and technology; and there is little doubt that South Asian women writers are deeply engrossed in recording and depicting social change and cultural transformations over the generations.

In addition to the themes outlined by Harrex, South Asian women writers have included themes of domesticity, marriage, food, gender discrimination, and perhaps most significantly, the theme of victimhood. As will be discussed in greater detail in the course of this thesis, this theme of victimhood has secured such a central place in the genre that it effectively sidelines a number of other themes. It is a theme particularly favoured by the South Asian *women* writers. The concerns of South Asian women writers do naturally overlap with those of South Asian men writers, but there is a difference in emphasis and focus.

[11] Taken from Usha Bande, Victim Consciousness in Indian-English Novel (Jalandhar, India: ABS, 1997) xviii.

## Stylistic Problems

Any South Asian writer putting pen to paper with the intention of writing literature in English would be faced with the daunting knowledge that there already exists a considerable body of literature written in this language, not only in UK, but in USA, Canada, Australia and a large number of other Commonwealth Countries. Regardless of whether or not the South Asian writer cares to be regarded as a postcolonial writer, by writing in English, he or she would be keenly conscious of entering into competition in the most prolific writing language in the world. It would be difficult for the South Asian novelist to escape an awareness of the possible Western and global audience, simply due to his/her choice of language apart from anything else. As much as this global language offers the author the opportunity to reach a global audience, the author is also challenged with the finding of a distinctive voice in this vast body of literature.

It was once assumed that the most insurmountable obstacle for South Asians writing in English was simply that they were attempting to write in a foreign language, the language moreover of their colonisers, a language other than their mother tongues. As was explained in the Introduction, writing in English bore a tag of servility as well as the badge of elitism. Today, at least two generations after Independence, many South Asians are either bi-lingual or multi-lingual, claiming English not only as a mother tongue, but as *their* language, and therefore, a language of South Asia. It is also an official language in India and remains in general use in other South Asian countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka, for official, educational and even military purposes. (For some diasporic South Asian writers, English may not only be their first language but also their only language. Oddly, this is also the case for some South Asian writers from within South Asia.) This proficiency and familiarity with English has meant a shift or change in stylistic problems for South Asian writers rather than a decrease of the same.

In the words of Bourdieu, "language is an integral part of social life, with all its ruses and iniquities, and that a good part of our social life consists of the routine exchange of linguistic expressions in the day-to-day flow of social interaction."[12] This

[12] Pierre Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power Trans. G. Raymond and M. Adamson (Cambridge : Polity, 1991) 1.

being the case, the first and perhaps the most fundamental problem which continues to confront and challenge South Asian writers is the problem of presenting a South Asian reality (with all its cultural implications, complexities and nuances) in a language neither evolved to articulate it, nor comprising the necessary inherent concepts, notions, sentiments, attitudes, ideology and vocabulary. Even to this date, one of the criteria of a successful piece of literature written in English by South Asians would be the extent to which it is successful in employing the English language with fluency, yet remaining distinctively South Asian without sacrificing either clarity or aesthetics.

According to Mukherjee, one cultural reality in South Asia may differ largely from another cultural reality and the differences can be articulated in regional languages and dialects, ".....cultural units in India tend to be aligned on linguistic lines."[13] In the vernacular languages of South Asia, or in bhasha, literature is inclined to be regionally distinctive; for example, Bengali Literature and Tamil Literature which originate from the north and south of India respectively, differ in their literary history, tradition and practises. Given this difference, it is significant that the works of a Bengali writer writing in English and that of a Tamil writer doing the same, apart of names of foods, clothing, places, and rituals which have been retained in the vernacular, are virtually impossible to differentiate, let alone identify by style, in written English. This 'disappearance' of the regional differences or distinctiveness is further compounded by the choice of material, particularly by South Asian women writers, who in their desire to strike a chord of common understanding across the spectrum of South Asian regions, have been inclined to select themes with broad or universal appeal. Moreover, because the target readership is diffuse and may include those who have no first-hand experience of India, the anxiety on the part of authors is manifested in the pull towards homogenisation, "an inability to perceive those realities situated outside the cognitive limits imposed by English and which cannot be appropriated into the East-West or colonial-indigenous paradigms."[14] Such homogeneous themes are necessarily few in number and will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, and this begins to explain the limitation in the variety of topics and themes in this genre, as mentioned in the previous chapter as one of the defining features of contemporary South Asian

[13] Mukherjee, Twice Born 24.
[14] Mukherjee, Perishable Empire 200.

women's writings. The subsequent two chapters will therefore elaborate further on the process of totalisation that takes place in this genre.

In general, the nuances and connotations contained in language depends on a certain complicity on the part of writer and reader, or between two speakers, and rests on a foundation of shared beliefs.[15] Writing in English therefore, puts South Asian writers in the difficult position of not being able to simply and freely imply and connote, but of also having to explain and educate the reader in the process of reading. A South Asian writing in English cannot assume the understanding of his/her readers, or expect too much by way of common assumptions. "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality."[16] In the translation of cultural notions through the vehicle of the English language, the author runs numerous and likely risks of symbolism and imagery being misinterpreted, of nuances being missed altogether, of signifiers falling on stony ground, of innuendoes and intimations missing their marks. (If South Asian authors, and South Asian women authors in particular, have been accused time and again of being over-emphatic, heavy-handed, and over-detailed, an appreciation of this singular cultural-linguistic problem goes a long way towards exonerating them from some of the blame for such rudimentary stylistic flaws.)

It has been noted by many critics that the problem of nuances and connotations appears most acutely in the writing of dialogue. If an author is writing of people who do not speak or think in English, the problem is acute, and unrealistic dialogue sequences may well be the result. Even if the author is writing of South Asians who do ordinarily converse in English, it may not be in standard English but a brand of English which may be nearly incomprehensible to native speakers of English.

However, it is not only in dialogue that this stylistic problem rears its head; it can be in the choice of material too, although this is a problem which offers more obvious and ready solutions. Mukherjee explains it thus: "Generally speaking, his [the author's] area of intimate experience is limited to a small geographical area. The quality that marks his writing is often the quality of that particular area, its typical responses

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[15] Bourdieu 23.

[16] Edward Sapir, Culture, Language and Personality (Berkeley, U of California P, 1956).

and its distinctive spirit."[17] In this age, this problem diminishes with the increase in travelling and in the promotion of national identity. It has been seen that many of the authors included in this study are fairly well travelled, even if only within the Indian subcontinent. Many, moreover, are very cosmopolitan, and this cosmopolitan outlook is in fact one of the solutions to the problem of finding common ground and common themes in the choice of literary material. In choosing to write of urban situations and settings, for example, South Asian authors find they can trigger that chord of common understanding, both nationally and internationally, and thereby side-step the problem of regionalism. This however, once again inclines South Asian women writers to limit themselves to a handful of themes.

Some South Asian authors have discovered that problems can be opportunities. In attempting to convey new concepts, or concepts which would have been unacceptable by traditional standards, or even concepts which directly conflict with culturally ingrained habits and expectations, writing in English is one way in which to find words, articulation, and notions, for change, protest, and difference. For example, in certain Indian languages, the word for independence, especially where it applies to women, may carry strongly negative connotations, and even the stigma of shame. In using English to depict and even express independence for women, authors are less constrained by the negative cultural baggage which traditionally burdened the concept.

As has been mentioned in the introduction, South Asian women are in the unique position of having been "doubly colonised", twice forced into the role as "the Other", first as the colonised, and then as women. This unique position of the perpetual outsider has perhaps afforded them a unique springboard from which to make creative linguistic experiments. The novel has perhaps been the literary form which has offered South Asian women writers the best opportunity to engage and converse with their culture, to chart social and cultural changes, and to anchor notions and ideas in specific times and places. That these writers elect to write in English is a particularly pertinent point; while it is a choice loaded with political and social implications, English may also be the language in which they can experiment and recreate, offering them a new literary territory to be claimed and conquered.

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[17] Mukherjee, Twice Born 174.

## Experiments and Expressions

As the problems of writing in English have changed over time, so too have the solutions so ingeniously devised by the authors. Literal translations may be neither adequate nor appropriate, and new linguistic experiments are the order of the day. Mukherjee identified three areas of linguistic experimentation tried by South Asian novelists, although she had her reservations as to the varying degrees of their success.

### Experimenting with Diction

One of the most widely tried literary experiments by South Asian women writers is experiments with diction, and this is a many-pronged experiment. It may include direct and literal translations of words, proverbs and clichés, which may either be glaringly obvious and even disruptive to the reading process, or which may be subtly interwoven into the rest of the text. Literal translation however, is seldom the best solution, and most contemporary novelists choose to leave only single words untranslated, words which they either cannot or choose not to translate. Generally speaking, most South Asian women writers identify these experiments for the benefit of their readers by italicising the relevant words. Some may choose not to do so, perhaps preferring to insert foreign words in the English text without drawing too much attention to the insertion, both for the purpose of reflecting their natural mode of thought and expression, and for a closer intertwining of their culture into the English language. Some authors provide translation lists at the back of their novels, which others, again perhaps deliberately, do not. (It may be because some authors feel the need to explain and translate to their readers in order that the full flavour of the writing may be appreciated, while others deem that little is detracted from the reading even if not every word is understood.)

Words which are most commonly left untranslated are nouns, and more seldom, verbs. The untranslated nouns most popularly included in South Asian women's writings fall into a number of categories. Names of South Asian dishes or foods or fruits are commonly left in their original language, either because this imparts the cultural flavour more successfully, or perhaps there is no English equivalent. For example, one often comes across words like *paan* (betel leaves wrapping lime and nuts, which are

then chewed), *halwa* (dessert made of grated carrot and milk and sugar), *ghee* (clarified butter), *dhal* (dish cooked with lentils).

Apart from names of foods and dishes, ties of kinship are often left in their vernacular also, perhaps for the sake of authenticity in dialogue, and again, perhaps to convey a South Asian approach to kinship and other relationships (for even non-blood-related South Asians may well address each other as kin). Examples of these include *didi* (older sister), *bhaiya* (brother), *bahu* (daughter-in-law), *chacha* (paternal uncle). However, it must be noted that such terms differ tremendously from language to language and from region to region in South Asia.

Names of items of clothing are also commonly left untranslated. Examples of such would be *sari* (length of cloth worn wrapped around the body in specific ways), *shalwar khameez* (combination of tunic and pants), *dupatta* (long, scarf-like item), and even accessories like *bindi* (the coloured round dot in the centre of the foreheads of women), *kumkum* (the red powder sprinkled by married women in the parting of their hair), *mangalsutra* (a string of black beads worn by married women).

Other words left untranslated are exclamations, and in this case, it is most likely that they are included in their original form for the sake of authenticity, especially in dialogues (because in moments of crisis and high emotion, it has been observed that many fluent but non-native English speakers are likely to revert to their mother-tongues). Exclamations may include those ranging from pride to horror; *shabaash* (congratulations, well done), *bas* (enough, finished), *hai ram* (with religious reference and most commonly used to express surprise or shock), *chichi* (a chiding which is not directly translatable but the sentiment "for shame!" comes close to this). Conversation fillers which may either contain a whole array of possible meanings, or no particular meaning at all, are also deliberately included on many occasions; words like *accha* (okay), *arrey* (oh no, shame).

Apart from names of dishes and foods, items of clothing, ties of kinship, and exclamations, there are a number of other miscellaneous words left in the vernacular which are quite liberally besprinkled in South Asian women's novels. The word *puja* is one which makes a frequent appearance, perhaps because it not only translates as "prayer", but it involves a certain set of rituals carried out in the process of the praying.

Another such word is *besharam*, which could be roughly translated as "shameless" or "without modesty", but which actually appears to be a word which encapsulates many cultural expectations and stereotypes and connotations.

Used sparingly and appropriately, all these categories of words left in the vernacular which are included in literature written in English are justifiable and even desirable. The criteria in judging the successful inclusion of these words would be relevance and clarity. Besides inclusion of words foreign to English[18], another linguistic experiment tried by many authors is the distortion[19] of or alteration or addition to English words. This, again, falls into several categories.

The misspelling of English words is one form of alteration. An example of this would be *saar* for "sir", which may be deliberately misspelled either to indicate the approximate sound of the mis-pronunciation of the word, or to indicate illiteracy, class, education levels, or regional dialectic influences. Often, misspelling is a successful device because in context, comprehension is seldom disrupted or threatened, and very often, a humorous note is added: "Excellent discipline, *sooparb* manners."[20]

Another form of alteration is in adding to words, for example, *gad-bad*, *politics-scholitics*, which is immensely common in bhasha. The latter two examples where the addition is an invented word made to rhyme with the English one is more often than not used to express contempt, disparagement, and discouragement, though sometimes it can be used in a playful vein. The alteration of English words also signals the possibility that these may be the English words which are included in vernacular speech.

One author who has revolutionised the use of the English language and made some of the most innovative and numerous of linguistic experiments, is Arundhati Roy. Her linguistic experiments are novel and largely successful; successful because they manage to infuse the English words with a South Asian (and perhaps Malayali) set of connotations without distorting the English language. The rest of this subsection will therefore focus on illustrating some of Roy's novel and potent linguistic experiments.

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[18] It must also be noted that the English Language may intend to or already have incorporated some such words.

[19] I use the word "distortion" without necessarily wishing to imply any misuse of the English language.

[20] Taken from Anita Rau Badami's Tamarind Mem (London: Viking-Penguin, 1996) 22.

Roy's novel The God of Small Things is full of capitalised words, and even phrases. "Crawling Backward Days", for instance, is Roy's invention of another way of referring to the days when the caste system was legal and Untouchables suffered a certain set of social indignities. "Love Laws" is another such example, "...Love Laws laid down who should be loved. And how. And how much."[21] Roy does not capitalise without attaching explanations and meanings, but once having capitalised and explained, she then uses these words or phrases again and again, thereby compiling a vocabulary of her own, creating a set of definitions pertinent only to her writing. The capitalising of words, which by Roy's usage almost amounts to sloganeering, enables Roy to encapsulate very complex cultural connotations in a compact manner, which makes for a very rich and unusual usage of the English language.

Not only does Roy capitalise as a set of referrals, she also does so to illustrate the workings of the minds of the twins, the protagonists in her novel. "If you ever...disobey me in Public, I will see to it that you are sent away..."[22] This chastising of the twins by their mother indicates to the children that "Public" is not only referring to the opposite of private, but refers to certain situations. "When Ammu was really angry, she said Jolly Well."[23] Equally, the capitalisation of the words "Jolly Well" indicates the perception of the twins of a certain mood of their mother's, a certain mental state which is signalled and conveyed by her use of those certain words.

Roy does not limit her system of referrals to known words. She creates new phrases through the telling of little side tales, tales which feed into the mosaic of background or emotional inheritance of her protagonists, and the consciousness of which is seen to affect them in their lives. "Pappachi's Moth" is one clear example of this, summing up in two words the tale of frustration and grief of the protagonists' grandparent, which filters through with all types of negative connotations into the existence of the protagonists, "A cold moth with unusually dense dorsal tufts landed on Rahel's heart."[24]

[21] Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things (London: Flamingo-HarperCollins, 1997) 177.
[22] Roy 148.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Roy 112.

One stylistic device which many authors employ, and which Roy exploits to perfection, is the combining of two or more English words to form a new word which taps into pre-existing codes or triggers a certain understanding. For example, "sourmetal smell", is explained by Roy through the process of association of experience, "like the steel bus rails and the smell of the bus conductor's hands from holding them."[25] This is a method which works very effectively, both linking the reader from the *a posteriori* to the *a priori*, as well as conjuring up a whole set of associated memories.

Roy is an author almost playful in her use of English. Besides capitalising words, Roy also reads words backwards, "BE INDIAN, BUY INDIAN." "NAIDNI YUB, NAIDNI EB." She combines words like "bluegreyblue" to describe the colour of a person's eyes, and she separates words, "A wake. A live. A lert." Through the use of all these devices, Roy deconstructs and decodes English words to enable a new and culturally different perception of them. In this, Roy is amongst the most successful of South Asian novelists for her mastery of the English language to the extent of being able to make it serve her ends in expressing and depicting a South Asian set of values and realities. This is the process of reconciliation of two realities being carried out painlessly and with true elegance. Roy has much explaining to do in the course of her novel – which does not make for easy reading – but she blends the education of the reader into overall the construction of the novel without running the risk of losing the narrative thread. "For me, the way words, punctuation and paragraphs fall on the page is important as well – the graphic design of the language. That was why the words and thoughts of Estha and Rahel, the twins, were so playful in the page.....I was being creative with their design."[26]

It would be useful to juxtapose Roy's linguistic experiments with those of another woman writer who also sought to express herself and her reality in a novel form. Ntozake Shange is an African American dramatist, who was very self-aware in her alteration of the standard English. Instead of capitalising words or phrases, she put names and other normally capitalised words in the lower-case, seeking the right to re-definition and re-identification. Shange experimented with the omission of punctuation

[25] Roy 72.

[26] Arundhati Roy, "The Salon Interview/Arundhati Roy" Salon Sept 1997. Online. 15 Oct 2001.

marks, intending to upset the ordinary perception of readers, derail expectations, and thereby deconstruct.

> "I cant count the number of times I have viscerally wanted to attack deform n maim the language I waz taught to hate myself in/ & yes/ in order to think n communicate the thoughts n feelings I want to think n communicate/ I haveta fix my tool to my needs/ I have to take it apart to the bone/ so that the malignancies/ fall away/ leaving us space to literally create our own image."[27]

This quick glance at Shange's work indicates the myriad of ways in which cross-cultural writers of literature in English experiment with methods, forms, and stylistic devices, to reconcile their subjects with their mediums. South Asian women writers, however, are notably far less aggressive or confrontational than one such as Shange in their linguistic experiments and usage of English. Theirs is seldom a challenge to the mainstream literature; their tone is persuasive rather than defiant. Anger is not a tone commonly found in literature by South Asian women writers. In fact, this lack of anger is a significant characteristic of South Asian women's works in the context of Third World women writers.

**Experimenting with Syntax**

The second form of experimentation as identified by Mukherjee is experimentation with syntax. Constructing what would be considered back-to-front sentences is a fairly common device because it suggests literal translation from a language which may differ tremendously in sentence construction from the English language. For example, this is a sentence in a novel spoken by a Sindhi horoscope reader/priest in his opening remarks to a client, " 'Nowadays, even for God, people will not pay,' Bhai Sahib grumbled."[28] Such sentences may deliberately be included by the author to indicate that the character is not a native English speaker, or it may indicate that the conversation is not actually taking place in English. In other similar instances, it is unclear as to whether or not such sentences constitutes the manner of expression most natural to the author, which is then transposed onto the character. It may also indicate that the author is partially under the influence of second language interference.

[27] Ntozake Shange, for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow hasn't been enuf (1978. London: Methuen, 1992) 68.
[28] Meira Chand, House of the Sun (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989) 10.

There are occasions where Indian-English syntax may come across to the native English speaker as quaint or amusing. For example, Bhai Sahib of the paragraph above, when recommending a sapphire to his client which would defend her against evil influences, says, "The quality is not mattering, only the stone is mattering."[29] This particular type of English is instantly recognisable to those who are familiar with Indian-flavoured English as being a very typical instance of how English is indeed commonly used (or misused) on the subcontinent. Deliberately incorporating grammatically incorrect English and experimenting with misspelling words may be one way of imparting a South Asian flavour to the writing, but as has been mentioned, it is also a literary device to indicate the social background or circumstances of the speaker.

One South Asian author who employs syntactic experimentation with a notable degree of success is Anjana Appachana. Appachana records or composes grammatically incorrect English in dialogue with such skill and consistency that she successfully depicts an Indian brand of English, and retains that note of authenticity. Appachana deploys this technique in a sympathetic manner, infusing humour without malice into her writing.

> "Mr Aggrawal chuckled. "Madrasis, they are speaking such badly pronouncing English."
>
> "Yes," Mr Singh guffawed. "These Yannas, they are saying yex for x, yam for am…when they are speaking English, no one is understanding."
>
> "How it matters what English they are speaking?" Mr Srivastava groaned. "All I am wanting is good Madrasi tenant for my barsati and only tenants I am getting are from north."
>
> Mr Singh nodded sympathetically. "I myself being Punjabi am seeing this."[30]

Appachana's other writings include instances of sentences in dialogue being short and abrupt, ungrammatically cut off, repetitive, circular in thrust, and generally capture in written form typical speech patterns. Appachana reconciles her two realities by rearranging English words to express Indian sentiments. Anjana Appachana is one of the few women writers who have succeeded in discovering and manipulating the porosity in the language boundaries[31] between English and the Indian languages.

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[29] Chand 12.
[30] This excerpt was quoted at some length in order to impart the full experience of this brand of English. Taken from Anjana Appachana's Incantations and Other Stories (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1992) 65.
[31] The term "porous language boundaries" was taken from Mukherjee, Perishable Empire.

## Experimenting with Imagery

The third mode of experimentation Mukherjee outlined involves the use of imagery. It may be imagined that the imagery and symbolism employed by South Asian women writers would differ tremendously from their European or American counterparts, for instance. The use of imagery is closely allied with cultural understanding of stories, myths, and legends. The role of mythology will be analysed in the last section of this chapter, and the use of imagery will be differed to the same section.

## Other Experiments

In concluding this study of the various stylistic experiments employed by South Asian women writers, it is worth mentioning two other authors, Bulbul Sharma and Rama Mehta, who have imaginatively employed techniques of bridging the cultural divide. Bulbul Sharma wrote a collection of short stories which was remarkable even in its form alone. The Anger of Aubergines. Stories of Women and Food intersperses short stories with recipes for the dishes mentioned in the stories. The stories highlight and analyse the relationship between South Asian women and food, and not only mentions a wide selection of dishes, but also explains the ingredients and methods. The recipes and the careful explanations convey a sense of the author attempting to communicate directly with her readers (particularly as Sharma includes a friendly and personal note in a direct address to her readers), and it also suggests that readers of different cultures could bridge their differences in coming together on such common grounds as culinary interests. It is amongst the most accessible of South Asian writings in English, structured, as it is, to *be* accessible.

Sharma's work is also significant because it can be seen to be forming the recently emerging pattern of contemporary women's writings, which explore new forms and styles which some women writers are most comfortable with and through which they feel best able to express themselves. African American women writers have also displayed many instances of including recipes and herbal concoctions in their young literary tradition, and otherwise using distinctively feminine modes to convey their multi-layered meanings.

Sharma draws attention to many aspects of the South Asian culture while writing in conventional English, using form and content, rather than medium or language, to communicate a South Asian ambience. This technique is contrary to many other authors who deliberately seek to keep the names of foods and dishes in the vernacular, but it is a technique no less workable. For Sharma's South Asian readers, there would be the pleasure of meeting the familiar in an unfamiliar language (or at least a language not commonly used to detail recipes and dishes), and to her non-South Asian readers, there would be the complementary pleasure in reading of the unfamiliar in a familiar language and syntax.

Apart from the style and literary devices used by South Asian women writers to infuse their writings with a sense of place, there is one more significant and oft overlooked technique of writing which manages to convey a way of thinking, a mindset, a mental approach to issues which is natural to people of certain ethnicities, for example, and wholly alien to people *not* of those ethnicities. The following illustrations of this technique are drawn from Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli, published in 1977.

Mehta's novel is written in fluent English, but it is also clearly the work of an author fluent in at least one other language judging from the sentence structures and manners of expression, which are far from being those of conventional standard English. Published in London, this novel describes a lifestyle which would be totally alien and unknown to the average Briton. Mehta attempts to convey to her readers the internal workings of a "haveli" in Rajasthan, a social set-up which is feudal in structure. To this end, Mehta retains rather than translate many terms, such as terms of kinship and address for example, "Bai Sa, Bua Sa, Kaki Sa, Mami Sa", the honorific "ji" attached to names, and also names of foods such as "roti" and "laddoo". Mehta does translate some phrases which she judges would be incomprehensible to her English-speaking readers, phrases which also convey the flavour of the place and period, such as the traditional blessing of "May you have eight sons", or "May the haveli flourish for ever". The narrative itself contains much explanation, ostentatiously for the benefit of Geeta, the haveli's newest arrival, but also for the benefit of the reader uninitiated in knowledge of Rajasthani and haveli customs.

However, Mehta's most successful experiments in conveying the practices and ideology which governs a haveli in Rajasthan lies in her characters' dialogue, which reveals their mental approach to issues, their expectations, their values, and their social norms. For example, the mistress of the haveli comes upon a quarrel between two of her servants, Lakshmi and Lakshmi's husband, Gangaram: "Leave my maid alone. Get out of here. Who are you to talk to her in this fashion in front of me? I have brought her up. How dare you raise your hand in my presence? Did I marry her to you that you treat her like this? Remember, she is your wife."[32]

It is edifying to follow the mistress's train of thought as she reacts to the tensed situation where Gangaram accuses Lakshmi of infidelity and adultery. Her very first command to Gangaram is given referring to Lakshmi as "my maid", not "your wife", which stresses the priority assigned to the relationships within the haveli, and stresses too the authority of the mistress, which is apparently above even the traditional conjugal authority of a man over his wife. Next, she forcibly reminds Gangaram of his lowly position with regard to herself, emphasizing not only her authority over Gangaram's wife, but also over Gangaram himself. She goes on to say, "I have brought her up." This seemingly is a fact which carries much weight and substantiates her claim both to the authority she assumes as well as to her role as Lakshmi's defender. The mistress's anger flashes out again as she rebukes the man servant for forgetting himself and what is due to her as a mistress in daring to "raise his hand in [her] presence". Only after all this does she finally mention the fact that Lakshmi is Gangaram's wife, and once again, with reference to the part she played in the arrangement, which almost implies a transfer of ownership, and which certainly implies that the duty Gangaram owes to his wife is secondary to the duty he owes to his mistress.

In all her arguments, the mistress of the haveli reveals the control the haveli has over the personal lives of its inhabitants, the internal hierarchy of power, and the demand for loyalty, obedience and awareness of one's proper place and position on the part of servants. This short passage alone illustrates the social values of such a society. Mehta writes in English, but in certain sentences, she appears to be mentally translating her ideas from another language into English, such as "Did I marry her to you *that* you

[32] Rama Mehta, Inside the Haveli (London: Women's Press,1971) 70.

treat her like this?" [italics mine]. Although the general purport of the sentence is easily understood, it is a rather odd manner of expression.

Having examined all manners of experiments with the usage of the English language by South Asian women writers, it would also be instructive to turn our attention to how the writings are constructed, the framework within which all these literary experiments are made.

**Forms and Frames**

It is unsurprising that even today, many successful contemporary South Asian novelists are also short story writers. In terms of historical and geographical co-ordinates[33], short stories differ from novels and even from novellas in that they need not be (although they often are) rooted in a particular time and place.

> "The difference between the novel and the short story is primarily in the contrasting treatment of the same material. The same personages may appear equally in short stories, or in a novel, but the point of view is entirely different, for the short story observes people from the outside, the novel from the inside. The short story writer describes impressions of life which he [sic] has seen, the novelist sympathetically portrays the life he has entered into and made his own."[34]

Although there have undoubtedly been some South Asian women writers who appreciate the differences between short stories and novels, and have skilfully employed the short story form, there have also been others who seem to use the short story as a way of trying their hand at writing, as a preparatory ground to writing a full length novel. Further, a fair number of South Asian women writers appear to either deploy the short-story form simply as a mini-novel, or to regard the novel as a extended version of a short-story. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (a diasporic author from USA) goes so far as to have produced one story in her short story collection which she then used again, with the same plot and characters, and even using many of the exact same sentences in a later novel, merely embellishing the original short story and detailing the scenes a little more. The entirely differing point of view as explained in the quotation above, which

[33] Mukherjee. Twice Born.
[34] A. Sherwin Cody, "The Difference between the Novel and the Short Story." How to Write Fiction: Especially the Art of Short Story Writing: A Practical Study of Techniques (London: Bellairs & Co., 1895).

differentiates and sets the two forms of writing apart, are completely lost in Divakaruni's handling of her material.

Juxtaposing the following quotes will provide a clearer idea as to the extent to which Divakaruni reuses material and reproduces sentences verbatim, with no appreciable change at all in view point. In Arranged Marriage (a short story collection), the protagonists are Anju (married to Sunil) and Runu (married to Ramesh), while in Sister of My Heart (a novel) published 2 years later, the protagonists are Anju (again married to Sunil) and Sudha (married to another Ramesh).

From Arranged Marriage: "There is a lot of disturbance on the line. I can hardly hear Runu's voice as she says hello...'What's wrong, Runu? I've been worried sick. Is it Ramesh? Or your mother-in-law?' 'No,' says Runu, 'They are fine,' she adds with venom.....Then she says, 'They want to kill my baby. '*What*?' I am sure I heard it wrong. 'They want me to have an abortion.'"

From Sister of My Heart: "There is a lot of disturbance on the line. I can hardly hear Sudha's voice as she says hello. 'Sudha, what's wrong? I've been worried sick. Has something happened to Ramesh or your mother-in-law?' 'No,' Sudha says, 'They are fine,' she adds with venom.....Then she says, 'They want to kill my baby. '*What*?' I am sure I heard it wrong. 'My mother-in-law wants me to have an abortion.'"

(The fact that Divakaruni lifts entire scenarios out of one story to reuse it in another, implicitly conveys to her readers that such a scenario is one Divakaruni emphasizes as a commonplace one, possibly one which is both widespread and frequent.)

Many of the contemporary South Asian short story writers write with a particular and somewhat narrowly specified theme in mind. For example, Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies deals mainly with the adjustment Bengalis have to make when making the transition from a life in the East to a life in the West, while Shauna Singh Baldwin's English Lessons and Other Stories revolves around a similar theme – that of Sikhs learning to cope with life in Canada and reconcile two identities. In writing a number of short stories with a common theme, these writers attempt to present a number of facets of the same social issue, and consequently, a number of ways their protagonists have chosen to deal with these issues. This technique has become increasingly popular and even celebrated of late. It is a form of framing not only tales, but of framing the diasporic experience.

The latent danger in this technique is that there exists within it, an underlying tendency, or at least temptation, to reduce complex social issues into bite-size (or at least short-story length) episodes. This "neatly-packaged" style of writing seldom progresses beyond being an exercise in depicting a social problem – as skilfully, lyrically, authentically, and completely as possible, but nevertheless depicting a definite *problem*, not simply a scenario – and then suggesting or at least portraying various solutions or possible methods of coping. I would argue that this very form of writing is a potentially limiting one because it restricts the worldview of the writers and encourages a prescriptive and oversimplified portrayal of lifestyles (either workable or non-workable), trapping the writer into a continual process of categorisation. However, it must be kept in mind that short stories are more apt to embody timeless themes and are generally less dependent on social context than novels.[35] Consequently, "short stories are more likely to identify characters in archetypal terms and are more patterned and aesthetically unified than novels are."[36]

Not all South Asian women writers subscribe to this technique, which moreover, appears more popular with the diasporic writers than those writing from within South Asia.[37] To take an example of an excellent short story collection which produces archetypal characters but which is far from limited in its content and depth by its form, we may turn to Appachana's Incantations and Other Stories. This collection of short stories is not constructed thematically, appearing instead rather more like a kaleidoscope of the social scene, giving the reader intriguing glimpses of a broad cross-section of Indian day-to-day life. This collection includes a tale of a young daughter-in-law struggling to cope with traditional familial pressures while maintaining her identity as a autonomous career woman, stories of parent-child relationships in a rapidly changing social and economic environment, the tale of a young girl traumatised by the knowledge of a beloved sister victimised by repeated and regular rapes, and perhaps most charming of all, it includes the caricature of Sharmaji. Clearly, Appachana realised the potential of this fictional character, and given the structure of her short story collection, was at liberty to include not one, but two stories of Sharmaji, the brazen, talkative, perpetually-wronged Indian clerk, merrily exploiting the inefficiency of Indian bureaucracy. In her

[35] Charles E. May, ed., The New Short Story Theories (Ohio: Ohio UP, 1994) xxvi.
[36] Ibid.
[37] The differences between these two groups of writers will be further explored in Chapter Three.

writing, Appachana reveals herself to be a humorous, perceptive, and sympathetic writer, observant but never prescriptive. Her stories are open-ended, non-moralistic both in tone and conclusion, and frequently tinged with amusement.

Many South Asian women writers may have written collections of short stories, but few have yet utilised the montage form or the short-story-sequence. A montage differs from a collection in that each story, complete as it is in itself, is also linked in some way to the other stories, either through the plot, or through the characters, or both, eventually forming a unified whole. An example of this can be found in the work of an African American writer who first wrote a short story sequence because she was not certain of being able to write a whole novel, and thus chose to begin by writing short stories. Gloria Naylor wrote The Women of Brewster Place, a sequence of short stories where each story told the tale of different women living in the same block of apartments called Brewster Place. Naylor repeated the montage in another piece of writing, Bailey's Café, where each character who ended up at Bailey's Café had his/her own chapter and story. In both cases, Naylor added concluding chapters which brought all the characters together at one time and in one location, thus completing the montage in full. This stylistic device has yet to be widely adopted by South Asian short story writer. Given the increasingly favoured style of writing short stories along a single major theme, the montage which encourages interaction between the characters of the various isolated stories, may serve to broaden the scope of the writing and reverse any tendencies to stereotype.

However, it is interesting to note that the montage form or short-story-sequence is gradually beginning to be employed by some South Asian women writers. Tahira Naqvi (a Pakistani author) and Thrity Umrigar (an Indian author) have both published works in 2001 which could justifiably be regarded as montages, in slightly differing forms. Umrigar's 'montage' is similar to that of Naylor's, and is a novel formed out of a series of chapters, each chapter devoted to individual Parsi residents in an apartment block in Bombay. Naqvi's short story collection could be considered a montage by virtue of the characters in each short story being related (sometimes tenuously) to the characters in the other stories, thus forming a network across the collection.

In both cases above (in Naqvi's work as well as in Umrigar's), neither author appears to have set out to use the short-story-sequence – it was almost by chance their writings form a montage. Umrigar's book is in fact titled, "Bombay Time. A Novel." South Asian women writers seem to have experimented at greater depth with the use of language than they have with the narrative form or structure. Much fiction written in English by South Asian women writers is relatively linear in form and straightforward in plot construction. Flashbacks to the past in the memories of various characters, or characters digressing from the main story line to relate stories, are common enough, but they usually feed directly into the main story line rather than forming sub-plots or counter plots.

There have however been several experiments with interesting forms, and the following paragraphs will provide some thumbnail sketches of examples of literary structural experiments tried by South Asian women writers; some of which have been successful, and some of which have only been partially successful.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in Sister of My Heart for instance, employed in a rather unsophisticated manner, a form of writing in which the two narrative voices of her protagonists took turns to be heard, each in alternate chapters. The form itself may have worked except for the fact that both narrative voices appeared to be one and the same character, a character with two names, the dual accounts neither conflicting nor individualised, the two opinions simply two halves of a whole. This somewhat over-simplified attempt at even-handedly presenting two protagonists did, however, succeed to a certain extent in juxtaposing two very different possible lives led by the women of one family.

Arundhati Roy portrayed most of her novel through the eyes of children, thus enabling her to question the most basic of traditional assumptions, even inverting them, turning them on their heads with a child-like playfulness, to incredibly strong effect. Roy's novel was constructed architecturally, influenced by her early training as an architect. Like rooms being built around other rooms, each character, furtively grinding away at his/her personal axe, contributes to constructing the catastrophe. Each action, petty or significant, goes a little way further towards exposing and straining the faultlines of the society, until the hapless Velutha, who is as much a victim of

circumstances as he is everybody's victim, is eventually murdered. Roy's novel is also largely constructed back-to-front. It begins with the climax and oscillates back and forth in time, back to delve into the past for whys, and forwards into the present to see how the climax – a turning point in the life of many of the characters involved – has affected those who survived. Roy's time frame is not of a past-present-future, but of the hidden past-past-present. With the destruction of Velutha and the consequent crumbling of other sections of the social edifice of Ayemenon, Roy's novel exposed the hidden ramifications of the social structure and the effect it has on its individuals.

Another author whose writings dealt with the hidden past and the guilty secrets of communities is Anjana Appachana. However, the construction of Appachana's Listening Now is not along a time frame, but along a frame of characters. This long novel of 510 pages is segmented into nine sections, most of which are named after the women characters who feature significantly in the life of the chief protagonist, Padma. Each section presents Padma's story from the point of view of the character it was named after, inviting the reader to take different angles of viewing, and offering the perspective of distinctly differing personalities. In each section, the story is reiterated, but the plot is revealed a little further as more and more pieces of the mosaic of Padma's life fall into place. This story line is neither linear nor circular; it is a spiralling one. The story is told and retold several times over, each retelling taking the plot a little closer to the conclusion. (Retelling and reconstruction in the work of South Asian women writers will be discussed at greater length in the following section.)

A South Asian novelist whose forte is form rather than language, and who habitually uses the structure of her narrative to emphasise her point, is Githa Hariharan. One of the most eloquent of structures found in her novel The Thousand Faces of Night is the protagonist's communications with her husband. (The very title of this novel is reminiscent of The Thousand and One Nights which also features a wife attempting to hold her husband's attention and to communicate with him.[38]) The conjugal exchanges in Hariharan's novel, (for that is what they are, exchanges rather than dialogues or conversations) slice repeatedly into the narrative, rupturing the flow of Devi's life, jolting and abrupt. Hariharan times the insertion of these exchanges to perfection,

[38] Hariharan's 1999 novel, When Dreams Travel, deals directly with the characters from A Thousand and One Nights. In this novel, Hariharan deconstructs the original story of Sheherezade.

reflecting Devi's experience of married life with a husband who appears briefly and disappears frequently.

This particular novel of Hariharan's comprises three parts. We first encounter Devi in America through an omniscient narrator, but as soon as Hariharan returns Devi to India, Devi's voice begins to tell her own story, taking over from the voice of the omniscient narrator. This change in narrative voice is significant because by so doing, Hariharan distances Devi from her American experience and hints that for Devi, her life like her voice only becomes distinct when she is home in India. In Parts One and Two, Hariharan produces a heavy flow of smooth narrative, merging Devi's memories with her present, mingling fairytales with Devi's reality. This seamless intermingling is indicative of Devi being all but overwhelmed by tales, submerged into momentary forgetfulness of reality just as the reader is submerged into momentary forgetfulness of the main story line. In the third and final part however, the stories end for Devi when she leaves her husband. In this final part of Hariharan's novel, there are no more legends of princesses and splendours, no more fairy tales, perhaps signalling Devi's choice to turn from fairy tales of her girlhood and hopes, to confront the stark reality of the present she has chosen.

Hariharan is one of the few contemporary South Asian novelists to experiment with the narrative voice. The majority of the South Asian writers of the 1950s and 1960s writing English fiction, wrote in the voice of the omniscient narrator, distancing themselves from their characters, but selecting this as a position from which to write all-knowingly, to present an aerial view so to speak, of the scenes they observed. The omniscient narrator was a natural choice for the authors of this age, reflecting as it does their concerns with the wider political and social issues. As we have noted earlier in the chapter, there was a shift of focus from the community to the individual in the next two decades of writing English fiction, and this in turn has been reflected in the shift of the narrative voice from the omniscient to the first person narrator. Moreover, where personas were of both genders in the Fifties and Sixties, increasingly in the following decades, the personas chosen by South Asian women writers were women. It is thought that the contemporary novels of South Asian women writers are many of them at least partially autobiographical.

By the 1970s, there was also a definite pattern emerging of South Asian women writers projecting their childhood memories and experiences into their novels, drawing upon this rich and relatively untapped vein of material for their writings. Anita Rau Badami in Tamarind Mem for example, uses the first person narrator to tell the tale of a girl growing up as a daughter of a strong but unfulfilled mother, whose husband's job on the railways meant a life of continual uprooting and resettling. Sharma Futehally, in Tara Lane also employs the first person narrator to portray the life of a sheltered and privileged girl growing up to take her place in a sheltered and privileged world created by her menfolk, a persona haunted by an active conscience and burdened with the guilt of class privileges, yet terrified of disrupting the delicately balanced equilibrium of her comfortable life. Anjana Appachana also uses the first person narrator predominantly, but hers is a slightly different usage in that Listening Now is a novel with many first person narrators. Appachana democratically hands the narrative voice from character to character, and this structure highlights the complex, confusing, and close-knit gallimaufry of voices and influences in the life of her protagonist.

A recent diasporic voice on the literary scene, that of Meera Syal, offers yet another twist on the use of the first person narrator device. Syal in her most recent work, Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee has three first person narrators (as well as an omniscient narrator to organise the progression of novel), but she shows that none of the three are reliable narrators, that each *believes* they are speaking the truth reliably, but in actuality, none are able to see the complete picture. Syal's undermining of the reliability of the narrator questions the reliability of the opinions and ideas which she has been fed and or which she has otherwise imbibed. Syal's work also questions the validity of the role models and moral code taught to South Asian women. This lead us into the final section of this chapter, which will take a leaf out of Syal's book, and examine the myth of the myth.

## The Myth of the Myth

Story telling has been identified by South Asian women writers as part of the oral tradition, a tradition predominantly practised by women, and one of the traditions common to women of all classes and castes. In a patriarchal culture which imposes

many and varied restrictions on women, story telling serves to inform while concealing, to inspire and caution, to threaten and entreat. Story-telling is a very important aspect of South Asian culture, being a indispensable tool of communication in a world of oblique and unspoken rules, imbibed and ingrained fears and taboos, unwritten but inflexible behavioural boundaries. It features most prominently in the women's world where straightforward and frank discourse may be neither approved of nor permitted. Like the African Americans who evolved forms of signifying in language in order to retain, conceal, and convey meanings in the face of oppression while escaping detection and punishment, South Asian women have also evolved their own forms of signifying, one of which is story telling.[39]

Story-telling involves the recounting of legends, myths, and also the tales of one's family and familial history. Mukherjee commented upon the use of myths in South Asian writing as the part of the novel which was *not* imported. In all other respects, she noted that the South Asian novelist was at liberty to take a leaf out of the book of his or her Western counterpart, but in recounting legends and tales, South Asian writers had to turn to their own culture. It has been argued that this is a relatively comfortable situation for South Asian novelists because South Asians are closer to their mythologies than many others, and experience their legends and tales on a day-to-day basis rather than in any textbook. Myths are very widespread across South Asia, and many cultures and regions may share the same mythologies, but these could appear in many variations.

Mukherjee identified two ways in which myths are used by South Asian writers; the "digressional technique", which is the story told within the story and generally used as mini-moral lessons or fables, and the "structural parallel", where a mythical situation underlies the whole or a part of the novel. She further noted that the use of mythology by South Asian writers may either be conscious or subconscious. As a literary device, myths are generally used to enrich and enhance a tale, by extending the understanding of the reader and tapping into an already existing knowledge or set of ideologies and cultural norms. Using myths as touchstones or reference points may be a quick way of neatly presenting a complex social situation. Myths work on the basis of readers and

[39] Henry Louis Jr. Gates, Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988).

authors having common assumptions, depending upon the reader to make the connection between the new protagonist and the mythical character.

Critics, both Western and Eastern, have commented upon the danger of myths which both provide and reinforce archetypes and obsolete moral codes, thereby informing, shaping and exploiting expectations. "Few myths have been more advantageous to the ruling class than the myth of woman; it justifies all privileges and even authorises their abuse."[40] The proximity of South Asians to their myths and legends, the interweaving of such tales into the fabric of ordinary living, may therefore represent a problem. Myths, by their nature, are given to abstraction and over-simplification. "Easy binaries that are deployed in explaining the position of Indian women have been habitually the ideological enclaves of exploitation."[41] If, as said above, it is predominantly the *women* who tell the stories and recount, augment, and otherwise keep the myths alive, than it may be ironic that it is the women who, partially at least, forge the very chains which may be used to bind them.

Story telling is so integral in the lives of South Asians that many South Asian women writers explain that it is common practise for girls to be named after heroines from myths and stories. Names like Devi (princess) and Sita (princess and wife to Rama) are common examples, and women are encouraged to live up to these names. (I have not yet come across a case of a woman being named "Kali" after the powerful and fearsome mother/warrior/avenger goddess.) Vrinda Nabar warns against underestimating the hold that myths have over the minds of South Asians, and tells us that when she was a child, she was "a victim to [the Sita myth's] hypnotic charm" and plagued her parents to change her own name to Sita.[42]

The effect of these tales and myths, the magic of them if one may call it that, is so pervasive that the grown woman may not manage to completely shrug off the aura of fanstasy or the mythical associations, and all too often, as a consequence, life could then contain a series of disillusionments. Githa Hariharan in The Thousand Faces of Night gives us adequate illustration of this. From her novel which employs the digressional

[40] Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953) 74.
[41] Jasodhara Bagchi, Indian Women. Myth and Reality (Hyderabad, India: Sangam, 1995) 2.
[42] Vrinda Nabar, Caste as Woman (New Delhi: Penguin, 1995) 113.

technique, it appears that the fairy tales told to little girls mostly concern marriages, with the implication that this should be the climax of a woman's life and ambition. Marriage certainly features as a prominent theme in South Asian women's literature, but although the authors do indicate the centrality of marriage in their women protagonists' lives, they constantly write of the unfairy-tale-like quality of life after weddings, insisting that marriage brings a whole new set of difficulties and problems to be dealt with, rather than solving any. South Asian women writers consciously choose to portray the many unhappinesses which usually lie in store for women after being given in marriage. These novels depart from the practise of the earliest novels written by women, gothic novels of romance and horror, which customarily depicted the marriage of the heroine to her desired hero as the destination of her life's journey, and as the climax and close of the novel.

The Thousand Faces of Night is a novel which incorporates an exceptionally large number of fables and myths. The tales told by Pati, the protagonist's beloved grandmother, almost without exception, are embellished with material riches and opulence, "Priceless gems, the size of ripe pumpkins, hung at the tips of chandeliers; the marble pillars shone like mirrors".[43] The effect of such exaggerated embellishment is a dangerous one, imparting as it does the implicit message that good behaviour (which includes adherence to and acceptance of traditions) will be rewarded with riches, and that womanly virtue is defined as patient endurance, self-sacrifice, suffering, and obedience. Stories are told to children in order to educate, chastise, discipline, and curiously enough, entreat them to acceptance, more, to an accustomed acceptance. The child who questioned the logic of love as a result of marriage, is told, "When you marry, Devi, your heart moves up to your shoulder and slips down your arm to the palm of your hand. The hand that holds yours tightly as you walk around the fire receives it like a gift. You can't do anything about it: when you marry, it goes to him and you never get it back".[44] This fanciful explanation which is passed off as rationale is so deeply ingrained in Devi that as a newly married woman, she is "bewildered by my own response, my acceptance of our nightly rituals".[45]

[43] Githa Hariharan, The Thousand Face of Night (London: Women's Press, 1996) 28.
[44] Hariharan 37.
[45] Hariharan 50.

Devi, fed as she had been on a diet of fantasies, is apt to accept the tales she hears in too literal a manner, to ascribe too much credence to these tales. She even reaches for more to sustain her, drinking in Baba's stories with avidity although at that point, she is no longer a child. For Devi, the boundary between reality and fantasy alternatively blurs and re-emerges with painful vividity when applied to her daily life.

Manisha Roy, in her analysis of Bengali women, gives an example of the social and practical uses of this cultural ritual of disillusionment, which Hariharan had described in her fiction. Roy points out that a young bride crammed with expectations of the perfect husband, as is common enough in Bengali culture, and will necessarily undergo a sense of disappointment in the early days of marriage.[46] (Roy also identified that men do not appear to labour under the same illusions and are more inclined to regard marriage in the light of a necessary arrangement rather than a romantic attachment, "marriage as a necessity, a milestone like any other.") However, Roy also explained that in a culture where the girls are aware they will be married by arrangement, these myths and romantic illusions appear to help prepare them to accept such arrangements with as much equanimity as possible, and as such, have their uses as well as pitfalls.

Vrinda Nabar, however, insists that the influence of the myths is an insidious one, and serves to strengthen the fears and illusions which are used to govern women and instil docility, "there is a fundamental parity between our perpetuation of mythical stereotypes like Sita[47] and Draupadi[48] and our present-day reluctance to admit any change that threatens the androcentric, patriarchal set-up."[49]

"In that country
where doors are adorned
with flowers and mango-leaves
the houses decorated
with lighted lamps,
in that country
the woman is still a slave.
Where Sita had to pass
The ordeal by fire

[46] Manisha Roy, Bengali Women (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1975).
[47] Sita: wife of Rama in the Ramayana, abducted by Ravana and required to prove her chastity by walking through fire (the agni-pariksa).
[48] Draupadi: a princess won by Arjuna and shared amongst the five Pandava brothers.
[49] Nabar 118.

> To prove she was a pativrata
> Ahilya[50] to sacrifice herself
> to Indra's sexual desire,
> and Draupadi was divided up
> among five men,
> the woman of that country
> still remains a slave..."[51]

Nevertheless, both Roy and Nabar in their arguments, and Hariharan in her fiction, strongly support the suggestion that myths do indeed form the identity of Indian women: "Indian womanhood is constituted by a multi-layered accretion of myths. From the ways in which Indian womanhood has been 'invented', 'imagined', and 'defined', a map may be drawn of the contours of class formation in modern India."[52]

"Authentic portrayals of women began to appear in English fiction [in the 50s and 60s], but the literary prototype into which the female figure was moulded can be traced back to the Sita/Savitri/Sakuntala models."[53] Being only too aware that many female figures can indeed be traced back to the Sita/Savitri/Sakuntala models, South Asian novelists of today regularly portray their protagonists grappling with the problem of reconciling these time-honoured role models with the changing times and their changing needs. Although many tales are still told of exceptional women, goddesses, princesses, selfless wives of holy men, and women of extraordinary beauty and/or virtue, contemporary South Asian women novelists appear to be reacting to the way such tales permeate their lives by consistently bringing to their readers realistic, ordinary protagonists, confused, struggling and erring. With the rise of authentic portrayals of women in fiction, the influence of myths has receded slightly into the background and became far more a digressional technique than a structural one.

As much as the finding of a voice (and being articulate) is the finding of autonomous identity, retelling is the process of deconstruction of gender and racial myths, and of reconstruction, the unveiling or resurrecting of other stories, real life stories. It is a characteristic of South Asian women's writings that generations of

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[50] Ahilya: a woman seduced by the god Indra who disguised himself as Ahilya's husband.
[51] Hira Bansode, "The Slave." Trans. from Marathi. Taken from Vrinda Nabar, Woman as Caste (New Delhi: Penguin, 1995) 118.
[52] Bagchi 1.
[53] Vijayalakshi Seshadri, The 'New' Woman in Indian-English Women Writers (New Delhi, India: BR, 1995).

women appear in their tales, inheriting emotional legacies, their lives interwoven and interconnected. These are the myths and tales of their mothers and foremothers which have long remained silenced and overshadowed, and which the writers are now identifying as sources of influences. Legends may have receded into the background, but stories of one kind or another appear to continue being interwoven into the fabric of South Asian women's perceptions and realities.

Contemporary women writers are even beginning to rewrite myths, to expose the myth of the myth, as part of their attempt to retell tales from their perspective and in the light of their experiences as women. Retelling tales features significantly in the writings of South Asian women novelists who seek to tell of a patriarchal society in the voices of its women, retelling in a form and a language peculiar to women. In some of her short stories, Shashi Deshpande retells myths from the point of view of mythical characters like Karna and Kunti, who speak of other mythical characters like Draupadi, Ghandari, Arjuna, and Bhima, as contemporaries.[54] Deshpande retells in an attempt to recreate the mythical atmosphere in present times and invites the reader to experience the depth of emotion which she imagines must accompany the events and occurrences. By so doing, Deshpande seeks to bring her readers closer to experiencing the myths by fleshing out the abstractions of the myths and making the characters both emotional and introspective.

However, in her short stories, Deshpande does not realise the potential power of retelling to the full. Deshpande neither exposes nor undermines the implication of a myth, as Hariharan, for example, does. In juxtaposing the fairy tales and myths with the life of her protagonist, Hariharan shows how distanced these myths are from the reality of day-to-day life. The answers given by the story-teller when questioned by the child about the story are fanciful, illogical answers, in keeping with the tone of the tale. Hariharan embellishes her tales lavishly, opulently, and even lovingly, but by emphasising and even exaggerating the splendours, she is signalling to her reader the absurdity of attempting to emulate heroines who dwelt in and under such different circumstances. In The Thousand Faces of Night, we see that the protagonist Devi is conscious and aware of the huge influence myths have had over her, and therefore, her

[54] Shashi Deshpande, The Intrusion and Other Stories (New Delhi, India: Penguin, 1993).

declaration, "If I was going to play out a travesty of the myths that have filled my childhood, I would tear aside all pretence..."[55] is ironical in the extreme. For Devi, the arranged marriage was part of the childhood fairytale which as an adult, she was encouraged to accept and enact. This further blurs the boundary between reality and fantasy, suggesting how closely entwined the two can be for even for the modern South Asian women.

Not only are the legends and myths of long ago retold by South Asian women writers, but their own stories are also constantly retold and revised. The tale of Mayamma, another character in The Thousand Faces of Night, is retold by Mayamma herself and no longer by the omniscient narrator in the later stages of her life. Hariharan, in permitting Mayamma a voice, acknowledges the development of this character's self-assertion after passing through the stages of being a daughter, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother, and eventually a widow. The retelling enhances the first version with further details; Hariharan achieving through the written form a fairly credible reproduction of an oral tradition with its multiple layers of stories within other stories.

Many South Asian women novelists make no secret of their love for myths and stories and fairy tales, but increasingly, the purpose of their writing is to tell their own stories, stories which are testimonies of strength and struggles, not fantasies of wondrous beauty and unimaginable riches. It is clear that many South Asian women writers are willing to toy with fables, myths and legends, to not only appropriate but also reinvent these aspects of their culture. Far from seeking to escape the reality of daily life in their story-telling, South Asian women writers use their writings to analyse and disentangle the complexities and conflicts of their lives and problems. Their narrative voices are clear and articulate, and increasingly unafraid to be less than perfect, ready to question and experiment and tell their tales in their own particular language.

[55] Hariharan 23.

## Conclusion

The fast-growing literary subculture of South Asian women's literature in English has not enjoyed unimpeded development. The very act of writing in English, the connotations of such a choice, its implications on authorial intent and readership, all render this literary subculture particularly susceptible to controversy, quite apart from the literary and linguistic problems of expression experienced by writers. The resultant hybridity of language produced in the work of contemporary South Asian women writers is perhaps the medium evolved to cope with the interrogation of patriarchal expectations and traditional norms, and self-redefinition. It is undeniable that there is a degree of exotica in both the language and the content of some South Asian women's writings, but as has been illustrated, there is also a tremendous contribution both to English and to Literature in English on the part of the better South Asian women writers. Such writers continue to grapple with the challenge of expressing a South Asian reality in the English language.

Contemporary South Asian women writers have come a long way from the classical *Bildungsroman* plot of the western novel. There are now certain identifiable defining characteristics of this literary subculture, one of which is the focus on South Asian women. Another defining characteristic which has been discussed is the inclination to a homogenised portrayal of the Indian subcontinent. "Certain words, objects and concept are associated with India in the popular imagination outside the country, which the writer in English may be tempted to deploy as short-cuts to create an ambience."[56] Such 'short-cuts' may undermine the development of the language in South Asian Literature in English, but there is a still more serious consequence of the over-usage of short cuts – the limitation of themes and topic to those which can be readily identifiable as belonging to this genre, at the expense of other themes which become sidelined or neglected because they do not provide such convenient literary short-cuts.

A third defining characteristic of South Asian women's literature in English is its inclination to posit protagonists as victims (which will be discussed at greater length

[56] Mukherjee, Perishable Empire 200.

in Chapter Two). The popular myths of South Asia contribute to the mindset, attitudes and expectations of South Asian men and women, relegating women to specific positions and roles in the society. In rewriting and deconstructing myths, South Asian women play their role in creating and highlighting certain elements of South Asian identity and positionality. They also play their role as storytellers, contributing to the telling and retelling of tales, telling the tale-within-the tale, creating multiple layers of stories told by multiple narrative voices.

It is particularly interesting that although the myths do not portray the women characters as victims (in fact, they present them as paragons), South Asian women writers have mostly picked up on the inherent or implicit devaluing of women in the myths, questioning the roles women play and the expectations women are permitted to entertain, which conspire to the victimising of women. The manner and depth of this literary questioning of women's roles form the primary focus of the following chapter. The irony is that amidst the questioning of women's roles, the portrayal of women as victims continues to be the most pervasive of themes in the genre.

# CHAPTER TWO: SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN

***"Leaving behind nights of terror and fear<br>I rise<br>Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear<br>I rise<br>Bringing the gifts my ancestors gave<br>I am the dream and the hope of the slave<br>I rise<br>I rise<br>I rise."***

*-Maya Angelou-*

## Signpost

A primary concern of South Asian women's literature is the position of women in their community. The writings of South Asian women are therefore inclined to pay close attention to the multiple roles played by and expected of women. Their literature reflect the complexities of the many relationships, familial or otherwise, which South Asian women daily deal with, bringing home the point that the South Asian woman seldom, if ever, acts in isolation. Being in a network or a mesh of relationships with others, her every action and ambition has ramifications and consequences.

South Asian women writers have long highlighted the fact that the South Asian woman is customarily defined in relation to others, and most frequently, in relation to her men folk. South Asian women writers have consistently highlighted the struggles of women to define themselves and achieve greater degrees of autonomy, while continuing to hold fast to family ties, traditional codes of ethics, and even to myths of womanhood. Most contemporary South Asian women writers have written emphasising the individuality of women, attempting to give their women protagonists the power of self-definition, or at least self-*redefinition*. However, at the same time, many South Asian women writers posit their female protagonists as victims in their societies, seeming almost to equate the very position of women with that of victimhood.

This chapter aims to investigate how South Asian women writers posit their women protagonists. The chapter will begin with a sketch of the general practices of patriarchy in South Asia, and women's roles and positions in such societies. The next section considers the position of women within the social structure of their families and/or communities, which is paralleled by their position in the physical structure of their houses and homes.

The following section will then turn to a study of the protagonists of two novels which depict South Asian women wishing to challenge patriarchal norms. This study will trace the motives and struggles of these protagonists and evaluate how well each fares. A detailed study of Shashi Deshpande's oeuvre will follow in the penultimate section, chosen because Deshpande is an author who has been writing consistently and prolifically for three decades, and moreover is a writer concerned with the *social* changes faced by middle class Indian women. The chapter will conclude with examining how other contemporary South Asian women writers, writing of South Asian women, position their characters.

## Women in South Asia

In this section, it is important to keep in mind that the position of women varies tremendously from country to country and from region to region, and is also highly dependent on religion, class, caste, and social status as well as geographical location. Much of what will be described in this section will largely be the case for the Hindu Indian woman, but it may also be fairly applicable (to varying degrees) to other South Asian women. This section primarily intends to describe some of the social norms which the South Asian women writers are challenging.

There is little doubt that South Asia is a region undergoing swift social changes, but this section will focus on discussing the orthodox ideology that has created the social context in which South Asian women have long been positioned. It will also discuss the traditional and culturally created roles assigned to women, roles which are of course subject to variations and permutations, depending on the set of individual circumstances.

For South Asian women, Simone de Beauvoir's articulation of patriarchy's ascribed position for women would be particularly pertinent: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute, she is the other."[1] South Asian women of various regions, cultures, and religions have been portrayed in their literature as being regarded, since time immemorial, as vessels of men, as part of their husbands, as properties of their families, as producers of heirs and descendants, to varying degrees. It is necessary to note that the South Asian women themselves have also long subscribed to the same worldview. In Chapter One, it has been discussed that South Asian women have imbibed the myths of womanhood along with the legends of Sita, Draupadi, Damayanti, amongst other heroines of old, and this explains in part the ready acceptance of some women of their traditionally inferior role. In the challenging of these legends, in the rewriting of tales, in the reinterpretation of the virtues of heroines, some women are seen to be challenging their time-honoured world-view, or at least, demanding modifications, revisions and alterations.

"Discrimination between the sexes in India begins at birth, or even before it."[2] The discrimination between men and women in India and in the rest of South Asia is generally marked, definite, and largely non-negotiable. In explaining the Hindu hierarchy of women, Esha Dey explains that biology is a woman's destiny, and further describes the position of women as "the metaphysical nothingness of woman" who is always a low-caste.[3] In the Hindu hierarchy, women are not credited as being autonomous beings, but have to be under the rule of a man. According to the laws of Manu[4], "no female – whether girl, young woman or old woman – was allowed independence of action. A woman was to be under her father's control in childhood, her husband's once married, and her son's when widowed."[5]

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[1] Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex Trans. and ed. H.M.Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape. 1968).
[2] Vrinda Nabar, Caste as Woman (New Delhi: Penguin, 1995) 51.
[3] Esha Dey, Women in Fiction and Fiction by Women eds., C.D. Narasimhaiah and C.N.Srinath (Mysore, India: Mysore-Dhvunyaloka, 1986).
[4] Manu (literally means "the wise one") refers to Manusmrti – a treatise (200BC – AD200) covering all aspects to the life of a Hindu, and which has acquired the status of a sacred text.
[5] Nabar 66.

Writers (such as Anjana Appachana, Meira Chand, Shashi Deshpande, Jaishree Misra, Punyakante Wijenaike, and many others) have portrayed the commonly held South Asian belief that wifehood is an imperative for women, widowhood and spinsterhood being the most inauspicious and dreaded of fates, and motherhood, the highest aim and foremost of duties. "In India, despite feminist protest and struggle, femininity *is* maternity."[6] Many writers have also depicted that it is through motherhood that a woman stakes her claim to rights and privileges, establishes her position in her family, and secures her future, "…..the culture confirms her status [that of a mother] as a renewer of the race, and extends to her a respect and consideration which were not accorded her as a mere wife."[7] Sudhir Kakar observes that male worship of motherhood makes maternity the only uncontested space of power for women in India. Children are seen to empower women, motherhood being a status regarded as sacred, invested with respect and authority. Sudhir Kakar goes on to note that "…..a Hindu woman's 'motherliness'…..is a relatively more inclusive element of her identity formation than it is among western women. Given her early training and ideals of femininity held up to her, motherhood does not have connotations of cultural imposition or a confinement in an isolating role."[8]

South Asian women writers have suggested that motherhood may not be quite as welcomed or lacking in imposition as Kakar suggests, but they do concur that South Asian mothers mostly appear intensely protective of and loving towards their children. Quite a few South Asian women writers also suggest that there are undercurrents of tension between mothers and daughters, especially in cases where mothers or families demonstrate a preference for sons. (This aspect of motherhood will be explored in greater length in a subsequent section of this chapter.) Even mothers who have no sons have been occasionally portrayed as 'difficult' mothers; critical, overprotective, strict, and demanding. South Asian women writers indicate that while the notion of motherhood with its accompanying status and privileges may be depicted favourably, the practicalities of motherhood are often more complex and a good deal less idealistic.

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[6] Geetha Ramanathan, "Sexual Violence/ Textual Violence: Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* and Shirazi's *Javady Alley*" mfs 39.1 (1993): 18.
[7] Sudhir Kakar, The Inner World. A Psycho-analytic Study of Culture and Society in India (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978) 79.
[8] Ibid.

In Hindu-influenced cultures (and in certain Muslim and Sikh ones also), a married woman is customarily regarded as belonging to and part of her husband's family, not her natal family. Coming into a new family, the bride is required to prove her loyalty to this family. Because she may be regarded not only as an outsider, but as a threat to her mother-in-law who may fear the bride's (emotional and sexual) influence over her new husband, a daughter-in-law may not feel accepted as an integral part of the family until she conceives. Many stories depict the treatment received by the daughter-in-law changing suddenly and drastically for the better when she becomes pregnant. To traditional South Asian families, a daughter-in-law is primarily for the purpose of continuing the family line, of producing children. (This is one reason why the physical appearance of the bride is of such importance in the choice of a bride.) With the bearing of children, and particularly with sons, a woman firmly establishes her place in her husband's family. As Bagchi rather acidly puts it, "A woman justifies her existence only as a mother and as a mother of sons. A mother's status is privileged not in the sense of special rights but as an attribute without which a woman is useless."[9]

In Bagchi's severe depiction, South Asian women are in an extremely vulnerable position, and never more so than as daughter-in-laws. Tales abound, both in South Asian languages as well as in writings in English, of tyrannical and fearsome mother-in-laws who terrorise their daughter-in-laws. Ill-treatment at the hands of a mother-in-law is a common theme of women's writings and discussions, to the point that the terrible mother-in-law has become a stereotype. However, striking a typically grim note, Naipaul provides a different point of view in explaining the experiences of the wretched daughter-in-law:

> "Mothers-in-law were required to discipline the child brides of their sons, to train the unbroken and childish girls in their duties as child-bearers, and household workers, to teach them new habits of respect, to introduce them to the almost philosophical idea of the toil and tears of the real world: to introduce them, in this chain of tradition, to the kind of life and ideas they have been introduced to by their own mothers-in-law. Such a disciplining of a child bride would have been considered virtuous; the cruelty, however willed, however voluptuous, would have been seen as no more than the cruelty of life itself."[10]

Naipaul appears to be suggesting that given the structure of such societies, the suffering of women is a natural and inevitable part of the social order.

[9] Jasodhara Bagchi, Indian Women. Myth and Reality (Hyderabad: Sangam, 1995) 35.

Daughters are customarily regarded as guests of their natal families who will be "given away" in marriage, while sons are permitted (and often expected) to remain in and part of their natal families for life. "The girl is repeatedly made aware that her time in her father's home is measured, and that there is another home that will one day be hers."[11] Because of this custom, a married woman may not be able to depend on her natal family coming to her defence, and may find she has few allies in her new family. Endurance, suffering, and sacrifice have long been propagated as womanly virtues, and it is commonplace for South Asian women to accept neglect, abuse, infidelity, and even abandonment at the hands of their husbands and their in-laws. As was discussed in Chapter One, South Asian mythology seems to endorse and promote this view, and South Asian women seem to live their mythology vicariously.

Women may find that they have few avenues for redress of their wrongs in their husband's family, except through their children. Nevertheless, South Asian women continue to strive and aim to be ideal wives, devoted to the service of their husbands and their families. This may partly be because there is no other arena of ambition open to them, it may even be because they do not wish to bring dishonour to their natal families or be accused of having been badly brought up, or it may simply be that women have imbibed and internalised the orthodox rhetoric of praise for the self-effacing wife.

Even in happy and stable marriages, it would not be unusual to find a woman more attached to her children than to her husband, given the structure of the joint family which provides little time and opportunity for couples to spend time together in private. A South Asian woman may find her role as a mother far more emotionally sustaining than her role as a wife.

> "Relationships with children are considered far more dependable, enduring, and fulfilling. This may be related to the fact that as a wife, a woman is expected to serve and surrender, whereas as a mother she is allowed the right to both nurture and dominate and is supposed to be venerated unconditionally. She can expect obedience, love and *seva* (service) from her children, especially sons, even after they grow up."[12]

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[10] V.S.Naipaul, India. A Million Mutinies Now (London: Minerva, 1991) 178-179.
[11] Nabar 64.
[12] Madhu Kishwar, Off the Beaten Track. Rethinking Gender Justice for Indian Women (New Delhi, India: Oxford UP, 1999) 225.

The giving away of daughters in marriage gives rise to a mother's possible preferential treatment towards her sons. A mother who knows that she will depend on her sons to care for her in her old age, and who knows that she will not have a place in her daughter's house after she is married, will naturally be inclined to invest much of her attention and care in her sons. Their success would be her guarantee of future well being, especially in old age.

One innate problem with all the cultural connotations associated with motherhood is that motherhood is made out to be a repository of all feminine virtue, the essence of the culture. "…..Indian womanhood is transfixed on an essentialist notion of 'purity' that was used in a particular historical juncture to define Indianness."[13] The use of the word "transfixed" is vital one, conveying as it does the sense of being pinned down, of being held in a fixed place, almost of being frozen into this image. And it is an image which burdens and stereotypes Indian women, who are led to expect so much from motherhood and from whom so much is expected as mothers. As Sheila Nasta notes, "in the iconographies of nationalism, images of mothers have conventionally invited symbols suggestive of primal origins – birth, hearth, home, roots, the umbilical cord of being – as encapsulated by terms such as 'mother tongue' 'mother country'."[14] Therefore, although motherhood may be the one uncontested arena of power for South Asian women, it is also an arena with patriarchally defined parameters and boundaries, which limit as much as they empower.

The majority of South Asian women appear generally fairly willing to defer to their elders and to their men. In large part, this is due to social conditioning, though a lack of choices or alternatives is also a factor.

> "…there is no gainsaying the fact that the typical Indian girl-child…..has to learn quite early on that she is a second-class citizen even in her mother's home. If she has brothers, she has to play second fiddle to them….. Her breaking-in is all the more rigorous if she happens to belong to an economically deprived class, for even in the best of worlds, the girl-child's needs are generally regarded as dispensable."[15]

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[13] Tanika Sarkar, "Nationalist Iconography: Image of Women in 19th Century Bengali Literature." Economic and Political Weekly (Nov 1987) 20.
[14] Sangeeta Ray, En-gendering India. Women and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives (Durham: Duke UP, 2000) 129.
[15] Nabar 57.

Conditioned (and from a tender age) to defer to their men folk for most part of their lives, the next question is to what extent are they prepared to defer, and in what manner(s)? This is a question vigorously and indignantly answered at least in part by a large number of women writers and will be studied in detail in the following section of this chapter.

Curiously enough, although it may appear to be in the interests of the women to challenge and change the norms of a patriarchy which disadvantages them, it is also the women who are seen as keepers and defenders of the culture, sometimes even set up as the last bastion of cultural purity and authenticity. Women themselves are seen to be voluntarily defending and adhering to the terms of patriarchy, sometimes even protesting changes advocated by their husbands.

It may, of course, be the case that for such women, they stand to lose more than they stand to gain from challenging the system. With seniority, some women command the hard-earned position of relative authority within the family and would be less than eager to relinquish it. Challenging the authority gained through seniority may also be a threat to their slender or precarious hold on power in the domestic sphere. Others may prefer the known evils to unknown ones. Some may subscribe to the idea of being keepers of their culture and would resist or be suspicious of challenges and changes. Whatever their reasons, many South Asian women are portrayed as clinging onto notions and practises which are damaging to them, and which they are aware their daughters wish to defy. Mothers attempt to mould their daughters into ideal bride material, thus handing on the female South Asian legacy of womanly submission, sacrifice, and suffering.

According to the second National Family Health Survey in India, the majority of women find at least one reason acceptable as justification for wife-beating, "attesting the social norm that gives the husband the right to use force to discipline wives who are perceived to be violating traditional gender norms."[16] The most commonly accepted reasons were found to be: neglecting their house and/or children, going out without

[16] Annapurna Jha. "56 pc Indian Women Justify Wife-beating." 17 Nov 2000. Rediff. Online. 20 Nov 2000.

telling their husbands, showing disrespect for in-laws, suspicion of infidelity, and not having borne a child or a son. Perhaps it is a self-fulfilling expectation that South Asian women engender. With the majority of Indian women believing that it is the right of husbands to use violence to discipline disobedient and defiant wives, it is little wonder that these women would be appalled by rather than approving or supportive of other women's attempt to challenge the patriarchal system. Social norms which include domestic violence highlight the oppressiveness of home for some South Asian women. The following section will therefore consider the positionality of South Asian women within their homes.

## No Place for Women

Having discussed the traditional and social positionality of South Asian women, this section turns to a consideration of the pragmatic division of space within South Asian households. This division of domestic space is indicative, and even reflective, of the social status of South Asian women, and the literatures of South Asian women writers testify to the physical structures of homes and houses playing a part in the delegation of roles and the moulding of identities. As Marangoly George points out, "the domestic is read as a site where massive negotiations between often competing ideological pressures are undertaken….."[17]

The portrait of the domestic home is one which has been changing over time. David N. Benjamin has identified five viewpoints from which *home* could be considered: as a lexical symbol; as a descriptive term in social scientific, humanistic and architectural literatures to describe a place of regular residency or origin for the ritual of return; as a juridical term marking a legal binding definition of a certain territory; as a condition in psychiatric research related to homesickness and its symptoms; and as an empirically derived cultural phenomenon taking into account the lexical cognates of cultural groups world wide.[18] It is Benjamin's second definition that will be studied in

[17] Rosemary Marangoly George, The Politics of Home. Postcolonial Relations and Twentieth Century Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge UP: 1996) 16.
[18] David E. Benjamin, The Home: Words, Interpretations, Meanings and Environments (Aldershot, UK: Avebury, 1995) 295-296.

this section from the specific viewpoint of South Asian culture, in order to discuss the gendered living space of day-to-day life for South Asian women.

In South Asia, the domestic portrait has been drastically altered by the dramatic increase of mobility, the shift from rural to urban residences, from joint families to nuclear families. One change which the majority of South Asian women have always made and continue to expect to make is the journey from home after marriage. As previously mentioned, in many South Asian cultures, a daughter is 'given' as a bride into her new family, and many women make this one journey in life even if they make no other – from their natal homes to the homes of their in-laws. Many young brides feel a sense of displacement with this sudden change in location, surroundings, status, responsibilities and roles.

The division of space is particularly interesting and complex in a joint family. As one author describes it,

> "Ours was and still is a typical Bengali joint family, every room in the house occupied, sections of the sprawling old mansion with its courtyards and corridors assigned to different branches of the family. There was no individuality (although sometimes, a younger daughter-in-law or junior sister-in-law grumbled or jostled for more power) but there was an attempt at separateness through which we children streaked like multi coloured fish against and across the currents. No section of that much partitioned house was barred to us. We grew up never knowing loneliness."[19]

This description reveals that there are differing levels of satisfaction regarding space and power distribution within the joint family, and also hints at the complexity of negotiating spaces, especially spaces that overlap in function and possession, in this particular type of living arrangement.

Widows, (girl) orphans, new daughters-in-law, and unwanted wives are amongst those who could traditionally expect the lowest levels of consideration within the joint family system. However, before discussing women who are vulnerable within their homes, it is edifying to first investigate the traditional position allocated to women in joint families, which although is one of subservience to men, is not without a certain degree of power.

The text chosen for this analysis deals with the complexity of the joint family system which involves the strict segregation of men and women in the household, and the keeping of women in purdah.[20] This particular novel was written at a time when South Asian women's literature was barely out of its infancy. Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli was written in 1977, describing a haveli in Rajasthan named Jeewan Niwas, a building of more than three hundred years old, belonging to a family favoured by the Maharaja.[21] This novel provides a portrait of the interdependency of behaviour and space in such a household. It also illustrates the case Gillian Rose makes when she writes that "gender-relations structure the time-space patterns."[22]

The tale is narrated primarily through the eyes of the central protagonist, Geeta. Geeta is a daughter-in-law and the bride of the sole heir of Jeewan Niwas. She is an outsider unused to the ways of the haveli, and it is through her eyes that the author explains and unfolds the internal workings of a haveli life to the reader.

As the newly married Geeta departs from her parents' home and approaches the haveli for the first time, various other neighbouring havelis are pointed out to her as belonging to her in-laws. The huge family network is paralleled in the confusing and complex network of havelis in the area. Later, Geeta discovers that trips outside her own haveli are restricted to visits to neighbouring havelis, thus limiting her physical horizon to the immediate area just as her social horizon is limited to her in-laws and family.

The structure of the haveli, Jeewan Niwas itself, is of particular interest. Mehta describes it as having many courtyards which serve three purposes: the courtyards divide the haveli into sections which are self-contained units, but as much as they divide, the courtyards also serve to connect the haveli, and all the courtyards are interconnected. The courtyards also link the women's section to the men's section. The

[19] Manorama Mathai, Returned Daughter – A Short Story Online posting. Indiastar. 19 March 2001.
[20] The women's quarters in zenanas which have long been strictly off-limits to men, have been a subject of deep interest for the colonialists and excited much curiosity. Stories have wildly exoticised the entire notion of zenanas and most accounts were written either by men or by non-South Asian women.
[21] Mehta is a home author and one of the pioneering South Asian women writers. Mehta's usage of English to convey the social reality of a haveli has already been discussed in Chapter One, in the section entitled 'Forms and Frames'.
[22] Gillian Rose, Feminism and Geography. The Limit of Geographical Knowledge (Cambridge: Polity-Blackwell, 1993) 25.

very design of the haveli dictates the amount of privacy of each individual, and the place he or she can claim in the household. In the customs and architectural design of the haveli, it is possible to identify all of Hagerstrand's three types of constraint: the physical constrains, the coupling constrains, and the authority constrains.[23]

Gender segregation is rigorously enforced in the haveli, both by the inhabitants' knowledge of the customs and in the architecture of the building. The haveli is a splendid illustration of how space is gendered. Certain spaces are restricted by gender, or restricted in terms of times of access, depending on gender. Geeta for example, discovers that her husband is not free to visit her whenever he wishes. In this huge haveli which houses four generations of the family and many servants, little can be kept secret, and Ajay cannot visit his own quarters in the day time unnoticed or unremarked upon. His behaviour, although he is the future master of the haveli, is circumscribed and restrained by the unwritten laws and customs of the haveli. Husbands and wives are assigned very definite and fixed times in which they may meet in private, (they do not even necessarily meet at mealtimes), and men do not enter the courtyards without being properly announced. Equally, there are certain rooms in the haveli which the women never enter and those are spaces exclusively reserved for men. The structure of the haveli and its unwritten rules dictate not only the relationships which are permitted to form, but the depth to which they are encouraged.

The hierarchy of power is evident not only in dress codes and manners of the inhabitants, but in the very spaces permitted to them. Geeta, for instance, as a daughter-in-law, is not permitted to sit with her father-in-law while he eats although Ajay's sisters, who are 'daughters of the house', may exercise this privilege if they wish. If Geeta wishes to convey a personal message to her father-in-law, her only method of doing so is through her servant who speaks to her father-in-law on Geeta's behalf while Geeta waits and listens in the next room. Servants have separate quarters, and not only know their places in terms of job requirements and positions on the social ladder, but they literally know their places and know where they are expected to be at which times, and which places are strictly out of bounds.

[23] Ibid.

Rama Mehta is an author who grounds her characters in their geographical locations. Geeta leads the life she does, develops in the ways she does, because she is confined to the haveli. Although she had been tensed with fear and frustration of being kept in purdah, confined in close quarters, and having little purposeful occupation, Geeta grows to appreciate her limitations. She even grows to love the mandatory veil which covers her face where once she was unused to it, because she discovers that the veil allows her privacy, a rare commodity in such a household. Geeta does rebel successfully on some occasions – for example, when she provides education to the servants and to the poor. Geeta is aware that life inside the haveli is life in a secluded little world, and she grows to love the haveli for providing this haven to her children. Geeta gradually adjusts to her new space and learns to move within its boundaries, negotiating certain new freedoms, and learning to be contented with the physical and social limitations. Although her period of adjustment was lengthy and often frustrating, Geeta eventually discovers she becomes a "willing prisoner within its walls"[24] and she grows to associate the ancient house with standing for honour, solidarity, devotion and security.

The haveli is primarily run by its womenfolk. Geeta's mother-in-law reigns supreme over the servants and in the women's quarters – which includes the storeroom and the kitchen. She oversees the cooking, the entertaining of female guests, the servants' lives and marriages, the haveli celebrations, and even the affairs of the junior relatives. However, the men in the haveli are always prioritised, deferred to, and indulged. Women in such a family structure have much power, but it is always a limited power. Geeta's mother-in-law is aware that the moment her husband dies, she would no longer be mistress of the haveli and that Geeta would be its new mistress. The women's positions of power are entirely dependent on their connection to their men. It is probable that the distance the women are taught to keep from the men, and the inaccessibility of the men, help to reinforce the authority of the men even in their absence. The movements and daily routines of the women in the haveli do indeed appear to trace the "everyday map of patriarchy".[25]

[24] Rama Mehta, Inside the Haveli (London: Women's Press, 1977) 170.
[25] Rose 25.

The rigid social structure of the haveli as portrayed by Mehta keeps the women subservient, but it also provides a certain level of protection to the women because certain sections of the haveli are designated as private, inner spaces. However, when the family structure fails to protect the positionality of the women, it leaves them relatively defenceless and immensely vulnerable. Although home is traditionally associated with being a haven and a sanctuary, and "the word home immediately connotes the private sphere of patriarchal hierarchy, gendered self-identity, shelter, comfort, nurture, and protection,"[26] home can be the central site of oppression for women. Meira Chand in House of the Sun, illustrates this in Lakshmi's story.

A lovable and beautiful young woman, Lakshmi has little choice in a marriage partner because she has a tiny dowry. Lakshmi's in-laws treat her cruelly in the hope of forcing her family to pay them more dowry money. When Lakshmi becomes pregnant, her mother-in-law deceives the naïve Lakshmi into a forced abortion because a child would establish her place in their family. When Lakshmi returns to her natal home in pain and distress, her mother insists that as a married woman she no longer has a place at her natal home, and coaxes her to return quickly before she loses her place in her married home. It would appear that such women are particularly vulnerable as their place in a home is far from assured and has to be constantly fought for or earned. Lakshmi is eventually murdered by her mother-in-law, who sets her on fire. (This recalls the issue of wife-burning which is so prevalent in Indian fiction which perhaps mirrors a very real even if uncommon atrocity.)

Chand's tale illustrates a worst-case-scenario for Indian women who suffer oppression at home – portraying women in the terrifying position of having no alternative place to turn to, and no option to leave the day-to-day hell that is home. "As well as being a symbol of protection and order, home can, in negative life situations, become a concretisation of human misery: loneliness, rejection, exploitation and violence."[27] In addition, Chand highlights the danger of Lakshmi having no identity if she cannot gain a foothold in her new household, because once given as a wife, she has little right or role in her natal home. As she failed to stake her place in her new family,

[26] Marangoly George 1.
[27] Pallasmaa 134.

Lakshmi's identity is eventually extinguished when she is murdered with the intention of being replaced with another candidate as wife to her husband. Home for Lakshmi is no sanctuary, but a hellish prison filled with menace, suffering, and real danger. Such stories deconstruct the notion of home as a stronghold, a place of safety, a refuge. It does however, reinforce the idea that South Asian women's identities are very often closely bound up with their domestic spaces within their homes.

Besides attempting to run back to their natal homes, South Asian women writers have portrayed women characters coping with oppression by trying to shrink into themselves, either in order to fit into their new homes, or to take up as little space as possible, or to attempt to be unobtrusive in the hope of being permitted to stay. Bulbul Sharma writes of an orphaned girl, Bala, who is unwanted because she is a girl child, and who moves from relative to relative, passed around like an unwelcomed piece of baggage. In this story, A Taste of Humble Pie, Sharma records Bala's awareness of her status in her body language – Bala always chooses the most uncomfortable seat and sits on its edge, always ready to jump up and perform anyone's orders. She hovers around on the periphery of the family, always available and eager to help, trying to please and be useful, because she feels she has to earn her place everywhere she goes. Little physical space is accorded to her, and Bala lives as simply as possible, limiting her needs to a bare minimum, eating little, and existing as meagrely, timidly and apologetically as she can.

Bala does all this because she has no permanent home. Home marks the boundary between an inside and an outside space; a space both physical and social. Desperate not to be completely isolated, those in Bala's position whom society may dispossess, (widows, orphans, divorced women, for instance), are willing to behave in as self-effacing a manner as possible, taking up as little space as they know how. Even those who have rights in their homes, such as wives for example, indicate through their body language and shrinking movements that they may not feel completely welcomed in their homes by their husbands. Such examples include wives who resort to clinging onto their side of the bed and sleeping very carefully so as not to accidentally take up more bed space than intended, or brushing their hair outside the bedroom in fear of their husbands' displeasure at finding hairs on the bedroom floor. In another short story,

Sharma illustrates very literally, a woman who attempts to shrink herself in the hope of pleasing her husband.

In Trials of a Tall Aunt, Roopbala is a woman who, at 5 feet 10 inches, stands half a foot taller than the husband to whom she was given in marriage. It appears that women are criticised in this society for being too big or too tall, almost implying that women *should* not take up too much space. Because her height and size causes her choleric husband to hate the very sight of her, Roopbala learns to avoid his abuse by hiding in the shadows when she hears his footsteps. "But she still continued to look after him, constantly alert to his every demand, yet remaining unseen."[28] Roopbala's attempt to be invisible and yet present, is a suggestion of the extent to which women in such cultures are prepared go to in order to fit into whatever tiny space permitted to them. Sharma deftly portrays the timid negotiation for a minimum living space on the part of women characters who feel they have little right to any space at all.

There are, of course, many who are not willing to give up their space and be forced into self-effacement. In one of her short stories, Anjana Appachana describes the frustration of a young Indian woman who had tried, unsuccessfully however, to fit herself into the position of *bahu* (daughter-in-law) as demanded of her by her in-laws.[29] Throughout the story, the protagonist remains unnamed, referred to only occasionally as bahu, suggesting that this is expected to be her primary role. This protagonist tries to shrink her social horizons by giving up practising her beloved sitar, sacrificing her evenings out, and spending little or no time with friends. She also tries to tolerate the constant invasion of her bedroom by various members of the family although she resents the lack of respect for her privacy. The only concession she refuses to make is that she refuses to give up her job.

Despite her attempts to adapt herself to the demands of her new family, our protagonist finds that the encroachment on her emotional needs and the denial of her need for both personal time and personal space, results in mounting frustration and the sense of suffocation. Even the moment in which she packs her suitcase and tells her

[28] Bulbul Sharma, My Sainted Aunts (New Delhi: Indus-HarperCollins, 1992) 134.
[29] Anjana Appachana, Incantations and Other Stories (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1992).

husband she is leaving the house, she is not afforded any privacy and her husband is helpless to prevent their nephew from sitting right there in their bedroom. The final straw for the protagonist is when she accepts that there was not any place or time in which she could discuss her problems with her husband and find him sympathetic, and thus decides to leave.

Appachana is just one of the many South Asian women writers whose tales suggest that troubled marriages have been threatened or broken, or at least stood better chances of being saved, had there been more domestic space and autonomy afforded the couple. The importance of sufficient personal space is not a priority in many South Asian households, and some writers have even recorded instances of how a closed door may be interpreted as a rejection of others as well as regarded as an unreasonable desire. In Appachana's short story as in others, it is clear that domestic space – its division, usage, and function – plays a major role in the shaping of the day-to-day lives of families and societies, in terms of power distribution, closeness of familial ties and other relationships, and designated behavioural patterns.

## Submission and Defiance

In the previous section we have discussed the novels of contemporary South Asian women writers which present the limited world in which women have been permitted to reside. Perhaps it is contrary to expectation, but although the majority of these contemporary South Asian women writers lead lives of relative liberty and autonomy, much of their writings are preoccupied with the social shackles of women in their communities. The portrayal of the female protagonist as victim (of her family, culture, community, etc.) has been so consistent that it has almost become a defining characteristic of this genre. The majority of South Asian women's literature in the last two decades contain portrayals of the sufferings undergone by women, and although many celebrate the spiritedness and resilience of South Asian women, it is only a handful of women writers who do not begin by positing their female protagonists as *natural* victims bearing the brunt of their societal or cultural ills.

Of particular interest in this section, are those South Asian women novelists who have written depicting the lives and fortunes of women who have chosen to live in ways which run contrary to the ordinary course of lives of other South Asian women. In considering the literary presentations of wifehood, motherhood and womanhood, a study of two of these novels would be particularly illustrative because it appears that when norms are challenged, it is *then* that they are most rigidly enforced. Synopsises of both novels follow below:

***Difficult Daughters*** by Manju Kapur (1998)

Virmati (Viru), the eldest of eleven siblings, was part of a large and well respected extended family of Arya Samajists, and had been promised in marriage (with her agreement) to a suitable young man from a similar background. When Viru fell in love with her college professor who was a married man with a child, Viru refused to marry her fiancée. Incurring the wrath of her mother, Viru decided to drown herself. Her suicide attempt failed and Viru was locked away in her home by her strict, uncompromising, but loving family, as a punishment and also in order to separate her from the professor. Later, Viru was sent to Lahore for further studies where her illicit relationship with the Professor continued, and Viru became pregnant. Unable to contact the professor and terrified of her family's reaction, Viru obtained the help of her roommate in arranging an abortion. After her studies, Viru was offered a teaching position in Nahan where she resumed her relationship with the Professor. Her employer's discovery of the relationship cost Viru her job, and she was determined to break off the relationship and move away. Desperate at the thought of losing her, the Professor eventually married Viru and took her to his home as his second wife. Viru was disowned by her family, and struggled to establish a place for herself in her new home, confronting the hostility of the Professor's first wife. At the time of Partition, the Professor's wife and household, excepting Viru, moved away to their village, and thereafter, Viru lived with the Professor and his children from both marriages.

***What the Body Remembers*** by Shauna Singh Baldwin (1999)

Roop, a Sikh village girl, had expected to be given in marriage as her elder sister had been – with a dowry and celebratory ceremonies. However, her father was a poor man when she came of age to be married, and both Roop and her father gratefully agreed to the proposal of a rich landlord who was seeking a second wife because his first wife was barren. Dreading being left unmarried and wishing a comfortable lifestyle, Roop was delighted to be married until she realised that not only did her husband's first wife detest her, she also demanded that Roop's children be given over to her after their naming ceremony. When Roop suspected she was being poisoned in the absence of her husband, she fled to her village and to her father, who insisted she return to her husband before

she dishonoured herself and her family. Roop's brother and protector was summoned home to deal with the situation from his army posting. Roop sent for her two children, knowing that her husband would not permit the loss of his heir even if *her* absence was insignificant. Roop's husband arrived at the village to negotiate with her brother and father for Roop's and the children's return, and promised separate households for his wives. At the separation, the first wife deliberately chose to contract tuberculosis as her hidden form of suicide. Roop was taught deportment and English and established herself in her home, both as wife and mother. Briefly separated from her husband at Partition, she was reunited with him soon after.

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As a young Sikh girl growing up in rural Punjab before Partition, Roop was made acutely aware of the differences in treatment and prospects between herself and her brother Jeevan. She was taught that only boys were fed eggs and meat, food which she was repeatedly cautioned was not meant for her; she was not permitted to attend her mother's cremation although her brother did so; and she was familiar with the idea that most of her father's resources were devoted to providing for Jeevan's future. Roop accepted all these inequalities with equanimity and little more than a little initial token protest, accepting that such was the natural order of things. Her upbringing conditioned her well to accept that a woman's role was one of submission and obedience in her community.

It was the women of her family and community primarily, who instilled this in the young Roop, older women who were experienced and pragmatic, and taught Roop that in order to survive and flourish in their world, pleasing her men folk was her best weapon. "Rule number one: you want to make a good marriage, you must be more graceful, more pleasing to your elders. I want to hear only 'achchaji,' 'hanji,' and 'yes-ji' from you. Never 'nahinji' or 'no-ji'."[30] These rules initiating Roop into womanhood, along with all the necessary knowledge and arts of womanhood, stressed that overtly, especially in language and demeanour and gesture, Roop must express only acceptance and acquiescence, never negation or refusal, no matter what may be asked of her.The rules are passed on by the women, who uphold a system which clearly disadvantages them.

[30] Shauna Singh Baldwin, What the Body Remembers (London: Doubleday-Transworld, 1999) 85.

Roop internalised these notions, making an exceptionally good marriage, and leading a relatively secure life. Her fears were that her husband may discover her bad ear (an ear which lost its hearing in childhood), that she may be either barren or unable to give birth to a son who would live, or that she may be found too stubborn or disobedient. Any of these would be justifications, in Roop's mind, for her husband to reject her as a wife and return her to her father as 'damaged goods'. "Papaji's words sound in her ear as if he was standing right beside her. 'Above all, give no trouble.'"[31] It was Roop's understanding that any defect in a woman, either physical or emotional, could render her unfit as a wife, and therefore, of little further use or worth as a person.

Roop's fears stem from an ingrained belief that her worth, the respect accorded to her, and her very identity, is derived solely from her men folk – her father, her brother, her husband, her sons. Roop either cannot, or at any rate, does not conceive of herself as an autonomous entity, capable of both happiness and independence at one and the same time. Roop underwent terrifying ordeals as she fled to Delhi during Partition with her three young children and her servants. She successfully concealed and saved her servant and children from harm, boldly risking her own safety to save her maid (and herself) from rape and possible murder, but even these deeds did not raise the notion in her mind that she is a capable woman, able to stand alone, and more, to defend and protect others under her care. When she arrives at Delhi safely and has yet no word of her husband, her thoughts run thus: "If Sardarji [Roop's husband] is dead, what is she? A widow with three small children seeking shelter in the navel of a strange and foreign land."[32]

Having examined the cause for Roop's fears and insecurities, and the source of them, the question naturally arises as to what precisely *are* Roop's fears?

> "Roop's heart throws itself against the basket of her ribs. Poverty is all around her, decrepit, angry, smelly, ready to drag her back, lower than anything she's ever experienced. Poverty the way the real poor know it, live it. The only thing between her and them, between her and the women who have begun crowding refugee camps and ashrams since the March massacres in 'Pindi, is Sardarji, his power, his wealth."[33]

[31] Baldwin 177.
[32] Baldwin 437.
[33] Ibid.

As the novel unfolds, it is made clear that Roop is terrified of being dispossessed, of everything. At every juncture in her life, she faced the possible threat of dispossession, all types of dispossession, and this fear haunts her all her life. In her youth, she feared belonging to no one, and to no place, if she is not married. As a young mother, she discovered that even her children could be taken away from her. As a second wife, she feared for her life at the hands of her husband's first wife. Returning to her father for sanctuary, she even had to fear her husband would not give his name to her children. Established as her husband's only wife (after the death of Sardarji's first wife) and the mother of three children, Roop feared her husband's death.

It is these myriad fears that keep Roop submissive and obedience and self-sacrificing at all stages of her life. She is naturally rebellious and selfish, knowing herself to be unlike her docile sister, Madani, and unlike her giving sister-in-law, Kusum, whose sole ambition was to please her husband and her father-in-law. She easily recognises the difference between her ambition and Kusum's, but ironically, it is Kusum who shares the women's secret with her; which is a weapon of the weak: namely that as women, they must be seen as always acquiescing in the eyes of their men, but in private, total obedience was not always necessary. Roop later realises that even Kusum's life was not her own, literally speaking. Kusum's acquiescence goes so far as that she voluntarily allows her father-in-law to cut her (Kusum's) head off in order to secure his *izzat* (honour). Many times in her life, Roop stands at crossroads, her innate sense of justice and self-respect urging one course, and her knowledge of the workings of her community urging the opposite. At every turn, Roop realises that she instinctively wishes to disobey, to defy, to refuse, what convention and custom demand of her, but at each turn, Roop chooses not to challenge her society, rationalising herself into choosing security and comfort over her natural inclinations and indignations.

Roop may have been a woman bribed and threatened into submission by society, but Virmati in Difficult Daughters is a woman whose life takes a very different course. Both novels position their tales around the mid-20$^{th}$ century, and in both cases, our protagonists are naturally defiant of their society's norms. However, where Roop eventually toes the line, Virmati refuses. Virmati had also been brought up with the

adage that "it is the duty of every girl to get married,"[34] as her mother and all her family never tire of reminding her. However, from the very start, Virmati differs from Roop in that she stakes a claim to herself as an autonomous being, acknowledging her anger rather than suppressing it, "Nothing was hers, not her body, her future, not even a pair of paltry, insignificant gold bangles."[35] Even in her language, we can hear Virmati's frustration, her seething indignation, and her anger against the order of a world which could so dispossess a woman.

Virmati is not a girl who is exceptionally bright or even ambitious. She is no great romantic, prepared to sacrifice all to be with the man she loves. Virmati's rebellion happens almost by chance and circumstance, born as she was in a time when social changes were crowding in thick and fast. After a failed attempt at suicide, Virmati could not bring herself to tell her austere, tradition-bound family that her actions were the result of the desperation of loving an already married man. Because an explanation was demanded of her, and finding that silence was not a viable option, the desire to study was the only credible alternative she could find, and although the explanation fell on incredulous ears, she was eventually sent to Lahore for further studies, and her fiancée married to her sister. At this stage, her actions were still more evasive than rebellious.

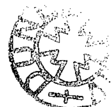
Virmati's primary defiance of tradition was her decision not to marry. Her family had mistakenly believed she had decided not to marry at all, but Virmati's defiance was particular and not general – she did not want to marry anyone else except the Professor, but this, of course, she could not make public. Her seeming defiance was unplanned and not always adhered to with resolution because Virmati had very strong emotional ties with her family. It was Virmati's mother who was the most outraged, taking Virmati's decision as a personal insult because her community viewed a girl's marriage as a necessity, not an option. Virmati's father was grieved but not angered or embittered by Virmati's defiance of her family's expectations. It was her father who permitted her to go not only to Lahore for a BT qualification, but later, to Nahan to teach. In the wave of nationalism that swept the India before Independence, education and seeking a career

[34] Manju Kapur, Difficult Daughters (Kent: Faber & Faber, 1998) 15.
[35] Kapur 172.

were possible forms of rebellion for a young woman, even if they were frowned upon and discouraged.

However, Virmati's defiance was not more than a covert defiance until she took the final and irreversible step – marrying the Professor and becoming his second wife. In marrying the Professor, Virmati was making it clear to her family, intentionally or otherwise, that she has chosen to prioritise her personal happiness and right of individual choice before her duty to her family and to its traditions. It was only upon this public defiance of her family's wishes and customs that Virmati became an outcast, no longer regarded merely as a wayward, misguided, stubborn daughter, but nevertheless still a daughter to be scolded and protected. She was now an outsider, beaten, disowned and turned out of her old home and family by her own mother. Virmati was not welcomed even at her father's funeral, and was blamed by her mother for all the family's misfortunes. Thus does Kapur illustrate that banishment from the family circle and loss of all status and standing in one's family was the consequence of a woman's rebellion and refusal to submit. (Significantly, her husband who attends the funeral of Virmati's father is not turned away and his presence is appreciated and welcomed. It appears that male defiance suffers relatively milder consequences than female defiance.)

Many South Asian women writers have been intrigued by and have examined the reasons for which so many South Asian women seem to continue being submissive even against their own interests, continuing to obey rather than defy. Their writings reveal that submission becomes a habit for many, a way of life, the line of least resistance, requiring little thought and little mental struggle. It is promoted as a virtue, a state to be aspired to, the mark or badge of a dutiful and desirable daughter/wife/daughter-in-law. "…..it is always the docile and the self-denying woman who is portrayed as the repository of 'authentic values'….."[36] Rebellion and disobedience, on the other hand, are deemed as aberrations to decorum, tradition, honour and religion. Disobedience is a path strewn with fears, dire consequences, and threats of poverty and isolation. Many South Asian women writers also portray characters with a strong belief in, or sense of, destiny. Fate, *kismat*, karma, the sins of a past life, these are some of the ways South Asian women rationalise the reasons for their



current conditions or circumstances, and this method of realisation induces passivity, acceptance and resignation. It induces women to endure and suffer rather than seek changes. South Asian women writers also portray as a understated tragedy, that most of the women who choose to suppress their tendencies to challenge that which they deem wrong or unjust in their customs, and choose instead to obey and submit, seldom realise the less intangible opportunity costs of their choices until it is too late.

However, although Roop and Virmati are portrayed as victims, they are not portrayed as silent, passive victims who do not struggle. Understanding the weak position they are in, both struggle to gain some ground. As home is the primary arena of social life for South Asian women, battles for increased social status naturally take place in terms of domestic territory.

Roop is a character who has to fight her battles with concealed weapons. She is only too aware that her position in her new family is a precarious one even though she is Sardarji's legal and chosen wife. Coming from a village family, and having no dowry, Roop knows herself to be a poor opponent for Satya, her husband's first wife. Satya is from a good family, beautiful, efficient and intelligent, fiercely jealous and possessive, and has been Sardarji's wife for twenty-six years. Unlike Satya who commands her household with authority and meets everyone's eye boldly, Roop requests rather than orders her servants, and is careful to lower her eyes in front of both her husband and Satya. She acknowledges her inferior position by gesture, movement and posture, knowing that her deference and submissiveness are her best defences at the early stages. Roop is very keenly aware that her youth, her beauty, and her body, are her only weapons in this domestic and emotional war.

Because Roop's new-found position as a wealthy married woman is entirely based on Sardarji's wishes, she is very careful to keep his favour and treads carefully, metaphorically and literally. Roop has one defective ear and habitually lip-reads. Her husband who does not know of Roop's hearing problem, is pleased to observe that she watches his lips closely when he speaks, interpreting her visual attentiveness as evidence of her love and obedience. Every movement of Roop's is calculated to please

[36] Bagchi 142.

her husband – covering her head in public, lowering her eyes, learning to wear and walk in a sari, from her eating habits to her speech. Because Roop considers that her entire identity is dependent on her husband, she treads very carefully on the invisible paths that he has marked out for her with his approvals and disapprovals, and is always fearful of accidentally straying.

For all her experience and her authority, and despite the vulnerable position Roop initially occupies, Satya cannot avoid seeing Roop as a threat because she herself is barren. Satya perceives that with a son, Roop would be staking an incontestable claim in their household. This is the reason that Satya insists on taking Roop's children away from her forty days after they are born, because she does not intend to give Roop the position as mother of Sardarji's children, grudging Roop her very fertility. Like the Professor in Difficult Daughters, Sardarji is equally, and wilfully, blind to the women's competition. He turns a blind eye to Satya's animosity and Roop's fears. Sardarji asks Roop to give up her children without a thought of her sorrows, just as he had thoughtlessly presented Roop with Satya's necklace, bangles, rings, earrings, toe rings and anklets. Seeing her jewellery on Roop rouses Satya's fury still further, for she takes that as evidence of being upstaged by the new wife. It is significant that to Sardarji, the properties of his wives are interchangeble. In his mind, both wives belong to him entirely, and consequently, so do their jewellery and children, and he is therefore at liberty to dispose of and distribute their belongings as he sees fit.

As the senior wife, Satya can command Roop's very movements. Roop may only share Satya's apartments when Satya invites her to come, and Satya reinstates her seniority subtly and occasionally cruelly. When the servants bring the children to the courtyard, for example, Satya deliberately reclines on the sofa, leaving Roop with only the options of standing or squatting.

> "Squat with the serving women.
> No.
> So Roop stands."[37]

Satya attempts to dismiss Roop's status as Sardarji's wife and her 'sister' – which is a social status technically almost equal to her own – by trying to relegate her to a position

[37] Shauna Singh Baldwin, What the Body Remembers (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1996) 251.

that would imply a much lower status, but Roop resists silently, not daring to openly protest. Knowing herself defeated in this, Satya turns cruel by taking Roop's baby son away from her as soon as Roop picks him up, despite Roop's plea for just one minute with her son. To reinforce her victory, Satya criticises Roop to the servant and banishes Roop from her presence with harsh words.

Roop moves with confidence in her new home only when she becomes pregnant. Her pregnancy is a firm footing on which to begin staking territory, and Roop is emboldened to request, and confident of being indulged. Once again, Satya is furious when her husband thoughtlessly presents Roop with the sweets which Satya has made for him, and although the sweets are of little material value in comparison with all the jewellery, Satya feels the same territorial anger of dispossession.

When Roop perceives that Satya is threatening her life, she retreats to her natal home, against the advice of her father who is afraid that by her absence, Roop will lose her place in her husband's home. Roop cleverly sends for her children knowing that their son is the one thing her husband cannot bear to be deprived of, even if he may find her and their daughter dispensable. Roop's brother fights her domestic battle on her behalf, and triumphs when he succeeds in forcing her husband to establish Roop in her own house in Lahore with him, to leave Satya in the Rawalpindi house, and to have Roop's children returned to her. By displacing Staya from her position at Sardarji's side and as mistress of his household, Roop displaces Satya from her positions of power and reduces Satya's significance in Sardarji's life. It is by distancing Satya that Roop transforms her husband's house into her home. Roop eventually claims the entire territory – her husband, her children, her household and servants, when Satya dies. The final symbol of Roop's complete victory is the acquiring of the dozen gold bangles and gold Omega watch which were Sardarji's gifts to Satya to placate her when he brings home a second wife. Taking over these last items, Roop takes over the entire territory (and burden) of wifehood from Satya.

Roop may have played her cards skilfully even though she had not been dealt a strong hand, but not all second wives fare as well as Roop. Virmati, who had fought

against her family and community to marry the Professor, finds herself in the degrading position of the unacknowledged guest in her new home.

Ganga, the Professor's first wife, is anguished at having no option but to allow Virmati into her house. She may be forced to accept the situation, but that does not prevent her from attempting to undermine Virmati's position through every conceivable means, and excluding Virmati from the family circle as far as she can. Her acts of domestic hostility may be trivial, even petty, but they are acts which stake territory in every nuance. For example, Virmati wakes the very first morning to find her husband's clothes have already been washed by Ganga, but her own set are left untouched. This not only signals how unwanted Virmati is, it also sends the message clearly to Virmati that Ganga is asserting her right to serve the Professor by doing all the things a wife is supposed to do. The Professor dismisses Virmati's complaint by suggesting that laundry is mundane and that Virmati should be happy to let Ganga see to such dull matters. The Professor completely misses the proper interpretation and the significance of Ganga's behaviour – which Virmati does not, correctly interpreting it as the staking and reinforcing of domestic boundaries.

The two women compete for their husband, Ganga, by running the house, and Virmati, by flaunting the Professor's attachment to her. The two women also compete for space in the house; when Virmati tries to use the kitchen to cook for herself, Ganga defends her territory by sobbing, making scenes, and washing everything that Virmati has touched, ritually cleansing her space and belongings from Virmati's sphere of influence as much as from her physical touch. "It was clear that not an inch of that territory was going to be yielded. If Virmati had the bed, Ganga was going to have the house."[38] Ganga even discourages her children from making friends with Virmati, refusing to yield emotional territory as much as domestic territory.

Virmati is permitted no space of her own – no space that is not shared with the Professor – in the house, and is permitted only to share on sufferance the spaces which her husband occupies them, *when* he occupies them. This arrangement underlines the fact that Virmati has no independent status in the house even as a second wife and is

tolerated only as an appendage of the Professor. "It is frustrating to live in a space which one cannot mark as one's personal territory."[39] Discovering the truth of this, Virmati articulates her frustration by complaining of many minor matters to her husband; that the food is never cooked to her liking, that she has to always be the last in line for the bathroom, that Ganga does not permit help in the household. To her complaints, her husband replies, "'Poor thing, you have me, let her have the kitchen.' Virmati looked at the domain of her kingdom and was forced to be content."[40]

Knowing herself to be temporarily defeated, Virmati removes herself from the house, using studies as her excuse to move away to another city. In Virmati's absence, even the 'domain of Virmati's kingdom' - the Professor - is temporarily taken over by Ganga who manages to coax her husband back to her bed. Much later, when the circumstances of Partition have rendered it necessary to move Ganga out of the house, Virmati takes great pleasure of giving away all Ganga's clothes to charity, clearing Ganga's belongings out of the house with tremendous satisfaction because in so doing, Virmati feels able to regard the house as her territory at last. Once having left her house, the unlucky Ganga never manages to return despite all her entreaties, although as a concession, Virmati does permit Ganga's children to live in the house.

In Difficult Daughters and in many other novels by South Asian women writers, new brides and daughter-in-laws are portrayed using all sorts of markers to negotiate and claim domestic territory. Some plant trees, which subtly suggests taking root, growth, and permanence, others have babies – which would make them mothers of their children and not just wives or in-laws, thus providing a much stronger foothold in the home. Still others seek to displace their mother-in-laws in the running of the house. The house and the man appear to be territories which have to be constantly guarded against invasion or colonisation.

Difficult Daughters is a good example of emotional and domestic battles being waged with great seriousness and even ruthlessness, scenes played out against a tapestry

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[38] Manju Kapur, Difficult Daughters (Kent: Faber & Faber, 1998) 230.
[39] Pallasmaa 137.
[40] Kapur 230.

of kitchens and bathrooms, pots and pans. Virmati may be the predecessor of the New Indian Woman, but she is still reduced to being an appendage of her husband's rather than an autonomous being.

> "I have a feeling that however independent and aggressive and powerful an Indian woman may be, she still has to go a long way before she is liberated in the real sense. At present a liberated woman is an outcast in our society, a miserable creature, with no sympathy or support from anywhere.....perhaps this is a transitional period. She is yet to emerge as the truly New Woman who can defy everything that binds her and yet be happy. It is a slow, painful, trying and uphill task....."[41]

As many South Asian women writers have portrayed, a South Asian woman's defiance of her society's norms, customs and expectations brings her some unhappiness and isolation. (The notion of the New Woman will be discussed at greater length in a subsequent section of this chapter.)

In his customarily pessimistic tone, Naipaul goes so far as to state that cruelty is in the nature of the Indian family life. "The clan that gave protection and identity, and saved people from the void, was itself a little state, and it could be a hard place, full of politics, full of hatreds and changing alliances and moral denunciations."[42] If one subscribes to Naipaul's claim, is can be seen that women have the choice of remaining within the family – and suffering its various 'cruelties' – or deciding to live without the family, and being an outcast. In both cases, suffering is involved and neither choice is without a price. Thus, the victimhood of South Asian women as portrayed by their writers is twofold: the victimhood of conforming (as Roop does) and thereby suffering the injustices and oppressions, and the victimhood of rebelling (as Virmati does) and thereby suffering alienation and shame. Whether South Asian women writers depict their protagonists as submitting or rebelling, the inclination is to present them as victims.

However, while the liberated woman may be an outcast to varying degrees, she is far from being nothing more than a miserable creature. Many South Asian women writers deliberately create or select as their central protagonists, characters who have the

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[41] Veena Shanteshwar, Women Writing in India. 600 B.C. to the Present eds., Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (London: Pandora-HarperCollins, 1993) 526.
[42] Naipaul 178.

courage to challenge certain aspects of their tradition, characters who certainly suffer for mounting the challenges, but who are undaunted in seeking a new and better order for themselves. For centuries, South Asian women have lived by complex and rigid codes of behaviour, codes designed to curb rebellion and reward submission and obedience. With political and economic changes taking place with rapidity in South Asia, social changes are increasingly the norm, and the rebellion of women is no longer as rare or as difficult as it once had been. Consequences are less dire, more options are available, the society seems increasingly tolerant, and media and 'Westernisation' influences are increasingly powerful and pervasive. There have also been more and more support groups in South Asia organised for women who do not or cannot live by their society's customs.

The following section analyses the types and textures of the defiance of contemporary middle class women as portrayed by Shashi Deshpande over two decades, the 1980s and 1990s, and will analyse the extent to which the New Woman has emerged in India.

## A Study of Shashi Deshpande's Fictional Women.

### Background

Shashi Deshpande has been writing since the 1970s, beginning with short stories initially published in magazines and later in a collection, and proceeding on to novels and children's books. It is therefore instructive to trace the changes and movements in the pattern of her writings and concerns. Moreover, Deshpande is unique as an author in the way she is deeply rooted in her culture and in her setting, "My background is very firmly rooted here. I was never educated abroad, my novels.....are just about Indian people and the complexities of our life."[43] Deshpande is emphatically the opposite of a diasporic author, and identifies closely with the circumstances of Indian women whose lives are entirely lived in India, and for whom travelling outside India and living abroad is not part of their world.

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[43] Shashi Deshpande, in the Afterword by Ritu Menon, 1999. Matter of Time (1996. New York: Feminist, 1999) 248.

Six of her eight novels spanning fully two decades (published in 1980, 1983, 1988, 1993, 1996, 2000) will be analysed in this section. (Two of her novels are detective stories in the genre of crime fiction rather than reflections and portrayals of Indian society and therefore will not be studied here.)

It is notable that the character or personality of the central protagonist and the main plot or story line in these six novels are remarkably similar. These novels could be read as separate works, but they do appear to form a series, not in terms of sequels, but as parts of a developing oeuvre. In each novel, Deshpande's tale is triggered off at approximately the same starting point, and it is consequently of interest to note that the portrayals of the protagonists' circumstances have changed over time. "She [Deshpande] says that she knows how the women feel and she knows the mood of India."[44] Deshpande's sustained writings over the decades are also interesting for the way in which they chart generational changes within families, reflecting and running parallel to the social changes in the wider Indian society.

A synopsis of each of the six novels follows, which will then be discussed collectively.

***The Dark Holds No Terrors*** (1980)

Sarita (Saru), a doctor and the mother of two young children, Renuka and Abhijit, returns to her old home after her mother died. She returns ostensibly to see her father, but her other reason was more pressing. She was being repeatedly raped and sexually abused by her husband, Manohar, who preserved the facade of a devoted husband during their daylight hours and in their public life. Saru returned to find that her father had a young man living in the house as his companion and was self-sufficient. In the process of seeking refuge from nightly assaults from a husband who suffered an inferiority complex, Saru reawakens her old demons of feeling unwanted and unloved. Rebelling against her mother who blamed her for the death (by drowning) of Dhruva, her younger brother, the young Saru had insisted on attending medical college, moving out to a hostel, and later marrying Manohar, against her mother's wishes. Her mother disowned her and died without any apparent desire for reconciliation. Saru is left to reflect on her motives for her life's choices, on her family lifestyle, on her relationships with others, and her professional identity. Although Saru may have had a vague notion about returning to her old home and to her father to seek safety, sanctuary and support,

[44] Sandhu K. Sarbjit, The Image of Woman in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande (New Delhi: Prestige, 1991) 13.

she eventually arrives at the understanding that she must confront rather than flee the terrors in her life.

***Roots and Shadows*** (1983)

When we first encounter Indu, our protagonist, she is already a married woman and the new matriarch of her family. Brought up in a joint family, Indu rebelled against the dominance of Akka, the younger sister of her grandfather and the family matriarch. Indu married Jayant against Akka's wishes and refused to return to the joint family because they would not acknowledge her husband. On her deathbed, Akka summoned Indu, who returned after 10 years of living away, and found that she was Akka's sole heir. Indu found herself responsible for the welfare of her extended family and found also that she was in a position of power, in a position to arbitrate their futures. The return to her natal home removed Indu from the course of her normal day-to-day life and put a physical distance between her and her husband for the first time. This affords Indu the opportunity to rethink her present life and her beliefs. Indu moves from regarding herself as a completely autonomous individual to regarding herself as a part of the joint family. The novel includes various subplots exposing the complexities and ramifications underlying the structure of the joint family. Indu commits adultery (without regret) with a distant cousin who dies by drowning at the close of the novel.

***The Long Silence*** (1988)

Jaya's secure life as wife, mother, and home-maker, is threatened when her husband, Mohan, is asked to leave his job while under investigation for malpractice. The couple move out of their house and into Jaya's small apartment in Bombay after seeing their two teenaged children off on holiday with friends. Shifted abruptly out of her normal routine and having time hang heavy on her hands, Jaya begins to reflect, and discovers her attitude towards her husband and her life turning on its head. Delving into her memories, Jaya recalls Kamal, the man who had sincerely appreciated her in entirety, and breaks silence with herself to see beyond the image she has projected for the world to see. In the process of her re-evaluation, Jaya discovers suppressed fears and frustrations. She also writes the story she had never dared to write before. Her world swiftly crumbles around her when Mohan abruptly leaves her without explanation. A high fever takes hold of Jaya, but this fever passes, as does the crisis. The conclusion is ambiguous, leaving the reader with the knowledge that Mohan is vindicated of malpractice and will return to her, and that Jaya is free to either resume her life of old, or to make changes.

***The Binding Vine*** (1993)

The protagonist, Urmila (Urmi) struggles to cope with the death of her baby daughter, Anu. Her husband, Kishore, is more often than not working away from home. Urmi lives with her mother and her son. In the process of grieving and recovery, Urmi involves herself with Shakutai, a poor, working-class woman whom she encounters by chance. Shakutai's tale forms the subplot to the novel. Shakutai's eldest daughter. Kalpana, is raped by her uncle and left in a coma. When her aunt, Shakutai's beloved sister, discovers her husband's crime, she commits suicide by dousing herself with kerosene and setting herself on fire. Urmi provides help and emotional support to Shakutai as she weathers all her tragedies. Urmi's other interest at a time when she was still mourning her daughter, was the discovery of her mother-in-law's writings. Mira, who died young, left a collection of poetry and records which Urmi read and translated, and with which she began to identify. In the process of understanding other women and empathising with them, Urmi finds her own way of coping with grief. The tales of various other women are also recounted, adding to the tapestry of the lives which touch Urmi's.

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***Matter of Time*** (1996)

The novel begins with Gopal's baffling decision to leave his wife, Sumi, his three teenaged daughters, Aru, Charu and Seema, his marriage, his family, and his job. Gopal, who had not been an unhappy husband or father, moves to a different part of town, making no secret of his whereabouts, and takes up a new, low-paying job. Sumi is initially stunned, but pragmatically moves with her daughters back to the Big House to live with her parents. The family and the extended family flounder in their attempts to understand Gopal's actions and to reverse them. Sumi's mother, daughters, and sister, are amongst those who attempt to communicate with Gopal. Aru, Sumi's eldest daughter, consults a lawyer about her father's actions and is advised that there is little the law can do for her. Sumi initially seeks to purchase a new house, but finding none to her satisfaction, settles down to living in the Big House once more. Meanwhile, several generations of family secrets and stories are revealed, along with the reason for the estrangement between Sumi's parents. At the close of the novel, Sumi and her father, Shripati, are killed in an accident and Gopal realises that he no longer has a place in his family. His daughters have built new lives which do not include him; the eldest cleaving to her widowed grandmother, the second pursuing her medical career, and the youngest self-absorbed.

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***Small Remedies*** (2000)

The protagonist, Madhu, is a middle-aged woman whose twelve-year-old son had recently died. Emotionally estranged from her husband, and still seeking to come to terms with the loss of her child, Madhu accepts the job of writing a biography of a

famous professional singer, Savitribai, who lives in a small town. Madhu gladly moves away from her home in Bombay to take up temporary residence with a married couple, Hari and Lata, who are distant relatives, in order to live near Savitribai. Savitribai was once Madhu's neighbour, and is therefore part of Madhu's past. She grants Madhu regular interviews in order to relate the details of her life and her career, but Madhu realises that Savitribai is only relating what she wishes the world to remember her for, leaving out the parts of her story which contain the most painful and personal memories. Madhu realises that she herself is living in the same way, attempting to cut herself off from emotional attachments and commitments to save herself from pain. In the course of her healing and recovery, Madhu's childhood is revealed to the reader, along with all the various characters who have played significant roles in Madhu's life. Madhu gradually begins to form new ties of friendship and affection with the new people she lives amongst, and gradually reconciles her understanding of her own past enough to permit herself to accept a future.

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**Deshpande's Protagonists**

Deshpande's favoured central protagonist is an Indian woman, unremarkable in the sense that she is an average, middle-class, middle-aged, fairly well-educated, urban woman. Sarbjit Sandhu argues that Deshpande chooses to focus on such women because she herself hails from a similar background. According to Sandhu, Deshpande also chooses to write about middle-class women because these women represent a large section of contemporary Indian society, and because Deshpande is pre-occupied with the social forces at work on them in society. According to Deshpande herself, "I am not writing about women, I am not even writing about any particular class. I am writing about human beings. Now those human beings happen to be placed in a particular environment, an environment I am familiar with..... My characters are from a certain milieu and that milieu happens to be middle class."[45]

Significantly, none of Deshpande's protagonists are conventionally good-looking women. Saru, for example, was fat and unattractive in her youth, Indu was small and dark, and Urmi dresses shabbily. Perhaps in the creation of such protagonists, Deshpande attempts to counter the more common diasporic tendency to portray women protagonists as exotically attractive. (The exoticising of South Asian women will be discussed at greater length in subsequent chapters.) Instead of having faces which

determine their fortunes, Deshpande's protagonists are intelligent, diligent, well-educated, well-read, competent and determined women. They are not notably likeable nor even pleasant women, but they are undoubtedly intelligent, capable, passionate ones. Although they are cast as ordinary women, not at all outwardly unusual in their walk of life, Deshpande appears to find it necessary to create protagonists with these characteristics, traits which perhaps stand the women in good stead when they attempt to rise out of their prescribed roles and shake off shackling notions of the society in which they have been bred and adapted.

Having created such heroines, Deshpande also sets out some of the parameters of their social world, "For a woman, intelligence is always a burden…we like our women not to think."[46] Deshpande's writings consistently explore how her protagonists cope in such a social climate. Although Deshpande situates her protagonists as ordinary middle class Indian women, the fact must not be overlooked that each of these women are somehow slightly out-of-place in their communities, and each has some angst which she carries and harbours. Deshpande's protagonists are culturally sensitive, but also culturally confrontational women. They test the boundaries of their culture at a point in their lives where they are strong and secure enough to successfully challenge the social norms.

Deshpande is also careful to sketch out the positions of her protagonists in their society. She makes it clear that how they are placed affects their choices to no small extent. All of her protagonists are married women, middle aged, and most of them mothers. Most have made love marriages, and all are, or have been, deeply in love with their husbands. All have been brought up in Hindu households although none of them appear deeply religious. The majority of them had rebelled against an older woman in their family, and most have left their natal homes only to return to them during a crisis. Perhaps Sandhu is justified in hinting that Deshpande's writing may be at least in part autobiographical, because her heroines are either writers themselves, or immensely interested in literature and writing. One other significant character trait which all her

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[45] Shashi Deshpande. "You Cannot Dismiss My Writing." Interview with Shoba Warrier. Rediff. 1 Sept 2000. Online. 1 Sept 2000.
[46] Shashi Deshpande, Roots and Shadows (New Delhi: Disha-OrientLongman, 1983) 33.

heroines share – to some extent – is their inclination to introspection. The following subsections will analyse Deshpande's positing of her women characters by studying them in various roles and across different periods of time.

**Deshpande's Protagonists as Wives**

Deshpande's heroines are a curious contradiction in themselves. So fiercely independent that many cut themselves off from their families at a perceived threat to their individualities, they nevertheless turn to their husbands and become dependent on them for love, approval and identity. Saru may have pitied Smita for docilely accepting the new name her husband chose for her, Jaya may have rejected *her* husband's choice of the name Suhasini for her, Indu may have scoffed at the notion of women praying to the tulsi plant for their husbands' longevity, but one and all realise that they subscribe to the notion that "A husband is like a sheltering tree," a notion which runs through The Long Silence like a refrain. Deshpande's heroines are uncomfortably, even fearfully, aware that they have defined themselves in relation to their husbands after resolutely cutting off even family ties to avoid being defined in relation to their families. "But twice in my life I had thought that I was free.....Both times I found out how wrong I was. New bonds replace the old, that is all."[47] These women eventually realise that they have simply avoided one trap only to fall into another, and this other is a trap so insidious that for all their education and intelligence, they had not managed to avoid being victims of it.

These modern, middle-class women which Deshpande's protagonists definitely represent, find (to their own surprise) that they have imbibed the notions of men's and women's roles unquestioningly, "It seems to me that we had, both of us, rehearsed the roles of husband and wife so well that when the time came, we could play them flawlessly, word-perfect."[48] Because their marriages, even after many years, contain this element of role-playing, the women continue to feel a sense of loss despite enjoying the approval of their society. Marriage, with all its accompanying securities, nevertheless resulted in losses for the women; loss of integrity, loss of articulation, loss of personal ambition, loss of courage. Over and above all these losses is the fear of the loss of a

[47] Deshpande, Roots and Shadows 14.
[48] Shashi Deshpande, The Long Silence (1988. New Delhi: Penguin, 1989) 95.

husband – of being that most inauspicious creature, the husbandless woman, the abandoned wife, the widow. "…..my marriage taught me this too. I had found in myself an immense capacity for deception. I had learnt to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wanted to see, to say to him nothing but what he wanted to hear. I hid my responses and emotions as if they were bits of garbage."[49] Deshpande highlights the fragility of the seemingly strong marriage, exposing the solidarity of this middle-class husband and wife resting on a tissue of deceptions and half-truths.

Caught in a patriarchal society, Deshpande's protagonists are seen learning to devalue themselves. They readily compromise or even disregard personal cost and personal integrity, prepared to go to any lengths to keep their marriages intact. Deshpande's protagonists who were writers, like Jaya, Indu, and Madhu, shrink from raising controversial issues even when these issues lay close to their hearts. Deshpande traces the process that transformed these women from bold, sincere, forthright youths to women who prefer to take the line of least resistance, avoiding pain and conflict at all costs. Even the bright, ambitious Jaya learns to make marriage, and nothing else, her career. The tragedy is that having played their roles to perfection, these women find their lives hollow, meaningless and unfulfilled, realising only after many years that their definitions of success (as imbibed from their society) did not coincide with their personal definitions of happiness. The resultant emotion is that of having been cheated, "Love is a big fraud, a hoax, that's what it is. They tell you it's the greatest thing, the only thing in life. And you believe them and fall into the trap…."[50]

To digress a little, Deshpande does include the hint of another possible trap her protagonists could have stumbled into – Deshpande's subplots frequently introduce another man on the scene, a man taking a more than platonic interest in the protagonists. In the absence of Kishore, Bhaskar courts Urmi; Boozie, a senior doctor, teaches and aids Saru in her medical career; Naren seduces Indu; Kamal encourages Jaya's writings and teaches her self-respect; but the protagonists realise that swapping their emotional alliances would not solve their problems.

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[49] Deshpande, Roots and Shadows 38.
[50] Deshpande, Roots and Shadows 157.

Deshpande's protagonists, for all their many strengths, are deeply insecure. They attempt to compare themselves with other members of their family to reassure themselves of their happiness, but eventually come to a sense of sisterhood and solidarity with the women of their extended family. Jaya, for example, had pitied the poor, insane Kusum, until she realised that she had used Kusum as a measuring stick to gloat over her own sanity and good fortune. Indu had not been able to understand her cousin, Padmini, initially, wondering at her wish to be married to any man who would say 'yes', but comes to the realisation that although she and her cousin seem worlds apart, they share certain notions: "The Indian way. The husband. A definite article. Permanent. Not only for now, but forever. To be accepted. Stop."[51]

However, Deshpande does make the point that women from middle class backgrounds and with advantages (financial, education, familial) as those of her protagonists, are less likely to accept a husband's desertion, abuse, neglect, or infidelity, with equanimity. Jeeja, Jaya's cleaner and a woman clearly of a different economic and social class from that of Jaya's, uncomplainingly accepts a husband who was a polygamous drunkard, enduring this "with no anger behind her silence."[52] Even more remarkably, Jeeja does not permit her daughter-in-law to protest her husband's (Jeeja's son) drinking and abuse. Jeeja's rationale is that "he keeps the *kumkum* on your forehead. What is a woman without that?"[53] For women like Jeeja, it is the state of being married, of being a wife, of having the public recognition of wifehood, which is of significance, and for this privileged stature, nothing is too much to endure.

It is not only a matter of a class difference, but a difference of ideologies. Padmini, Indu's cousin, concurs with the likes of Jeeja in regarding marriage as a necessity. For reasons different from those of Jeeja's, admittedly, but a necessity nevertheless. "Of course I am marrying him because there is nothing else I can do.....There is only one thing I am really good at.....looking after a house. And to get a house, I have to get married."[54] Padmini's logic clearly demonstrates that to her, a husband is simply a means to an end. Women who regard marriage as a necessity seem

[51] Deshpande, Roots and Shadows 126-127.
[52] Deshpande, The Long Silence 51.
[53] Deshpande, The Long Silence 53.
[54] Deshpande, Roots and Shadows 125.

to regard the man they marry as an issue of secondary importance to the fact that having a husband provides security, a shield against the disapproval, contempt, or pity, from their community, and wifehood is an assurance of worth. It is a paradoxical development in a patriarchal society which has long assumed women either belong to their menfolk or are chattels of men, that marriage is regarded by women as a career, to the extent that men are objectified, stripped of personal worth and desirability, valued not for themselves but for what they can provide.

Deshpande's protagonists wrestle with a set of problems peculiar to women in their positions, which is by no means the problems which the majority of Indian women encounter. "The predicament of Deshpande's protagonists is peculiarly Indian as experienced and endorsed by many a Western-educated Indian reader."[55] It is true to some extent, that their privileged education and experiences have distanced Deshpande's protagonists from the more closely tradition-bound women, even if these women happen to be mothers, mother-in-laws, cousins, or otherwise closely related. Deshpande's protagonists do ponder the attitudes of the women they interact with, with no small degree of incredulity, surprised by the stoicism, acceptance, and resilience of women like Shakutai and Jeeja. Unable to fully empathise, Deshpande's protagonists seem a world apart. They do, however, struggle for understanding and attempt to decide whether the lack of resistance and protest over what they themselves would deem unsufferable, is a sign of strength, or simply despair, apathy and resignation.

> "Inner strength.....A woman's life, they had told me, contained no choices.....the women had no choice but to submit, to accept. And I had often wondered.....have they been born without wills or have their wills atrophied through a lifetime of disuse? And yet Mini [Padmini], who had no choice either, had accepted the reality, the finality, with a grace and composure that spoke eloquently of that inner strength."[56]

In her novels, Deshpande demonstrates the curious situation that has developed in a fast-expanding middle-class India – social changes have come so rapidly and encompassingly for women, that those who have moved into this new world are almost at a loss to comprehend the conditions and continuing restrictions upon those who have not.

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[55] Viney Kirpal and Mukta Atrey, Shashi Deshpande. A Feminist Study of Her Fiction (New Delhi: BR,1998) 9.

The notion of acceptance being a sign of strength (especially on the part of the women), has long permeated the South Asian mentality, from mythologies which eulogise suffering as a virtue to contemporary novels like Deshpande's which grimly celebrate the likes of Akka (Roots and Shadows), Mira (The Binding Vine), and Kalyani (Matter of Time), which portray women much wronged, but women who triumph by dint of patience and endurance. Deshpande's protagonists are torn between this culturally ingrained notion and their own theoretical notions of equality between sexes, personal fulfilment as important, and individual happiness as a goal. In their personal lives, they are forced to reconcile these conflicting notions in the arena of marriage. "The unconventional are seen to suffer for their violation of accepted norms of society, or for questioning them….. The conventional women suffer too, but their suffering is sanctioned by the norms of Indian culture and particularly that of a patriarchal culture."[57]

It is clear that Deshpande's protagonists have a strongly developed sense of self-worth, independent of family or husbands. More than that, they recognise the gulf between their goals and criteria, and those of the more traditional women:

> "I knew that these women had their own standards for judging people. Nothing about me….. my academic distinctions, my career, my success, my money….. none of these would impress her. To her I was just a childless woman. To get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grandchildren….. they were still for them the only successes a woman could have. I had almost forgotten this breed of women since I had left home. Now seeing them was like discovering a new world. Each one of them, riddled with ignorance, prejudice and superstition, was a world of darkness in herself. And even more amazing was their ignorance of their own darkness."[58]

Indu's use of language in her thoughts indicates how clearly she differentiates between herself as an educated, enlightened, liberated woman, and "this breed of women". Indu distances herself from them in her thoughts, mentally classifying them as belonging to another section of society, and although she comprehends their values, she makes it clear that she finds them limited and even pathetic.

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[56] Deshpande, Roots and Shadows 6.
[57] Bala Kothandaram, "Betwixt the Devi and the (She) Devil: The Feminists Dilemma in Indian English Fiction in English." Feminism and Literature ed., K. Radha. (Trivandumi: Kerala U Central Co-op Stores, 1987).
[58] Deshpande, Roots and Shadows 116.

The conclusion to the novels hint that Deshpande's protagonists are not prepared to pray to the tulsi plant any longer, metaphorically speaking. Having discovered that they too had carried their own world of darkness despite all their advantages of birth, situation and education, Deshpande's protagonists prepare to break their silence and emerge from their dark worlds. Jaya makes changes within herself that renders it impossible to return to her old life, Saru is prepared to confront her husband without fears, and Indu commits adultery without guilt and chooses to disregard her husband's advice to turn away from her family. By the end of the novels, most of Deshpande's protagonists who have been brought up on maxims like "A husband is a sheltering tree," have found enough strength and confidence within themselves to disperse with the shelter if that is the price they have to pay for regaining their individuality and autonomy. Deshpande's novels are almost Austenian in that the female protagonist becomes self-aware, undergoes the process of self-development/self-improvement, and eventually achieves self-fulfilment.

**Deshpande's Mothers and Daughters**

A curious feature of Deshpande's characters is that although they resist and challenge their society's traditionally defined role of the wife, they subscribe avidly to the traditionally defined role of the mother. Even Madhu, for whom a husband could be deserted without a single moment of guilt, was a mother devoted to the point of obsession to her son. Those of Deshpande's protagonists who have lost a child are depicted as mourning to the point of oblivion, while those who are mothers with living children are perpetually anxious mothers.

Stereotypically, a mother has been characterised by "tenderness, fragility, love, charity, loyalty, submission and sacrifice .....totally absorbed in the activities and qualities of caring.....placing the needs of her charges above her own, she busies herself with feeding them, watching over them, making them happy."[59] This description fits almost exactly what Jaya, one of Deshpande's earliest protagonists had attempted, even aspired, to be, striving to create that perfect family and fearing failure. After years of trying, Jaya painfully realises that the norms advocated and sanctioned by society had

led her to expect unrealistic and unreasonable qualities from herself as a mother and from the position of a mother. "Whatever had given me the damn fool idea that once I became a mother, I would know my children through and through, instinctively? Yes, this was what they had told me: you become a mother and everything follows naturally and inevitably – love, wisdom, understanding, nobility."[60]

Not all of Deshpande's protagonists are seduced by the myth of the mother, or the myth of motherhood, but although they may have been successful in freeing themselves from the trap of the myths, they do not extend the same liberty to their mothers. Deshpande's protagonists are demanding daughters, judgmental of their mothers even if they are more magnanimous towards their fathers. Saru who had always perceived her mother's preference for her brother, Dhruva, had always been stung by the inequality of her position as a daughter in their Hindu household. (Mothers doing *pujas*, observing fasts, cooking special foods for their sons, have been the subject of many South Asian women writers, and in The Dark Holds No Terrors, Deshpande makes mention of the same.) The knowledge that her mother not only blamed her for Dhruva's death by drowning, but also wished her dead instead of Dhruva, drove a permanent wedge between mother and daughter, an estrangement which was never resolved. Deshpande and other South Asian women writers have portrayed the preference which many South Asian mothers seem to have for their sons. Writing from the women's point of view, Deshpande's account is yet another testimony to these daughters' sense of injustice and indignation.

It was to her father that Saru appealed when making her first bid for freedom, and it was her father who assented, while her mother had vehemently forbidden it. South Asian fathers may not traditionally have been assigned major roles in the upbringing of their daughters, but Deshpande's fathers are generally characterised as concerned, open-minded and indulgent parents. Saru had a supportive father, Urmi and Sumi had slightly more distant, but consistently loving fathers, Indu had an easy-going, understanding father, Madhu had a father who brought her up well in the absence of a mother, and Jaya had a father who proudly named her "Victory", and had great ambitions for her. In each

[59] Sheila Ruth, Issues in Feminism: A First Course in Women's Studies (Boston: HoughtonMifflin, 1980).
[60] Deshpande, The Long Silence 173.

case, the portrayal was one of strong attachment and mutual respect between daughters and fathers, minus the tension with which the mother-daughter relationships seemed fraught. "Fathers are perceived as lenient by daughters who feel oppressed by their mother's strictures. The patriarchy of the father remains hidden as the women act on their behalf to condition the daughters."[61] Kirpal and Atrey provide but part of an explanation. In their patriarchal system, it may be the case that it is the women who choose to adhere more rigidly to the system, whereas the men feel a greater sense of liberty to alter their traditions and embrace changes if they so choose, and therefore, can afford to be more 'lenient' as parents. However, whatever the reasons for the strong bond between daughters and fathers in Deshpande's fictional worlds, there always exists a definite tension and a sense of strain in Deshpande's mother-daughter relationships.

It is fairly obvious that Deshpande's protagonists had options which were hardly likely to have been available to their mothers. In her novels, Deshpande gives her reader the sense that over a single generation, middle-class India's conditions for women had altered drastically. This may have augmented the tension between mothers and daughters, one generation adhering insistently and proudly to traditional customs, and another straining to break free of the same. It takes Deshpande's protagonists a considerable number of years to realise that it is not the older generation they must defy in order to be free of burdensome traditions and customs because those same traditions and customs have been long ingrained within them. This realisation does enable improvements on problematic relationships between mothers and daughters, as Deshpande's novels reflect.

Part of the above mentioned tension in the relationships daughters have with their mothers could be accounted for by the protectiveness mothers feel towards their daughters, knowing the difficulties which their daughters would face in a society which could be hostile and dangerous to its women. "Why did you want a son? Is it because you were frightened of bearing this constant burden of fear for your daughter as well?"[62] This is best illustrated in the story of Shakutai and Kalpana. Shakutai, who fears for Kalpana because her daughter is proud, beautiful, and unafraid, attempts to control her

[61] Kirpal 78.
[62] Shashi Deshpande, The Binding Vine (London: Virago, 1993) 150.

daughter's activities to the point of losing Kalpana's respect and confidences. It is a predictable tale, but one which Deshpande draws renewed attention to by recounting it as a tragedy, both for Kalpana, raped and left in a coma, and for her mother, Shakutai, who rues every decision she has ever made for her daughter.

It was in Deshpande's 1993 and 1996 novels that daughters began to appreciate the difficulties in their mothers' lives and to glean an idea of the motives for their mothers' behaviour. In The Binding Vine (1993), Urmi who had tolerated but never empathised with her mother, Inni, began to feel a sense of comradeship with Inni after she was told of Inni's sufferings as a young wife and new mother. The tale, which recounted a particularly harsh decision by Urmi's father, forced Urmi to consider her father from another angle. Deshpande highlights the fact that in a marriage, and perhaps all the more so if it is an arranged marriage, a man may simultaneously be a good parent and a poor husband. Deshpande also points out that in many cases, a daughter may not be fully aware that her excellent father is a less than excellent husband to her mother. In one of Deshpande's short stories, My Beloved Charioteer, the mother demands of her daughter who mourns her dead father, "Yes, your father, but what was he to me?.....He was your father, but what was he of mine?"[63]

In her 1996 novel Matter of Time, Deshpande's daughters are remarkably more attached to their mothers, and we see Sumi's eldest daughter in particular, seeking to protect her mother from the consequences of her father's desertion as best she could. Several mother-daughter relationships are portrayed in this novel – that of Sumi and her three daughters, Sumi and her mother, Kalyani, Kalyani and *her* mother, Manorama, and even a hint of Manorama's background. Deshpande's exploration of mother-daughter relationships is more searching in this novel than in any other previous ones. The novel also covers a broader time span than Deshpande had ever attempted. This novel also contains a daughter who feels guilty in her relationship with her mother, yet another new development in Deshpande's oeuvre. Heretofore, Deshpande's mothers had felt agonies of guilt and despair and confusion in dealing with their daughters, but in Kalyani, Deshpande depicts a gentle woman, overawed and made to feel inadequate by a very forceful and demanding mother, and eventually surrendering to her mother's wishes out

of a sense of guilt, with dreadful consequences. Deshpande makes is very clear that she is of the opinion it is unhealthy and even disastrous for a daughter to feel she has to live up to her mother's high expectations.

There is a sense of solidarity between mother and daughters in Matter of Time, which was absent in the other novels, except in The Binding Vine, where Urmi does make some attempts to be gentle and patient with her mother. (It is worth mentioning that Urmi calls her mother by name, as do Sumi's daughters. In a society where anyone who is related would be addressed by their title denoting their relations, and even those who are not related may affectionately be called brother, sister, uncle or aunt, to have daughters addressing their mothers by name is extremely unusual.) The biggest difference between Sumi and Inni, and the mothers of the other protagonists, is that Sumi and Inni are well-educated and not particularly traditional women, and therefore, not entirely dissimilar to their daughters in their outlooks. In portraying a greater sympathy between such mothers with their daughters, Deshpande seems to suggest that as the gulf in attitudes, expectations, ideologies, and experiences between middle-class generations decrease, there is a greater chance for a corresponding decrease in the tension between mothers and daughters.

**Progression in Deshpande's Novels**

The Long Silence is said to be Deshpande's most autobiographical novel, where Jaya the protagonist comes closest to Deshpande's heart in her self-analysis and struggles as a writer. In the first three novels discussed in this section, the protagonists are fairly self-absorbed, wrestling for most part with their inner demons and searching for their identities. They are, however, always conscious of their extended families, and Deshpande does make it clear that her protagonists do not function in isolation, nor is the nuclear family an unrooted entity. For example, when Sumi moves back into the Big House with her daughters after Gopal's desertion, her extended family rally around her and close the gap of Gopal's absence as seamlessly as possible, providing generous support and understanding. Deshpande's heroines are always seen moving from a nuclear family unit, *back* into the joint family for support and strength. Despite the fact

[63] Shashi Deshpande, The Intrusion and Other Stories (New Delhi: Penguin, 1993) 58.

that the Hindu ideology promotes the notion of the daughter as given away by her natal family into a her husband's family, Deshpande insists that a woman's natal family is of a cohesive nature, both before and after her marriage, and never more so than during a crisis.

Deshpande's portrayals of joint families do indicate that in the joint family, there will be strong members just as there will be parasitical members, there will be aggressors just as there will be defenders, but she paints an overall picture which suggests that there is comfort and solidarity to be found in the joint family, and that the joint family is the individual's first port of call for help when the nuclear family unit is threatened. Deshpande's protagonists are clearly women who had moved out of their joint families because they had found it restraining and limited, but they are women who have learnt anew to value the joint family structure. In a time when more and more nuclear families are breaking away from the joint family, Deshpande's novels celebrate the strength and support which can be found in the latter. As much as Deshpande criticises some aspects of tradition, she also celebrates its other aspects.

The childhood, marriage and struggles of the central protagonist has been the main focus of The Dark Holds No Terrors, The Long Silence, and Roots and Shadows. By her 1993 novel, The Binding Vine, Deshpande had shifted her focus; Urmi, the central protagonist, is seen to be at the centre of a large network of other women characters, characters which receive a far higher degree of prominence than Deshpande has thus accorded them. Urmi is a protagonist who is happier than any of her predecessors despite grieving over her dead child, a woman more at peace with herself and consequently, in a better position to form and develop deep relationships with other women and share their lives vicariously. Other characters in this novel are used by Deshpande to portray the spectrum of other problems which beset women. Vanaa, for example, who is Urmi's closest friend, is an echo of characters like Jaya and Indu, a wife who eagerly and voluntarily submerges her personality and identity in order to please her husband. In her reiteration of this behaviour on the part of wives, Deshpande appears to be indicating that this may be a common pattern amongst such women, and one which continues to recur, and not just an isolated instance.

Matter of Time, Deshpande's 1996 novel, differs from her earlier novels to no small degree. One very striking difference is that Gopal, Sumi's husband, speaks in the first person. Deshpande explains her departure from her usual practise thus, "I wanted to see if I could use a male voice again, but not as I used to earlier." Ritu Menon notes that Deshpande who had heretofore used a male persona only in her short stories, had not only given Gopal the speaking voice, but had also "invest[ed] him with the same qualities usually reserved for her female protagonists: reflection and introspection."[64] Besides Sumi's and Gopal's, there are many other 'speaking voices' in the novel from the other characters. Deshpande allows the other characters to tell their own stories, and the result is a wide range of personal stories, from several generations of Sumi's family. This may be Deshpande's attempt to explore multiple perspectives and avoid seeing solely a woman's point of view.

Another noteworthy shift in Matter of Time in comparison with Deshpande's other novels is that Sumi is deserted by her husband. Deshpande's other protagonists had been afraid to even envision life without their husbands, and Jaya, who was forced to confront only the possibility of having been deserted by Mohan, becomes emotionally paralysed. In this novel, Deshpande creates a protagonist who actually is deserted by her husband and explores the consequences. Sumi, however, is not cast in the same mould as Saru, Jaya, Indu and Urmi. There is no tremendous change in Sumi from the beginning of the novel to the conclusion. When the reader is introduced to Sumi, she is a woman already complete in herself. Although introspective, Sumi does not undergo agonies of self-doubt, as did Deshpande's earlier protagonists. Sumi is stunned by Gopal's desertion, and describes herself as angry and humiliated, but she manages to take this drastic change of events in her stride, assuming full responsibility for her daughters, and even meeting Gopal calmly and without reproach. In Sumi, Deshpande has created her strongest protagonist yet, a woman able to live and love relatively free of myriad fears.

In her most recent novel, Small Remedies, Deshpande's protagonist makes a further radical move – it is she who deserts her husband. Madhu is the first of Deshpande's protagonists to take such an unusual step. Like Sumi who survived her

[64] Deshpande, Matter of Time 258.

husband's desertion, Madhu is a woman surrounded by loving friends and family members who provide the network of support. In this very contemporary novel, Deshpande seems to indicate that the Indian society is changing to the extent that support is not withdrawn from the single woman, whether deserted by her husband or one who voluntarily deserts her husband. It is remarkable that Sumi does not appear to suffer the derision or contempt of her society for being a deserted wife. Similarly, Madhu does not appear to suffer any disapproval or loss of status for choosing to live away from her husband. Neither Sumi nor Madhu appear to feel any overwhelming pressure to conform, nor are they fettered by traditional roles and expectations of women.

Perhaps in such portrayals, Deshpande is attempting to reflect a middle class Indian community growing increasingly tolerant and accepting of social changes. Certainly Sumi and Madhu appear to function in a society which, for all its many customs and traditions, leaves them room for autonomy and individuality, a privilege previously only accorded to men. The forthright pursuit of individual fulfilment on the part of Sumi, Madhu, and the rest of Deshpande's protagonists certainly indicates their departure from the traditional ideology that the good Hindu woman exists only to serve her family. And yet, Deshpande's protagonists are all of them culturally as well as technically Indian, and many of them Hindus. It is noteworthy that Deshpande depicts the urban middle-class Hindu woman departing from tradition at a time when politically, Hindu values are being touted and extolled. How do contemporary Indian women reconcile their new-found autonomy with traditional values?

Deshpande's New Woman is not merely a rebel. She is a woman who both derives support from her family as well as provides support to her family. She is different from the traditional order of self-effacing women as described in the earlier section of this chapter, but neither is she a Western woman in her expectations and cultural inclinations. "The 'new woman' was to be modern, but she would also have to display the signs of national tradition….."[65]

[65] Gayatri C. Spivak, "Strategy, Identity, Writing." The Post Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues (New York: Routledge, 1990) 39.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan contends that the image of the New Woman in India is primarily derived from the urban, educated, middle-class career woman,[66] an image which Deshpande's protagonists fit neatly into. The New Woman, who according to Rajan, is primarily constructed by the media and for commercial ends, is new in the sense of "having evolved and arrived in response to the times, as well as being intrinsically 'modern' and 'liberated'."[67] Although Deshpande portrays what could be regarded as the New Woman in India, that is to say an independent, professional woman able to stand on her own and even able to defy certain customs, Deshpande also indicates that the New Woman may not be quite so new, and that women from several generations ago had already laid the foundations for the emergence of the New Woman. Considering Deshpande's last novel for example, in which her protagonist leaves her husband, Madhu realises that although she herself is a New Woman who has evolved in response to the times, the older woman whose biography she is writing, was also a New Woman ahead of her times. Savitribai was a woman who broke most of the social norms in a far less permissive era, leaving her husband not only to become a professional singer, but also to live with another man who played the tabla in accompaniment to her singing. Madhu struggles to grasp the enormity of such a course of action in the past generation, but only manages to glimpse the immense obstacles and difficulties faced and surmounted by Savitribai.

Despite the New Women rapidly emerging in India, Deshpande does note that a large number of middle-class Indian women continue to subscribe to the traditional notions despite living modern lives. An example of this would be the education of girls, which has been much improved, but as Vrinda Nabar acknowledges, many girls obtain college degrees because it is an asset for a bride-to-be, rather than for the love of knowledge or the start of a career.[68] Marriage is still the destination and the desired goal for and of many young Indian girls, and social purdahs continue to exist. For those who genuinely become the New Indian Woman trying to balance a career with a marriage and family life, reality may not be as charming as the image, and the New Indian Woman may well find that she is torn between two spheres of life with no allowances

[66] Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Real and Imagined Women. Politics and/of Representation (London: Routledge, 1993) 130.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Nabar 68.

made for her being forced to cope with a full professional life as well as a full domestic life. Deshpande's wide range of characters do portray some of the problems faced by the New Woman and point out that sometimes, there is a masquerading of the traditional under the guise of newness and modernity.

"Far from presenting a simplistic narrative of progress from imperialism to 'autonomy', women's writings in India had to take into account the fact that this was also a period when new machineries of control were established, and new ways of being Indian shaped and circulated."[69] This is certainly true of Deshpande's writing and true of Deshpande's creation of protagonists whom she deems are representative of contemporary middle-class urban Indian women. 'Machineries of control' by Western forces and/or local political powers may indeed be creating ideals of Indianness, but authors like Deshpande are determined to make their voices and visions heard and known. Furthermore, in a time when there is increased political valorisation of Hindu values, Deshpande's protagonists are seen to be swimming against the tide.

Deshpande's novels habitually refrain from placing female protagonists in positions of helplessness or weakness, (although in contrast, diasporic writers *do* habitually thus position their women characters) and although many of her protagonists suffer emotional blows, they are not seen to be in need of male protection or shelter. In this way, Deshpande's writings are totally at odds with most contemporary portrayals of South Asian women, who are more often than not, victims of culture and circumstances.

## Other Contemporary Portrayals of South Asian Women

"[the Asian woman] lives a degraded and inhuman life, ruled when young by her father, by her husband after marriage, and by her sons if she were to become a widow, and that in general, her opinions, views, feelings and emotions are treated as worthless."[70] Although the majority of novels of contemporary South Asian women writers do depict South Asian women struggling in patriarchal systems, their writings

[69] Indira Chowdhury, "Mothering in the Time of Motherlessness. A Reading of Ashapurna Debi's Pratham Pratisruti." Modern Critical Theory Group 21.3 (1998) 308-329.
[70] Parekh. "The Indian Family." Girls of Asian Origin in Britain ed. Seetha Crishna (London: YWCA of Great Britain, 1975) p14.

also make it clear that Prakesh's statement is a worst-case-scenario, which may still hold true in some parts of South Asia, but is by no means the situation for all South Asian women in this day and age.

Taking Manju Kapur's novel, Difficult Daughters, for example, it is fairly clear that the social situation has been changing drastically from generation to generation. Virmati's mother, Kumati, who was married young, had had an arranged marriage and brought a suitable dowry to her husband's family. Kumati had eleven children and although she was literate, was never in a position to pursue any career other than that of wife and mother. Virmati herself had married with no dowry and married a man of her own choosing, becoming his second wife against the wishes of her family. She had taken several higher degrees, lived on her own, and made an academic career for herself. Virmati's daughter is young and unmarried, but she does not seem to be under the same familial or social pressures that her mother had been. Implicitly, the reader is made aware that Virmati's daughter has the power of mobility, choice, and independence, privileges which Virmati did not have. The changes for the women from one generation to the next has been drastic. What becomes the norm for one had been unthinkable in the youth of the other.

Many other South Asian women writers also portray women characters with similar privileges. Some write of young women who are sent abroad for further education, others depict unmarried young women working and socialising freely, and most testify to and record the many changes that have taken place in South Asia which enables women, especially urban middle class women, to lead more autonomous lives than ever before. The rise of the nuclear family, the decline of the joint family, the movement from rural to urban lifestyles, the growing middle classes, family planning, and the economic changes in South Asia are all reasons for these sudden social changes. Madhu Kishwar argues that the life of degradation, perhaps such as was portrayed by Prakesh in the quotation at the beginning of this section, would only be possible if women were entirely dependent on their family and had no resources or options available to them. She argues that with the number of economically independent (or at least financially contributing) women in South Asia ever increasing, women are less and less likely to accept ill treatment and manipulation at the hands of their men.

Although conditions and circumstances are changing, and rapidly, for many South Asian women, South Asian women writers nevertheless do not present or represent women as functioning on equal footing with men. The New Indian Woman as discussed above, previously defined by Rajeswari as being "the educated, urban, middle class career woman", has forcefully emerged on the social scene, but South Asian women writers consistently emphasise the continuing gender discrimination faced by women at all levels of society. ".....the culture of overvaluing male lives at the cost of female lives is not a mere hangover of traditional norms, as is often believed, but is also a widespread contemporary phenomenon."[71]

One of the South Asian women authors who most eloquently portrays the inequality of women in Indian society, depicting not only how female lives are devalued, but also how this devaluation is integrated into the foundation of the society; in its workings, its customs, and its norms, is Arundhati Roy. The following section will illustrate Roy's portrayal of the contemporary middle class Indian woman as a second class citizen of her society.

**Woman as Caste**

The writings of Roy in The God of Small Things draws a parallel between the position of women and the position of Untouchables in Indian society. Ammu and Velutha are both victims of their society; the happiness and sanity of one, and the life of the other, are sacrificed by their community to maintain status quo. Being a woman, Ammu is not permitted the same privileges as her brother, just as Velutha, being of the Untouchable caste, is not permitted the same privileges as those of higher castes. Roy uses humour and ridicule to undercut the self-righteousness of the society and to expose the hypocrisy of a discriminative system.

Roy presents Ammu as a highly intelligent and sentient woman, keenly aware of her position and fiercely resenting it. "She was twenty seven that year, and in the pit of her stomach she carried the cold knowledge that for her, life had been lived. She had

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[71] Kishwar 79.

had one chance. She made a mistake. She married the wrong man."[72] Roy expresses her indignation through the arrangement of her words rather than in the words themselves. Roy's deliberately short sentences highlight the starkness of Ammu's point of view, the bleakness of the sensation of forever living with the consequences of marrying the 'wrong' man. And in Roy's novel, just as Ammu's one mistake costs her dearly, so too does Velutha's one mistake – the mistake of breaking the Love Laws – cost him his father's regard, his reputation, his illusions and hopes, and his life. Roy hints that in her society, both women and Untouchables are made to walk a precariously thin line.

Ammu's situation is juxtaposed to that of Chacko's, her brother. Chacko is educated locally in the university, and then sent to Oxford where he married an English woman, and later, was divorced by her. Because he is a man, and a son of the family, he is not forced to live with the consequences of his mistakes. Chacko is not only welcomed back with open arms to his family, but also inherits the family property, the family business, and smugly informs Ammu that what is hers is also his. In no way is Chacko dispossessed or even chastised for his actions. Ammu is persecuted by her family for her relationship with Velutha, whereas Chacko's seduction of factory girls is excused as "He can't help having a Man's Needs."[73]

> Ammu's position, in comparison, is best summed up by her grand-aunt,
> "She [Baby Kochamma] subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a *divorced* daughter – according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a *divorced* daughter from a *love* marriage, well words could not describe Baby Kochamma's outrage. As for a *divorced* daughter from an *intercommunity love* marriage – Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject."[74]

Roy peels back layer after layer of social convention to reveal that in this community, the gender divide is sharp and uncompromising on all significant issues, and its women are disadvantaged at all levels. She portrays the gender discrimination as being based on grounds as illogical and unfair as discrimination against Untouchables. Roy implies that such injustices are part of the fabric of society, characteristics of the society.

[72] Arundhati Roy, The God of Small Things (London: Flamingo-HarperCollins, 1997) 38.
[73] Roy 168.
[74] Roy 46.

**Smaller Portions for Women**

Roy's novel depicts Ammu and the other women characters as victims of their societal norms. There are South Asian women writers who depict women as victims of their parents. This 'victimisation' is less obvious, but perhaps no less insidious.

In Appachana's novel, Listening Now, there is depiction of sibling envy and competition, one of the commonest forms of inequality South Asian women are often confronted with. Shanta is the eldest daughter of the family of this novel. The happiness of the family is occasionally strained by the tension of Shanta suspecting her mother of favouring her brother. "'But, Amma,' twelve-year old Shanta had said, enraged, 'you gave me two pieces of chicken and you gave Madhav *three*. Why are you *always* doing that?'"[75] The childhood resentment harboured by Shanta continues into adulthood and colours her relationship with her mother all their lives. "Madhav. Always Madhav. He got the appreciation; she, Shanta, the criticism. When he came back from college, Amma welcomed him with two meat dishes, chicken and mutton, and khir filled with almonds and raisins. When she came home after her marriage there was one meat dish and no almonds in the khir."[76]

Shanta, like so many other characters in South Asian women's writings, uses these food markers to measure the love and appreciation of her mother. Otherwise an accomplished and capable woman, she only feels devalued in terms of personal worth when she compares the treatment she receives with that which Madhav receives. Many authors apart from Appachana, also record instances of mothers or other female relatives doling out larger portions or even different and extra dishes to the male members of the family. "If food is treated as a code.....the message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion....."[77] Like Shanta, most South Asian women writers appear to subscribe to the concept of 'codes of food', regarding both the quality and quantity of food as being in direct proportion to the status accorded the person, used as

[75] Anjana Appachana, Listening Now (New York: Random House, 1998) 164.
[76] Appachana 187.
[77] Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal." Implicit Meanings. Essays in Anthropology (1975. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 254.

an indicator, measure or reflection of the person's worth. It appears that South Asian women consistently feel they are given smaller portions – and not only at mealtimes.

Roy and Appachana's novels emphasise drastic gender inequalities. To conclude this section, it would be instructive to discuss a South Asian novel in which there are no central male characters, to observe the conditions for a woman in an all-women-world, in a world where gender-inequality is not an issue.

**A Family of Women**

In the novels of many South Asian women writers, the household revolves around, or at least is primarily concerned, with one or more of its male members, not infrequently to the exclusion or neglect of some of its women. Leena Dhingra writes of a family which primarily consists of women, exploring the interaction of women in the absence of men. The domestic atmosphere in Dhingra's novel, Amritvela, is characterised by cosiness, comfort and understanding. There is no fear of dispossession and no struggle for consequence in the family, such as we find in The God of Small Things or in Listening Now.

Amritvela's protagonist, the London-based Meera, returns to Delhi for a visit after the death of her parents. She lives in a household which is primarily comprised of women – Bibiji, her great-aunt and the matriarch of the family, Daya, her aunt, Maie, who is her great-aunt's faithful servant, and Minoo, the little sweeper girl. Other women do appear in the novel – other aunts, cousins, and distant relatives, but it is those in the household who form Meera's family. Meera's family are a doting one, concerned without being suffocatingly so, and respectful of her individuality while attempting to guard her from censure and criticism. They extend unconditional affection to her and pamper her to no small degree. Meera is indulged, guided, protected, and loved by her family, and the terms of address are clear reflections of her status – she is usually addressed in terms of endearment, and frequently as "rani". The other women characters in the novel also generally treat one another with affection and gentleness. There are frequent chastises and mild rebukes, but there is also a sense of familial unity. The hierarchy of seniority is enforced from time to time, the women gossip and recount

scandalous tales, but there is no sense of oppression or alienation towards any member of the family. On the contrary, the tales are told and retold with the intention of reaffirming kinship bonds and helping Meera to touch base with her Indian family and Indian identity.

In Amritvela, there is a notable absence of any significant male presence in the family. One would not wish to argue that were there any male relatives in the household, Meera's family would love her any less, but it is possible, even probable, that the quantity as well as the quality of the attention and affection bestowed on her would be quite different. At any rate, Amritvela stands apart as the only South Asian novel which does not contain any significant male character, a novel which explores a domestic world inhabited only by women. It is noteworthy that in such a domestic, women-dominated world, in the absence of men, the female protagonist is not posited as victim.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to investigate how contemporary South Asian women writers posit their women characters. As previously mentioned, with the exception of Deshpande, the vast majority of contemporary South Asian women writers posit their female protagonists as victims – not so much because of their class, caste, or circumstances, but primarily and simply because they are women. The intense emphasis on the victimhood of South Asian women has become a characteristic of the genre, and it is certainly the case that most contemporary South Asian women's novels contain much sorrow and poignancy, and relatively little humour. It appears that there are a large number of South Asian women writers who are set upon articulating the many wrongs long inflicted on South Asian women, and this is a driving motivation for their writings.

Deshpande's writings constitute an unusual addition to the genre because her protagonists are not overtly victims. They are women with a large degree of freedom of choice, mobility, and financial independence. However, they are still victimised by their own notion that their self-worth is defined in terms of their marriages, which is a concept derived from tradition, upbringing, myths and social conventions. When Deshpande's protagonists realise that in limiting their social and self-definitions to

being someone's wife, they realise that they have voluntarily traded one set of bonds for another, and have not yet achieved autonomy or liberation. Deshpande's protagonists rise above themselves when they learn to stop deriving their self-worth from their partners. Deshpande's protagonists may not be victims, but the general insistent positing of women as victims by the majority of South Asian women writers, and the equating of South Asian womanhood with inevitable victimhood, reinforces the general notion that South Asian women are perpetual victims.

It is perhaps also worth noting that the majority of the contemporary South Asian women writers discuss the victimhood of women largely in domestic and familial terms. Little mention is made of gender discrimination in the workplace, or in the legal system, or on the political stage. The depiction of victimhood is not exactly confined to, but it does appear concentrated on social and cultural circumstances and systems. It was therefore a primary concern in this chapter to focus on the positionality of South Asian women and their consequent manoeuvring of their domestic circumstances. Domestic space is not only important as the world they primarily occupy, but also as a space loaded with implications of their worth and their social positions. There are unseen lines and boundaries in their living spaces just as there are unsaid rules and social laws in their culture. The physical structure of their homes and social set-up of their households are all boundaries which shape their identities and define their daily lives and rituals in minute, subtle, but significant ways.

Victimhood may have become so central a theme of so many South Asian women writers that it may have caused the exclusion or sidelining of other themes. Some notable absences in literature of contemporary South Asian women (especially on the part of the diasporic authors) include the effects of globalisation on South Asia, the political situation, and the economic reforms, none of which feature to any significant extent in most contemporary South Asian women's fiction. Another notable absence in the literature is sexuality. This has of course been traditionally a taboo topic of discussion, but for the articulate and liberated woman writers of this age, it is a strange fact that there is relatively little mention made of sexuality, except where it pertains to sexual abuse, rape, domination by men, and virginity. Little or no mention is made of homosexual love, despite the many portrayals of socially practised gender segregation.

It can be fairly argued that each author should be at liberty to write on any theme(s) she desires, but taken collectively, the genre of South Asian women's writings does incline the reader to suppose or even conclude that generally, South Asian women are downtrodden members of their societies.[78] Whatever its relation to the truth of the matter, this at least is the message which South Asian women writers have succeeded in conveying globally. And the most effective distributors of this image are the diasporic authors. The next chapter examines the differences between writers from within South Asia and diasporic South Asian writers, tracing the different identities sought after and created by these sets of authors.

[78] The issues of authorial responsibility and representation will be discussed at greater length in Chapters Three and Four.

# CHAPTER FOUR: READER RESPONSE

***"I write. Let the reader learn to read."***

*-Anon-*

## Signpost

This chapter focuses on how readers respond to contemporary South Asian women's fiction. The introductory section will describe some of the expectations under which South Asian women writers work and present their work to a global audience, and will also outline some of the criticisms levelled at editors for their choice of material made representative of South Asian women's literature. It also discusses reasons for which some South Asian women writers cater to the expected and the stereotypical, and the subsequent resulting limitations in the genre.

The readers chosen for analysis of reader responses are members of an Internet mailing list, and the next section will therefore provide a brief background to the evolving culture of this medium. This will be followed by a discussion of cyberspace communities which have formed, and are continuing to form, as a result of the many Internet mailing lists which have mushroomed. This section of the chapter engages with the issues of identity in cyberspace. Some of the limitations of such communities will be highlighted and these limitations will be kept in mind when analysing reader responses on the chosen mailing list.

Following on from that, the structure, set-up, and practices of the chosen mailing list is described in detail, in order to facilitate understanding of the practices of this particular mailing list, and the positionality of its participants. Here the reason this particular mailing list was selected and its suitability to this study is also explained. Two authors have been selected for close analysis of reader responses to their writings, one a home author and the other a diasporic one. The second half of the chapter comprises a study of the reader responses to each of these two authors. These are responses (mainly

The penultimate section of the chapter contains a short study of the works of Anita Desai, a prolific author who has been writing for several decades, a product of East and West as she claims both German and Indian descent, and more significantly, an author whose life has been based both in the East and West.

## Defining Diasporic Writers

In this chapter, I will be working with the literature of diasporic South Asian writers from Australia, Canada, UK, and USA, and may occasionally group these countries under the term, "the West", for ease of reference. For the same purpose, writers writing from within South Asia have been designated the term "home writers".[1] (It must be noted that diasporic South Asian women writers are inclined to define themselves as such based on race, culture, and family background, rather than on nationality and political status.)

However, upon closer analysis of the literary and personal backgrounds of the authors (such as are available to be studied), it rapidly becomes evident that South Asian women writers cannot be classified into two clear and distinct categories; those who either write from within or from without South Asia. The division cannot be supposed to fall into such neat and sharply defined compartments. Many South Asians now travel widely, frequently, and for extended periods of time. Many reside both in South Asia and in the West, having family and bases in both locations and thus moving freely and frequently from one to the other. Some have immigrated, some hold dual-citizenship, while others have permanent residence status in countries outside their own. This travel and mobility, which was scarcely possible only several decades ago and far more uncommon, now blurs the boundary between the home and diasporic writers. This suggests that these very boundary markers are negotiable, and certainly questionable.

[1] One may well have reservations about the potentially misleading term "home writer"; the term was chosen to imply that the writer resides within South Asia, or is a national of a South Asian country. It is not possible to ascertain the nationality of every diasporic writer, but the purpose of this differentiation between home and diasporic writers is less to determine the political status of the authors, and more to register the geographical residences and locations of the writers, which goes a long way in influencing the writing.

The distinction between travel (however frequent) and diaspora needs to be made, and it is worded most succinctly by Clifford who says, "diaspora is different from travel (although it works through travel practices) in that it is not temporary."[2] For the purposes of comparison, and in order to trace the emerging pattern in the writings of the South Asian women, in this chapter diasporic writers are so defined if they either do not write from within South Asia or else are not *primarily* based in South Asia. (This is a working definition rather than an attempt to classify writers into watertight compartments.)

The texts selected for analysis in this chapter have been chosen for their deliberate engagement with issues not only of being a woman, but of being a *South Asian* woman, wherever she may find herself. A fairly wide range of texts will therefore be discussed in this chapter for the purpose of analysing the many facets of the experience of being a South Asian woman.

## Notions of Identity

Wherever contemporary South Asian women writers may be writing from, it is clear from the outset that many grapple with issues of identity. Identity is one of the most common themes in their literature and in many cases, the search for self-identity is portrayed as confusing, painful and only occasionally rewarding. Some write semi-autobiographical novels, delving into personal pasts in order to either discover or re-examine their motivations and affinities. (This chapter does not, however, aim to determine the degree of autobiography in the novels of South Asian writers.) Others use fictional characters and situations to question traditional norms, testing, trying, and occasionally reinforcing (whether intentionally or otherwise) notions of race and culture. Many contemporary South Asian women writers write with a sense of attempting to make their individual voices heard over a cacophony of long-standing stereotypes and expectations.

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[2] James Clifford, Routes – Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997) 251.

When deliberating over issues of identity, it can be observed that diasporic South Asian women writers, to a far greater extent than the home writers, seek and debate concepts of home. Perhaps because "diaspora is a culture without a country,"[3] diasporic writers have a natural tendency to seek a concrete, tangible, and locatable *place* in which to ground their roots. Behramji Malabari, a reformer and columnist, had opined that 'home' is to be mapped in concentric circles of belonging, where the core is the place where one is born, spreading out to a regional and national identity.[4] However, for the diasporic South Asians, the notion of home is somewhat more fraught with complexity than as expressed by Malabari.

Living in countries where they form a part of an ethnic minority, some diasporic South Asian writers find themselves partly nostalgic about a South Asian homeland, and partly uncertain as to where exactly constitutes home for them. Diaspora is a composite, as discussed by James Clifford, "a history of dispersal, myth/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support for the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship."[5] Given such a complexity of identity, where indeed is home for the diasporic writers?

When discussing 'home' in South Asia, it becomes clear that most diasporic South Asian authors have a specific location in mind. Their conscious or subconscious definitions of home seldom include or embrace an entire country. For some, it is a particular state, for example, Kerala, or Punjab, or Tamil Nadu. For others, it is particular cities – Delhi, Calcutta, Kandy, Lahore, etc. For still others, it is a particular house in a particular city or village, lived in by particular members of their family. The sense of belonging, of being welcomed and wanted, or being rooted, is caught up in a mesh of memories of sounds, scents, and sensations, and the focus point of this complicated set of affiliations is often a single building, structure, or location. In fact, 'home' may not even be a physical location, and as Marangoly George points out,

[3] Elazar Balkan, and Marie-Denise Shelton, eds., Borders, Exiles, Diasporas (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1998) 5.
[4] Inderpal Grewal, Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel (London: Leicester UP, 1996) 136.
[5] Balkan 3.

"Home is also the imagined location that can be more easily fixed in a mental landscape than in actual geography."[6]

Therefore, if home may not even be a locatable geographical place, "it is evident that home is not merely an object or a building, but a diffuse and complex *condition*, which integrates memories and images and desires and fears, the past and the present."[7] [Italics mine.] The diasporic South Asian writers may find themselves torn between two or more identities because they mistakenly assume that home is a tangible, locatable spot on a map. When living in the West and looking to South Asia as home, it is all too easy to subscribe to nostalgia, forgetting that "a home is also a set of rituals, personal rhythms and routines of everyday life.....it is a gradual product of a dweller's adaptation to the world."[8]

It is, moreover, an unnecessarily limiting concept to suppose that identity has to be monolithic. Many diasporic South Asians appear to labour under the assumption that there has to be a trade-off between being 'authentically South Asian', and being 'Westernised'. There is a habitual attempt to set up a situation where the 'traditional' is pitted against the 'modern'. In a search for cultural purity, too many fall into the unrealistic assumption that tradition is at polar opposites from modernity, seeking to designate one as desirable and the other as undesirable. In the temptation to oversimplify or dichotomise, diasporic South Asians engage in a process of 'selective rejection of Westernization'.[9] This selectiveness is in turn a reaction to or an influence of post colonialism. In much of the literature of the diasporic South Asian women writers, the protagonists are portrayed learning to negotiate a hybrid identity, forging a new self which manages to co-exist more comfortably both in a South Asian environment and in a Western one. In discussing the tensions which dominate 'colonised lives', Aligiah describes these tensions as "the attempt to build a bridge from

[6] Rosemary Marangoly George, The Politics of Home. Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 11.
[7] Juhani Pallasmaa, "Identity, Intimacy and Domicile – Notes on the Phenomenology of Home." The Home: Words, Interpretations, Meanings and Environments ed. David N. Benjamin (Aldershot, UK: Avebury, 1995) 133.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Uma Narayan, Dislocating Cultures. Identity, Tradition and Third-World (New York: Routledge, 1998) 22.

one culture to another without falling into the ravine in the middle in the process."[10] This hybrid identity is therefore presented as something of a balancing act.

For second-generation diasporic South Asians, the concept of home may be shaped by the implicit notions passed on to them via indirect memories, tales told and retold to evoke a utopian time and place, ideas and images which gradually take the form of a distant 'home'. Stories of and from home are therefore carefully preserved and transported by the emigrating South Asians, packed in memories just as their prized possessions are packed in cases and boxes to be taken from East to West. These memories and stories will then in due course be lovingly taken out to be handed on to the next generation as part of their inheritance.

However, story telling is not only the passing on of memories or a side effect of nostalgia, it is also a form of empowerment, transforming the storyteller from a passive subject to whom things happen, to a persona who creates and controls the tale. As Bhattacharyya reminds us, "when Scheherazade tells her stories we all know that story telling is a strategy for the disempowered."[11] For diasporic South Asians, story-telling may also be a way to claim lofty and desirable cultural connections, especially if that contrasts with a mundane everyday existence. In the course of this chapter, it will be illustrated how stories circulate and attain legitimisation and even fable status.

For many of the diaspora, culturally suspended in countries where they are constantly misunderstood, perceived as the Other, the outsider, a part of an ethnic minority, 'home' may come to be defined as the one place where one is a fully paid-up member of the majority. In the attempt to share their yearnings to 'return', one generation is capable of passing on the inheritance of nostalgia for a distant 'homeland' to the next generation, instilling the belief that their current residence is not, and could never be, regarded as home. However, in the words of Avtar Brah, "on the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination.....on the other hand, home is also the lived experience of a locality."[12] In omitting to take into the account the

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[10] George Aligiah, A Passage to Africa (Great Britain: Little, Brown and Co., 2001) 20.
[11] Gargi Bhattacharyya, Tales of Dark-skinned Women. Race, Gender and Global Culture (London: UCL Press, 1998) 160.
[12] Avtar Brah, Cartographies of Diaspora. Contesting Identities (London: Routledge, 1996) 192.

latter and equally valid experience of home as defined by Brah, the diasporic South Asians frequently find themselves increasingly distanced from their next generation.

Besides the pitfall of nostalgia, diasporic communities are inclined to succumb to "totalisations", defined by Uma Narayan as casting values or practices which pertain only to specific privileged groups within the community as values of the "culture" as a whole. Totalisations are one of the results of deterritorialisation, the displacement of identities and meanings.[13] In the following discussion of the literature by diasporic South Asian women writers, it can be seen that nostalgia, totalisation, and deterritorialisation are all factors which play their parts in shaping the imagination and identity of the diasporic community.

## Diasporic South Asian Women Writers

The writings of diasporic South Asian women writers clearly demonstrate that notions of identity are intimately bound up with concepts of home and place. Their writings also suggest that these notions, as conceived of by the women characters, change over time, and significantly, change depending on their location and environment. Diasporic South Asian women writers, almost without exception, testify to a sense of dual or multiple identities. Many hint at a 'double consciousness', as it was termed by W. E. B. Dubois. Many go on to perceive the East and West as being in cultural conflict and/or opposition, and set up their stories accordingly, always emphasising the sense of being torn in two directions.

The geographical location of the women characters in the novels of diasporic South Asian women writers largely fall into three broad categories: South Asian women who were born and bred in a Western country and have subsequently either been sent back to South Asia for a prolonged stay or to be married, or have simply chosen to 'return'; South Asian women who were born and bred in South Asia and subsequently have either been sent or have chosen to live in the West; and South Asian women who were born and bred in a Western country and continue to live there.

[13] Caren Kaplan, "Deterritorialisations: The Rewriting of Home and Exile In Western Feminist Discourse." Cultural Critique 6 (1997): 187-98.

## From West to East

" 'Home' is a crucial category within European travel because it is the space of return and of consolidation of the Self enabled by the encounter with the 'Other'.[14] Home is an equally crucial category in diasporic South Asian travel, because it is also in the space of return and of consolidation of the Self, but in this case, it is enabled by the encounter not with the other, but with one's own. This section dealing with South Asians travelling from West to East will be studied by considering three novels in which the protagonists, at various stages of their lives, make their journeys from UK or USA to India.

These three texts have been chosen partly because they tell the tale of diasporic South Asian women returning to South Asia and grappling with the issues of identity, and partly because they portray three protagonists at different ages and stages of life; one is an adolescent, one a young single adult, and the third, a wife and mother. All three feel the conflicting tug of loyalties, and to different degrees, seek a sense of belonging. The manner in and extent to which they feel the conflict of loyalties does depend in part on their age. According to Prashad, it is not only issues of identity which the diasporic South Asians have to grapple with, they also have to deal with both the notions and the reality of a distant homeland, "Those in India too struggle with the reconstruction of culture. The only advantage they have over the desi[15] diaspora is that they do not have to labour under the illusion that there is a distant land that is home of pure religion, of the dharma that Hindu American children are told to long for."[16]

Motherland, by debut novelist Vineeta Vijayaraghavan, tells the tale of a young Indian American girl who spends her summer in Tamil Nadu.

### *Motherland*

The teenaged protagonist, Maya, is sent by her parents to Tamil Nadu, to spend a summer with her mother's relatives. This trip is intended to remind Maya of her roots

[14] Grewal 6.
[15] Desi: defined as those who claim South Asian ancestry.
[16] Vijay Prashad, The Karma of Brown Folks (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000) 156.

and culture, and attempt to dissipate some of the undesirable influences of Westernisation. As Maya renews her acquaintance with the way of life in India, and accustoms herself once again to living under a different set of rules, standards and expectations, she discovers new aspects of herself. Dinner parties, visits to friends of relatives, dealing with servants, all these daily events bring home to Maya the disturbing knowledge that in some way, she is different from her relatives. Maya's grandmother who had brought Maya up until she was four, reveals Maya's own hidden past to her, assisting her to understand and empathise with her mother. When Maya's grandmother has a stroke, Maya's parents are amongst the family members gathered. Maya's grandmother dies within two weeks, and after the cremation, life reverts back to its normal rhythms, but Maya finds that she is left with a new-found confidence that she carries a sense of home within her.

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It is significant that although only fifteen, Maya is already old enough to feel the tug of different identities. The novel Motherland was chosen for close analysis because the protagonist is an adolescent, not quite matured enough to be entirely self-assured about her identity, but aware enough to feel the pull of two sets of loyalties. In presenting a fifteen-year old protagonist, Vijayaraghavan enables the reader to glean an idea of the influences which filter through into Maya's life, gradually shaping and altering – and occasionally confusing – her notions of belonging and identity as she goes through the process of growing up.

Although she has much affection for her relatives and attachment to India, Maya clearly regards America as her home, the place where she lives and plans her life, "Every time we returned to the States from trips to India, I was in heaven in the taxi home. A big American car, with good brakes, good shocks, leather cushions, and a real road, fully paved and sealed."[17] Maya is portrayed unabashedly relishing the comforts of the middle-class American lifestyle with all the amenities of a developed country. However, when with her American friends and boyfriend, Maya differentiates, however unconsciously, between herself and them, seeing herself and her family as somehow set apart, "He [Steve] couldn't have known that in our tradition, necklaces are more important than rings."[18] At this point, Maya is identifying herself as Indian.

[17] Vineeta Vijayaraghavan, Motherland (New York: Soho, 2001) 15.
[18] Vijayaraghavan 60.

Maya is confused because, to a greater extent than she recognises, at unexpected moments, she finds herself tempted to identify herself as American. In conversation with her uncle and aunt, Maya suddenly discovers her latent loyalties and affinities, " "Why would America want to do that?" I asked. I was careful not to say "we" for America."[19] It appears that amongst her Indian relatives in Tamil Nadu, Maya feels American, whereas amongst her white American friends, Maya feels Indian. Wherever she is, Maya compares herself with others and finds herself balancing between two sets of experiences which seem worlds apart from each other, and yet are both contained within her. In containing these separate worlds within her, Maya feels she is not completely a hundred percent from or of either.

Maya discovers that with each trip to India, she finds herself struggling harder not to feel out of place, "If I scrubbed hard enough, I hoped I would peel away that layer of Americaness that made me feel clumsy and conspicuous here; I wanted to unearth that other person who had felt at home here and known how to fit in."[20] Maya's problem can in part be attributed to the fact that she is unaccustomed to the less comfortable living conditions, but the problem is also augmented by the fact that her relatives notice her 'clumsiness', remark on it, joke, or otherwise draw attention to her being from USA, however inoffensively. Her relatives regard her foreign status with a mixture of pride and deprecation, proud to be able to claim a niece and therefore connections in USA, and deprecating because they fear she may no longer be one of them.

"Now more than on earlier trips, I felt how hard and how exhausting it was to translate, even though we were all speaking English. There were so many ways of being and expressing myself that I had to leave behind, so many I had to relearn."[21] Maya makes an interesting point when she says she has to *translate* even though all are speaking in English. The English spoken in India and in America are naturally different and the teenaged Maya feels obliged to change her manner of self-expression, which in turn necessitates some shift of self-identity also.

[19] Vijayaraghavan 105.
[20] Vijayaraghavan 35.
[21] Ibid.

The older Maya grows, the more it is brought home to her that she has to come to terms with the dual identities she has inherited, and that both worlds are increasingly demanding of her loyalties. She finds herself walking a finer and finer line as fewer and fewer allowances are made for her youth. Part of Maya's problem is the approach and attitude taken by her relatives in India. She finds herself presented with only two options, " "Look Maya," said my aunt, with an edge of exasperation. "It is up to you. You can come here and be a tourist, do whatever you like to do, or you can come here and be a member of the family, with responsibilities and obligations. You choose." "[22] Her aunt's words convey to Maya the implicit warning that she must conform if she wishes to retain the privilege of her place in the family, leaving Maya little room to be both Indian and American simultaneously, leaving Maya little room to be the Indian-American which she is. Little occasional remarks or reminders such as, " "You've been Indian longer than you have been anything else," my aunt said. "Don't forget that." "[23] are designed to instil in Maya a sense of owed loyalty and duty.

In the course of the novel, Maya is juxtaposed to her two cousins, Madhu and Brindha. Although only ten, Brindha is born and bred in Southern India, and fits with ease and completeness into her culture and place. Madhu, on the other hand, is what Maya's relatives would deem very westernised. Accepted and welcomed by the family, the acceptance of Madhu is nevertheless, only partial. Maya's uncle and aunt may be happy to host Madhu and help her order new clothes, but they are not prepared to introduce her to their friends. Madhu is held up to Maya as an example not to be followed. Maya absorbs this knowledge, and decides she does not wish to take the same path as Madhu does although it fascinates her. Maya strives to be just like her Tamil Nadu relatives and to fit in, but she is always aware that in some matters, such as in the treatment and regard of servants for example, she is remarkably different from her relatives.

The different experiences undergone by diasporic South Asians when visiting South Asia may occasionally be due not to the unfamiliarity with the conditions in a developing country, but to the outdated notions of South Asia which have long been

[22] Vijayaraghavan 115.
[23] Vijayaraghavan 106.

nursed, cherished, and lovingly passed on to the next generation by the diasporic community. In Bombay Talkie by Ameena Meer, for example, the supposedly liberated, Californian born and bred protagonist Sabah, discovers that her ideas are more conventional than her Indian counterparts. Having just graduated from university, Sabah agrees to "go to India for three weeks, help my friend Rani sort out her life, find a suitable husband, and absorb some culture….." in exchange for her parents allowing her to be "free for the next few years."[24] Having taken it for granted that she is what Indians would consider extremely Americanised, Sabah arrives in Delhi to find a far greater degree of decadence than she had anticipated. Instructed by her mother, who herself had had a strict North Indian upbringing, to emulate Rani, who has married and settled down in India, Sabah soon realises that Rani's is far from being a fairytale lifestyle. Unconventional as she considers herself, Sabah is still shocked to learn that having extra-marital affairs is considered acceptable as long as they are discreetly conducted, and that such casual affairs are more the norm than the exception amongst certain social circles in Delhi.

Meer highlights the point that the diasporic South Asian community erroneously assumes that the memories they have preserved of South Asia are accurate. In actuality, these memories may be remarkably different and removed from the reality of a contemporary South Asia. This suggests that diasporic South Asians have preserved the idea of their homeland and culture, the notions remaining unchanged with the passing of time. Diasporic South Asians may not be fully aware that in their absence, their culture has evolved and altered, and that their ideas may even be regarded as archaic or old-fashioned in the place or country they regard as home. Their version of South Asian culture may only be an out-dated or fossilised version, or even a partially reinvented culture. Not only do some diasporic South Asians appear to regard South Asia as their true home, they also regard it as the home of their morals and value systems; a set of ethical references which they mistakenly regard as fixed and/or unchanging.

The last novel to be discussed in this subsection also deals with the theme of returning to India from the West for a visit, but in this instance, the protagonist is in a different stage of life and much older than either Sabah or Maya. It is interesting to

[24] Ameena Meer, Bombay Talkie (Chatham: MacKays, 1998) 37.

observe that in Leena Dhingra's Amritvela, the London-based Meera, brought up in England since she was eleven and who is now both wife and mother, is still gripped with a strong sense of her dual identity and double consciousness. Despite her extensive period of time living in England and although her parents, whom she primarily associates with India, have now passed away, Meera still feels a strong bond with the country, "…even through the jet-lag I'm aware of the mixture of feelings – of memories and emotions that India arouses in me – a sort of trepidation and wonder! As a child on my visits back I used to feel…..almost overwhelmed that I should be connected to all this. I feel the need to reconnect….."[25]

In this quotation which was taken from Meera's diary entries, the two immediate conclusions which may be drawn are her strong attachment to India and her regard of India as vast and mysterious, and therefore, somehow alien to her although she wishes to belong. It is significant that Meera continues to feel such attachment although she no longer finds her parents with her in India, because it indicates that her sense of belonging is not entirely, although it clearly is in large part, derived from them. Meera is a character who lives in what Avtar Brah terms the "diasporic space", "the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them' are contested."[26]

Although Meera is a woman who understands that she feels "suspended between two cultures," only one culture is discussed on this novel. Amritvela is not structured to portray how Meera copes in England – it is entirely set in India, during Meera's brief holiday visit. Meera is seen to be treated almost as though she were a child, especially by her aunt and great-aunt with whom she stays. She is also welcomed by the rest of her extended family, and although it is a very different lifestyle from the one she is accustomed to, Meera discovers the difference is far from being abrasive. It is constricting, limiting, and more interdependent on others than she is used to, but it is also comforting and soothing. The best illustration of the myriad differences is in the episode of the parcel.

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[25] Leena Dhingra, Amritvela (London: Women's Press. 1988) 13.
[26] Brah 209.

Upon arrival in New Delhi, Meera decides she must fulfil her promise to a friend to send a parcel on his behalf to West Bengal. Unsuspectingly, Meera informs her great-aunt of this simple matter in the presence of friends and neighbours. She is totally unprepared for the furore of excitement that her simple announcement arouses. Firstly, she is advised by all and sundry that she should not post it herself for any number of good reasons. She next makes the mistake of bringing out the parcel wrapped in brown paper and string, and is unaware of having done anything inappropriate until her great-aunt leaps to the defence, declaring that that cannot be the parcel, it is merely the package. Later, after her parcel had been lined with polythene and sewn into a cotton cover, Meera's great-aunt explains to her,

> " "In India parcels have to be wrapped in cloth…."
> "I'd forgotten."
> "It doesn't matter, rani, but we don't want outside people imagining you're a tourist or something."
> "But I am – in a way."
> "Don't be silly. You're in your country, and we are your family." "[27]

Meera's great-aunt does not empathise with Meera's sense of being caught between two cultures, claiming her unequivocally as belonging to India and to her family there, but she is not unaware that Meera is nevertheless enough of an outsider to make mistakes which may betray this to non-family members. Although she is protective of Meera, the implicit message such behaviour conveys is that it is somehow shameful for Meera to *appear* an outsider, whatever the reality may be. Like Maya's relatives in Motherland, it is seen that well-meaning and doting relatives may apply subtle pressure on diasporic South Asians to behave and conform in such a manner that would qualify them as 'properly' and wholly South Asian. Such pressure, coming as it does from those well established in their territories, and moreover, having the upperhand in the role of family, elders, hosts, protectors, and well-wishers, is especially difficult to resist.

The amusing episode of the parcel continues when Meera decides to refuse the offer of another aunt to send the parcel via her son's office, a route which would require waiting another three days for the son to return from a business trip. Despite all the advice showered on her, Meera decides to post the parcel in person at the post office, and in so doing, discovers more about the workings of the country. She discovers that

[27] Dhingra 24.

instructions are neither clear nor explicit and that the system simply assumes one's knowledge of it. In the course of her visit, Meera finds that this holds true at many levels, ranging from posting a parcel to making the correct responses to her cousins.

In the confusion of the badly signposted system in the post office, Meera eventually discovers that her parcel, wrapped in cloth as it now correctly is, is required to be stamped and sealed in red wax. Meera obtains the wax easily, but is frustrated in her attempts to purchase a seal, which has to be ordered in advance. She stumbles upon a kindly bookseller who offers her the loan of his own seal, and even then, Meera discovers that she is a complete novice at stamping the seals. The bookseller's assistant performs this favour for her with a deftness that is painfully contrasted to Meera's lack of experience, and eventually, Meera succeeds in posting her parcel. Dhingra uses this to illustrate her point that the system in India may be totally alien to a Westerner, set up as it is to be interdependent on one's connections and network or friends and family.

When in South Asia, many diasporic South Asians find that they are part of a large joint or extended family, a very different experience and position from interacting only with a nuclear family. All the diasporic South Asian women writers, without exception, compare either implicitly or explicitly, the closeness of family ties within and without South Asia. Most portray family ties in South Asia as being stronger and closer than in Western countries, where they are more likely to feel their individualism to a greater extent, and more alone. Some write of this aloneness with relief and pleasure, portraying it as a welcome haven away from the suffocation of family pressure and interference, while others describe it as loneliness, alienation and exile. This comparison is carried out both by diasporic authors describing moves from the West to the Indian subcontinent, and vice versa. This leads us into a consideration of the second category of diasporic South Asians: those who have been born and bred in South Asia, and who have immigrated to Western countries in their adult lives.

**From East to West**

In most of the diasporic South Asian women's writings, the journey from West to East is a brief one, a trip made during vacation time or in times of family

emergencies, a time away from work and the usual routine of everyday life. More often than not, it is a trip which involves meeting relatives and old friends, very frequently, staying with the nuclear and/or extended family. It is usually a brief sojourn from the familiar to the forgotten or distant familiar. Journeying from East to West, however, is portrayed by the South Asian women writers as being a very different cup of tea altogether. It is a move from the known to the unknown. It is usually for a considerable amount of time, to be calculated in terms of years rather than weeks or months. It may be a traumatic journey due to the certain knowledge that those left behind in South Asia have invested much and are eagerly awaiting news of success. It is a journey away from close networks of family and friends, to the loneliness of being a stranger in a strange land. Return to South Asia is usually assumed, but at an indefinite point in the future.

This section contains the study of three diasporic South Asian women writers, chosen not only for their introspective handling of diasporic issues, but also for the range of countries and races; Lahiri writes predominantly of diasporic Indians (perhaps Bengalis) in USA, Baldwin of diasporic Sikhs in Canada, and Lokuge of immigrant Singhalese in Australia.

A favourite theme of diasporic South Asian women writers when discussing emigration to western countries, is the theme of alienation. In her Pulitzer Prize winning Interpreter of Maladies, Jhumpa Lahiri writes of Mrs Sen, an Indian woman who migrates because she is married to a university mathematics lecturer working in America. Mrs Sen baby-sits a young boy, Eliot, and it is through his eyes that Lahiri reveals the many and varied ways in which Mrs Sen struggles to settle down to a life a world apart from the one to which she is accustomed. Eliot observes the curved knife which Mrs Sen has brought with her from India, her reaction to receiving an aerogram giving her news of her new born niece, her happiness in obtaining fresh fish, her fear of driving, amongst many other little tell-tale signs of loneliness and yearning for home. She attempts to adjust to her life in USA, but she continues to regard India as home. The determination to continue regarding India (or South Asia) as home is one way diasporic South Asians cope with uncomfortable and seemingly hostile new environments.

Baldwin's stories of Sikh communities in Canada also discuss how immigrants cope with their new environments. Several of Baldwin's short stories have been selected for analysis as each displays a different aspect of the diasporic experience of Sikhs in Canada, incorporating the perspectives of housewives and career-oriented Sikhs. Baldwin's stories demonstrate that each character experiences the same sense of dislocation and displacement, but for different reasons, to different extents, and consequently evolve different methods of coping. The significance of analysing *several* of Baldwin's stories is to illustrate how the diasporic experience, even for the same ethnic and religious group of immigrants, may not be a uniformed experience.

"Montreal 1962" is Baldwin's tale of a young housewife who has immigrated to Canada with her husband. She is deep in thought about being away from her community as she lovingly handles the turbans which she is washing. Being nostalgic for home, she reflects only on the way her distant homeland compares far more favourably than Montreal, where she finds herself. This short story hints at the problems of preserving one's culture in a place which does not comprehend such a culture, let alone sympathise with it. For this protagonist, the turban becomes the symbol not only of the Sikh identity, but of her pride in this identity. Although aware that her husband has been disadvantaged in seeking employment because he wears a turban, she nevertheless resolves, "And so, my love, I will not let you cut your strong rope of hair and go without a turban in this land of strangers.....Then we will have taught Canadians what it takes to wear a turban."[28] This indicates that the diasporic South Asian may be very conscious of being a representative of his/her race/religion/culture/country of origin. Baldwin's words suggest that there is a need on the part of the diasporic South Asians to prove something to Westerners, a fear or a refusal or a precaution against being despised, pitied, or patronised. The turban may no longer be worn only because it is part of one's culture, but may in part be worn because in the public eye, one's cultural identity has to be constantly demonstrated and reinforced.

Piya, in "Toronto 1984", is not a housewife but a young woman who manages to begin a promising career, swallowing indignities and racial slurs en route to her success. This story illustrates the point that diasporic South Asians, with some degree of

justification, may be inclined to think that they have a more difficult life than their Western counterparts. Piya has the usual problems faced by any young person beginning a career, but she has the additional burden of being culturally different, which may prove to affect her career adversely. In addition, she has the pressures of family and cultural obligations, which may not be structured to be sensitive towards the needs of her working life. Characters like Piya are caught between the stresses of combating the problems of being South Asians in a Western country, and of fulfilling their traditional roles and responsibilities. Not only is the demand on them doubled, they may find themselves in the position of having to make difficult decisions when the demands of the two sets of obligations happen to conflict.

Not all career-oriented diasporic Sikhs in Canada view their situation as Piya does. In another short story, Baldwin also hints that some South Asian immigrants to Canada may choose to submerge their cultural identity in order to fit in as seamlessly as possible into the Canadian working life. Ratan, a character in "Devika", deliberately ignores racist remarks and eagerly partakes in his colleagues' and boss' culture, attempting to be considered one of them in order that his career should not be disadvantaged. Situations such as these implicitly lead immigrants to the notion that there necessarily has to be a trade-off between asserting one's cultural identity and fitting into one's environment.

In such cases as Ratan's and Piya's, diasporic South Asians are depicted feeling the need to counter or overturn the stereotypes and prejudices against their race and/or culture. They are portrayed striving to prove themselves in all arenas – in schools, universities, work places, intent on being as perfect and faultless as possible in order that no defect can be regarded as being the result of their difference of colour, mother tongue, race, religion, or culture. Piya and Ratan are examples of South Asian immigrants attempting to integrate as painlessly and seamlessly as possible into mainstream society. In contrast, "Montreal 1962" depicts Sikhs who feel that as an ethnic minority, their identity and culture is under threat.

[28] Shauna Singh Baldwin, English Lessons and Other Stories (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1996) 7.

Whether attempting to stand apart or to integrate, it appears that diasporic South Asians are self-consciously representatives of their race and culture, aware of being cast in such a role, and accepting it, occasionally even welcoming and exploiting it. One frustrating outcome of such a role is that "as emissaries, third world individuals are often expected to be virtual encyclopaedias of information on all sorts of different aspects of their complex 'cultural' heritage. Their encyclopaedic expertise is often expected to range from the esoteric to the mundane, from popular to High Culture, from matters of history to contemporary issues."[29] Even diasporic South Asian women writers are not exempt from such pressures and expectations and find themselves needing to verify their cultural facts before publishing. This concern with accuracy of cultural fact suggests a lack of confidence on their own knowledge of the culture, and a possible difference in the way they themselves practise their culture on a daily basis.

The sense of being an 'emissary', in Narayan's terminology, is simultaneously annoying and gratifying. It does serve to set the diasporic South Asian apart, perpetually labelled as 'the Other' in a Western environment, but if the difference is regarded as privileged, exclusive, or desirable, it may well be welcomed. It appears that being 'the Other' is acceptable and even pleasant, as long as the wider community regards their difference as an asset rather than a liability or a lacking.

However, the sense of being the Other may occasionally be regarded as such an insurmountable problem that only a drastic and complete shedding of one's original identity would suffice. Baldwin illustrates this in the story of Devika who creates an alter ego. Devika invents a fictional friend whom she names Asha because she invests her fictional friend with all the passion and adventurous spirit her old friend Asha had impressed her with when they were younger.

Having been taught to abide by the unwritten rules and criteria that would qualify her a good Sikh wife, Devika arrives in Canada and soon learns that the rules and criteria in this country may well be different from the cultural value system which she shares with her husband. Not wanting to transgress her own sense of what is right and proper, Devika either consciously or subconsciously creates the character of Asha

[29] Narayan 132.

who lives with her and her husband as a guest, finding that she can articulate her wishes and desires through this character, as she cannot do in her identity as Devika. "The interdependence of identity and context is so strong that psychologists speak of a situational personality."[30] After a car accident, Devika announces to her husband that 'Devika' has left, and only 'Asha' remains. With this, Baldwin implies that no less than a radical change of identity was needed to enable a character like Devika to cope with her new environment. It may be that Baldwin's creation of fiction within fiction is in turn *her* way of portraying the multiple layers of identities which immigrant South Asians encompass.

Naturally, not all diasporic South Asian women alter their personalities to the extent Devika did in order to adjust to their new surroundings. Manthri, the protagonist of Chandani Lokuge's If the Moon Smiled, is an example of a character whose personality, values, and behaviour, did not alter or adjust at all to her new environment. This novel provides a valuable study, tracing as it does, the life of its diasporic characters over several decades.

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***If the Moon Smiled***

Manthri, a young Sinhalese, Buddhist Sri Lankan village girl from a loving family, is married (in an arranged marriage) to Mahendra. The marriage is not a happy one because Mahendra accuses and never forgives his wife for not being a virgin when he married her, an accusation which Manthri resolutely denies all her life. Mahendra moved Manthri and their two children, Nelum their daughter, and Devake, their son, to Australia. They settle in Adelaide, returning to Sri Lanka only for brief holidays. Nelum grows up to be bright and independent, chooses to study medicine, and is resentful of her parents' preoccupation with their son. Devake, however, not permitted to have any ambition other than studying medicine as decided for him by his father, becomes withdrawn and uncommunicative. It is an unhappy household, with little solidarity between the parents and the estrangement between parents and their children increasing over time. The tale winds to its unhappy end with Mahendra living alone and embittered in his house, Manthri, mentally unbalanced and in an institution, Nelum, successful but distant, and Devake, addicted to drugs and unemployed.

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[30] Pallasmaa 137.

Mahendra and Manthri are a couple who have transported their entire value system along with them as they immigrated. Manthri was reluctant to go at all, but her mother informed her that she has not the option of refusing because her home was with her husband. This is quite a typical definition of home for women of many South Asian cultures. Despite the cultural edict however, Manthri remains loyal to her sense of being rooted in Sri Lanka, not withstanding the fact her permanent place of residence, husband, and children are in Australia.

Although Manthri obediently emigrates to Australia, she continues to regard and refer to Sri Lanka as home, angering her husband, but conveying this notion, at least in part, to her children. Nelum finds herself accidentally and unthinkingly referring to Sri Lanka as home when in conversation with her Australian boyfriend. Nelum does realise, however, that Sri Lanka is not home to her in the same way as it is to her mother. " "Mum is lucky," she thinks,….."she has Sri Lanka." "[31] Nelum is aware that unlike her mother, she is the product of two cultures, whereas Manthri will always identify herself as Sri Lankan.

It is also significant that on certain occasions, when speaking to Nelum in Sinhalese, Manthri notes that her daughter replies in English. It is also noticeable that Manthri uses Sinhalese when she is attempting to coax or persuade her children, and Lokuge registers this by inserting Sinhalese words like "duwa" (daughter) and "putha" (son), in Manthri's dialogue. In using such terms, Manthri's language reminds Nelum and Devake of their connection to her, and also of their duty to her. Manthri dreads the day they will call her "mother" instead of "Amma". In giving her refusals, however, Nelum uses English. It is probable that Nelum finds it easier to refuse her mother in English, easier perhaps to explain herself and her intentions in a language other than her mother tongue. It is even probable that Nelum finds English a language designed and equipped to make sense of and organise the environment in which she finds herself.

Devake is the chief victim of the conflict of cultures. It has been ingrained into him that his parents have paid a high price for his benefit, and he is now obliged to reap those benefits to justify their sacrifices, " "I've sacrificed my whole life for you – my

career, my country," Mahendra dictates, "only for you to have a good education. Go on, now, go and study. You must not neglect your work even for a moment." "[32] Defeated by the burden of such demands and expectations, Devake retreats into sullen silence. Mahendra, who makes these demands of him, is left thwarted and disappointed, while Manthri, his adoring mother, finds herself bereft of her son's happiness and closeness. Lokuge depicts a worst-case scenario in her novel, but it is a frighteningly plausible tale. This is a novel which overthrows the image of the perfect Asian family, close-knit and mutually supportive. Mahendra does attempt to present his family as the perfect Sri Lankan family, but the image cracks and eventually crumbles.

In Lokuge's novel, it is obvious that Mahendra and Manthri do not understand their children's point of view, and it is just as obvious that although Nelum and Devake have an inkling of their parents' motivations, they do not subscribe to the same. Members of the South Asian diaspora who have been born and bred in the West, like Nelum and Devake, are usually aware of their dual cultural identity, and struggle with problems quite separate and different from those of their parents' generation. The second generation diasporic South Asians are twice alienated – from their 'home culture' (South Asian culture) as well as from their 'host culture' (Western culture). They do incorporate a hybridity of cultures, but seldom anything as comfortable as a 'fusion'. This brings us to our third category: South Asian women who have been born and bred in a Western country and who write from there.

**East in West**

This subsection focuses on South Asians who have never known a home within South Asia, i.e. the second-generation diasporic South Asians. One author who falls into this category is British-Punjabi Meera Syal. Anita and Me, Syal's first novel, depicts the characters Shyam and Daljit, who like Mahendra and Manthri, are immigrants to a Western country. The protagonist of Meera Syal's novel, however, is neither Shyam nor Daljit, but their daughter, Meena, for whom home is Tollington, England.

[31] Chandani Lokuge, If the Moon Smiled (New Delhi: Penguin, 2000) 137.
[32] Lokuge 73.

Anita and Me depicts Meena growing up and learning early to juggle two identities – one for home and family life, and one for public life amongst her English peers. Meena clearly enjoys her cosy family life, but she also strives to be regarded as a 'Tollington wench'. She enjoys the company of her parents' friends – the diasporic South Asian community in Britain, the 'aunties' and 'uncles' – but she also hankers after the company of Anita Rutter, a brazen, hard-boiled English girl.

Although deeply attached to her parents, Meena learns from childhood that she has two sets of morals to juggle and contend with, one applicable at home, and the other applicable outside her home. For example, Meena is well aware that stealing would horrify her parents, and yet she does steal, because it affords her a pleasing sense of bravado, and it is the passport to acceptance amongst her peers. Meena is impressed by her parents and the way they live their culture, but it is their culture, rather than hers. She is aware that the standards and practises of her parents' culture would earn her little by way of street credit, and accordingly, she learns to deal in a different moral currency, just as she learns to speak with a different accent and slang when outside her house. Although just a child, Meera perceives that life inside the home and life outside it are divided into two separate worlds.

Syal shows that even a child as young as Meena (nine years of age), although identifying with her parents' culture to some extent, already understands that she is different. She notes that although her parents are respected and approved of by the general community they live amongst, they do not completely respect or approve of their neighbours. They choose not to belong and set themselves apart from the English community. Meena, in comparison, is comfortable thinking of herself not only as English, but as belonging to Tollington, "…..I had won them over with my cheeky charm…..and my deliberately exaggerated Tollington accent, thus proving I was very much one of them, they did not need to shout to make themselves understood or think they could get away with muttered swearing and I would not understand, that I belonged."[33] She enjoys her easy inclusion in the Tollington community and it is not until she is a little older, that she would realise the underlying racial tensions and realise too, that she does not, in fact, belong. This, in a curious inversion, is the same

experience as that of Maya in Motherland who also finds that in visits to India, as she grows older, increasingly she is being forced to choose her set of affiliations. This indicates that for diasporic South Asians, wherever they go, whether in South Asia or in their new homes in the West, they continue to experience the sense of double-consciousness.

In her next novel, Syal portrays a slightly older set of second-generation South Asians. In Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee, Syal neatly – perhaps too neatly – classifies the British South Asian women into three categories: those who completely refuse to conform to the conventions of South Asian communities (like Tania), those who completely conform (like Chila), and those who partially rebel and partially conform (like Sunila). Tania is cast as a beauty, a successful career woman, bold and daring, emotionally independent but unfulfilled. Chila is depicted as not classically attractive, a little too plump, but docile, obedient, eager to please, and a dedicated homemaker and wife. Sunila is a case study of youthful rebellion, her high ambitions collapsing into a failed degree and a love marriage, but living respectably (if somewhat frustratedly) as a wife and mother of two, holding down a lack-lustre job for the salary it pays. Syal's depiction of the three protagonists is a trifle too pat, firstly, for the way it dichotomises tradition and modernity, and secondly, for the implication that these three women have chosen the degree to which they subscribe to either tradition or modernity (seen as mutually exclusive) and that this choice has been the primary determining factor of their lives.

Syal's characterisations in her second novel are close to being caricatures. Her writings draw on stereotypes, simultaneously exploiting and exposing them. The exploitation of stereotypes provides the delightful humour in her writing, but the exposing of the same sounds a grimmer chord. This novel contains a number of interesting observations of the diasporic South Asian community in Britain, neatly woven into the background of the plot.

One of these observations is that diasporic South Asian girls in Britain may enjoy their duality of culture and identity up to the point of marriage, when they would

[33] Meera Syal, Anita and Me (London: Flamingo-HarperCollins, 1997) 97.

have to decide where they wish to belong. " "See how I combine this bindi with that leather jacket and make a bold statement about my duality?" We three girls managed the oft-quoted juggling act until it was time to find a man.....and then it was time to cut the crap and own up to who we really were."[34] The implication is that in marriage, one is taking the final step to adulthood, to being a full-time member of a community and all its ensuing responsibilities. A character like Tania for example, who had not married although she could have done, and lives with whomever she pleases, is regarded as shirking her duties, unfilial and irresponsible, and is estranged and nearly exiled from her own family.

In Tania's flippant, ironic voice, Syal discusses another aspect of being a South Asian immigrant family. "Anyone with a bit of sense would guess that a comprehensive-educated kid from a blue-collar family in the East End is force-fed her own language and rituals as a matter of survival, our defence against the corruption outside our front door."[35] Children of such families have had it instilled in them that there is a clear and definite border between the outside world of the English community, and their private world, within the home. It appears to be a hard and fast division which they carry in their consciousness, however well integrated they may become. (This boundary between the home and the outside world will be discussed in greater detail in the final section of the chapter.)

Uncomfortable as this divide is, Syal's novels all depict the South Asian emigrants building new lives for themselves which neither fit into the British culture, nor into the South Asian one. ".....grandchildren.....the most convenient reason they all quoted for not returning back to India when in actuality, the India they all know had vanished around the time of black and white films and enforced sterilisation."[36] It is indeed probable that the 'home' which diasporic South Asians left behind would no longer be there awaiting them as they remember it, and that the only true 'home' for them is the one they have built for themselves. Syal reiterates her belief that diasporic South Asians straddle two worlds, two cultures, and two identities in a space which they

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[34] Meera Syal, Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee (London: Anchor-Transworld, 2000) 148.
[35] Syal, Life 146.
[36] Syal, Life 194.

have carved out for themselves, a diasporic space, perhaps the only space in which they feel entirely 'at home'.

The stories of second-generation South Asians are also explored by diasporic Asian-Americans. The anthology Our Feet Walk the Sky compiles tales of South Asian women from various social classes, in various stages of life. A large number of the short stories appear to be devoted to the depiction of the exploitation of South Asian women, either by their society and its patriarchal structure, or by the men (usually the husbands). A few stories also depict women in South Asia living in dire poverty. Despite their wretched conditions, the stories unfailingly depict their protagonists/heroines as being resilient, steadfast, courageous and spirited. "The element of romanticization which is present in every nationalism is even stronger among nostalgic migrants who often form a rosy picture of the country they have left and are able to imagine the nation where it did not exist before."[37] Some of these tales read almost as celebrations of such women. Another thread running consistently through the anthology is the ways diasporic South Asian girls/women cope with living as ethnic minorities. Guilt, resentment, and rebellion, appear to be the commonest reactions to cultural taboos which deprive them of the privileges or freedoms enjoyed by their Western peers.

It is not possible to ascertain exactly why such themes, as mentioned in the paragraph above, appear prevalent in the writings of the diasporic South Asian women writers in this anthology. Some writers may have deemed these as the themes most significant for discussion. They may also be motivated by the desire to educate, explain, startle, or provoke, thus choosing to emphasise some issues over others. They may even be influenced by the potential readership, and may be conscious of projecting certain images of their culture and race to a Western audience.

One oft-occurring problem with the writings, particularly that of the second-generation South Asians, is the inclination to generalise with totalisations, sweeping statements appearing more the norm than the exception. For example, in her short story "Stop the Insanity", Bella Mayani writes, "Coming from a generation in which you are

[37] Peter Van der Veer, eds., Nation and Migration. The Politics of Space in the South Asian Diaspora (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1995) 6.

in purdah till the wedding night and then become a servant for his family and less than human for your husband.....”[38] Another such example, by Qirone Adhikary reads, “Being excitable, passionate, tempestuous – in a word, Bangali [sic] – she starts telling her story, interspersed by sobs, hyperventilation, hysteria, hair-pulling and chest-pounding.”[39]

These generalisations reinforce fables and stereotypes of Indian women being bound in servitude, and Indians as a race being hysterical and histrionic people.[40] In making such statements, some diasporic South Asian women writers are seen to be propagating certain cultural images, implying that that which may apply only in a certain section of society, is in fact the norm in the wider South Asian community. It is a diasporic tendency, Avtar Brah tells us, that “tradition is itself continually invented even as it is hailed as originating from the mists of time.”[41] Narayan further reminds us that people are “susceptible to the suggestion that practices and institutions are valued merely by virtue of the fact they are long-standing,”[42] a susceptibility that the diasporic South Asian community have no monopoly over. In circulating stereotypes and playing with clichés, writers like Mayani and Adhikary play a role in providing (mis)information on South Asians, thereby contributing to the creation of the global image of the South Asian culture.

Whether moving from East to West, or vice versa, or having been born and bred in the West, the one clear message from diasporic South Asian women writers is that they are different, very different, from their Western and South Asian counterparts. They are people who are as multi-cultural as they are multi-lingual. They do not regard themselves as fully belonging in either culture, and have practically evolved a sub-culture peculiar to themselves. They try to take the best from both worlds, but suffer the sense of hybridity and cultural entanglement. “Transplanted, the individual is transformed; the “I” is no longer a speaking subject with a clear history and a distinct

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[38] Bella Mayani, “Stop the Insanity.” Our Feet Walk the Sky, Women of the South Asian Diaspora ed.The Women of South Asian Descent. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1993) 214.
[39] Qirone Adhikary, “The Marriage of Minoo Mashi.” Our Feet Walk the Sky, Women of the South Asian Diaspora ed. The Women of South Asian Descent. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1993) 187.
[40] These notions and stereotypes were first propagated in exoticised novels and tales by non-South Asian writers.
[41] Brah 209.

voice but rather becomes a composite product of historical antimonies and contradictory impulses."[43]

Apart from the cultural entanglement (which can also be regarded as hybridity), diasporic South Asian writers have in common the deep desire to 'look back' to South Asia, to write and discuss at length the confusion of identity they are experiencing. This process of 'looking back' which has been described as nostalgia, seems irresistible to diasporic writers. Salman Rushdie explains that for Indians,

> ".....exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind."[44]

Rushdie highlights a vital point – namely that some of the Indias created by the diasporic communities may be no more than imaginary Indias. Be that as it may, the images of South Asia propounded and disseminated by the diasporic writers have the power of creating/recreating a South Asia to the wider world, (especially to a Western world, given the readership), and through the countless retellings, the 'true' portrayal of India may be warped, skewed, and distorted. Rushdie further explains that this skewed perspective may not be due to authorial irresponsibility, but is in fact the inevitable consequence of diasporic life because "it may be that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost."[45]

Although the diasporic writers may reflect their identities through fragments of broken mirrors as Rushdie puts it, these reflections are imbibed by others in the diasporic community, namely, the readers. (Reader response will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Four.) Some readers do of course challenge the accuracy and completeness of the portrayal of South Asia, but for many, the literary images advancing

[42] Narayan 22.
[43] Balkan 3.
[44] Salman Rushdie, The Eye of the Beholder. Indian Writing in English ed. Maggie Butcher (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1983) 76.

and propagating (and even prescribing) a certain way of life which is then labelled as 'diasporic South Asian' results in the diasporic community trying to reproduce what they have read. Writers are therefore at least partially responsible for contributing to the creation of a diasporic culture. In brief, the imagined and fictionalised diasporic experience may have become more real than reality.

## Home South Asian Women Writers

In Chapter Two, we had analysed the novels of Shashi Deshpande, who is self-identified as a home writer. In fact, she not only identifies herself as such, she insists on being recognised as such, "I am different from other Indians who write in English. My background is very firmly here [India]. I was never educated abroad, my novels don't have any Westerners, for example."[46] Deshpande seems to imply that being rooted in India and not having spent part of her time abroad, and writing about Indians, is what marks her writings as that of being a home writer. She makes it clear in another interview that she does not wish to "feel any literary kinship" with the likes of Nayantara Sahgal and Kamala Markandaya, for instance, and when asked to explain why she felt "alienated" from them, she replied that their world is "not my world, that what they created is seen from a certain angle" which didn't allow a sense of intimacy with the place or with the people. [47] "Now when I think of it I realise that [this writing] was intended for a Western readership…."[48] Deshpande's words seem to carry a hint of resentment towards the diasporic South Asian writers. Certainly, her interviewer, Ritu Menon, makes the claim that Deshpande's writing voice is more authentic and more representative, being a home writer, as compared with diasporic writers, "One will not find in her [Deshpande's] novels any element of the "exotic," a *National Geographic-land-and-its-people* kind of treatment of the unfamiliar."[49]

Whether these claims are justified or not, it is a curious thing to note that although the vast majority of novels and short story collections written by diasporic

[45] Ibid.
[46] Taken from a 1993 interview with Shashi Deshpande by Lakshmi Holmstrom. Matter of Time (New York: Feminist, 1999) 248.
[47] Shashi Deshpande in an interview with Ritu Menon. Matter of Time (New York: Feminist, 1999) 248.
[48] Ibid.

South Asian women are concerned with the roles, positions, experiences, situations and circumstances of the women, writings by home South Asian women writers are far more diverse in theme and concern. Perhaps Deshpande has commented with some accuracy as to the limitation in the world view, or the angle from which it is presented, on the part of most diasporic South Asian writers.

However, as has been said, the texts chosen for analysis in this chapter were chosen for their engagement with issues of identity as South Asian women. It must be said that such texts are numerous in the literature of the diasporic South Asian women writers, but as the novels written by the home South Asian women writers range more widely in topic, it is not quite as easy to select texts suitable for the purposes of this study. (Deshpande herself, for example, although an author primarily concerned with the middle-class Indian woman, had turned her hand to two novels of crime fiction.) It was unsurprising to find that diasporic South Asian women may feel mixed-up or confused over their identities, but it seems that even South Asian women living in South Asia undergo their own identity crises, in their cases, usually more a crisis of personal than cultural identity.

Getting There is a novel by a home South Asian woman writer portraying the protagonist, Manjula, undergoing an identity crisis. Manjula is a free lance artist (and not a particularly successful one), living an ordinary middle-class life in Bombay. She becomes fascinated by Piet, a Dutch fellow-boarder whom comes to India for several months to learn spirituality from a guru. This fascination is what jolts her out of all she had heretofore taken for granted, leading her to question herself and her identity. In this novel, the author, Manjula Padmanabhan overturns many stereotypes.[50] Manjula the heroine is neither attractive nor deserving. She is not pressurised to marry, not suffocated with over-protectiveness, not neglected nor abused, and not restricted in her mobility and choices. Strikingly, Manjula fits into none of the character types that diasporic South Asian women writers customarily depict. Manjula's family are rather

[49] Shashi Deshpande, Matter of Time (New York: Feminist, 1999) 252.

[50] It should be understood that the author uses her own first name as the name of her protagonist. This clearly implies some degree of autobiography in the novel, but this is not further discussed because the autobiographical extent of the literature is not the focus of this study.

indulgent and kindly, exasperated by her but consistently supportive. The novel does not mark Manjula out as being distinctive in any way by virtue of being Indian.

Manjula (the protagonist, not the author), makes a long trip from Bombay to New York, and then on to Germany and The Netherlands, seeking to know what would fulfil her. Almost immediately upon arrival in the USA, Manjula finds her expectations are somewhat misguided, and that her mental image of America is as unreal as the American, or even the Indian-American mental image of India may be. "The America I knew was a cosy place where moms baked cookies all day long and left them on kitchen window sills to cool so that little boys called Beaver could come by and steal them."[51] In the humour and sarcasm of the long recital of stereotypes following this excerpt, the author gently ridicules such blanket conceptualisations of a place, exposing the influence of the media. However, even more interestingly, Manjula (the protagonist), feels a sense akin to that of having been betrayed, "I didn't like being struck over the head with a cultural sledge-hammer. I wanted to feel at home."[52] It is curious that Manjula would want or expect to feel at home in a country where she is merely on vacation.

As the novel develops, we find that for Manjula, she feels at home wherever she feels good about herself. "He [Prashad] had gained access to the heartland of my family."[53] We see, from Manjula's words, that home may not be a concrete and tangible place, but territories of affection and emotion which lies within a person. She leaves Prashad, her boyfriend, when she discovers that she no longer feels good being with him, and like a homing pigeon, goes straight to a country completely alien to her, to seek out Piet, with whom she does feel at home.

In the course of her travels, Manjula finds that although she is trying to discover her own identity, identity is meanwhile being forced upon her by others, such as the diasporic Indian woman Manjula encounters at a party in New York. Upon discovering Manjula is unmarried but travelling with her boyfriend, this stranger bursts out with,

[51] Manjula Padmanabhan, Getting There (London: Picador, 2000) 140.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Padmanabhan 41.

"It's wrong, it's un-Indian, my dear, I'm sorry to say this! You're a disgrace to our great nation.....we Indians living in the West, we try to hold our heads up high.....then you people come from home and destroy the impression we try to create.....you drag the name of all Indians in the mud – with your short hair and your shapeless clothes!" This little speech makes it clear that the Indian-American woman who is appalled at Manjula, has a very proprietary attitude towards the Indian culture. She is self-consciously a self-appointed representative of India although she does not reside there, and she has decided which images of her "great nation" she wishes to present to the Americans, and which images she will censor. It is particularly amusing to note that the final attack on Manjula is not directed at her morals or behaviour, but at her attire – indicating once more that image and appearance are her priorities. It is very ironic that she scolds Manjula, a woman who has never lived anywhere else except in India, for being "un-Indian". Padmanabhan signals the possibility that it is a very narrow definition of Indians that the diasporic community may be subscribing to. This echoes Bharati Mukherjee's mention of those who have "appointed themselves guardians of the 'purity' of ethnic cultures."[54]

Kavery Nambisan is an author who also tells the tale of a young Indian woman who travels to resolve her own identity. Shari, the protagonist of Nambisan's novel Mango Coloured Fish is a young woman who travels to understand what she has to escape from. Shari finds her home far from being the sanctuary it is supposed to be; "We have private and social personalities; home is the realm of the former. Home is the place where we hide our secrets and express our private selves. Home is a place of resting and dreaming in safety."[55] When Shari feels her social personality is being created at the expense of her private personality, she makes up her mind to put some distance between herself and her home.

Shari's is only a partial identity crisis because she has already figured out what she does not want to be: she does not want to be the woman her mother is attempting to mould her into. Shari's family is run by her dominating mother, who exercises control with a mixture of unscrupulous charm and uncompromising determination. Shari's older sister, having the same goals and ambitions as her mother, had been the 'perfect

[54] Referring to the quotation in the Introduction chapter.
[55] Pallasmaa 137.

daughter'. Shari's older brother had not been a perfect son, and as a result, had been the black sheep of the family and chose to live far away in Vrindaban, happy in his choice of a wife and in his work as a low profile doctor. It is to this brother that Shari escapes, with her marriage fast approaching.

Nambisan highlights the North-South divide of India in Shari's family. Although they are Tamils from Madras (Chennai), her mother had decided that Delhi culture is more refined, and has tried to erase their Tamilian origins. Her husband had meekly complied with her wishes, which ranged from choice of attire and food to personal interests, "Father gave up the dhotis he wore at the house for kurta-pyjamas, and rubber chappals for kolhapuris; ate rotis instead of rice, drank tea instead of coffee, and listened to Begum Akhtar and Bade Ghulam Ali instead of Mali or Chembai."[56] Although it is inarguable that one's attire, for instance, does potentially announce one's identity, it appears that Shari's mother regards attire as having the power to determine one's identity.

Fleeing marriage with Gautam, a man whom she had herself chosen, Shari flies to Vrindaban, and then on to Delhi to stay with her old school friend, Yash. Shari flees her family because she wishes to escape the type of lifestyle her marriage to Gautam would inevitably comprise. On the verge of assuming the new identity as Gautam's wife which her mother fervently wishes for her, Shari also flees because she loves an unsuitable man, one who does not wish to marry her, but one who understands her and does not seek to change her. In Delhi, Shari moves out of Yash's house, and finds a room for herself in a hostel, for several weeks. Although such accommodations lack the comforts she has been accustomed to, it does afford her the time and space to do as she, and she alone, wishes. Shari realises that accepting Yash's hospitality, just as accepting her family's support and later Gautam's support, would require a conforming of her personality to their wishes, to some extent.

A large part of Shari's identity crisis lies in the fact that her society's structure does not leave her much opportunity to define herself. Living with Yash, she realises that Yash has allowed her society's wishes and values to form her life, and that Yash is

unhappy and dissatisfied in and with her identity. Nambisan portrays the bait of social sanction and financial security trapping South Asian women like Yash. Nambisan also portrays that it is so subtle and insidious a trap that although Shari instinctively struggles when she feels it closing around her, she is not entirely sure what it is, precisely, that she is struggling against. This makes it more difficult not only to resolve an identity crisis, but to recognise one as such in the first place. Nambisan's novel hints that some societies are so highly structured that there is little room for exploration of self-identity.

Another type of problem with identity faced by home South Asian women is discussed by Jaishree Misra in her first novel, Ancient Promises. This problem arises because India is so culturally diverse that as was mentioned in the Introduction, Indians from different regions may regard each other as foreign. That being the case, not all of India could be home for Indians, and Misra's novel highlights the enormous regional differences which present her protagonist, Janaki, with identity problems. Far from struggling to discover herself as Shari and Manjula had done, Janaki is a character who finds herself accepting someone else's definition of her identity all her life because she feels it is part of her duty. Although in love with Arjun, the eighteen-year-old Janaki allows her parents to arrange her marriage to Suresh Maraar, because she feels she has disappointed her family enough with her duplicity over her romance with Arjun, and could not be justified in further hurting her loving family. Upon marriage, Janaki is immediately faced with a host of identity problems.

Firstly, she finds herself unused to living in Kerala although she is a Malayali girl and had always spent her holidays with her grandparents in Kerala. Janaki, "as a Malayali girl growing up in Delhi, with Malayali parents but Delhi friends, and Malayali thoughts but Delhi ways,"[57] is as much a sufferer of a conflict of cultures as any diasporic South Asian girl could be. Having been given into the Maraar family by her own family, Janaki feels displaced and disorientated. Not being fluent in Malayalam, Janaki finds she even has problems communicating in her new household, and that she is different from the Maraar women in language, dress, manner, and behaviour. From the very beginning, her different ways of hanging clothes, the different foods she is

[56] Kavery Nambisan, Mango Coloured Fish (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998) 12.
[57] Jaishree Misra, Ancient Promises (London: Penguin, 2000) 18.

accustomed to, her habit of saying "please" and "thank you", the absence of a long plait, are all commented upon as failings in her as a person. Being young and eager to be loved in her new family, Janaki tries to change herself, to change her very identity in order to fit in properly, but it is all to no avail.

Ancient Promises emphasises the theme of role-playing. Janaki's first self-identification was as a daughter, which led her to agree to being a wife and daughter-in-law. Having failed to be a desirable daughter-in-law, and hardly recognised in her role as a wife, Janaki next decides that being a mother of a son would be an identity which would bring her acceptance and love. Janaki's entire life is spent seeking an identity which she defines only in relation to others.

## Comparisons of Notions of Identity

As has just been discussed, Misra's protagonist is a woman who discovers that although she 'returns' to Kerala after marriage, having spent her childhood and adolescence in Delhi, she does not find a Keralan identity nor does one suit her. She finds that the home she has been assigned, with the Maraar family, could never be home to her or for her. Both Nambisan's and Padmanabhan's protagonists are in the same boat, discovering that their homes were in fact hindering them from exploring their identities. Manjula and Shari both find it necessary to put a physical distance between themselves and their families and homes in order to construct their individual identities because they are South Asian women attempting to discover identities independent of their homes. It is also outside her home with the Maraars that Janaki is freed to choose an identity. This is a diametrically opposite situation from that of diasporic characters who seek or look to their home and/or homelands in order to define their identities.

However, it must not be forgotten that the middle-aged fictional protagonists of a home writer, Shashi Deshpande, also rediscover their identities, more by chance than by design, when they return to their natal or childhood homes in times of distress. Deshpande's protagonists are women who have broken away from their home identities and created new identities for themselves, only to find that these so-called new identities were in reaction to their old homes. This is not dissimilar from the South Asian

immigrants to Western countries who carry with them not only their cultural heritage, but their cultural baggage as well, living in the West, but continually referencing a distant country. Clifford points out that diasporic women are "caught between patriarchies, ambiguous pasts, and futures. They connect and disconnect, forget and remember, in complex, strategic ways. The lived experiences of diasporic women thus involve painful difficulty in mediating discrepant worlds."[58] These diasporic South Asian women are also inclined to form their identities in reaction to the culture they have brought from South Asia, either in conformity with it or in rebellion against it.

Another commonality in terms of notions of identity in the literature of diasporic and home South Asian women's is that both sets of writers highlight the cultural practice of holding up ideals of the good South Asian women to be emulated. In this sense, wherever they may live, South Asian women find that their identities as such are predefined, by cultures which base *their* identities on the womenfolk.

Broadly speaking, issues of identity for diasporic South Asian women are bound up with ideas of home, roots, and belonging, whereas issues of identity for home South Asian women are inclined to be concerned over individualism and realising self-potentials. It appears that these notions and debates over what it means to be South Asian is primarily contested and shaped by the diasporic community, to a much greater extent that by the South Asians within South Asia. "In general the migratory experience can lead to more embracing identifications on the margin of the host society. Those who do not think of themselves as Indians before migration become Indians in the diaspora."[59]

Diasporic South Asians, especially those living in countries where they have facilities for publication and publicity available to them, are better positioned to formulate this image. It must also be noted that outside the Indian subcontinent, it is generally easier to obtain the publications of diasporic South Asian women writers than to obtain the work of home writers. This may in part be due to the audience and the demand for specific literature. (This will be discussed in greater length in the subsequent

[58] Clifford 259-260.
[59] Van der Veer 7.

chapters.) It is ironic that these articulate diasporic South Asian women writers may be so much more effective than their South Asian counterparts in marketing their ideas and ideals, that they almost consign the home South Asians to the position of subalternism. Diasporic literature is not only a reflection of diasporic life; it also plays a part in the propagating of certain ideas and ideals which contribute to the shaping of the identity of the diasporic community. In short, diasporic literature produces a culture which it then circulates and legitimises.[60] This diasporic culture is initially an imagined culture, but having grafted itself into the imagination of the diasporic community, it becomes part of the thriving culture.

## Of Home and the Diaspora

This penultimate section of the chapter turns to the work of Anita Desai, a celebrated author who can justly lay claim to be both a home and a diasporic author. Born in 1937 in Mussoorie (a hill station north of Delhi), Desai is the daughter of a German mother and an Indian father. Desai has been a prolific fiction writer since the 1960s and has published many novels and short stories. She obtained her first degree from Delhi University and moved to Bombay after her marriage at the age of twenty. She has lived in Calcutta and other Indian cities, and has taught in England. Anita Desai is currently based in USA (she teaches writing in MIT), where she spends most of the year, but returns for a period of time each year to Old Delhi where she joins her husband. These biographical details reveal the extent to which Desai has been culturally infused in two worlds. She may more accurately be classified as a sojourner rather than either a home or diasporic writer.

Desai's work has been remarkable for its focus on the female psyche and its fine attention to detail. Her forte had been to display the interior lives of characters who are usually unhappy, characters who are highly sensitised to their surroundings and to whom the world and their environments seem highly abrasive. More often than not, Desai's characters are unwilling participants in life and prefer to look into the arena of life as spectators, just as their author looks through their eyes into the arena of lives in India. Although most of her writing has been set against an Indian background, Desai has not

[60] Edward Said, Orientalism (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

limited her range of fictional characters – she writes of male and female protagonists, rich and poor, Indians and non-Indians. However, it is in her last two published books that Desai begins to draw East and West into juxtaposition. It is her most recent novel that this section will discuss, because this novel is one of the very few which attempt an even-handed drawing of parallels between India and USA. In Fasting, Feasting, Desai compares food – its purchase, consumption and symbolism – in an Indian and in an American family.

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***Fasting, Feasting*** (1999)

The first half of this novel is set in India. Uma is the eldest daughter of conservative Indian parents, and although an enthusiastic student, Uma soon proves to be an inept scholar. She is also generally clumsy and unattractive. Her parents make two attempts to marry her off, both of which result in humiliating failure at the hands of a con artist and a bigamist. Despite being unmarried and unemployed, Uma is not permitted to take a job outside home. Aruna, the second child, is pretty and ambitious and uses marriage as an escape from her family to set up her dream life in Bombay, although her success is only partial. Arun, the chief protagonist of this novel, is the long-awaited son, and given every privilege his parents can provide – except the privilege of choice. Forced to pass exams and pursue higher education, Arun finds himself studying in America, and during the summer vacation, goes to stay with the Patton family as arranged for him by his own family. He discovers the ugliness beneath the façade of the ordinary American family and the curious similarities between America and India despite the obvious and immediate differences.

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Through the purchase, consumption and symbolism of food, Desai examines the identities of the cultures which have produced such practices. Desai draws out unexpected and interesting contradictions: for example, she observes that in America, "it's strange in a land of plenty that there's also a fear of food."[61] Desai further observes that some people in America didn't seem to want to enjoy food. In her novel, Desai portrays a young American girl who is slowly starving herself despite the accessibility and abundance of food, an increasingly common problem in a "land of plenty".

[61] Anita Desai in an interview with Maya Jaggi. The Guardian. 1 August 1999.

Although the Patton family and Arun's family would consider that they are completely different from one another, Desai draws out easy and natural parallels. Melanie, for instance, feels as frustrated and neglected as Uma does, despite the vast differences in age, location, circumstances and sets of experience. Both find reasons to feel wronged and thwarted by their families. Rod and Aruna both cope with or react to their families by becoming self-absorbed, intent on their private visions which they pursue with single-mindedness; Aruna seeking to create a sophisticated family life in Bombay, and Rod seeking to hone the perfect, fit body. Both pursue their visions with selfish concentration and disregard of the other family members, and both are equally self-righteous in their pursuits. Thus do both escape the unhappiness of an unsatisfactory family. The chasm between Rod and Aruna is huge, in their situations, opportunities, prospects, cultures, but in Desai's narrative, it is the similarities which are striking. Even the two sets of parents are portrayed as distinctly similar. Mr Patton and Arun's father both head their families, both with certainty of unchallenged authority, and both with little knowledge of or concern over the unhappiness of their family members. Both have wives whom they do not trouble to please although their wives do try to please them.

The link between these two families is Arun, the unattractive protagonist provided by Desai. Misunderstood, tightly controlled by his own family, and spiritless, Arun arrives at the Patton home only to find himself equally misunderstood, equally forced into activities he does not desire, and continues to be spiritless. However unpromising the protagonist, it is nevertheless through his eyes that Desai looks at the two countries, and this is how Arun views them:

> "No, he had not escaped. He had travelled and he had stumbled into what was like a plastic representation of what he had known at home, not the real thing – which was plain, unbeautiful, misshapen, fraught and compromised – but the unreal thing – clean, bright, gleaming, without taste, savour or nourishment."[62]

It appears that Desai does not find India comparing unfavourably with the developed and wealthy America. If anything, she suggests that the problems are fundamentally similar and that the American social ills are like "plastic representations" of the Indian ones.

[62] Anita Desai, Fasting, Feasting (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999) 185.

Fasting, Feasting is a novel where opposites meet and dovetail, rather than collide. It is a novel where austerity is juxtaposed to gluttonous surplus, where control is juxtaposed to freedom, and where the East and West are ideologically rather than culturally juxtaposed. "Desai refuses to polemicise about the relative merits of East and West, giving us parallel perspectives."[63] Diasporic writers are inclined to compare and portray differences they experience in South Asia and in the West, inclined to feel that while "heritage pulls you in one direction, assimilation [pulls you] in the other."[64] Desai's writing, however, has turned towards quite the opposite – she compares and portrays similarities, far more similarities than may be initially imagined. Desai has always been a pioneer in her writing, and this observation of similarities rather than differences between East and West has yet to be explored by other South Asian women writers, whether home, diasporic or sojourner writers.

## Conclusion

In Chapter Two, it had been argued that South Asian women have long defined themselves and their self-worth in relation to their men folk, their families, and their domestic circumstances. In this chapter, it appears that for South Asian women, their notions of identity are also intimately bound up with their notions of home; the geographical location of their home, as well as their imagined home. It is *in* their homes that their social positions, duties, and privileges are defined, recognised, and practised, and therefore it is in their homes that their identities are created, negotiated and reinforced.

For South Asian women of the diaspora, nostalgia, familial expectations, and the notion of the distant and perfect homeland continue to dog their notions of identity and belonging, "...women in diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by, a "home" culture and a tradition – selectively."[65] The word "selectively" is significant – diasporic South Asian women do indeed practise only certain elements of their culture and tradition, and certainly not the culture in entirety. While some diasporic South Asians

[63] Aamer Hussein. 3 June 1999. Online posting. The Independent. 25 Sept 1999.
[64] Aligiah 20.
[65] Clifford 259-260.

attempt to emulate mainstream society and integrate, there are others who deliberately flaunt their differences, marketing it as exotic, mysterious, exciting, or in whichever form would enable them to best use it as a means to their ends. These diasporic South Asians brandish their skin colours, accents, clothes, and all other symbols of their difference, either as weapons or as trophies, or both.

The selectivity of the culture which diasporic South Asians live and practise, results in diasporic South Asian culture becoming a partially reinvented culture. Perhaps it is as a result of this, that there exists a constant anxiety over the authenticity of the culture they claim as their South Asian heritage. (It is an irony that both the non-South Asian world as well as the diasporic South Asian communities look to the literatures by the South Asian writers for understanding and knowledge of South Asian culture, when some of these very writers (the diasporic ones) feel the need to have their writings checked for cultural accuracy and authenticity.)

From the contemporary writings of the diasporic South Asian women, it appears that South Asian women of the diaspora feel the tug of loyalties and confusion of identities until they learn to balance dual-identities or double consciousness, and combine those into a certain equilibrium. In the literature of diasporic South Asian women writers, there is usually a strong polarisation of East and West, with comparisons drawn and juxtapositions made between these two supposedly socially opposing or even conflicting cultures. It is only a tiny handful of writers such as Anita Desai whose works do the opposite and explore the similarities between East and West rather than set them up as irreconcilably different. The majority of diasporic South Asian women writers portray their protagonists fighting the dual battle for ethnic/racial rights and recognition, and the battle against patriarchy and traditional cultural restrictions and taboos. These battles are made even more complicated by the fact that the protagonists are usually seeking acceptance both within the inner circle of their families and in the outer, racially and culturally different world.

In comparison, the writings of the home South Asian women authors do pursue the notion of identity, but not through a comparison of what lies within South Asia with what lies without. Home South Asian women writers are inclined to analyse the way

their protagonists try to develop themselves in ways which are different from those traditionally prescribed by society. Women are portrayed attempting to rise above gender stereotypes and powerful social expectations of them as women, wives and mothers, and striving to gain some degree of autonomy and individuality. Their struggle is primarily against the patriarchal nature and habit of their society rather than a sense of double consciousness. Like the diasporic South Asian women, they are also regarded as keepers of their culture, and burdened with the role of being guardians of the sanctity of their traditions, but unlike the diasporic community, they need not fear distance from the homeland causing the loss or dilution of their culture.

South Asian women writers (both home and diasporic ones) may write with certain authorial intentions, portraying certain aspects of the culture, propagating and even inventing certain cultural norms, but how do their readers in the South Asian communities around the world receive their writings? The next chapter therefore turns to the readers of South Asian women's writings to study their reception and response to the literatures, of both home and diasporic authors.

# CHAPTER FOUR: READER RESPONSE

***"I write. Let the reader learn to read."***

*-Anon-*

## Signpost

This chapter focuses on how readers respond to contemporary South Asian women's fiction. The introductory section will describe some of the expectations under which South Asian women writers work and present their work to a global audience, and will also outline some of the criticisms levelled at editors for their choice of material made representative of South Asian women's literature. It also discusses reasons for which some South Asian women writers cater to the expected and the stereotypical, and the subsequent resulting limitations in the genre.

The readers chosen for analysis of reader responses are members of an Internet mailing list, and the next section will therefore provide a brief background to the evolving culture of this medium. This will be followed by a discussion of cyberspace communities which have formed, and are continuing to form, as a result of the many Internet mailing lists which have mushroomed. This section of the chapter engages with the issues of identity in cyberspace. Some of the limitations of such communities will be highlighted and these limitations will be kept in mind when analysing reader responses on the chosen mailing list.

Following on from that, the structure, set-up, and practices of the chosen mailing list is described in detail, in order to facilitate understanding of the practices of this particular mailing list, and the positionality of its participants. Here the reason this particular mailing list was selected and its suitability to this study is also explained. Two authors have been selected for close analysis of reader responses to their writings, one a home author and the other a diasporic one. The second half of the chapter comprises a study of the reader responses to each of these two authors. These are responses (mainly

from South Asian women) to the literatures of Divakaruni and Roy, collected over a four year time period.

**Expectations**

Although publishers are responsible for the availability of books on the market, and authors may write with intended or target readers in mind, these are but some of the factors which influence the responses of readers to texts. The previous chapter discussed the differences between home and diasporic South Asian women writers, and the motivations and influences which affect the tone, substance, and style of their writings. However, readers respond to literature not just based on editors' choices and authorial intentions, but also as a result of their own individual sets of moral codes, experiences, preconceptions, idea(l)s, and even prejudices. This chapter will consider the differences in reader responses to contemporary novels by South Asian women, because "central to the readings of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient."[1]

"Books by Other [as opposed to Western] women are expected to tell us something about *their* cultures, their lives."[2] It has been noted by critics time and again that readers expect to learn some 'truths' when they read women's writings. South Asian women in particular have been expected to speak heretofore unspoken truths, to tell the hidden stories of patriarchy, to relate the unheard women's side of the tale, to articulate on behalf of the silent subaltern, to represent all the women of her culture and community, and in general, to hold up a banner and function as a figurehead and representative.[3] This attitude is largely due to the fact that South Asian women's literature is still not part of mainstream literature (except for a very select few, such as the works of Anita Desai for example), and the increasing visibility of South Asian women's writings has led readers to regard the authors as preservers and presenters of South Asian culture.

[1] Wolfgang Iser, The Art of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Responses (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978) 20.
[2] Amal Amireh, and Lisa Suhair Majaj eds., Going Global. The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers (New York: Garland, 2000) 36.

The writings of South Asian men such as Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth have not been regarded in this interpretative way to the same extent, and the works of several male South Asian writers have been more easily assimilated into mainstream literature. Where South Asian writers were once supposed to have been writing in reaction to the Empire and their postcolonial history, the writings of South Asian *women* writers are assumed to be in reaction to the writings of South Asian men writers, postcolonialism, and Western feminism. Contemporary South Asian women novelists have all these factors to contend with, as do contemporary women novelists from other Asian countries and from the Middle East. The result of this attitude towards third world women writers is that ".....a few individuals are made to represent the countries they come from, their manufactured notoriety giving their speech greater authority and meaning. Their books are thus received as convenient sources of 'truthful' information for a public in need of native support for its own prejudices."[4] The general perception of South Asian women writers as the purveyors of cultural truth has certainly coloured the readers' responses to their literature.

Of late, there has been an increasing number of anthologies of South Asian writings being published. It is of interest in this chapter to consider the material selected for inclusion in such anthologies because these collections are frequently regarded by the readers as representative collections of work from a given group of people. Anthologies also imply that the pieces included are selected to give a fair and balanced overview of and insight into the group of people they represent and discuss. The pieces selected for inclusion are significant because they are usually the editors' choice of relevant, important, topical issues and themes to be discussed. The editors shape the identity of the group under discussion in the eyes of the reader simply by virtue of what they select and what they dismiss, creating a certain and particular perspective. Anthologies of South Asian women's writings have come under heavy criticism regarding the material included and the material excluded, because anthologies are not only regarded as 'convenient sources of truthful information', but are also generally regarded as texts of choice in teaching and learning about a particular literature.

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[3] South Asians in the West being considered as emissaries of their culture has already been discussed in the previous chapter with regard to how this affects authorial intention.
[4] Amireh 36.

The anthology Women Writing in India for example, came under severe criticism from Harveen Sachdeva Mann who contends that this two-volume anthology which was funded by Western establishments, concentrated on familiarizing a Western audience to South Asian discourse.[5] Mann points out that despite its claim of making Indian women's writing available to English language readers in India and around the world, it displayed an over-riding partiality towards a Western readership. Mann goes on to illustrate his arguments and points out glaring omissions in the anthology. One of the most significant of Mann's criticisms is that the editors (Tharu and Lalita) seemed to assume an identical or universal approach to the anthology from all English language readers, from wherever they come. Some South Asian women writers appear to labour under the same erroneous assumption, writing on the premise that their values are shared equally by women in the West and by women in the Indian sub-continent. As was discussed in Chapter Three, the concerns of home and diasporic writers are often different and it can therefore be logically deduced that the interests of the home and diasporic readers would also be different. It is therefore not uncommon to find novels by South Asian women writers well received in the Western world and yet rather unpopular amongst South Asian critics and readers.

Another anthology, Our Feet Walk the Sky, was criticised for its partiality towards USA and India despite its claim of being an anthology by and for diasporic South Asian women. Dhaliwal charges editors of the anthology for inattention to issues of reception, resulting in

> "The linear teleology of assimilation.....generated through the employment of endless binary oppositions, the freezing of South Asian women in the subject position of victim, the conceptualisation of membership in bourgeois Western feminist organisations as completely liberating, and the assumption that the "family" is the only source of subjugation or is only a source of subjugation."[6]

Dhaliwal also argues that such anthologies homogenise South Asian women and produces "the paradigmatic South Asian gendered diasporic subject as an Indian, Hindu, middle-class, heterosexual immigrant to the US, and a victim of her own culture….."[7] Dhaliwal's paper clearly indicates that a disregard of possible reader responses could

[5] Harveen Sachdeva Mann, "Bharat Mein Mahila Lekhana, or Women's Writing in India. Regional Literatures, Translation and Global Feminism." Socialist Review 24:4 (1994): 151-171.
[6] Amarpal K. Dhaliwal, "Reading Diaspora. Self-Representational Practices and the Politics of Reception." Socialist Review 24:4 (1994): 13-43.

lead to a collection of writing which far from providing information and insight, could damage and pervert the image and identity of South Asia instead.

Dhaliwal is correct in pointing out that some South Asian women writers, in particular, the diasporic writers, are inclined towards constructing oversimplified binaries of good versus evil, east versus west, traditional versus modern, and etc., and thereby training readers to expect such contrasts in novels. These oversimplified dichotomies in stories are also the resultant selection of editors, which serve to further reinforce the readers' perception/assumption that all writers set up their stories in similar ways. In brief, it is a highly selected and often limited sample of writers who are regarded as the literary representatives of their race/culture.

To a certain extent, due to the gap between the structure of the language and the experiences described, South Asian novels are necessarily encoded texts. It is a measure of the author's skill as to how unobtrusively he or she can design the literature to enable a reader to decode a text, without distracting the reader from the novel or detracting from the artistry of the writing. The relationship between language and the world the authors live in, and the problems this involves, have been discussed in Chapter One where there was a study of how South Asian women writers present a South Asian world in the English language. This chapter therefore focuses its attention on a different aspect – namely how the gap between an Eastern culture and lifestyle expressed in a Western language affects, as well as is received, by readers.

Many South Asian women writers have grappled with this particular problem, some less successfully than others. Many are self conscious of having to explain themselves and their cultures even as they tell stories. Novels in which the South Asian women writers considered that they had to educate their readers to read and comprehend their books have often resulted in awkward prose and rather heavy handed writing. The consequence of such intentions in writing is a certain amount of distraction or artifice in novels which detracts from the plot and read almost as insertion and asides. Some readers have found these somewhat contrived explanations presented alongside the plot

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[7] Ibid.

very helpful in approaching and understanding a culture alien to them, whereas other readers have been annoyed at the less than subtle methods used by some authors.

The majority of South Asian women writers, in particular the diasporic South Asian women writers, appear to write with the purpose of making the 'South Asian Woman' known to the world, although it is clearly not possible to have any monolithic, complete or definitive version of what it is to be a South Asian woman. Many of these writers construct a fictional world where *being* a South Asian woman is the central focus of the writing. This being is portrayed as a passive being rather than a performative role. It is no coincidence that a large number of these novels discuss issues of patriarchy, women's (relatively lowly, inferior, or powerless) position in South Asian societies, and choose to highlight the unique problems of being a South Asian woman, with its particular burden of limitations, restrictions, and expectations. Not only are contemporary South Asian women's novels focused on portraying the experience of being a South Asian woman, most portray tragedies, ranging from the mundane and to the majestic. It is possible that this trend of writing which emphasizes disadvantages and drawbacks for the protagonist because she is a South Asian woman, has led to a preoccupation with the notion of victimhood in the genre, a categorisation which has become a burden. Victimhood as a contemporary preoccupation of South Asian women authors has already partially been discussed in the previous chapters, and this chapter will focus on how it affects and shapes reader response.

It is arguable that it is natural on the part of South Asian women writers to wish to tell their stories based on personal experiences, on tales they have heard from friends and family, to articulate their particular set of realities, but the inclination of many South Asian women writers to highlight the victimisation of their protagonists could be teaching readers to expect this in South Asian fiction. Moreover, as was pointed out by Dhaliwal (earlier in this section), the overemphasis of victimhood freezes South Asian women into a subject position. There have been a small number of readers who have protested the overwhelming abundance of gloom and pessimism in the genre, but the majority of the books seem well received in general, especially amongst diasporic South Asian women readers. It is possible that being taught to expect victimhood of women in this genre, some readers may even reject differing portrayals of women as inauthentic or

outside of the genre, or may regard the absence of victimhood in the fiction as a deficiency or shortcoming, thus cyclically perpetuating the limitation of the genre.

It should be kept in mind that most contemporary South Asian writers, men and women alike, are fairly accessible to their public through promotional tours, bookclubs, book readings, conferences, cultural events, as guest speakers, lecturing in Universities, via e-mail, or just in overlapping social circles. Knowing the authors and details of the authors' personal lives, heightens the readers' interest in their writings, but it does affect their readers' reception of the books. It also inspires others to try their hand at writing. Several aspiring authors have expressed enjoying discussions about writing with published authors via mailing lists and e-mails, and a fair amount of author-reader communication does appear to take place on the Internet. There is also much interaction between authors, and predictably, many South Asian women writers are also enthusiastic readers of other South Asian women's writings. According to Jhumpa Lahiri "We look out for each other. We draw strength from each other."[8] Chitra Divakaruni also feels that sharing information and contacts, endorsing books and attending each others' readings leads to "the idea of a writing community".[9] As may be imagined, there is consequently some degree of intertextuality in the contemporary writings of South Asian writers, in particular, of the diasporic writings.

## Virtual Culture

As the Internet is the source of the reader responses used in this chapter, it is important to consider some of the related issues concerning the culture of the Internet. Of the many aspects of the Internet culture, this section will focus on a discussion of the issue of identity on the Internet in order to explore how Internet users perceive (and are encouraged to perceive) their positionalities, and how this subsequently affects their approach to and interaction on the Internet.

Historically, the Internet had been dominated by North Americans, and therefore, by English speakers. It has been estimated that with the incredibly rapid

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[8] A.P.Kanath, "Women of Indian Diaspora Create a Big Impact." 23 Aug. 1999. Rediff. Online. 1 Sept. 2000.
[9] Ibid.

global spread of the Internet, especially in countries like India and China, web browsers are increasingly being adapted for different languages and scripts to cope with the 5.5 million Indian and Chinese users the Internet is expected to have by 2002.[10] It is also expected that from its dominance of the Internet, the usage of English will decrease by more than half to about 40% on the Internet.[11] English is, however, still the lingua franca of Internet users today. So much so that even social and cultural groups with their own distinct languages, scripts, and mother tongues, still use English as their medium of communication. (A clear example is that of Asians using English in a global medium to discuss global books written in English.)

Communities form on the Internet and these communities are many and varied. Internet communities are groups of people who meet (sometimes very regularly and frequently) to discuss matters of common interest.[12] It has often been noted that the identity of Internet users is something which users can and do create and recreate, rather than simply describe, acknowledge, or testify to. This type of identity is fluid, changeable and changing, and difficult to check or disprove. It can be regarded as a virtual identity (as opposed to real identity, just as the Internet is termed a virtual world as opposed to the real world). "To have a virtual presence means deliberately constructing an identity for yourself, whether it is choosing an e-mail name, putting together a web page, designing a graphical avatar, or creating a nickname for a chatroom or virtual world."[13]

The fluidity of identity and the ease of constructing such identities have been interpreted by some parties as a particularly advantageous feature of the Internet, and one moreover, which opens up numberless possibilities. This interpretation has been seized upon and marketed by companies like Microsoft, IBM, Compaq, etc, advertising the absence of boundaries and the limitless reach of the Internet. "There is no race. There is no gender. There is no age. There are no infirmities. There are only minds. Utopia? No, Internet." This is a television commercial for MCI. Such advertisements are based on the theme that getting on the Internet is the passport to a wonderful world

[10] Mark Warschauer, "Language, Identity and the Internet." Race in Cyberspace (London: Routledge, 2000) 157.
[11] Ibid.
[12] The word "meet" in this case simply means to communicate via a mutual forum for discussion.

where the imperfections and problems of the real world simply do not exist, where the stumbling blocks and barriers of old are left behind for an exciting, entertaining, informative, improved in every way, virtual world.

Lisa Nakamura examines such advertisements closely, and counters their claims. She points out that the Western Internet user is positioned and encouraged to imagine himself/herself as the privileged observer, while the "otherness" of the Other is emphasized and exoticised. "These ads claim a world without boundaries for us, their consumers and target audience, and by so doing, they show us exactly where and what those boundaries really are. These boundaries are ethnic and racial ones. Rather than being effaced, these dividing lines are evoked over and over again."[14] Similarly too with the reproduction of South Asian identity; in claiming to discuss all things South Asian, certain aspects of South Asian culture is made prominent, reinforced, reiterated to the neglect of other aspects, to the point where dividing lines are indeed drawn within the South Asian communities, setting up borders not only between South Asia and the West, but also between home and diasporic South Asians.

It has also been contended that because the user is "unseen" by other users, discrimination on grounds of gender, race, and so on, is a problem automatically transcended in the virtual world. Jennifer Gonzales notes that Bruce Damer in his book Avatars! expresses this commonly held, albeit erroneous, notion, "One of the best features about life in digital space is that your skin colour, race, sex, size, religion or age does not matter; neither.....[do] academic degrees you have." Gonzales challenges the claim of fluidity and freedom of identity on the Internet, deeming Damer's opinion as a "naïve yet pervasive notion". Gonzales contends that the so-called liberated online users are unable to leave behind the social categories that define them in the real world and to presume to the contrary would be to

> "misunderstand the complexity of human subjects who inevitably enact and perform their new identities through the sign systems they already inhabit, and through which they are already interpellated. It would be equally naïve to suggest that subjects are somehow not also powerfully *shaped by* the images and activities that take place for them online."[15]

[13] Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert E. Rodman, eds., Race in Cyberspace (London: Routledge, 2000) 6.
[14] Kolko 21.
[15] Kolko 44.

While the Internet is undeniably a powerful tool and medium of communication, it is clearly not without its pitfalls and flaws. The following section considers some of the fundamental problems with using the Internet as a source of data and for the purposes of studying reader responses.

## Cyberspace Communities

Cyberspace has been described variously as "an arena of power", "a new arena for participation in public life", "a repository for collective cultural memory", and is essentially "a reconceived public sphere for social, political, economic and cultural interaction."[16] This section explores the workings of certain types of communities which have formed in cyberspace, and the problems and limitations of such communities, especially those pertinent to the study of reader responses and issues of identity.

Cyberspace discussions and dialogues take place in e-mails, chat-rooms, talk-programs, mailing lists, online forums, and etc. These discussions are considered highly accessible in general, but the often unspoken pre-requisite is of course, first and foremost, access to computers and subsequently access to the Internet. Internet users are still the privileged ones who can afford the cost of a computer and Internet connections, or are otherwise given or provided such access. For those who wish to participate actively in discussions and be an active member of online communities, access to the Internet must also be on a regular and frequent basis, usually daily, therefore adding another pre-requisite – that Internet access is readily available on a regular basis.

As access to the Internet is by no means universal, it has been noted that analysing readers' responses online would necessarily be limited to those readers who are able to get on-line. Nevertheless, the Internet as a source has been of great help in the research due to the difficulty (on the part of readers) of obtaining South Asian women's literature. The global reach and coverage of online mailing lists coupled with the fact that online groups are generally formed through common interests, enables people to discuss South Asian women's writings, people who may otherwise not have

the opportunity to do so because they may not be able to easily locate others in the same physical vicinity who have read the same writings.

It has been observed that online discussions are almost wholly textual in nature. There is no direct interaction, no tones of voices to listen to, no facial expressions or gestures or body language to convey any messages, and only very occasionally, a visual image may be sent. The bulk of the communications are made in the form of purely written texts. This characteristic of online discussions has often led to misunderstandings, misinterpretations, confusion and complications in the interaction. Mailing lists in particular, where members are usually complete strangers to each one another, are especially prone to such misunderstandings. It is not uncommon for discussions on mailing lists to degenerate into shouting matches (writing in uppercase), name-calling (e.g. sexist, racist, bigot, chauvinist, etc), verbal abuse, flaming, and all types of unpleasantness not at all conducive to dialogue and debate. It is possible that secure in the knowledge that whatever one posts, and safe from the possibility of meeting the recipient face to face or even of being identified as the rude/abusive/irresponsible poster, posters may take greater liberties and exercise less restraint than they would otherwise do in the real world.

The freedom which the Internet affords posters [i.e. one who posts mail for discussion] is double-edged. There is virtually no policing on the Internet, which leaves posters free to write what they will and to whom they will. A poster has tremendous power in being able to post to thousands of other subscribers on a newsgroup or mailing list, or even cross-posting (which is generally frowned upon in Internet etiquette) to several mailing lists. The Internet is a relatively 'safe' environment in which to voice views and exercise freedom of speech and expression, a wonderful medium for the suppressed and the unheard, but the lack of editing and censorship places power in the hands of potentially irresponsible posters.

The accessibility of mailing lists and groups has long been hailed as one of the advantageous features of the Internet. Researchers have noted, however, that while there are few technological barriers to joining mailing lists or newsgroups, in actuality, online

[16] Jan Fernback, "The Individual Within the Collective: Virtual Ideology and the Realization of Collective

communities can be unwelcoming, daunting to newcomers, and even intimidating or simply hostile. "Like any other community, it [Netiquette][17] uses language to erect barriers to membership."[18] Furthermore, online posters make use of many abbreviations (such as IMO meaning In My Opinion, BTW meaning By The Way), acronyms, and other 'codes' which may render the language confusing and inaccessible to the uninitiated.

It is also not uncommon to find that several individuals 'hog' discussions by posting long mails and/or frequently. In a mailing list, it is likely that only a minority of the members are active participants and the majority are lurkers (those who receive the mails but do not contribute any and participate only by watching). Thus the identity of the group is likely to be formed by a fraction of its members and is unlikely to be a true reflection or an accurate representation of the views of the group as a whole.

Mitra makes this same point in his 1997 paper and taking Indian identity as an example, further argues that "the image of India produced solely within the Indian newsgroup would be of little consequence since that image is available only to the predominantly Indian users who would inhabit that particular space."[19] While it is true that newsgroups on India primarily attract Indian users, it is not entirely true to also say that the image of India thus produced within the newsgroup would be of little consequence. For one thing, there are other users apart from Indian users on Indian newsgroups, and as Gajjala argues, "it would seem that what is happening online is actually a replaying of discourses that circulate within real life communities."[20] If Gajjala is correct, such images of India as are produced in the newsgroups and discourses which are replayed on the Internet would be of much consequence as it permit those who would ordinarily not have access to such communities and such discourses to view and participate. However, Mitra is accurate in highlighting the limited coverage of the Internet and the selectiveness of the sample.

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Principles." Virtual Culture. Identity and Community in Cybersociety (London: Sage, 1997) 37.

[17] Netiquette is generally understood as shared customs in an Internet community, or Network Etiquette.

[18] Cameron Bailey, "Virtual Skin: Articulating Race in Cyberspace." Immersed in Technology, Art, and Virtual Environments (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) 38.

[19] Ananda Mitra, "Virtual Commonality: Looking for India on the Internet." Steve G. Jones eds., Virtual Culture. Identity and Community in Cybersociety (London: Sage, 1997) 63.

[20] Radhika Gajjala, "Cyborg Diaspora and Virtual Imagined Community: Studying SAWNET." 17 Nov 1996. Online posting. Manavi. 21 March 2001.

Mitra also insists that rampant cross postings would bring subgroups into conflict and that because the issues discussed are predominantly negative, they produce "a particularly dismal picture of division and differences.....this is a matter of concern because this can ultimately hurt the way Indian communities in the West want to create a collective memory of themselves in the space of the Internet."[21] Mitra's concerns are of great significance because they call attention to the creation of collective identity on the Internet and its many failings and flaws. Diasporic communities, in particular, are inclined to be "communities recreated through memory."[22]

Most discussions which take place online are fairly informal. Most constitute opinions contributed by posters. More often than not, claims and statistics are posted without sources being cited, and opinions delivered without substantiation. Discussions are seldom 'chaired', and without a central focus or a coordinator, many discussions go off at tangents all too easily. Some relevant and promising topics die a natural death when they are not picked up by others and discussed. Occasionally, subscribers to a group may miss out on topics which interest them and which they would have discussed simply because they have been offline for any number of reasons, and upon rejoining, find that other topics have been introduced. This non-permanence of the discussions has also been pointed out by Mitra who termed it the "ephemerality" of discussions on mailing lists and newsgroups. It is an irony that the diasporic communities recreated through *memory*, as Gajjala describes, are in fact also ephemeral in quality. They are ephemeral because of the nature of this collective memory which can be rapidly changing. Mitra noted that "it is a constantly shifting space where specific texts remain available for a limited period of time, Consequently the image that is produced by these texts is non-permanent."[23]

This recreation of community through Internet discussions is an online version of the recreation of South Asian identity by diasporic South Asian writers, as was discussed in the previous chapter. Writings/books about South Asian upbringing, South Asian childhood, South Asian lifestyle, feed into the collective memory sustaining the diasporic communities. The identity of diasporic communities are also partially formed

[21] Mitra, 69.
[22] Gajjala.
[23] Mitra 59.

in the activity of reliving memories and retelling stories. Diasporic South Asians are able to create and affirm their identity both by subscribing to and circulating South Asian tales and memories, and by tapping into the collective community memory. These so-called memories too changed over time – although not nearly as rapidly as on the Internet. The printed word in hard copy is much less ephemeral than the posted discussion on Internet discussion groups of which there are seldom copies or saved records. This feature of the ephemerality of material on Internet discussion groups leads us to a consideration of the problems involved in researching just such discussions.

An implication of the ephemerality of online discussions, especially in terms of research, is that archives are likely to be incomplete and more often than not, lost. In the case of the particular mailing list I have selected for the purposes of the study, it has been archived by one of its founding members purely on a voluntary basis, and is exceptionally well-archived and complete. Admittedly, to some extent, even these excellent archives are ephemeral because they could be lost/deleted at any given moment simply due to problems with file space, and the fact that they are kept by only one member of the mailing list who alone has access to them, and who is under no obligation to continue archiving the daily postings of the mailing list. Technically speaking, any and all members of the mailing list may have access to these archives, but in practise, permission has to be obtained from the one member who has been systematically archiving the posts from the beginning.

Mitra argues that for the purposes of research, yet another problem which arises is that there is no "closure" which would enable proper analysis. Because the Internet changes and grows so swiftly, any reading of the network discourse by researchers may be undermined in its claim of authenticity.[24] On the part of posters, they have little control over how their posts may be used.

[24] Mitra 76.

## MIRA

The mailing list selected for analysing readers' responses to novels written by South Asian women writers is a list I shall call MIRA.[25] MIRA has been in existence since 1993[26], and its membership is restricted to women. It is a list which concerns itself with all issues concerning women and South Asia.[27] It is not a reading group, but because of the interests of its subscribers, literary discussions are frequent. The range of texts discussed on MIRA is fairly wide – from classics, to children's books, to poetry, to contemporary western fiction, and of course South Asian literature by South Asian men and women, both from the subcontinent and from the diaspora.

Perhaps due to the fact that this is a women's mailing list, many more South Asian women writers are discussed than men writers. While there were postings on the celebrated South Asian male writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, V.S. Naipaul, R.K. Narayan, Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, amd Vikram Seth, apart from these famous names, it did not appear that MIRA members were familiar with other, lesser-known contemporary male South Asian writers, and certainly not to a similar extent as their knowledge of the works of relatively little-known South Asian women writers.[28]

MIRA is a community which has grown to approximately 800-900 members in 2000. Between January 2000 and December 2000, 150-200 members have posted mails. (The high percentage of lurkers is a common characteristic of Internet mailing groups.) MIRA has been chosen partly because it is a well-behaved and fairly decorous group which can carry a sustained discussion with civility. MIRA's members generally post courteous mails, passionate without being offensive, and more often than not, supportive and informative mails. MIRA's members take pride in the atmosphere of the mailing list which many declare they find enjoyable, conducive and supportive. Some members testify to a sense of solidarity, and are in the habit of addressing the others as "sisters". The members are in general agreement that they feel free to share frankly and

[25] MIRA is a pseudonym.
[26] This information was provided in an online interview with one of the founding members of MIRA.
[27] I have been a MIRA subscriber for three years and have closely observed as well as participated in the discussions.
[28] Possible reasons for this discrepancy will be discussed in the following chapter.

openly for two reasons: firstly, because this is a women-only group, and secondly, because anonymity is permitted and respected. MIRA is coordinated to some extent by a moderator-of-the-month, and this moderator is responsible for sending out the daily mass postings, protecting the anonymity of members who wish this privilege, and answering queries from the members. The moderator, however, does not appear to edit any of the mails received.

As far as can be ascertained, the vast majority of MIRA's active subscribers work and/or reside in North America (judging from e-mail addresses) although there are others from Australia, Canada, India, Italy, Malaysia, Singapore, UK, etc. MIRA's members range in age, but the majority appear to be 18-50 years of age (judging from the activities discussed which reveal age of children, stage of career, travel and working experiences). The active participants of MIRA mostly appear to be either middle class or upper middle class. From the names of the posters as well as the parts of their lives that they share in their postings, the vast majority of MIRA members seem to be South Asian women. The regular posters and active participants are largely diasporic South Asian women, the majority of them appearing to be Indian Americans. MIRA includes a number of South Asian women writers, South Asian women lecturers in various universities (mostly in North America but also in other countries), students, journalists, photographers, and professionals from other disciplines. Its members appear to be largely well educated, well travelled, and in relatively comfortable financial circumstances.

In the preceding section, some of the limitations of cyberspace communities were highlighted, and it is therefore interesting to note that MIRA seems relatively exempt from most of the common problems, which was part of the reason MIRA has been chosen for the purposes of this research. As has been noted, the discussions on MIRA are mostly friendly and pleasant, and seldom degenerate into verbal contests or abuse. On the issue of the fluidity and uncertainty of identity, although some posters do exercise their right to anonymity, the majority of MIRA's members post non-anonymously, and some even include their occupation, addresses and contact information. Some MIRA members know one another personally, others try to hold meetings and arrange gatherings if they reside in the same city, and those who travel are often invited to visit or travel with other MIRA members. Although it does seem that

the majority of MIRA members who make personal contact are those who reside in North America, and identity is still an issue as far as an Internet mailing list is concerned, it does seem that a fair number of MIRA members are indeed whom they claim to be. There had been a few occasions when an anonymous poster had aroused the suspicion of a MIRA member who doubted that the poster was a woman, and such instances although few and far between, caused immense outrage and upset many members thoroughly. However, regular postings over a long period of time from members whom other MIRA members have never had the opportunity to meet still amply authenticate the identity of these members to a very large extent. Because there is no foolproof way to check the identity of all MIRA members, the membership of MIRA is based on trust and members are accepted and welcomed in good faith. It has been a practise which generally appears to have worked well for MIRA.

The problem of ephemerality as noted by Mitra does pose a problem in MIRA's discussions. Very frequently, MIRA members may not recall precisely who posted what, and mistakes have been made when postings have been wrongly attributed. These mistakes are generally honest mistakes and although the confusion may cause some annoyance and sharp disclaimers, there is seldom much damage done after an exchange of explanations.

Of the many postings sent on a daily basis to MIRA, only a fraction of these contain literary discussions. Posting topics include child care, family, clothes and fashion, personal experiences, men, culture, employment/visa/language problems, issues of identity/alienation, information on charities, agencies, conferences, gatherings, entertainment, various events, and etc. Literary discussions include non-South Asian writers, writers writing in South Asian languages and not in English, and most frequently of all, South Asian writers writing in English. The MIRA archives of the years 1997-2000 have been selected for the purposes of this research.

In these four years, a fairly large number of books and authors have been discussed. (It is common practice to find the same book or author discussed in several different years.) As far as South Asian women's writings are concerned, in 1997, MIRA had postings on 9 South Asian women authors writing in English, 10 in 1998, 13 in 1999, and 18 in 2000 (Table 4.1).

(Table 4.1: Authors discussed in MIRA from 1997-2000.)

| Year | Authors discussed in MIRA postings |
|---|---|
| 1997 | Meena Alexander, Anita Rau Badami, Kiran Desai, Chitra Divakaruni, Dinu Kamani, Madhu Kishwar, Rama Mehta, Arundhati Roy, Meera Syal. |
| 1998 | Anjana Appachana, Chitra Divakaruni, Sharma Futehally, Sunetra Gupta, Indira Mahindra, Bharati Mukherjee, Kirin Narayan, Arundhati Roy, Manisha Roy, Meera Syal. |
| 1999 | Anjana Appachana, Anita Rau Badami, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Kiran Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Faroukh Dhondy, Chitra Divakaruni, Manju Kapur, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Gita Mehta, Uma Parameswaran, Arundhati Roy. |
| 2000 | Anjana Appachana, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Chitra Divakaruni, Pramila Jayapal, Madhu Kishwar, Ameena Meer, Rama Mehta, Jaishree Misra, Mary Anne Mohanraj, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Mrinal Pande, Uma Parameswaran, Sangeeta Ray, Arundhati Roy, Meera Syal. |

In these four years, the number of MIRA members who posted and participated in literary discussion about South Asian women's writings remained small and fairly constant; 35 in 1997, 29 in 1998, 28 in 1999, and 35 in 2000. It has been observed that two authors, Arundhati Roy and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, have been consistently under discussion all four years. The following section of this chapter will contain a close study of discussions on these two authors who seem to have aroused the most interest amongst MIRA members. These are also amongst the authors whose works are studied in other chapters of this thesis.

The question may well arise as to why these particular two authors have been prominent in MIRA postings. Firstly, because of the number of North American MIRA members on the mailing list, and also due to their active participation in MIRA, it is those books readily available and widely in print in North America which stand the best chances of being widely discussed on MIRA. For instance, although Meera Syal's two novels attracted much interest and praise, they were not discussed until they were in print in North America (which is usually 6 months after release in UK,) and even then, many Indian American members of MIRA approached Syal's books cautiously, expressing a sense of apprehension of not fully understanding the experiences of

diasporic South Asian protagonists living in England. (This is a caution not shown towards novels written or set in South Asia.) Another example would be that of the works of Shashi Deshpande, who although had won the celebrated Sahitya Akademi Award for the best novel in India, is mainly published in India and may not be so readily obtainable in the Western world. Therefore, despite the many novels she has written and the relevance of her writings to the personal testimonies of MIRA's members, she is seldom discussed and her works do not appear well known to members of MIRA.

It appears to be the practise of the mailing list to share with other MIRA members books and articles of interest. No book is formally selected for discussion. A posting about a book or author may be sent because a MIRA member may wish to voice her views and impressions, or provide a recommendation or review, or initiate a discussion, or receive some feedback, or has met the author, or had recently attended a reading. Sometimes a book generates a tremendous amount of interest because it wins a prestigious prize (for example, Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies won the 1999 Pulitzer Prize) and becomes much discussed subsequently. The discussion continues only if the thread is picked up by other members who send postings in response. There have been many occasions when a posting has been sent about a book or author and that has not been discussed either because no one else who has read it or who knows anything about it wishes to post, or there may be some other topic of greater interest under discussion at that point in time, or because some of the members who might have been interested in continuing the discussion have not been accessing their MIRA mailing list for a period of time. Moreover, it has also been observed that some MIRA members are likelier to respond to postings sent in by those MIRA members who are personally known to them offline, although there have been lurkers who admit that sheer interest in the topic under discussion has persuaded them to participate instead of continuing to lurk.

It has been observed that MIRA members (those interested in literary discussion) make earnest efforts to locate or obtain books written by South Asian women writers. In postings, there are often requests for sources of books, web page addresses for book reviews, and even offers to sell books to or buy books from other members. MIRA members seem well informed on book readings, authors' promotional

tours, conferences, new books yet to be published, and besides keeping each other aware and up to date on such matters, MIRA members also attempt to start bookclubs and reading groups where they reside. To some extent, MIRA members do influence one another in their choice of reading material. As can be concluded, the books 'selected' for discussion are 'selected' based on a variety of sources and reasons. It is a fairly random selection process, but it does reflect the members' awareness of the literature and the ways in which the literature is brought to their attention.

A number of contemporary South Asian women writers are also members of MIRA. Some of these authors have been observed advertising their books in postings (albeit on a friendly and non-commercial basis), and because of the friendly footing on which most MIRA members interact, these authors readily answer questions about their writings. (The direct and immediate interaction between authors and readers naturally encourages MIRA members to obtain and read the books written by these authors.) It has been noticed that some of the South Asian women writers use MIRA as a source of information about South Asian women and South Asian customs in their writings. Authors, especially diasporic ones, appeal to MIRA members for help in tracing legends and folk tales, ask to be corrected about or reminded of traditions, rituals and rites, and occasionally request volunteers for the purpose of checking manuscripts prior to publication for authenticity and accuracy.

More often than not, MIRA's members post only once in a literary discussion. There are a very small number of members who engage in a dialogue in an online literary discussion, and most send only a single posting on one author or one novel, and no more. The literary discussion on MIRA usually comprises a collection of views and contributions rather than a back-and-forth exchange of thoughts and arguments, although there are occasions where the latter does occur. In the discussion on the works of Chitra Divakaruni and Arundhati Roy, for example, from 1997 to 2000, only 4 members posted more than once, out of the 40 members in total who sent postings. This is in part due to the fact that MIRA members are inclined to write to the group as a whole rather than tailoring their postings for any one member, even when they are reacting to a previous posting. (Members who wish a dialogue with other members often invite one another to e-mail privately/back-channel rather than continuing to send their communications on the general mailing list.)

The following sections contain an analysis of postings to MIRA which constitute literary discussions on one diasporic author and one home author. [29]

**MIRA Discussion on Chitra Divakaruni (1997 - 2000)**

In 1997, there were two discussions on the writings of Chitra Divakaruni. The first discussion took place in February 1997, running for approximately two weeks (13/2/97 - 28/2/97), and was picked up again the following month for a further two and a half weeks (10/3/97 – 28/3/97). From the very first discussion, it was clear that opinions on Divakaruni's work were diverse and varied. Comments on Arranged Marriage and Mistress of Spices ranged from laudatory to derogatory:

I.N. : Divakaruni's AM [Arranged Marriage] is one of my favourite collections. (13/2/97)

T.S. : I found Divakaruni's book quite insipid and puerile..... (14/2/97)

The MIRA members who praised Divakaruni's prose enjoyed her style, her choice of issues which they deemed significant, the versatility of her narrative voice, and most of all, the creation of characters whom they felt they could either identify with or relate to. However, there were a larger number of MIRA members who criticised Divakaruni's novels severely. Complaints ranged from finding the novels dull and boring with one-dimensional, unremarkable characters, to weightier criticisms concerned with issues of identity and representation.

In the first discussion in February 1997, two postings protested the possible misrepresentation of South Asian women through Divakaruni's writings:

B.S. : I just wish the jacket of her AM [Arranged Marriage] book would declare the experiences of her characters to be that of abused or suffering women and not the typical experience of immigrant women or whatever that it states. Would be a bit more honest IMO [in my opinion]. (25/2/97)

E.E. : ..... I wish it was not implied in any way that her writings all inclusively depict the Indian American community. I am concerned because many South Asian

[29] Postings to MIRA have been reproduced exactly as they originally appeared, with acronyms, capital letters, and even with grammatical and spelling errors, for the sake of accuracy, although where necessary for the sake of clarity, insertions have been made.

> related writings and movies which Western audiences are privy to, feed the Western romanticised image of the exotic East, with frail looking dark beauties, the smell of incense and spices, the soft strains of a sitar and/or tabla (Ms Divakaruni arranged to have classical music playing while she read.....at least to me it seemed very contrived.) (26/2/97)

From the two quotes above, it is clear that both posters felt that Divakaruni's writings either misrepresented them to a Western readership, as diasporic South Asian women, or else failed to provide an accurate or encompassing portrait of South Asian women living in America. E.E. indirectly suggested that Divakaruni may be one of those guilty of knowingly and deliberately offering a misleading portrayal of her community in order to pander to the romantic notions of the West. It was also clear that both B.S. and E.E. were not only concerned with their own reactions to the novels, but were also concerned over the potential reactions of the larger, non-South Asian society, fearing that a lop-sided and exoticised portrayal of the South Asian community would result in an erroneous image of South Asia. It is interesting to note that both B.S. and E.E. and a number of other MIRA members, seemed to automatically assume that South Asian women writers are representative voices of South Asian women in general, especially to the Western world. The protest of these MIRA members seem to stem from a fear that the stories told by Divakaruni would be assumed (by a Western audience) to be *their* collective stories.

It is also interesting to note that B.S. complains about being misled in her expectations of the book Arranged Marriage by the *jacket* of the book. Book jackets which undeniably provide the initial impression to readers will be discussed in the next chapter in order to study what and which impressions are selectively being given to readers of South Asian women writers, and the implications of such impressions.

In the second discussion on Divakaruni in 1997, the posts began to question motives, both on the part of author and readers. (It should be noted that several MIRA members who sent postings had met Divakaruni in person, either at a social venue like a temple, or at a book reading. Their accounts of the encounters indicate that their reception of her work has been coloured by the impression the readers received of the person and personality of the author, to no small degree.) There were fewer solitary postings simply registering individual impressions and opinions, and a larger number of

postings in dialogue with one another, reacting to each other's suggestions and ideas. Discussions arose as to what an author's responsibilities were, and what could justifiably be expected of an author.

I.D. : I agree that South Asian writers don't always have to have an agenda; at the same time, I do think that they have an obligation to NOT give into ethnic stereotyping that feeds into what the western audience already believes is Asian or Indian. (18/3/97)

S.T. : This is in response to postings on Divakaruni's "AM" [Arranged Marriage] and South Asian Identity, for my reading of her short stories pertains directly to the way I have constructed my own bicultural identity. I myself did not like her debut novel, because I felt it was a very one-sided view of the reality of South Asian women. ..... All of the women are reconstructed only in terms of the men (future or present) that they are in love with. Furthermore Divakaruni completely ignores issues of CASTE and CLASS in her novel where all her women heroines are usually brahmin and Middle Class. I find this kind of representation of Indian women annoying because it is very stylized and YES stereotypical. (26/3/97)

I.N. : S.T. ..... I'd like to ask what are *we* looking for? "We" in the sense of being South Asian women...I almost feel like we're looking for a leader to represent us (in the form of Divakaruni or Mira Nair). As a writer, she can only write about her own world. ..... So what are our expectations of south asian writers? Of course she (and ginu kamani and [Bharati] mukherjee and countless others) can only express their own experiences. They're not out to wave a flag and say "here's the south asian woman in all her complexities all bound up into a hard cover book." (27/3/97)

T.K. : ..... I would say she writes all this stuff to get acceptance in the western society as she did mention in her interview that the west made her a writer. .... (28/3/97)

I.D.'s and S.T.'s postings protested a stereotyping of South Asian women by Divakaruni, and although not directly articulated, there was a sense of betrayal in their postings. Those who criticise Divakaruni's writings frequently hint at or testify to a sense of either being disappointed by or disappointed in Divakaruni as a South Asian woman writer. In all likelihood, the disappointment stems from the unspoken assumption that by virtue of her race and position, Divakaruni is 'one of them', i.e. a member of an ethnic minority which is little understood by the majority. The short excerpt above from T.K.'s posting further substantiates this; T.K. does not simply say that Divakaruni writes to gain acceptance, but to gain acceptance in *the Western society,*

which makes it clear that T.K. mentally sets Divakaruni apart from non-South Asian Americans.

I.N.'s posting indicates her awareness of her positionality as a reader, and makes an attempt to give the author the benefit of the doubt. (It should be noted that I.N. was one of the posters who had enjoyed Divakaruni's writings.) Posters like T.K. (whose posting was lengthy and indignant in tone) are obviously not prepared to extend the benefit of the doubt to Divakaruni and seem convinced that this was an author writing to sell rather than to tell.

In March 1998, the topic of Divakaruni's writings arose once more, this time focusing on the novel Mistress of Spices, rather than the collection of short stories, Arranged Marriage. A South Asian MIRA poster living in a South East Asian country started the discussion with a couple of disparaging postings expressing her disgust for Divakaruni's novel.

M.M. : ....I just finished reading Chitra Divakaruni's Mistress of Spices and I am APPALLED. If you really are looking for negative stereotyping just read the book. It is the worst mish-mash of melodramatic hocus-pocus that I have read for a long time ..... I haven't read anything so pathetic by an Indian author ever, Divakaruni obviously has a Western audience (oops read American audience; I think the Brits by virtue of their long association with India are a lot smarter about Indians) in mind but I hate what she does to the image of India in order to sell her books. ..... I think making a big hue and cry about it would only get the book more publicity than it deserves. Crap should be flushed away – without a fuss. (6/3/98)

Two days later, M.M reiterated this opinion for the benefit of another MIRA member who questioned it and concluded with:

M.M. : What I object to most of all is that CBD's [Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's] portrayal of Indians, especially Indian women, is so one-dimensional. I find it very unreal, even offensive. (8/3/98)

M.M.'s passionate comments received several postings in response, and one of those took up the argument on the responsibility of the author, defending Divakaruni's choice of both style and content, and for her autonomy as an author. (It is significant that this poster is herself a South Asian woman writer.)

B.C. : In reference to comments on Divakaruni and the women in her fiction. I don't know why she gets such a bum rap from both SA men and women – she cannot win for losing ….. But should a writer have an agenda? Do we expect this from men writers? There is always a theme that develops with good writing, and yes, the writer's worldview is out there for everyone to see. But should women writers write only about strong women? Or should she write about being human? What exactly is the quality in Divakaruni's writing that seems to grate on people so? Isn't there a quality of magic realism in Mistress [Mistress of Spices] – so are we perhaps not reading her right in the sense of allowing for that particular style of writing? (12/3/98)

B.C.'s postings with its multiple questions triggered off a number of responses the very next day, indicating high interest and involvement from other MIRA members. Of those responses, two were particularly significant. One was from M.M. who had initiated this 1998 discussion on Divakaruni, protesting that she had no axe to grind and that criticisms of a South Asian writer may be objective and fair without hidden agendas or ulterior motives being involved.

M.M : Dear B.C. I don't think my objection about Divakaruni has anything to do with her gender or origins; I like to complain about bad writing no matter who writes it. ….. I think we tend to come down on critics a little too hard in our community – does the SA [South Asian] critic have to have an agenda besides not liking bad prose?…When the story is banal, stereotypes to pander to the beliefs of a certain audience, or is simply badly edited, I say "this is my personal opinion – I think this book sucks." (13/3/98)

The second significant response to B.C.'s posting was from a MIRA member, who though initially seemed to support B.C.'s opinion, nevertheless went on to (unconsciously) contradict herself in the second half of her posting.

D.S. : Dear B.C. I agree with you, I don't think anyone HAS to have some global agenda beyond telling their stories and I definitely think that just because a SA [South Asian] woman is one of the few of "us" visibly published/ writing out there she should be expected to hold up all of our banners/issues/torches…..But that is not my problem with Divakaruni. My problem with her is that she writes to exotify, she writes to nutshell-ize, she writes to caricature ….. I am mad that she seems to have sold out – caricaturing and exotifying and spicing up brown people with some cultural imagery, some ethnic names, some "community" stories only to serve us up on a plate for the "anything ethnic" loving western palate….. (13/3/98)

The second part of the posting expresses frustration and a sense of having been betrayed, "served us up on a plate". D.S.' obvious indignation suggests that although

she does, in theory, exempt authors from the responsibility of holding up "banners/issues/torches", in actuality, she believes Divakaruni speaks to a Western audience as a representative of South Asian people.

There are a fair number of posters and readers like D.S. who are unaware that their inherent expectations of Divakaruni and other South Asian women writers may conflict with their desire to deal fairly with books and authors and allow authors the maximum liberty of choice. Discussion on MIRA on what can justifiably be expected of an author is frequent, lively but more often than not, ill-defined. It appears that just as each reader has a personal criteria of what constitutes as 'good' literature, so too each reader has a personal set of ethics which dictate what they regard as the responsibility of the author. Divakaruni seems to be one of those authors who have transgressed the personal limits set by many readers. It is not entirely clear in the posting as to whether MIRA members object more strongly to Divakaruni's motives or the effect Divakaruni's writing has on her potential readers.

There has been much concern over the image of South Asian women as is presented by Divakaruni to the Western readers. Two postings contained points of interest on this issue. One is from a non-South Asian MIRA member who described having enjoyed Divakaruni's Arranged Marriage.

M.L. : A lot of people talked about 'AM' [Arranged Marriage] about a year ago – most [MIRA members] didn't like it, it seemed. I did like it, but then, I'm not a South Asian woman. (18/2/99)

M.L. implies that it may be easier for a non-South Asian woman reader to enjoy Divakaruni's writing, and implicitly also implies that South Asian women may have reason to find it objectionable or offensive. It also implies that she was able to enjoy it without reserve because whatever Divakaruni wrote, she was not writing on M.L.'s behalf because M.L. is not a South Asian woman. This suggests that as a non- South Asian woman, M.L. *does* assume that other South Asian women readers will regard Divakaruni as their spokesperson. It is unclear as to whether M.L. herself, as a non-South Asian woman reader regards Divakaruni as a representative voice of South Asian women.

The other posting with reference to how a Western reader may respond was sent by another indignant MIRA member who posted to illustrate the damage, in her experience, which Divakaruni's writings have done the image of South Asians.

T.K. : I am personally not a fan of Chitra Divakaruni.....After a few months at work one day one of my american colleagues at work asked me "does your husband hit you sometimes and your in-laws harass you?" I was so taken by surprise I could hardly speak for a few seconds. When I recovered I asked him why he felt my husband would hit me and my in-laws would harass me. Then he told me he read AM [Arranged Marriage] and after reading through the book he got this impression about Indian arranged marriages..... I will not recommend anybody (especially my non-indian friends and colleagues) to read her books. (26/3/97)

The close of T.K.'s e-mail indicated that she almost wishes to shield her community *and* the western world from the influence of Divakaruni's books. Other South Asian MIRA members also testified to having 'white' or American friends who had read Divakaruni's novels and responded very differently from themselves.

Curiously enough, after the critical responses of the MIRA members in the 1998 discussion, in 1999, Divakaruni's work was once again the topic of animated discussion, but this time the responses were inclined towards being positive and supportive of her writings.

D.S. : I for one found the book [Arranged Marriage] portraying quite an accurate description of women trapped in a "traditional" value system. Its [sic] like a getting a glimpse of familiar friends speaking aloud in this collection of short stories. (17/2/99)

J.A. : The first time I read this book [Arranged Marriage] my reaction was, "wow, somebody really captured what it is like to be a South Asian woman in America or even back home." Ms Divakaruni describes many different situations and tells them with grace and style ..... I think that Ms Divakaruni [sic] books are a real asset to the growing body of South Asian literature ..... I also find that I can relate to many of her characters and it is comforting to know that we share common experiences ..... (19/2/99)

D.A. : Hi, I'm a big fan of Divakaruni's AM [Arranged Marriage] ..... (23/2/99)

P.N. : I, for one, think chitra is fantastic..... (23/2/99)

It is unclear as to why these members had not participated in the previous discussions which were more critical; it is unlikely that all of these members could have been coincidentally absent or offline at the times Divakaruni was under discussion. It is possible that in the light of the negative reaction to Divakaruni's writing vigorously expressed by some, those who had in fact enjoyed the books had chosen to remain lurkers, perhaps because they did not wish to debate the point. The disdain and disgust expressed by some MIRA members may have deterred others from responding with a totally conflicting point of view. Although MIRA members pride themselves on feeling the freedom in this particular mailing list to speak their minds, it does appear that in certain cases, MIRA members are more likely to contribute where they feel they share opinions, preferring to concur than to counter, and are even possibly daunted by the strength of others' opinions where they do not share those opinions. As Hartley puts it, "It might be said that the reading group is a forum for the kind of talk associated with women: co-operation rather than competition….."[30] (Although MIRA is not a reading group, it effectively functions as one when in literary discussion.) Whatever the reasons, several e-mails in praise of Divakaruni's writings attracted responses in the same vein.

Other postings in 1999 and 2000 indicate that Divakaruni's writings continue to provoke a range of positive and negative responses from her readers:

G.S. : I have wondered what it is about Divakaruni and Bannerji that makes them write about the stuff that they do. In my humblest opinion, I find much of their writing to be Americanized trash. So sorry, if I offend their followers, but I do feel they propagate stereotypes and prejudices that as a young person, I feel I can do without. There are other Indian or South Asian writers, men and women, who (in my opinion) do a much better job of being great exponents of Indian literature. (19/10/99)

V.A. : , I liked Chitra Divakaruni's story in the Atlantic Monthly [Mrs Dutta Writes a Letter]. I found a certain poignancy to it. I also found strength in it…..I am no critic of literature but I think good Lit should leave a lot unsaid, a lot for the readers to fill in and CBD [Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni] does that. That to me is her strength as an author. The other strength is where she leaves the protagonist at the end of the story…..(25/1/00)

V.A. was not the only MIRA member to discuss Mrs Dutta Writes A Letter, but the other posting on this short story was polemically different in response. K.M. who

[30] Jenny Hartley, Reading Groups (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001) 137.

had posted in 1998 argued that the story was unconvincing and pointed out the details which she found flawed:

> K.M. : I read the "Mrs Dutta" story ….. I thought she had some major stereotyping in there! Mother-in-law/daughter-in-law undercurrents…the poor little son in between…Puhlease!! [sic] Kids watching TV she does not understand. Ms Divakaruni should go and visit India now and she will see that everyone there is watching TV all the time!! …American "white" woman not smiling – come on, we know that!! Americans always smile at others …. Frankly, living in California (and her story is set here) I hardly see anyone smoking!! ….. I thought she added all these touches to make it a touching/mushy story….. (15/4/98)

The MIRA members indicate that they are constantly aware of their positionality, and for the Indian Americans in particular, their postings indicate that they are constantly aware of being an ethnic minority in a Western world which they regard as one which does not understand them. There are of course all types of criteria readers use in judging whether a piece of literature is 'good' or 'bad', but the curious thing is that both Divakaruni's critics and supporters appear to be using the same criteria. It appears that as a South Asian woman writer writing about diasporic South Asian women characters, Divakaruni is under fairly high expectations from her South Asian women readers to provide an accurate portrayal of the community, and her writings are expected to faithfully reflect the 'true picture' or image of South Asian culture. Those who dislike Divakaruni's work accuse her of stereotyping and oversimplying, whereas those who enjoy her work praise her for the successful creation of characters, situations, and problems whom and which they recognise, relate to, and identity with.

## MIRA Discussion on Arundhati Roy (1997 – 2000)

By comparison, postings on Arundhati Roy in this four-year period have been far fewer in number than postings on Chitra Divakaruni. There have been more than twice as many postings on the latter, which was initially puzzling because being the 1997 Booker Prize winner, it could be supposed that Roy's novel received a fair amount of publicity and was very visible on the literary scene. The God of Small Things has been widely circulated, prominent in bookshops, and therefore, accessibility could hardly have accounted for the huge difference in postings from MIRA members.

It is possible that because Chitra Divakaruni has written three novels, two collections of short stories, and a book of poetry, it is likelier that readers would have come across one or the other of her works. (By comparison, Roy has written one novel and several long political essays, some of them on the construction of the Narmada Dam and its implications.) However, two other possible reasons spring to mind: firstly, Roy is a writer writing from India, whereas Chitra Divakaruni is a diasporic South Asian writer. The majority of active participants on MIRA being South Asian women residing in North America, it is possible that they may regard Divakaruni as a representative of women in their circumstances. Divakaruni's characters are mostly diasporic South Asians, and this fact may render her diasporic readers feeling freer to identify with or criticise her work. Diasporic South Asian women may be more hesitant to criticise a home writer (such as Roy) because they may be less sure of their ground, less confident of the validity of their arguments, and more willing to defer to the author's supposedly superior knowledge of life on the subcontinent.

The other possible reason for the fewer postings on Roy in MIRA may be due to the fact that The God of Small Things is not as straightforward or as simple a piece of writing to analyse as Divakaruni's writings are inclined to be, and this may cause readers to hesitate in contributing comments and opinions for fear of exposing a lack of understanding on their part. Roy has been widely acclaimed by (Western) critics as a literary lion, and her celebrity coupled with the complexity of her style may have intimidated readers into reserving opinions, particularly negative ones. Her formidable reputation, rather than raising debates over her work amongst the reading public, may in fact deter critical discussion of it.

On MIRA, there were not many sustained discussions or dialogues on Roy's novel although comparatively speaking, her writing did attract more attention than the writings of most other South Asian women writers. The vast majority of the postings on Roy were very positive (unlike the postings on Divakaruni, of which only a smaller half seemed to have enjoyed her writings), and Roy's style in particular seems much admired by her readers. In March 1998, there were several exchanges within the space of a week, all in support of Roy's novel:

I.N. : I just finished Arundhati Roy, and I think she's too amazing for words. She just took every rule about writing and cut it up. The end is at the beginning, the beginning at the end, and emotions are tangible..... (11/3/98)

V.H. : That was exactly my view about Roy. She broke all rules with perfect elegance..... (12/3/98)

M.A. : .....well, I'm certainly glad I didn't waste my money on Divakaruni...I'm reading "God of Small Things"......and am enthralled at [Roy's] skill at language...some of it is pure poetry..... (15/3/98)

I.D. : Thank God we have writers like Arundhati Roy cropping up who can create multidimensional characters and do it well. (18/3/98)

Once again, it can be seen that in MIRA, postings expressing certain opinions on literature seem to encourage similar postings to be sent. However, one striking difference in the manner of expression between the fans of Divakaruni's writings and Roy's is the strength of expression in their responses. Words and phrases such as "enthralled", "amazing", "pure poetry", "perfect elegance", all indicate that some of Roy's readers were awed, deeply impressed, and of the opinion that she is not only a good writer, but also an outstanding writer. Roy's novel seems to have evoked very strong responses and touched deep chords within some of her readers. This depth of feeling and response very seldom appeared in postings on Divakaruni, even in the postings from her supporters. (There were several MIRA members who did compare these two authors and found much lacking in Divakaruni's work.)

Equally, although there were some who did not enjoy Roy's novel, none of those postings expressed the same disdain, disgust, or dismay that was expressed by some posters on Divakaruni's novels. A few postings took issue with Roy's style:

R.L. : I found the writing style [of <u>The God of Small Things</u>] fairly tedious after awhile as if the author was showing off how clever she was rather than contributing to the story. (27/1/97)

A.B.: I just finished reading "God of Small Things"! It was pretty good. ..... The book was sometimes irritating because of the explanations stuck in between – but on the whole enjoyable..... (4/8/97)

B.C. : ….. I did NOT like the cutsy [sic] style she descends to at times which got annoying but on the whole I liked the voice, the message and the delivery. (24/1/00)

However, even those who criticised her writing style mostly found something positive to say about the novel as a whole. It would appear that although Roy's style may not have been to everyone's taste, she seems to have generally impressed her readers. There were two other dissenting voices, one of which was cynical in tone and questioned the motives of the publishers, reminding the others that the novel is a marketed commodity with all those implications:

K.S. : We are treating her [Arundhati Roy] as an informant whose words are completely transparent. We need to keep in mind that an enormous amount of money is riding on the success of this book ….. what I am highlighting in this note is the extent of the packaging of the author and her work. Obviously, these details don't conform to the image of the rebel and bohemian that the industry wants to sell. (6/7/97)

It appears that the marketing techniques of booksellers have caused some readers to be wary and suspicious of the information they receive, both about the literature and about the author. (Readers may have cause to be critical of the literature made available to them because this literature is selected by editors and publishers and presented in certain and deliberate ways. Readers should in fact keep in mind that publishing houses publish with profit in mind. The role of the publisher and the presentation of the literature to the public, being such central concerns in the literary world, will be further discussed in Chapter Five.)

The other poster who was not entirely satisfied with The God of Small Things protested against the trend of pessimism and gloom in the novel, a trend which she perceived the South Asian authors in general inclining towards:

D.S. : ….. she [Arundhati Roy] ultimately wrote a really original and touching tale…..Nothing against her lovely novel persay [sic], but ultimately, I am a little tired of "perverse South Asians and their extended families, unable to communicate, repressing sexuality only to allow it to emerge, warped and twisted" type tales…It's all rather glum and esoteric and self-flagellatory [sic]…. Do we always have to be so "magical" and "karmic" and "extended family twisted"? Forgive me,…..if I'm a little longing for a SA [South Asian] novel with a wry, fresh, critical, but optimistic sensibility. (29/10/97)

D.S. seemed to regard all South Asian women writers, both home and diasporic ones as falling into the same category, making no distinction between whom they may be speaking of and for. Her complaint of a lack of optimism in South Asian writings suggests that she is concerned with the image South Asian writers project (of South Asia) to the rest of the world, a concern shared by many MIRA members as was evident in the postings on Divakaruni. It also suggests that a reader like D.S. would place Roy firmly in the specific genre of South Asian women's writings, not just in the more general genre of fiction, or novels.

Although the issue of representation and the author as emissary was often raised in the discussion of Divakaruni's work, D.S. is one of the very few who took Roy to task concerning inaccurate, or incomplete representation. While many of Divakaruni's readers did seem to assume she was a spokesperson for the South Asian community, as is reflected in their inclination to measure how successfully she told "their" story, this criteria was apparently not held up to Roy's writing. In fact, Roy's work was frequently held up as a yardstick to the works of other South Asian women writers, which is a suggestion of the esteem in which her novel is held, and the pedestal on which her writing has been placed.

C.S. : I read Sharma Futehally's novel Tara Lane, recently, and quite enjoyed it. Perhaps not as original as the God of Small Things.....(26/1/98)

B.C. : I dislike the style and the prose [of The Glassblower's Breath by Sunetra Gupta] – it was way too self conscious and the author seemed too impressed with her vocabulary and mastery of the language...There was a little of this sylistic thing in Roy's books as well, GOST [The God of Small Things], but it is controlled and bearable up to a point. Gupta has just gone crazy with that. (29/5/98)

S.V. : I can really identify with the characters [in Anjana Appachana's Listening Now] which was a problem for me in Arundhati Roy's magnum opus and even some other books by Indian writers. (27/8/99)

Not all the comparisons were in Roy's favour, but the significance of such increasingly commonplace comparisons is that The God of Small Things has been accepted as a landmark in the genre, a reference point, and is one of the best known of South Asian women's novels. It is compared by readers to the works of a whole range

of other South Asian women writers, both home and diasporic ones, and in the example above, compared to writers writing from India, UK, and USA.

In the discussions, it appeared that while MIRA readers assumed that a reader's response to Divakaruni's writings would depend on whether or not the reader is South Asian, this assumption did not appear in the postings and discussions on Roy's novel. This may indicate that MIRA readers do not regard Roy as having written for any audience in particular, thus exonerating her from the suspicion of writing to "serve us up on a plate".[31] This may perhaps also be deduced as being an implicit compliment to Roy's writing, that her readers regard her novel as universally appealing.

## Reader Attitudes Towards South Asian Women's Writings

A total of thirty-one MIRA members posted on Divakaruni's writings in 1997 – 2000, and in the same time period, seventeen posted on Roy's novel. This group of readers with their diversity of responses exemplifies the myriad positions and stances which readers are likely to take. In the exchange of reactions to the various pieces of writings, it was clear that readers are influenced by one other's opinions and comments. The discussion is valuable to readers primarily because it offers them perspectives and points of view which they would otherwise not have considered.

South Asian women writers have objected to being identified as women writers (contending that male writers are not referred to as 'men writers' and merely as 'writers'), and also to the fact that they are judged not just on their literary accomplishments, but on their private lives. It was therefore refreshing to note that very few MIRA readers sought to evaluate the books based on the authors' gender, marital status, class, or background. It was clear that information about an author would inevitably and naturally influence their perception of the writings, but it was not to any damaging extent. Roy's novel, for instance, was semi-autobiographical, but Roy's personal life was seldom mentioned or discussed by the MIRA readers except for an outpouring of sympathy for Roy when it became known that her novel was attacked by various parties in India.

[31] Taken from a posting in MIRA on 13/3/98 from D.S.

Divakaruni's personal life did not come under much scrutiny either, except in one isolated instance where a reader was indignant that an author would negatively portray arranged marriages when the author herself had a love marriage, and felt Divakaruni ill-qualified to do so, arguing based on the (fallacious) premise that an author cannot write on something beyond the reach of her personal experiences.

T.K. And hers [CBD] was a love marriage. Then how come she can write about on what one goes through in an arranged marriage. (28/3/97)

Although T.K.'s argument seems a simple and obviously misguided one, it does raise the interesting issue of how far South Asian readers trust South Asian authors to write of situations and circumstances beyond the reach of their personal lives. The question does arise as to whether a relatively privileged South Asian woman could presume to speak for women of other classes and castes in underprivileged circumstances. In this particular instance, it is clear that T.K. has no confidence in Divakaruni's ability to understand, let alone be trusted to authentically portray, the tradition and practicalities which constitute arranged marriages, and T.K. is therefore indignant that the author should venture to pronounce and publish such opinions on arranged marriages.

In T.K.'s case as well as broadly speaking, the issues raised by MIRA readers were mainly concerned with the portrayal of South Asian culture (which includes the position of women in their societies) through the literature. Readers were concerned firstly with their own reaction to issues in novels by such writers as Roy and Divakaruni, which they deemed very close to their hearts, but they were also very concerned over how the rest of the (Western) world would regard South Asia and South Asians as a result of the literary representation. This concern appears to apply not only to contemporary novels, but to any and all literature on South Asia. For example, in discussing the Karma Sutra, it was exactly the same concerns which arose in the discussions on Arranged Marriages.

D.A. : As for how this submissive portrayal [Karma Sutra] will make Indian women seem in the eyes of Westerners, it's an age old problem we face every time any sort of movie/book comes out about the South Asia..... is it asking too much for even handed portrayals of the culture? (30/1/97)

There was a certain sense that many of the MIRA readers felt proprietarily towards literature by South Asian women writers, in a way which was not in evidence when they discussed literature by other Western women, or African American women. Interestingly, this proprietary attitude is not uniformly extended towards *all* South Asian women writers, but has its degrees; extreme in the case of authors such as Divakaruni who is an Indian-American writer, somewhat less proprietary in the case of Roy who was born and bred and who lives in India, and even less so in the case of one such as Meera Syal, who is a Indian-British writer. These varying degrees of proprietary attitudes on the part of MIRA readers who responded to literary discussion (who are primarily composed of diasporic South Asians living in USA), indicates that the greater the emotional attachment on the part of the readers to a given geographical location, the more proprietary they are likely to feel regarding material written by and about South Asians in that place. Equally, the less the personal involvement in and experience of a city or country, the less likely it would be for a reader to protest against or openly challenge the authority and claims of an author writing about such a place. There were MIRA readers who were hesitant to pronounce judgement on Meera Syal's novels simply because they assumed South Asians in Britain have a very different experience from South Asians in USA, and that having been colonisers, the British intrinsically have a clearer understanding or a greater expertise of South Asia than have Americans. (In the course of other non-literary discussions in MIRA, it was clear that some diasporic South Asians in USA whose ties with South Asia are somewhat tenuous, were more than willing to defer to South Asians either from South Asia or with stronger links to South Asia on all cultural matters.)

This proprietary attitude which South Asian MIRA readers seem inclined towards led (and still leads) to frequent discussions on MIRA of the problem of representation. When one such discussion arose yet again in May 2000, a MIRA reader wrote to counter the strait-jacket of expectations she perceived South Asian readers putting on South Asian writers:

J.Z. : Accusing a writer of this [pandering to his/her readership's preconceived notions of South Asian life/culture] suggests that South Asians are a monolithic group and that a writer fails THEM ALL when he/she panders to the West. I suggest that each writer comes from a body of experience which is unique, and conveys this sense of South Asia in his or her own way. (7/5/00)

J.Z. accurately highlights a very significant problem with the readership of South Asian women's writings, particularly the readership which consists of diasporic South Asians. Such reductive or deterministic expectations from readers could curtail the artistic autonomy of authors and reduce the scope of the literature. As was discussed in the introduction to this chapter, the preoccupation with victimhood for instance, has already influenced the genre.

A proprietary attitude on the part of some MIRA readers does however mean that these readers clearly have a special interest in South Asian women's writings, and on the whole, they seem to enjoy such literature. Although this is the general consensus, there are a few who do not find this literature praiseworthy. There is definite recognition that raising awareness of South Asia is a positive step, but there is occasionally severe criticism of the actual quality of the writing.

V.N. : I can't stand Bharati Mukherjee's writing, and it was more than a struggle to get through Jhumpa Lahiri's book. It just plain annoyed me. No, actually, it was some of the worst writing I have ever read. I can't say I found CBD [Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni] too interesting either. I have always thought that until the cream rises we are in the position of accepting what it there. I celebrate these women for being published, but come on, much of their writing is mediocre. (20/9/99)

Those of V.N.'s views appear to be of the opinion that promotion of South Asian women's writings is to be encouraged, but do not hail the publications as being of notable literary merit. Incidentally, V.N. was not the only MIRA reader who did not enjoy Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies. Although Lahiri's success was generally celebrated on MIRA, there were those who were simultaneously pleased for her because she is a South Asian woman whose writing was recognised by the American society, and yet felt her book undeserving of the Pulitzer prize. It would appear therefore that perhaps some South Asian women readers read South Asian women's writings because of who the author is, rather than for what or how the author writes.

## Conclusion

"The text represents a potential effect that is realised in the reading process."[32] In seeking to analyse the effect on readers realised in their reading of South Asian women's writings and expressed in MIRA discussions, this chapter has sought to understand not only the literary opinions of the readers, but also their expectations of and attitudes towards the literary texts, the authors, and the genre. It has been seen that the diasporic literature constitutes almost a collective memory of the diasporic experience, and the literature is regarded as a reference point, an archive, as well as a source of information which can instruct and prescribe.

In the course of studying the workings of MIRA as well as some of the literary discussions which have taken place on this semi-public, cyberspace forum over a four-year period, it has been observed that a great many diasporic South Asian women appear to be amongst the most enthusiastic of readers of the genre of South Asian writing in English. There is a sense of solidarity amongst the readers on MIRA, as women as well as being mostly South Asian women, and a consequent desire to support writers of South Asian descent. However, it is not only a sense of solidarity with the writers that MIRA readers display – there is also a sense of *collective ownership* of the genre. It is this sense of collective ownership which is apparently outraged when readers feel themselves misrepresented in the literature.

This sense of collective ownership is, perhaps, one reason South Asian women readers seemed to enjoy identifying with fictional characters in novels. However, many did seem to object to the motives of some of the authors, especially when these authors were suspected of catering to a Western palate. The writings of home South Asian women writers were less often criticised – and if criticised, then less severely – than the writings of diasporic, and in particular, American South Asian women writers. It appears that many South Asian women readers of this genre claim, whether consciously or otherwise, a rather privileged position of their own. They do not wish to be misrepresented to the non-South Asian world, but on the other hand, it appears there *is* a desire for representation, especially that which would heighten the global profile of

[32] Iser ix.

South Asian women. It is a curious thing to observe that those readers who were furiously resisting the possibility of misrepresentation to the Western world, did not express a similar fear of misrepresentation to the Indian subcontinent. Thus once again the dividing lines between home and diasporic South Asian literature is made clear, not only in its authorial intentions, but also in its readership, reception, and representation.

The sense of collective ownership of the diasporic literature appears to also extend to a sense of ownership of information and/or knowledge about South Asian women or South Asian society. As a non-South Asian woman participating in various topics of discussions on MIRA, there have been occasions where the validity of my contributions/opinions were questioned on the basis of my 'outsider' status. [33] This questioning was by no means universal and was unlikely to have been offensively intended, but there does appear to be an unsaid understanding that South Asian descent is a badge of membership, so to speak. Within MIRA, there even seems to be a staking of regional intellectual territory – for instance, in discussing a Sikh-related issue, the Sikh members of MIRA would state definitively at the start of the posts that they are Sikhs, or that they are from Punjab, or that they have one Sikh parent, with the unwritten implication, ".....and *therefore*, we *know*....." This attitude which indicates a certain sense of proprietoriness towards the identity, culture, image, etc. of South Asia, does come through in the reader responses to the writings on and/or by South Asian women.[34]

In researching reader responses to South Asian women's writings, it was far easier to find discussion on diasporic writings than those on home writings. One reason is of course the availability of texts, but another reason may be the accessibility of the writings themselves. As Marangoly George points out, "Given that immigrant fictions are often concerned with the experience of immigration to western nations and are written in global languages, these fictions seem to straddle the geographical world. As a

[33] As mentioned in the Introduction Chapter, I am a Malaysian of Chinese descent.
[34] In August 2002, there was a lengthy and animated discussion on Elizabeth Bumiller's May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons, and many indignant responses to this book were due to MIRA members regarding Bumiller as a complete outsider who neither understood nor fairly portrayed Indian women, and moreover, one who could be regarded as a Western imperialist imposing and propagating a false portrait of India. (Those few who defended her right to state her views were in very small minority.)

result, this literature travels well."[35] This also fuels the ability of diasporic literature in the creation of the global image of South Asians, a theme which has repeatedly emerged in various parts of this thesis already.

The research reveals that a number of readers found fault with the depictions of South Asia, South Asian customs and culture, and South Asian people in the literature, but the general sentiment is one of support for this genre and even celebration of it and its authors. There were a few readers who noticed and commented upon the consistent casting of protagonists as victims, and protested against this trend. However, the numbers of these were relatively small, and most seem to welcome the trend, enjoy the approach, and accept this woman-as-victim notion. (One may even speculate that the easy and wide-spread acceptance of the concept of South Asian women as automatic victims on the part of South Asian women readers, indicates the authors are providing an accurate reflection of the mindset of South Asian women in general.)

The extent of this acceptance can be observed in the marketing of this literature. It is an acceptance either led by or reflected in the publishing world, which reinforces the concept that the victimhood of South Asian women characterises this genre. This is partially conveyed through the pictures and photos which are selected as representative of the genre and chosen as jacket covers for novels by South Asian women writers. This will be further explored in the following chapter which investigates how the literature is presented to the public by publishers, how books rather than texts, are circulated.

[35] Rosemary Marangoly George, The Politics of Home. Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth Century Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 172.

# CHAPTER FIVE: MATERIALITY OF TEXT

*"In art, the impression is the fact."*

*-Anon-*

## Signpost

Following on from Chapter Four which discussed reader responses to South Asian women's literature, Chapter Five investigates the manner in which this literature is marketed to its audience. So far, the literature has only been considered in terms of texts, the printed words on pages. Most studies of South Asian women's writings also focus solely on texts. However, in this chapter, the themes in the texts will be considered in relation to the material, corporeal books.

Once placed on the market, books rely on a large number of factors to sell them – ranging from reviews, publicity, author's reputation, commercial promotions, price, literary trends, time and place of release, and so forth. Book jackets are also specifically designed to advertise books, suggest their genres and types of reading, and thereby further appeal to potential readers. In order to study the books as well as the texts, this chapter will study the book jackets of some of the novels discussed in this thesis, taking into account how the jackets match the content of the novel, and attempting to gauge the types of responses these jackets are intended to invoke.

"In societies where there is a market for women's books, the market influences the reception of the book."[1] In this circuit of influence, the market is undoubtedly influenced by publishers' decisions, but the decisions of the publishers are also in turn at least partially based on the probable marketability of the books they eventually publish. Therefore, as much as the literature appears to be informing the culture, especially in the case of the diasporic South Asian communities in the West, the reception to the literature affects the literary and publishing trends of the genre. This chapter will

[1] Amal Amireh, and Lisa Suhair Majaj, eds., Going Global. The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers (New York: Garland, 2000) 37.

therefore begin with a brief overview of the workings of the publishing industry and the role of publishers in order to explore how books are chosen for publication.

This will be followed by a section which will discuss the specific genre of contemporary South Asian women's literature, and its current standing in the publishing world. This section will primarily be based on the feedback received from various publishing houses which publish contemporary South Asian women's fiction written in English. The next section turns to an examination of various jackets on the contemporary works of fiction about South Asia and South Asians, written both by South Asian women as well as by non-South Asian women. In the following section, four novels have been selected for detailed analysis of their jackets which depict South Asian women, in order to study the significance and implications of these chosen images.

## The Publishing Process

In the course of the research, it was discovered that despite the rapid growth of South Asian women's literature, these books are still not very widely available. More frequently than not, high street booksellers did not have stocks of most South Asian women's writings, and were occasionally unable to order in copies when requested to do so because they would very often find those books were out of print and no longer available. Moreover, South Asian women's writings published in South Asia were usually relatively difficult to obtain in UK, and had to either be obtained via the Internet, interlibrary loans, or simply purchased in South Asia. While books published in India by publishing houses such as Penguin India, Kali for Women, Rupa and Co., do occasionally make their way into the Western literary market, books by women writers published within Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are far less readily available, and still relatively difficult to obtain.

Although obtaining the writings of some South Asian women writers can be difficult, it has been observed that a fairly significant number of publishing houses are making concerted efforts to publish the writings of Third World women writers and to promote this genre. Such publishers include Penguin, Harper Collins, Women's Press,

Aunt Lute, Kali for Women, TSAR Publications, amongst others. However, the active promotion of Third World women writers should not be exempted from criticism, both for the manner in which this promotion has been undertaken, and for the motivations of the publishing houses.

Publishers are instrumental and influential in the shaping and encouragement of the forming of a "canon" of Third World Literature.[2] This canon is designed to provide the Western readers with the position of the privileged spectator, viewing cultures portrayed as the other, and emphasized as being different, removed and exotic. The canon of literature selected by publishers is only partially based on what they perceive as representative of the genre; the commercial factor in this business cannot be overlooked. There is no doubt that publishable material is selected as such partially based on its marketability and likelihood of profit.

This shaping of the canon of Third World Literature by "design professionals" (literary intermediaries who determine the availability and physical appearance of the book and shape the textual manuscript) has been condemned as exploiting Third World discourse for the purposes of First World consumption, and of course, for profit.[3] It has also been contended that "although First World feminists may buy and read such books out of a sense of feminist solidarity, their readings are shaped by this interplay of market forces and discursive pressures."[4] It is said that these texts are "commodified", because " literary decisions come together with marketing strategies and assessments of audience appeal (ranging from interest in the "exotic" to feminist solidarity) to foreground certain texts and repackage or silence others."[5]

It is thus very clear that the decisions to publish or not to publish, to run reprints or not to run reprints, are crucial in the process of determining what is eventually read and what is not, as to which books remain available and which fade into obscurity.

[2] I do not, however, wish to imply that all publishers collude to produce any single canon – indeed, it should be kept in mind that there are often battles between editors, publicity departments, sales departments and etc. However, although there is no collusion amongst the publishing houses to produce 'canons' of literature, publishers make no notable efforts to disrupt the formation of 'canons', possibly because it is a more marketable form of literature.

[3] Amireh 5.

[4] Amireh 6.

These decisions lie in the hands of the publishing houses which wield immense power and influence over the literary market and consequently, over the literary world, holding as they do, the key to the availability of the reading material and access to the reading public.

There is no doubt that publishing is a commercial as well as an intellectual undertaking. Apart from deciding what it will publish, publishing houses are responsible for advances to be paid to authors, book reviews, print formats, jacket designs, print-reruns, and advertising and publicity expenditure. Diana Athill, who had been the editor in the London publishing company Andre Deutsch Ltd., described the publishing firm as "a complicated business which has to buy, sell and manufacture or cause to be manufactured. What it buys and sells is products of people's imaginations, the materials for making books, and a variety of legal rights."[6]

Manuscripts are generally brought to publishers via agents because publishers have found it time-consuming and relatively unrewarding sieving through the so-called 'slushpile'. Most major publishers would not accept unsolicited manuscripts for works of fiction, and the agents therefore act as filters. The rejection rate of manuscripts is generally estimated to be very high (estimates ranging from 75% - 98%, although no precise statistics have been available).[7]

The costs involved in publishing a book are easy enough to estimate, but the income derived from the sales of the book is much harder to accurately predict. The tastes of the public are shifting and considered fickle, and unless the books are specialised ones, with a specific and predictable market (such as school text books, for instance, or academic publishing), the potential market is a matter of informed guesswork based on past experience. Based on an estimate of the potential market, the publisher then takes decisions on whether or not to publish a given book, whether to publish it in hardcover or paperback (which would also depend on where it is to be distributed), what jacket design would attract most sales, what format to print it in, how

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[5] Amireh 4.
[6] Diana Athill, Stet. A Memoir (London: Granta, 2000) 6.
[7] These are estimates provided by various members of the publishing industry based on personal experience of publishing rather than statistically derived.

many copies to print, what retail price to set, how to obtain suitable and sufficient review coverage, and so forth.

A high percentage of manuscripts will not recover the total costs of production, but the profit from successful books will carry the losses. Successful books are defined as those which generate income from sales which are in excess of the costs of advances paid, publishing costs, and publicity expenditure. For commercial reasons, publishers may accept a large number of manuscripts because it is very difficult to predict which will be profitable and which will not. In her memoirs, Diana Athill, gave it as her opinion that a best seller does not necessarily depend on good writing. According to her, some best selling books are written “astonishingly badly”. “The quality of the writing – even the quality of the thinking is irrelevant. It is matter of whether or not a nerve is hit in the wider reading public as opposed to the serious one which is composed of people who are interested in writing as an art.”[8]

However, not all books are published for commercial profits – there may be some which publishers will publish even knowing there will not be much financial compensation, but because they are contributions to literature and could enhance the prestige of the publishing house. There are publishers who would take on new authors with potentially unprofitable manuscripts, in the hope that nurturing a promising author will produce profitable manuscripts in the future. These are risky ventures, but on the other hand, few authors write debut novels which immediately become best sellers. Equally, there are publishers which would commission certain books from authors because they anticipate these would be in demand and therefore profitable.

Although there are hundreds of publishers, it is unlikely that any two would have exactly the same criteria for accepting a manuscript. All publishing firms specialise to some extent and would be unlikely to accept manuscripts which do not fall into the type of books which are associated with their imprints. Publishers’ decisions are also based on other factors such as an estimate of prospective sales, the tradition and image of the firm, and the size of the firm (as larger publishing houses could perhaps afford more experimental books). Publishers also follow trends in the publishing world, and

although there is much competition and rivalry between publishers for a bigger share of the market, there is also some degree of 'copying', especially when it is clear that one genre or another is rapidly gaining in popularity.

As far as works of fiction are concerned (which is the segment of the market South Asian women's novels and short story collections fall into), the reading public is perceived to have conservative tastes, and readers are inclined to choose and stick to buying books by authors they are familiar with, or of whom they have heard.[9] In the case of Chitra Divakaruni's Sister of My Heart for example, (published in hardcover by Doubleday, London in 1999) the back cover did not carry any reviews of the novel itself, instead, it carried reviews of The Mistress of Spices, an earlier novel of Divakaruni's. Publishing houses show a preference for publishing 'known' authors and thereby seek safety in the established popularity of the author, but it also indicates that readers may be more likely to purchase other books by authors whose books they have already read.

This reader-loyalty (which appears similar to brand-loyalty) does not make it any easier to introduce a new author onto the literary scene. Because of the conservatism of the readers, both publishers and booksellers are also inclined to be fairly conservative in their production and promotion of books. Jeremy Lewis, a director of Chatto & Windus for a decade, sums up literary publishing as always having been "a risky, marginal trade, more dependent on the whims of luck and fashion than on the prediction of market researchers, and finely dependent on a finely judged balancing act between the demands of literature and commerce."[10]

The advertising of each book is a tricky matter because unlike most other industries, each book is perceived to be almost a new commodity. Athill describes the publishing firms as selling "products of people's imaginations", and explains that "what it [the publishing firm] manufactures is never the same from one item to the next."[11] Reviews are therefore of vital importance, as are book tours which authors take to

[8] Athill 223-224.
[9] This information was provided by an ex-employee of Harper Collins in a phone interview.
[10] Jeremy Lewis, Kindred Spirits. Adrift in Literary London (London: Harper Collins, 1995) 183.
[11] Athill 6.

promote newly published books. Back covers of paperback novels by South Asian women writers generally carry a synopsis of the plot rather than reviews. (It is apparently much more difficult to get reviews for paperbacks than for hard covers.) Some back covers include quotes from the book, information on literary prizes or awards won by the author or by the book, and even information on shortlistings for literary awards. Hardcover novels usually feature reviews on the back cover, either by newspapers or by other authors. Mediums such as the TV, the radio, cinemas and the Internet all help to boost book sales. However, because each book is almost a new product, it is relatively difficult to conduct market surveys which could estimate how well it would be likely to sell.

Geographically speaking, a book's potential market consists of anywhere the language in which it is published is read. However, in practical terms, the major distributor of books are bookstores. Bookstores which are well stocked are mostly found in cities and in university towns, but with the growth of e-commerce, the Internet has rapidly become a supplier of books. This medium of distribution has been growing in significance for authors in South Asia, who for decades have demonstrated a preference for publishing abroad. This preference is usually based on such factors as better advances, more congenial publishers, better protection of their authorial rights, better support from editors, a more global market, and the potential for higher financial rewards.

One of the pioneers of South Asian writing, V.S. Naipaul, laments the accession to power of the publishing houses, "My grief is that the publishing world, the book writing world is an extraordinary shoddy, dirty, dingy world. There are probably only three of four publishers in London that one has any regard for. The others have the morality and the culture of barrow boys – street sellers, people pushing rotten apples."[12] Naipaul's vitriolic attack indicates the depth of his concern over the profit-oriented outlook of the world of publishing. The following section will therefore examine, through dialogue with some publishing houses, the motives and intentions of the publishers of South Asian women's literature.

[12] Mel Gussow , "It is Out of This Violence I Have Always Written," interview, V.S. Naipaul, 16 Sept 1984, NY Times, Online, 15 Apr 2002.

**Publishers on South Asian Women's Fiction**

Fiction by South Asian women writers is primarily published by a handful of publishing houses and their divisions; Harper Collins, Penguin, and Random House are amongst the largest publishers of this genre. Other publishing houses which have published South Asian women's fiction written in English include Aunt Lute, Faber & Faber, Kali for Women, Picador, Rutgers UP, Virago, and Women's Press. I have conducted online, telephone and postal interviews with representatives from most of the above-mentioned publishing houses, beginning with a set of prepared questions and then entering into dialogue based on the responses to these questions. This section is based on information derived from these interviews.

Some of the publishing houses listed above have only published a very small number of books by South Asian women writers. Aunt Lute, for example, has only published one anthology, while Kali for Women has only published several books by South Asian women which are written in English. (Kali for Women is a publisher which mainly publishes works in translation.) Rutgers UP has published a single novel written in English by a South Asian woman writer (as well as several academic works also by South Asian writers) because it fitted in with their strong lists in women's and gender studies, and in their Asian studies.[13] Such publishers publish the fiction of South Asian women writers as the exception rather than the rule.

According to some publishing houses such as Chatto & Windus and Transworld, although they have published a number of South Asian women's writers, they have not done so out of any specific agenda to promote these writers. These publishing houses state that it is their policy to publish books of good quality, based on the books' literary and commercial merits, irrespective of the gender or ethnicity of their authors. They explain that this is because they do not have a fixed selection policy. In direct contrast to such publishing houses, The Women's Press is an example of a publishing house with very specific criteria. The Women's Press only publishes the works of Canadian citizens. Furthermore, they look for specific themes in women's fiction – for example, the roles of women, women's relationships, issues pertaining to deconstructing

patriarchy – and "do not see it as [their] mandate" to publish books which do not directly tackle these themes.[14]

Some other publishers are interested in promoting both male and female writers from India, and Picador and Penguin have, to this end, set up the Picador India and Penguin India lists. The authors on the lists may be published in UK, but they are also being promoted in India by these publishers because they consider there is an expanding readership in India for contemporary Indian writers writing in English.

Most of the publishing houses admitted, when asked, that little market research is done as to what segment of the market makes up the buyers and readers of South Asian women's writings. Little seems to be known about the gender or ethnicity components of the audience for this genre. Apparently, publishing houses do not target any specific audience in their sales although most readily agree that there has been a recent and global interest in and a growing demand for such writings. (It seems clear that South Asian women's writings is definitely *not* exclusively targeted at a South Asian audience.)

Publishers agree that the recent success of such authors as Anita Desai, Githa Hariharan, Manju Kapur, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Arundhati Roy, who have won major literary awards, has made South Asian women writers more visible in the West. It may also have had the effect of inspiring other South Asian women writers in their careers. It has also been noted that there is a growing interest on the part of the reading public of Europe and North America for stories from South and East Asia. Nevertheless, even with the clear trend of a growing demand in the market for South Asian women's writings, publishing houses claim that the acceptance/rejection rate of manuscripts by South Asian women writers are the same as those of any other writers. A representative of Harper Collins did however hazard an estimate that the majority of manuscripts are submitted from agents based in Britain, Canada and USA, with only a minority coming directly from South Asia. Moreover, of those manuscripts submitted directly from South Asia, he estimated that 90% come from India, confirming the notable dominance of

[13] Rutgers UP now has a policy in place whereby they no longer publish works of fiction.
[14] Ruth Bradley-St-Cyr, Managing Editor of Women's Press.

Indian writers on the South Asian literary scene as is reflected on bookshelves of booksellers.

When asked about the future of South Asian women's fiction in terms of sales, responses differed. It was the opinion of the Publishing Director of Harper Collins that "to judge from here, halfway through 2001, saturation point is nowhere in sight for South Asian women writers, but it will, assuredly come!"[15] The representative of Women's Press had quite a different opinion, ".....agents have been seeking them [Indian women writers] out. In my opinion however, I don't think this will last too long, because not too many Indian women writers have been v. [sic] successful, commercially, in the recent past."[16] It remains to be seen which of these two predictions will most closely reflect the reality of South Asian women's literature in English.

In discussion with the publishers, it became apparent that for the majority of publishing houses, their interests lie with English written books, not texts in translation. It has been contended that in fact

> "Publishing conglomerates chasing the next 'big' Indian novel will select only English-language works. The phrase 'translated from' has started to acquire negative connotations: difficult, obsolete, non-global. Nor is it sufficient simply to be a gifted Indian English-language writer with a notable body of work: only a first novel will attract serious media attention and pre-publication deals from publishers searching for the next *God of Small Things*."[17]

The large number of debut novelists appearing on the South Asian literary scene (as will be discussed in the final chapter) certainly lends weight to this accusation that publishers appear to be seeking best sellers from South Asian women débutante writers.

Publishers are responsible not only for selecting potential best sellers, but for promoting them in a way which will lead to best seller status. One major factor in the marketing of the books is the publicity the book and author receive, and a vital part of this package is the jacket of the book. The jackets have to be attractively eye-catching

[15] Philip Gwyn Jones, Publishing Director of Harper Collins.
[16] Ritu Menon, a founder of Kali for Women.
[17] "India in the Mirror of World Fiction." New Left Review, 13 (2000): 75-88.

and are usually designed to be signifiers. The following section takes a close look at the jackets of books by contemporary South Asian women writers.

## Judging a Book by its Cover

It is an old adage that a book should not be judged by its cover, but in fact, the decision to buy a book is at least partially based on its immediate appearance, that is to say, its jacket design. Recommendations, reviews, and previous experience with the genre or the author may all be influencing factors in a reader's decision regarding purchase, but the jacket is amongst the most immediate of a book's attractive characteristics.

South Asian women's novels published in Canada and USA are likely to first appear in hardcover versions whereas in South Asia, they appear to be predominantly published in paperback format. In the UK, paperback originals also appear to prevail, and it is the case that paperbacks simply sell better in the UK, whereas in USA for example, hardcover books of fiction sell fairly well. Paperbacks are much cheaper to produce, and this is mainly due to the large numbers in which they are printed, intended for the mass market. The rights for many paperbacks are still bought from hardcover publishers, and it is usually the case that if a books is not published as a paperback original, there will be a time gap (of at least six months) between the release of the hardcover version and the paperback version of the book. (It is believed that paperbacks tend to damage hardcover sales.[18])

However, whether in hardcover or in paperback, the jackets of books are intended to attract attention to the books and to persuade the potential reader to buy them. Because books are commodities, commodity sales and marketing techniques are employed by publishing houses and booksellers. Bookshop displays are arranged to be eye-catching, and the importance of jacket designs should not be underrated. A jacket or cover may or may not succeed in persuading a potential buyer to purchase a given book, but it is the first, and in some cases, the only way in which the reader's attention is attracted and the book advertised.

Book jackets not only carry images and/or photos, but also the title, the name of the author, and occasionally a small quotation either in praise of the book, or a quotation from the book. All these items are designed to make the book appear interesting and desirable and to persuade a potential buyer to pick up that particular book and read the review or synopsis on the back, or on the inside front cover.

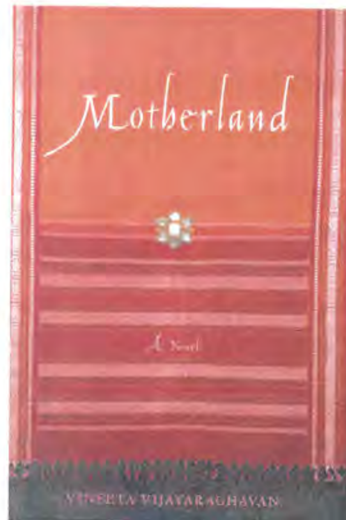
Of the twenty-seven novels by South Asian women writers discussed in the first four chapters, it is observed that fifteen (or fifty six percent) of these novels have front covers which depict the face (and sometimes also the figure) of a South Asian woman, or of South Asian women. These front covers with depictions of South Asian women also effectively label these novels as 'women's books'. The high percentage of this front cover theme suggests that publishers may be deliberately utilising cultural stereotypes, or at least tapping into cultural codes, to advertise and market their books. This cultural code is deliberately kept as simple and direct as possible, so as to be comprehensible to as wide an audience as possible.

A book's cover, or jacket, summarily glanced at, initially imparts little more than a fleeting impression. However, according to Bourdieu, "any art perception involves a conscious or unconscious deciphering operation." [19] Bourdieu goes on to discuss how a cultural code would enable immediate and adequate comprehension, which is part of the act of deciphering. Publishers would therefore commission designs of book jackets which contain metonymic signs, images of items or elements commonly associated with South Asia, such as 'bindis' on foreheads, certain styles of jewellery, veils worn by women, and etc. These images would all tap into a cultural code and would lead to instant comprehension of the South Asian themes or flavours in the novel. Various publishing houses have tried to market their South Asian women's novels by designing the jackets or covers of their books to include pictures of saris. Examples of contemporary novels with jackets completely dominated by pictures of saris include Love, Stars and All That (by Kirin Narayan) published by Washington Square Press

[18] Michael Legat, An Author's Guide to Publishing (London: Robert Hale, 1982) 33-34.
[19] Pierre Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production. Essays on Art and Literature (Oxford: Polity, 1993) 215.

Publication of Pocket Books (New York)[20] in 1994 (Figure 5.1a), Motherland (by Vineeta Vijayaraghavan) published by Soho Press (New York) in 2001 (Figure 5.1b), and The Hero's Walk (by Amrita Rau Badami) published by Bloomsbury (London) also in 2001 (Figure 5.1c).

(Figure 5.1a)




(Figure 5.1b)

(Figure 5.1c)

(Figures 5.1a, 5.1b, 5.1c : Jackets of books by contemporary South Asian women which feature saris.)

Both Motherland and The Hero's Walk are novels which focus not only on South Asian women, but also on South Asian families. In comparison, Love, Stars and All That is a novel which primarily details the protagonist in search of a husband and of romance. The personal beauty of the protagonist in Love, Stars and All That is heavily stressed in the novel, whereas this is not the case in Motherland and The Hero's Walk. The different emphasis in the novels are reflected to some degree in the manner of the portrayals of saris on their jackets.

Love, Stars and All That is a paperback novel with a cover striped in thin bands of gold on which the words of the title are printed. Behind those bands of gold, in the background of the cover, is a shiny yellow-orange sari with a thick red and gold border. The draping or folds of the material suggests that this photograph of a sari is a close-up of the trunk of a woman's body wrapped in the sari. Motherland, a novel in hardcover, carries on its jacket a photograph of an orange-red sari with stripes of red, rose and pink

[20] A division of Simon and Schuster Inc.

designs forming the border. It is a far less sensual photo in comparison with that on the cover of Narayan's novel. The colours of this sari are less glittery, the material of the sari apparently less slippery, and the material is simply laid out flat and not wrapped on a person. The bottom half of the jacket of the hardcover novel by Badami, The Hero's Walk is also of an orange-red sari with a slim border of black and gold. The pattern on the sari is subtle but intricate, and once again, it is a far less elaborate photo of a sari than that on Love, Stars and All That.

Although the jacket or cover photos of these three novels are of various types of saris, and in various arrangements, they are unmistakably photos of saris. Perhaps the conscious and unconscious 'deciphering' of these cultural codes would suggest to a reader that just as the sari is a woman's costume, and a costume primarily worn by South Asian women, so too is the focus of those novels on women's matters, and matters pertaining to women of South Asian descent or culture. Furthermore, the richly-coloured, elegant saris depicted in these photos carry connotations of femininity, fragility, and complexity. It is perhaps hoped by publishers who commissioned the design of the jackets of these novels that the saris would appeal to South Asian readers who would identify with the sari or be drawn by its familiarity, and to non-South Asian readers by the exoticism and Orientalism suggested by saris.

The jackets of the South Asian women's novels which do not carry representations of South Asia or images of cultural artefacts which utilise the cultural codes, generally depict an illustration either of the title of the novel or an illustration of something central in the plot of the novel. The following examples are taken from the covers of a couple of the novels already discussed in the thesis. Sunlight on a Broken Column (by Attia Hosain) published by Penguin (India) in 1988, is a paperback novel with a cover depicting a brick arch with a shaft of sunlight shining diagonally across the bricks. (Partition and its social implications is the backdrop against which Hosain's characters are portrayed.) This brick arch is a view of the Golconda fort in Hyderabad. The Mango Coloured Fish (by Kavery Nambisan) also published by Penguin (India) in 1998, depicts a golden-yellow (and perhaps mango coloured) fish swimming amongst other smaller red fish, against a background of what appears to be corals. (The jacket is simply an illustration of the title in this instance.)

None of the images or photos on these jackets suggest themes peculiar only to South Asia, or even women's issues. They are, however, novels written about the positionality of South Asian women in their families and societies. It appears that cultural coding (to borrow Bourdieu's terminology) is not a method employed to advertise these books. These are also novels written by *home* South Asian women writers. These book jackets (on Sunlight on a Broken Column and The Mango Coloured Fish) can be juxtaposed with the three novels which were discussed earlier in the section (Love, Stars and All That, Motherland, and The Hero's Walk) which all carried depictions of saris, which as has been noted, could be regarded a form of cultural coding. It is either a curious coincidence or else there is a definite motif in the designs of book jackets that those novels discussed here with jackets which are 'culturally coded', do happen to be those written by diasporic South Asian writers.

Having considered the jackets of books by both home and diasporic South Asian women writers, it is of interest to turn our attention also to jackets on books by non-South Asian women writers. As may be expected, books on South Asia or about South Asian women written by non-South Asian women are also marketed in a culturally coded fashion, even more blatantly so than those by diasporic South Asian women writers. It appears that the greater the distance of the author (either geographically or culturally or both) from the subject of their writings (which in this case is South Asia), the greater the need for jacket designs which focus attention and insist on the 'South-Asianess' of the book.

Elisabeth Bumiller who was a reporter for The Washington Post, spent three-and-a-half years travelling all over India and wrote a book entitled May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons, published in 1990 by Penguin (India). The cover photograph (Figure 5.2a) is of the sunlit face of an extremely attractive, young, smiling Indian woman.[21] She is festooned with intricate and elaborate gold jewellery on her forehead, in the parting of her hair, on her nose, and more gold jewellery stretching from her nose, across her cheek and into her hair. Her eyes are khol rimmed, and she has a round red bindi on her forehead, almost between her eyes. The material covering her head is of shiny material, as is the decoration around her neck. The ensemble suggests festivity and

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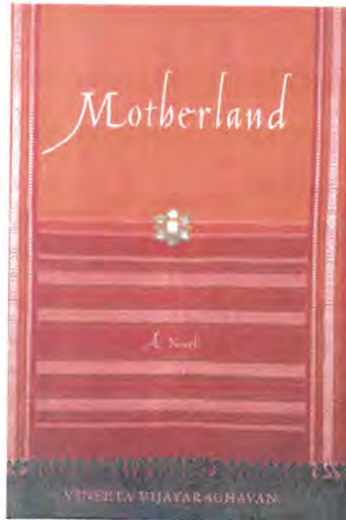
(Figure 5.1a)



(Figure 5.1b)

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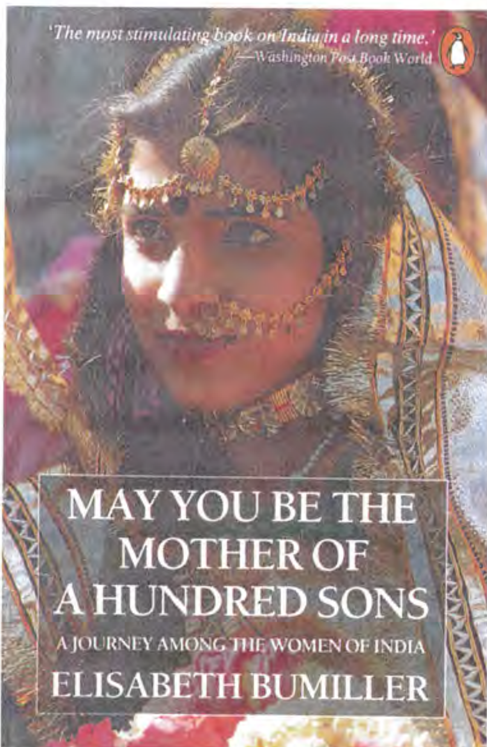
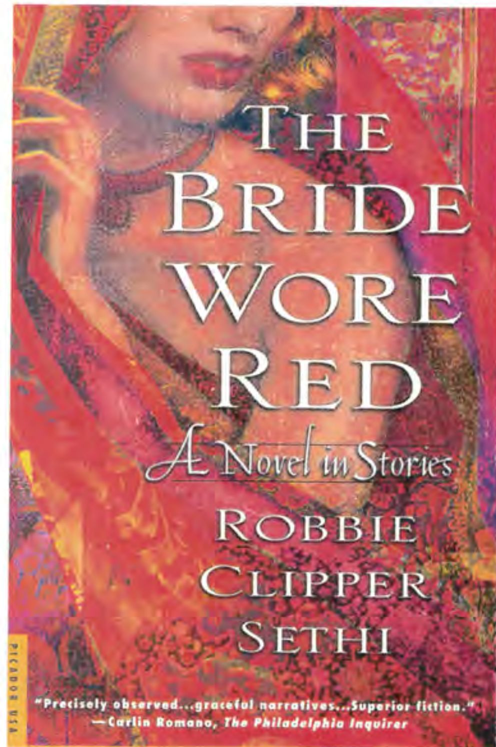
ceremony, even if not a wedding. The photograph appears almost as one which could have come from the National Geographic. It is clearly not the daily apparel of Indian women and the costume depicted hardly apparel in which daily chores could be performed. The photograph for the cover design seeks to emphasise elements which are exotic, elaborate, and intricate, perhaps intended to suggest that as much as the costume and accessories are beautiful but unfamiliar to the Western eye, so too is the culture. This type of exoticism "involves the creation of an other who is strange but – at least as important – beautiful."[22]




(Figure 5.2a)




(Figure 5.2b)

(Figures 5.2a, 5.2b: Jackets of books about South Asian women but which are written by non-South Asian women.)

The Bride Wore Red, a novel (in short stories) by Robbie Clipper Seth, an American woman writing about American women who marry Indian men and travel to India, was published by Picador (New York) in 1996. The cover of this novel (Figure 5.2b) blatantly exploits the exotic elements of South Asian culture. The woman in the picture is portrayed with a bare shoulder and arm, clearly not wearing any blouse or top,

[21] The cover photograph is by Ashok Majumdar; the cover design is by Amiya Bhattacharya.
[22] Catherine A. Lutz, and Jane L. Collins, eds., Reading National Geographic (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1993) 93.

with some cloth pulled over to cover her breasts. Her very red lips are slightly parted and there is just a glimmer of golden hair curling out from beneath the cloth covering her head. The foreground and background of the cover feature swirling red materials with intricate designs. The intended effect is clearly to highlight the glamorous and the sensual, rather than to contribute to any understanding of the culture.[23] This is an example of the exploitation of cultural coding which this genre is particularly susceptible to. The novel itself contains little which is sexually explicit, which suggests that the jacket of the novel merely intended to suggest, convey and reinforce the notion of Indian culture being different, exciting, sensual and alluring.

Non-culturally coded book covers are in minority, and most of the jackets of contemporary novels by South Asian women not only feature South Asian elements, but mostly images or photographs of South Asian women. There are, of course, instances where cultural coding is both acceptable and appropriate.

There are broadly two types of images of the South Asian woman which appear on book covers – a stylised representation of a South Asian woman, or a photograph or picture of one. Good examples of the former type can be found on the covers of Shashi Deshpande's novels (some of which have been discussed in Chapter Three). The covers of The Long Silence and The Dark Holds No Terrors, published by Penguin (India) in 1989 and 1990 respectively, both feature a drawing of a woman wearing a sari and a 'bindi' on the centre of her forehead. A Matter of Time, Deshpande's second last novel, published by The Feminist Press (New York) in 1999, carries a copy of an oil painting of three South Asian women as its jacket design.[24] It seems entirely appropriate for Deshpande's novels to carry such covers because Deshpande is a novelist primarily concerned with portraying and working out the problems which entangle the lives of middle-class women in India. The drawings on the covers are simple and representative, with no hint of flamboyance or sensuality, nor any attempt at conveying mystique or exoticism.

[23] The cover design and illustration of The Bride Wore Red is by Honi Werner.
[24] This oil painting is from a collection in the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, India.

This, however, is not the case for a fair number of other contemporary novels by South Asian women authors, particularly when published in Western countries. As Gillian Rose wrote, ".....this rendering [of the world in visual terms] even by photographs, is never innocent.....These images are never transparent windows on to the world. They interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways."[25] The images on the book covers of South Asian women's writings are also designed to interpret their world in very particular ways, and the following section will contain a discussion of this interpretation.

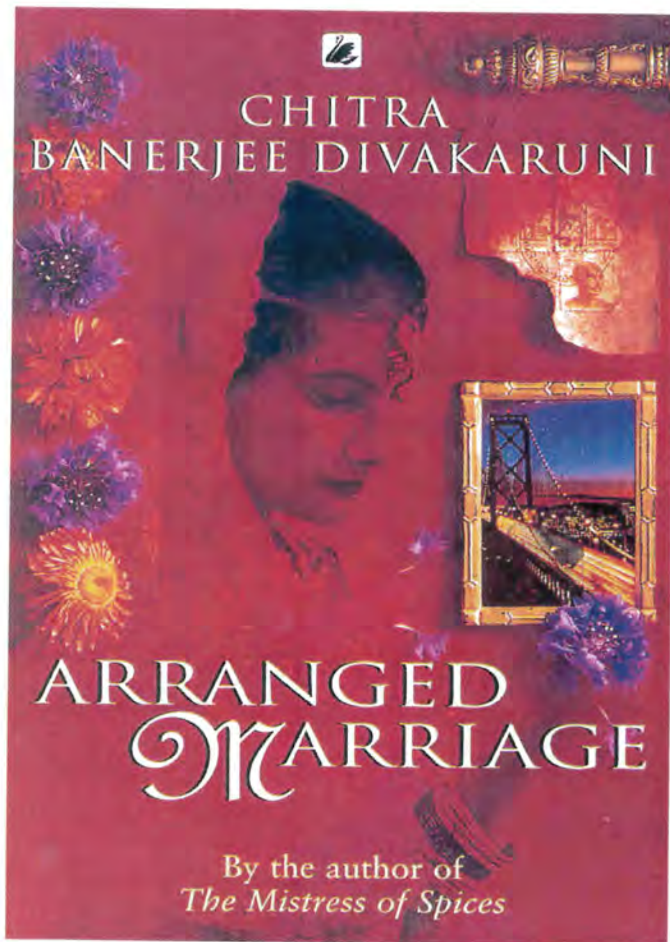
## The Absence of a Smile

The four novels chosen for discussion in this section were published by different publishing houses in Great Britain in different years, ranging from 1997-2000. Not only do these four novels have covers or jackets designed to depict South Asian women, their designs appear to have been selected with the purpose of highlighting only *certain* characteristics of South Asian womanhood which are calculated to hold special appeal to potential buyers. These four jackets will be discussed at length to analyse the ways in which the image of South Asian women has been commodified and marketed in such representations.

Arranged Marriage (Figure 5.3) by Chitra Divakaruni, was published by Black Swan (London) in 1997 in paperback. Emerging from the red background of the book cover is the portrait of an Indian woman.[26] She is drawn in profile, with sharp features, and appears quite young. The portrait is presented almost as though in red lighting. Not many details can be discerned, but it appears that the woman's lips are coloured in deep red, her eyelashes are long, and her eyebrows well shaped and well defined. The woman is drawn with downcast eyes and with her head slightly bowed. Her forehead is decorated with what may well be wedding jewellery. She is wearing a veil which partially covers her head, and which blends into the background. Little more can be seen of the woman apart from her face, except for some bangles on her wrist – the rest of the

[25] Gillian Rose, Visual Methodologies. An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials (London: Sage, 2001) 6.
[26] This portrait is drawn by Beverly Brown in 1996.

arm is faded back into the background red. Besides the profile of the Indian woman, the cover also features a framed photograph of the Golden Gate Bridge, a corner of an envelope with Indian stamps and a postmark, and flowers such as those commonly used in India to make garlands. These images are synecdochal signs, representing (respectively) immigration to the USA, links with India, and Indian floral decorations. The picture of the bridge, which is highlighted by its frame, suggests a possible bridging of two cultural worlds. The central image (that of the woman) and the name of the novel provide anchorage for all the other images scattered on this front cover.




(Figure 5.3: Book jacket of Arranged Marriage by Chitra Divakaruni.)

The title of the book suggests that the portrait of the Indian woman could be that of a bride. The veil and the downcast eyes suggest the timidity, modesty and perhaps bashfulness of the bride, qualities which are stereotypically expected of and associated with Indian brides. Divakaruni's book focuses on the position of Indian women as brides who have to emigrate to USA. The slightly bowed head suggests submissiveness

and docility, once again tapping into and reinforcing the stereotypes of Indian women and Indian wives. The bride's bowed head also suggests that this is a passive woman to whom things are happening; this is a woman who is being *sent* from India to USA, most likely as someone's wife. This probability is, of course, also reinforced by the title of the novel. (The titles of novels which appear on this front cover, Arranged Marriage and The Mistress of Spices, are likely to have been chosen to appeal to the Western palate as touching on issues excitingly different and remote, exotically Indian.)

The portrait is of a beautiful woman, possibly because the ordeals of a young and beautiful bride is calculated to hold more appeal to readers than that of a protagonist of average appearance. The few details which are clear in the portrait appear to have been chosen in order to emphasise the fragility and perhaps vulnerability of the Indian woman. It is a highly selective portrait which depicts only details which fit into stereotypes of Indian brides. The overall red colouring further romanticises the appeal of the cover design.

Manju Kapur's debut novel published in the following year, 1998, was published by Faber & Faber (Kent), and the paperback edition was released the year after, in 1999 (also published by Faber & Faber). The cover of Difficult Daughters (Figure 5.4) is dominated by a photograph in monochrome of the face of a young Indian woman. The photograph appears to have been taken with the woman facing the camera, but looking intently out of the photo, slightly to her left. She appears to be wearing a sari, with the border of the sari just slipping off her head. The woman has a round 'bindi' right in the centre of her forehead, her hair is neatly pulled back, and she does not seem to be wearing any jewellery, or at least none of which is visible either on her ears, nose, or around her neck. Her features are straight and symmetrical, her eyes are large, her complexion smooth, and her face oval shaped. The woman is unsmiling in the photograph and her expression is one of anxiety and poignancy.

The woman's gaze at a distant point apparently somewhere beyond the camera imparts a sense of mystery and remoteness to the woman. It also suggests that she may have chosen to distance herself from her community and stand apart as an individual.

(Figure 5.4: Book jacket of Difficult Daughters by Manju Kapur.)

The significant absence of jewellery may perhaps suggest to South Asian readers the possibility of this woman being a widow or bereft in some way. The sepia photograph adds to the effect of this being an old picture, and therefore suggests memories, old tales, perhaps untold or long buried secrets, perhaps even something to be discovered. The fact that this seems an old photograph also heightens the reader's curiosity as to whom this woman could have been. This in fact is the underlying theme of the novel – the daughter who searches for her mother's identity, and in her lifetime, the mother who had searched for her own identity. The search for a personal and autonomous identity is an oft-recurring theme of the genre.

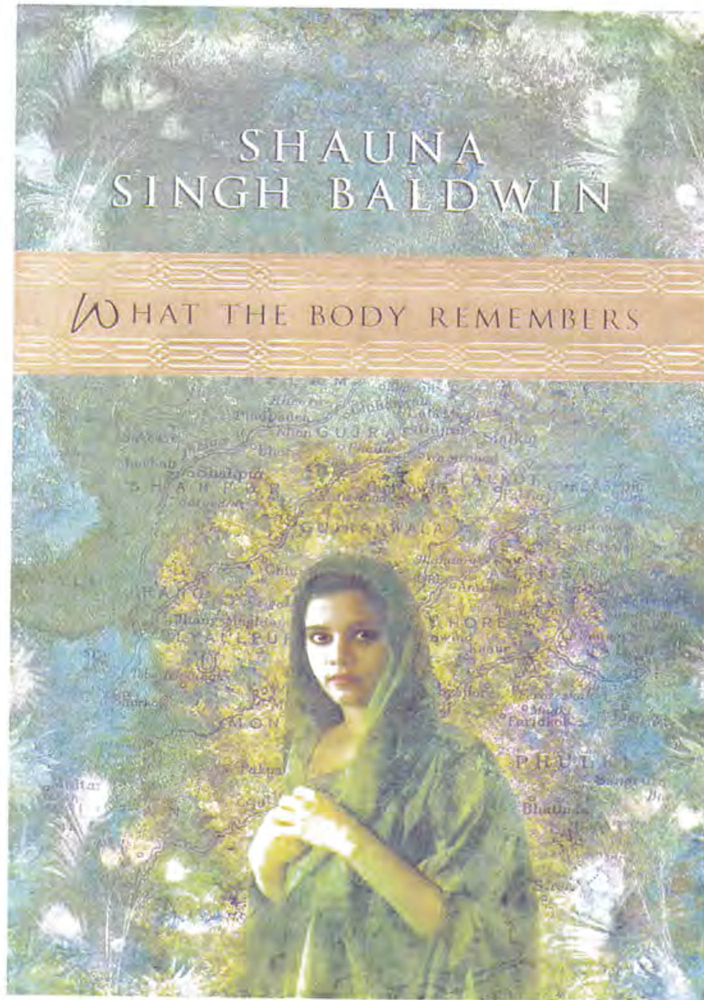
The overall effect of the photograph on this book cover is perhaps calculated to hold special appeal to readers who are seeking to read stories of victimhood and

hardships, women's secret tragedies, grief and sufferings, especially if this is the sort of life story expected of South Asian women. The photo is an emotionally appealing one, moving in its combination of feminine beauty and tragedy. The 'bindi' on the forehead and the sari slipping of the hair emphasises that it is not just any beauty and tragedy, but a South Asian flavoured beauty and tragedy. There is nothing else on the cover except this photo of the woman's face which focuses one's attention to this Indian woman, and the photo of the large and eloquent eyes gazing out of the attractive face, is one designed to engaged sustained eye contact and invoke emotional response; moreover, the sort of response which may not be so readily forthcoming if the photograph had featured a cheerful, ordinary South Asian woman with no hint of oppressions, secrets, or dramatic sufferings.

One's first impression of the jacket of Baldwin's first novel, What the Body Remembers (Figure 5.5), is a medley of greens. This novel, published in 1999, was originally published in hardback by Doubleday (London).[27] The title of the novel is printed in black across a textured band of gold about one third of the way down the front of the jacket. Above the band of gold is printed the name of the author in white capitals, which stands out against the background of greens. The two surnames of the author proclaim both her Sikh ancestry and the likelihood that she is a diasporic author.

The background of the upper third of the jacket appears to depict foliage and several peacock tail feathers. The background greens of the lower two thirds of the jacket however, depict a map of the state of Punjab. In front of this map and in the foreground of the jacket design, visible only from head to waist, is the picture of a young woman, dressed in a 'ghagra' of thin, filmy green material, with her head covered. The woman appears extremely fair of complexion, and is dark haired, dark eyed and red lipped. The figure of the woman is slightly turned towards her right, but the face and the eyes are turned towards the observer. The woman's hands are clasped to her bosom. (The back of the jacket carries on in the same theme of greens forming a foliage, but there is the addition of a white peacock displaying his tail feathers.)

[27] Doubleday is a division of Transworld; Transworld is a division of Random House.




(Figure 5.5: Book jacket of What the Body Remembers by Shauna Singh Baldwin.)

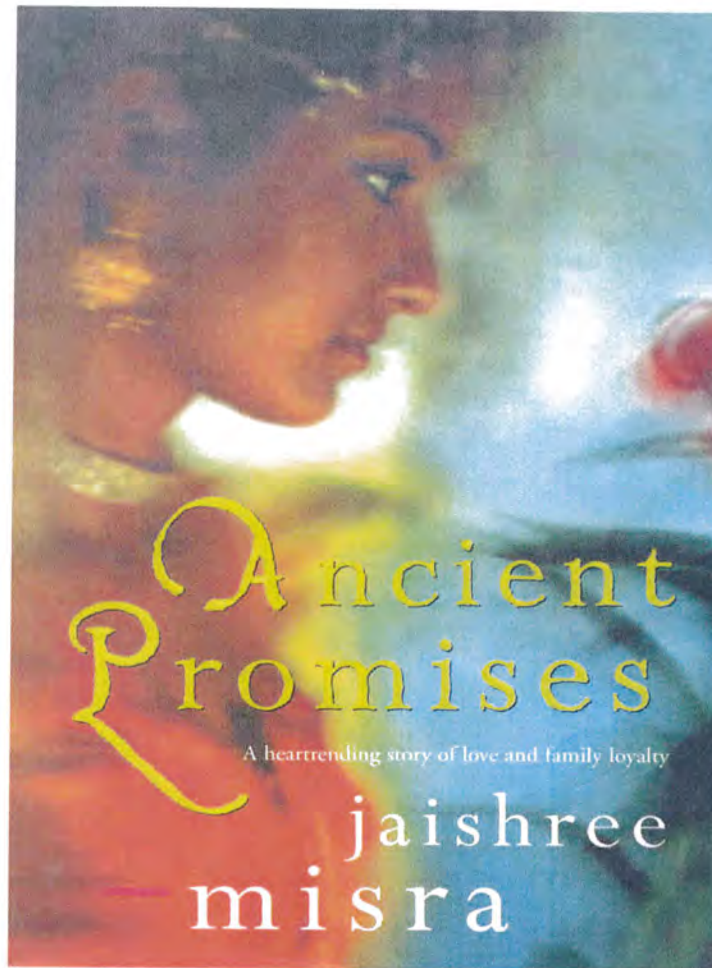
The map of Punjab immediately suggests elements of something political, geographical and perhaps historical in this novel. In a sense, the map behind the woman automatically places her, marks her to be from a land with all those exotic names of cities and places which are just discernible behind her. It suggests the figure of the woman may well be that of a Punjabi woman. Her figure being in the foreground of the jacket suggests that this is the personal story of a Punjabi woman amidst a background of political events which will be told. Because she is pictured in front of a map, it suggests that she is as much part of the territorial conflict as the land. The name of the novel also taps into the notion that as much as territorial conflict marks the land, the conflict also leaves its marks on the bodies of the women, and both land and women are caught up in strives as territories to be conquered and claimed. However, the women are also actively engaged in conflict as much as they are pawns within conflicts, and indeed, the protagonist of the novel finds herself fighting domestic battles for status and space in

her households even as her physical body and her social identity are regarded as possessions of men.

Once again, it is a young woman who is depicted, and a rather lovely young woman at that. Her complexion is perfect, her features even, and her eyes are large. The combination of the near-transparent green material of her 'ghagra' and the mingling of the green of the foliage with the green of the map lends a sense of the unreal, or at least of the mysterious and mystical, to the overall atmosphere created by the design of the jacket. The posture of hands clasped in front of her suggests fear, trepidation, hope and helplessness. All these elements appear to be highlighted with the intention of evoking responses of sympathy for and curiosity over the possible plight of an exotic young beauty.

The last of these four books to be considered is Jaishree Misra's Ancient Promises (Figure 5.6), published in paperback by Penguin (London) in 2000. The cover photograph is blurred, but it can be seen that there is a young South Asian woman in profile. The cover photo only shows the woman from forehead to bosom. The woman is wearing a thick shiny chain around her neck, large gold earrings, and other ornaments in her hair and on her forehead which do not appear clearly enough to be identified. Her eyes are rimmed with khol, and her head is bent slightly forward. In the dim lighting in the photograph, the woman appears to have a smooth, golden brown complexion. She is wearing clothing of orange-red material, but it is not possible to determine the nature of the clothing from the little which can be seen of it. The back cover of the novel has another partial photograph of the same young woman, this time seen from three quarters angle. She is clearly unsmiling in this shot, and it can be seen that the orange-red material is cut rather low in the front.

In the blurred photograph and the dim lighting, the first things which catch one's eye is the glitter of the heavy gold earrings and the thick necklace. Both these ornaments appear extremely elaborate and suggest opulence and wealth. The other gleam of light in the photograph is caught in the white of the eye of the young woman. That gleam draws one's attention to the face, which although lovely of feature, is unsmiling and




(Figure 5.6: Book jacket of Ancient Promises by Jaishree Misra.)

unwelcoming. This suggests that although possessing youth, wealth and beauty, the young woman on the cover of this novel is unhappy and discontented. The photograph on the back cover displays rather unexpectedly the very low front of the costume, which is slightly at odds with the heavy and traditional jewellery. The expanse of skin from collarbone downwards suggests sensuality, as does the dimness of the lighting and the blurred background of the photograph. The lighting is perhaps intended to suggest the light of oil lamps or firelight such as which would appear in a wedding ceremony. It is also the only one in these four photos in which the woman does not appear to have any cloth (either shawl, sari, or scarf) pulled over her head, which is a sign of womanly modesty in many parts of South Asia. The notable absence of this head-covering could perhaps suggest modernity, a break with tradition, emphasis on lack of modesty, or could be drawing attention to the woman's unconventionality.

In three of these four photos, the women are in traditional clothes. "Exotic dress can stand for a premodern attitude, western dress for a forward-looking Western orientation."[28] In these three novels, the protagonists struggle with the conventions of their societies which limit and restrict them as women, and these novels portray the relatively weak positions the protagonists occupy. In contrast, in Misra's novel, the protagonist, who on the front cover is portrayed without any head-covering and is wearing what appears to be a dress, is a protagonist who suffers and subsequently defies the conventions of her society, eventually divorcing her husband and electing to be a single mother.

All the pictures or photos of South Asian women on the front covers of these four novels have certain common characteristics: all the backgrounds of these photos are somehow blurred, hazy, vague of detail, and all serve to focus attention on the faces and forms of the women. Furthermore, the women are all young, notably attractive, and all of them unsmiling. "The smile, like the portrait, follows cultural conventions in defining and depicting the person.....The smile is a key way of achieving idealization of the other, permitting the projection of the idea of a happy life."[29] The absence of a smile in all these pictures on the cover designs is significant. None of the women are presented as contented or effervescent individuals. The pictures seem concentrate on portraying the women as victims, passive and suffering. The focus on such images of women on book jackets parallels the focus of the genre on the *plight* of South Asian women.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that images of South Asian women are being marketed in a specific manner in order to suggest the unhappiness, fear, and suffering of young and beautiful South Asian women, who are somehow helpless, submissive, fragile and vulnerable. Not only are these images deliberately exotic, they also emphasis exotic victimhood. Even the titles of the novels are dramatised and exoticised.

[28] Lutz 93.
[29] Lutz 96.

Nowhere on these covers is there any hint of protection for the women, or signs of the women's strengths and independence, nor even a group of women, which would have suggested sisterhood, solidarity and companionship. Instead, the costumes and the accessories, the postures and the expression on the faces, all firmly position these women as being passively tradition bound, inevitably subject to the conventions of their societies, and completely alone in their situation. The sheer number of book covers (of books by South Asian women writers) with these exact themes limits the understanding and contribute to the stereotyping of South Asian women. Such portrayals of South Asian women for the benefit of the western audience may have been chosen to invoke feelings of superiority, gratitude and relief at not being in such circumstances, pity and sympathy for the supposedly wretched plight of women in oppressive patriarchal societies, and in general, to draw attention to differences which can be regarded as exotic and exciting.

There is a curious lack of hybridity depicted on book jackets although the stories themselves may be entirely concerned with negotiating identities, living with hybridity and learning to reconcile differences between the East and West. It is the "South Asian-ness" of the books as well as the figure of the woman which are the elements most exclusively promoted on the book jackets.

As far as can be ascertained, none of these covers were designed by South Asians, which suggests that the portrayal of South Asian women on these book covers are from the perspective of Western designers, artists, and photographers rather than from the point of view of South Asians.[30] As these books are published in Great Britain, and presumably for a Western market, it also suggests that these are the elements of South Asia which are calculated to appeal to the Western public and to promote interest and consequently, sales. It is especially interesting to remember that book covers of novels by South Asian women which are published in India do not appear to have front covers dominated by such themes. Women are apparently less often highlighted as victims or as beautiful creatures or as tradition-bound in the covers of books published

[30] The cover design of Arranged Marriages was by Stuart Haygrarth and the picture by Beverly Brown, the photograph on the cover of Difficult Daughters was courtesy of Pentagram, the cover of What the Body Remembers is designed by Sandy Gardner, and the cover photograph on Ancient Promises is by Carol Fulton.

in South Asia. Home South Asian writers seem somewhat less inclined to highlight submissiveness or tragedy or victimhood in their writings.

It is interesting that critics have noted a parallel form of marketing in books written in English by Middle Eastern women. One example provided by Amireh and Majaj is that of the novel Nusanit (published by American King Penguin in 1987) by a Jordanian author, Fadia Faqir. Amireh and Majaj pointed out that although it is a highly political novel discussing Arab-Israeli and intra-Arab conflicts, its book cover features a veiled, faceless Arab woman, bearing no relationship to the novel. This, according to Amireh and Majaj, "taps into audience assumptions about Arab women."[31] Publishers or cover designers of South Asian women's literature also tap into audience assumptions, but in the case of this particular genre, some of the writings within those book covers feed and encourage those audience expectations of South Asian women.

It is difficult to ascertain to what extent audience expectations influence the selection of books for publication. However, there seems little doubt that in the publishing world, there exists a circuit of culture, whereby as much as publishers are 'gatekeepers of knowledge', the decisions taken by publishing houses are very much based on their estimate of what readers desire. It could be seen as a circular process whereby publishers are largely responsible for selecting the genre and shaping the form in which the genre is promoted and presented, and the readers then learn to associate certain forms with certain genres, subsequently influencing the market supply of literature with their specific literary demands.

In Lefevere's discussion of African literature written in English, he referred to "patronage by stipulation", a concept which exposes the fact that "patronage selects the themes that can be treated, emphasizes certain techniques and rejects others, according to the changing appreciation of elements in the poetics."[32] This concept could be applied equally to South Asian literature written in English which in large part also depends on the patronage of Western societies. It is unfortunate that both diasporic South Asians

[31] Amireh 5.

[32] Andre Lefevere, "The Historiography of African Literature Written in English." The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, ed Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffins, and Helen Tiffin. (London: Routledge, 1995) 467.

and non-South Asians, as we had seen in the study of reader responses (Chapter Four), are generally inclined to regard the literature as representative of South Asian culture. This chapter has sought to reveal and emphasise the selectivity of the publishing process, the market forces involved in publishing policies, and the promotion of a relatively monolithic culture, at the expense of a fair and balanced representation. "The view of Third World women's texts as providing unmediated glimpses into "Other" cultures is not only naïve, but also highly problematic."[33]

[33] Amireh 5.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

> ***"…..the will, the discipline and self-control to shape a sentence or follow out a hard train of thought. From the first rhythmical urge of the inward creative force towards the material, towards casting in shape and form, from that to the thought, the image, the word, the line, what a struggle, what Gethsemane."***
>
> *- Thomas Mann-*

### Signpost

Through the course of this thesis, South Asian women's literature has been discussed in terms of its postcolonial legacy, its stylistic characteristics, its positing of South Asian women, its search for identity, its reader response, and its promotional and marketing techniques. What, therefore, has primarily been analysed over the six preceding chapters, is the *culture* of contemporary literature in English by South Asian women writers. However, "cultures do not hold still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a particular self….."[1] Because cultures do not hold still for their portraits, it is deemed that the study of this literature would not be complete without taking a quick glance at the most recent of their writings, and thereby, updating as far as possible the continuing evolution of this literary culture.

This chapter will begin with a review of the themes discussed in the thesis. The next section will briefly discuss the fiction published by South Asian women writers in 2001 and 2002. Continuing and emerging trends will be observed in this contemporary literature, especially with regard to the geographical locations of authors and plots. In the following section, some of the themes in these new publications which resonate with the themes already discussed in the thesis will be highlighted. This chapter seeks both to reconsolidate some of the conclusions that have been arrived at in the course of the thesis, as well as to identify and understand the directions in which this literature is

[1] James Clifford, "Partial Truths". James Clifford and George E. Marcus eds. Writing Culture : The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986) 1-26.

heading, and the cause for its development in these specific directions. The final section of this chapter reconsiders the categorisation of the genre and further research which would add valuable insight in the study of South Asian women's writings.

## Review

From the Introduction chapter, it was clear that with the complexity of their post-colonial and patriarchal inheritance, South Asian women writers face any number of possible pitfalls and difficulties in writing prose fiction in English. Chapter One explored the many linguistic and literary experiments made by the South Asian women writers in terms of both language and form.

Having been doubly colonised, South Asian women writers definitely found themselves in the position of the Other, and many used this peripheral position to contextualise the positionality of South Asian women. Their experimental writing attempted (with varying degrees of success) to portray a South Asian world in the English Language without either distorting the language or compromising on authenticity of tone and content. The writing had to be widely accessible to a diversity of readers from vastly differing cultural backgrounds, which resulted in attempts to find universal themes, which in turn regretfully led to a limitation of themes in the genre. The theme of South Asian women as victims in particular, has almost come to characterise the genre.

In the course of discussing literary experimentation, the discussion of experimentation with symbolism and imagery led to a consideration of the place and role of mythology in the life and literature of South Asian women. The study of the use of mythology in the literature revealed an insidious victimisation and devaluation of South Asian women, consigning them to certain roles, relegating them to certain modes of behaviour, and romanticising women's subservience to men and to their communities.

These underlying expectations of South Asian communities which have been held for centuries and preserved in the form of myths and legends and fairytales, led to a

consideration of the *current* positionality of South Asian women. Chapter Two explored this current positionality, taking into account the regional, cultural, class, and religious diversity across South Asia. In exploring the positionality of South Asian women, this chapter also took into account the *physical* positionality of these women in terms of domestic space. This study involved an examination of the invisible boundaries which exist within joint family homes and the domestic battle for space and status. It also examined the vulnerability of women who felt they had no right in any home, and those women for whom home was a prison and a place of torment.

With the changes in economy and politics and the modernisation of South Asian countries, it is important to trace the changing positionality of South Asian women over the generations. To this end, the oeuvre of Shashi Deshpande was studied as this author's works span fully three decades. Her writing which focuses on the women's situation highlights issues of class differences, gender discriminations within and without the home, the changes in urban India leading to cultural changes for the people, and concludes with what Rajeswari Sunder Rajan terms the New Indian Woman. It was found however, that this New Indian Woman may not be that radical a change because in many cases, the figure of the New Indian Woman was tradition functioning under the guise of modernity.[2] Therefore, although women were taking advantage of the increasing opportunities afforded to them, they were using them to fulfil traditional requirements rather than to change societal norms which disadvantage women.[3] The writings of many South Asian women also reflect that although the system seems loaded against women, it is nevertheless women who carefully preserve and uphold the system, even to their own detriment. In fact, in a close study of two contemporary novels by Kapur and Baldwin, it was found that whether deciding to submit or to rebel against convention, South Asian women are portrayed as doomed to ineluctable victimisation and suffering.

The New Woman is discussed by both home and diasporic writers, but the two sets of writers approach the concepts of identity and positionality in different ways.

[2] This was explained in Chapter Two.

[3] An example of this is women who obtain higher degrees less for self-development or careers than to heighten their chances on the marriage market.

Chapter Three traced the pattern of difference between the writings of home and diasporic authors. It is found that because circumstances (due to geographical location and corresponding experiences) are so different for home and diasporic writers, their viewpoints on the position of South Asian women naturally also differ.

South Asian women are portrayed as perceiving their identity based on their notions of home, family and community. However, home and diasporic writers have very different approaches to the creation or construction of self-identity. For the diasporic South Asian women in particular, their search for identity involves a search for an understanding of where constitutes home for them. Diasporic South Asian women writers have portrayed the very real possibility of South Asian women immigrating to western countries getting the worst of both worlds. Second-generation South Asians have been portrayed as having different outlooks and concepts of home due to a certain adaptation to their adopted country and culture, and a resultant hybridity.

In this chapter, it was observed that the writings of diasporic South Asians have greater influence over the shaping of a global South Asian image and identity. In most cases, their writings are more widespread, more easily accessible, and better promoted than those of the home writers. One important factor contributing to the accessibility of diasporic South Asian women's literature (as opposed to literature by the home authors) is that diasporic writing is generally more inclined to a hybridity of cultural norms, explaining South Asian culture even as it portrays it.

Diasporic South Asian women's literature is a space in which self-identity is frequently discussed and negotiated. Consequently, it was found that the diasporic South Asians in particular read and respond to writings by South Asians as a way of informing themselves of their culture and social identity. Chapter Four investigated the identity of cyberspace communities as a prelude to investigating how a virtual South Asian culture is being created online. Once again, it was concluded that like the literary image of South Asians, it was the diasporic South Asians who seem to have the largest influence in the creation and circulation of this image.

An online mailing list provided data for reader responses to the contemporary novels of South Asian women writers, both home and diasporic ones. It was found that many diasporic women readers seem to have a sense of collective ownership of the genre which was highlighted when they felt betrayed by those writings which they deemed were exploitative either of the literature or culture for the sake of marketability. It was also found that there was less criticism of home authors than of diasporic authors, and it was surmised that this could be because diasporic readers feel a greater affinity with, and consequently perhaps a greater sense of collective ownership of diasporic South Asian Literature. It could also be partly because diasporic readers are less certain of their own knowledge or familiarity with their 'home culture', and therefore are readier to accept what they read by home authors as truth, and less willing to challenge the authority of home authors.

There has also been a lively discussion amongst readers as to the role of writers as representatives and emissaries. While there was a general consensus that writers ought to be free to create, there was also a general feeling that South Asian women writers somehow have a certain responsibility because they are regarded as automatic purveyors of the truths of their culture, as well as (involuntary) representatives of the culture to the wider world. There was also some protest by some readers over what was perceived to be an incessant portrayal of South Asian women as victims.

The protest over how writings pandered to the Western palate at the expense of the integrity of the representation led to a consideration of the other factors involved in the marketing of South Asian women's writings. Chapter Five examined the publication process and the motives of publishers of South Asian women's literature, and then homed in on book jackets of South Asian women's fiction to analyse the visual and symbolic images of this genre and culture which are currently being promoted.

As the images of book jackets were designed to function as signifiers, it was important to study the undertones and implications of these signifiers. Apart from the cultural coding used to tap into existing stereotypes, it was found that the signifiers were imparting the message that South Asian women are habitual victims, and that this was the most widespread image of South Asian women. On book jackets, South Asian

women were being exoticised as both submissive and tragic, accentuating their difference and distance from western women, emphasising an Orientalist suppression of women, and drawing ever more definitive lines between the East and West. It was found that other Third World women's writings were also being similarly marketed, indicating a general casting of Third World women in a certain mould.

Women as vulnerable members of their society has been a theme which has recurred in all shapes and forms in the writings of contemporary South Asian women. It is also a theme running somewhat contrary to the supposed emergence of the New Indian Woman who should be less vulnerable than ever before. Either authors are not keen on portrayed the New Woman as a protagonist, or else the New Woman is still as vulnerable as her sisters before her. In studying the positionality of South Asian women, the writings of both home and diasporic writers, in examining the role of mythology, the reception of readers, and the marketing of the literature, it has been seen that the equating of womanhood with victimhood has characterised the genre almost to the exclusion of other themes. It is perhaps a phase of development which this young literary subculture must undergo in negotiating its own identity. The discussion of the literature published in 2001 and 2002 in the following section reveals a possible gradual shift in the development of the genre, a development which is built upon the work of the past five decades of South Asian women in writing.

## Publications in 2001 & 2002

This section will briefly discuss some of the conclusions which may be drawn from the observation of this table in order to gauge the direction in which the literature is developing, to observe how these new authors have learnt from their predecessors, and to note which themes continue to be relevant and prominent in the literature.

Table 6.1 displays information about those works of fiction written by South Asian women writers which were published after 2000.

(Table 6.1: Publications of South Asian women's writings in 2001-2002.)

| Author | Genre | Author's country of origin | Current location of author | Primary location of plot | Publication details |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Talat Abbasi | Short stories | Pakistan | USA | Pakistan | Oxford, UK, 2001 |
| Brinda Charry | Novel | India | USA | India | Penguin, India, 2001 |
| Chitra Divakaruni | Short stories | India | USA | USA | Abacus, UK, 2001 |
| Chitra Divakaruni | Novel | India | USA | USA | Random, USA, 2001 |
| Suguna Iyer | Novel | India | India | India | Penguin, India, 2001 |
| Amulya Malladi | Novel | India | Denmark | India | Ballatine, USA, 2002 |
| Bharati Mukherjee | Novel | India | USA | India | Hyperion, USA, 2002 |
| Anita Nair | Novel | India | India | India | Penguin, India, 2001 |
| Meera Nair | Short stories | India | USA | India | Pantheon, USA, 2002 |
| Kavery Nambisan | Novel | India | India | India | Penguin, India, 2002 |
| Tahira Naqvi | Short stories | Pakistan | USA | USA | TSAR, Canada, 2001 |
| Preeti Singh | Novel | India | India | India & Egypt | Hodder & Stoughton, UK, 2002 |
| Indu Sunderesan | Novel | India | USA | India | Pocket Books, USA 2002 |
| Manjushree Thapa | Novel | Nepal | USA | Nepal | Penguin, India, 2001 |
| Thrity Umrigar | Short stories | India | USA | India | Picador, USA, 2001 |
| Vineeta Vijayaragha-van | Novel | India | USA | India | Soho Press, USA, 2001 |

Although all these writings listed in the table are works of fiction, there is a good mix of novels and short story collections. Of these sixteen publications in 2001 and 2002, there are ten debut authors represented here, which indicates that there are more and more newcomers joining the literary scene.[4] The momentum of South Asian women writing literature in English only seems to be accelerating, judging by the increasing numbers of first time authors. As was mentioned in Chapter Five, the Publishing Director of Harper Collins had said that a saturation point will eventually assuredly come, but at this juncture in time, it appears that the saturation point is still nowhere in sight.

The table includes information on the author's country of origin as well as the current residence of the authors because it was found that many of these authors have emigrated from South Asia to USA. The vast majority of the authors in the table are in fact currently residing in the USA. Many, therefore, are diasporic American Indians, and it is this group of writers who are the most prolific of the contemporary South Asian women writers, which in turn implies that it is *their* portrayals of South Asia and South Asian women which will be most widespread and dominant. As has been mentioned in previous chapters, it had been predominantly the diasporic women writers who were the creators and keepers of the global literary image of South Asian culture, and this trend looks set to continue.

Curiously, this list does not seem to contain any second-generation diasporic South Asian writers. Most of the writers on this list were born and raised in India. However, two Pakistani writers have joined the literary scene – Naqvi comes from Lahore and Abbasi from Karachi, and although both reside in USA, both write about the Pakistani community. (Naqvi writes about the diasporic Pakistani community in her latest publication.) For the first time, there is even a Nepali writer publishing a novel in English – Thapa, from Kathmandu. Nevertheless, it is the writers from India who still prevail in sheer numbers, and it is their writings which dominate the South Asian literary subculture. In The Perishable Empire, Meenakshi Mukherjee had expressed a

[4] The debut authors on the table are: Abbasi, Charry, Iyer, Malladi, M.Nair, Singh, Sunderesan, Thapa, Umrigar, Vijayaraghavan.

fear that the increasing prominence of literature in English would cause a less than representative view of India to emerge.

> "The category of writers called 'The Third World Cosmopolitans,' who are globally visible, who are taught in postcolonial classrooms the world over, and who are hailed in the review pages of Western journals as interpreters and authentic voices of the non-Western world hardly ever include a writer from India who does not write in English.....the precondition for belonging to this club is that s/he must write originally in English. Implicit here is an erasure of the diversity of India."[5]

Judging by the list of recent publications on this table however, it would appear that Mukherjee has more to fear than the erasure of India's diversity, or even the erasure of South Asia's diversity, because even the women writers from India writing in English are easily outnumbered by their diasporic American-Indian sisters.

It is a curious fact that although the majority of the authors on this list are currently located in USA, their stories are mostly written against a backdrop of locations *within* South Asia. Without exception, all the debut writers on this list have chosen a South Asian setting for their first works, perhaps due to their familiarity with both the culture and the geographical location of their countries (and cities) of origin. It is possible that having settled outside South Asia, they may choose to write of South Asia in order to inform other non-South Asians about their culture. It is remarkable however, that all ten debut writers have independently decided to start by writing of life for people in South Asia even though most of them are now living in USA. (Vijayaraghavan is a slight exception in that although her novel is situated in India, she writes of a diasporic protagonist on a summer visit.) There is usually a wealth of local detail in these books, suggesting that these authors are drawing on personal experiences and memories.

It is also worth noting that although all the debut novels and short stories on the list have located their plots and characters in South Asia, Divakaruni and Naqvi did not choose to do so in their writings. It is must be remembered that both Divakaruni and Naqvi are *not* debut writers, and both have previously written novels with South Asian settings. (It is Divakaruni's third collection of short stories and her third novel, and Naqvi's second collection of short stories.) Continuing their literary careers, these

authors have chosen to turn from writing of South Asians in South Asia, to writing of the diasporic experience for South Asians in USA. It remains to be seen whether these debut novelists will also be turning to write of life in USA for diasporic South Asians in their subsequent works. This literary trend of turning to situate South Asian characters in the West instead of in South Asia is explained by Anita Desai who herself has turned to depicting life in both India and USA after writing many books about life in India, "a screen has come between me and India. I can't simply ignore this experience abroad – it's too overwhelming, it demands to be dealt with, somehow grappled with….."[6]

The publication details in this table indicate that Penguin India is one of the publishing houses which is most actively publishing South Asian women writers writing literature in English. Penguin India is apparently keen to publish work by new novelists – three of the five novels by South Asian women writers published by Penguin India in 2001 are debut novels. Other publishing houses in USA - Random House, Picador, Soho Press - are also publishing houses which have previously published South Asian women's writings and are clearly ready to continue promoting this genre.

Another interesting general observation which can be drawn regarding the writings listed in the table is that all except Indu Sunderesan's novel, entitled The Twentieth Wife, are writings based on contemporary times. (The Twentieth Wife is a historical romance of the seventeenth century Mohgul Empress Nur Jahan's rise to power.) In previous years, South Asian women's literature did deal with other time periods apart from the present, particularly that of Partition as it caused immense social upheavals in the Indian subcontinent, but it appears that the most contemporary trend in South Asian women's fiction is to reflect and discuss the here and now.

Having made these preliminary observations about the South Asian women's literature published after 2000, the next section will go on to discuss how these new writings resonate with the styles and themes of their predecessors.

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[5] Meenakshi Mukherjee, The Perishable Empire. Essays on Indian Writing in English (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2000) 197.

[6] Anita Desai in an interview, eds., Sangeeta Ray, Engendering India. Women and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives. (Durham: Duke UP, 2000) 128.

## Resonances

"At its least presumptuous, the word 'intertextuality' merely indicates that one text refers to or is present in another."[7] There seems little doubt that there is a considerable amount of intertextuality in the literature of South Asian women writers. For example, there is hardly a contemporary author who has not read Rushdie's Midnight's Children, and many testify to having been moved and inspired by it. As has been previously explained, South Asian women writers frequently read, recommend and write reviews for one another's books, and are influenced by each other's writings.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the most recent of South Asian women's writings display stylistic traces of intertextuality. The first chapter had discussed the stylistic and linguistic experiments of South Asian women writers, and although relatively little progress has been made in the latter type of literary experimentation, in terms of style and structure, contemporary writings have been more adventurous. Divakaruni's latest novel, for instance, for all its faults and failings, does use a number of devices to make its points, from the voices of multiple protagonists (including the thoughts of a baby) to cancelled letters, and even homework essay assignments and feedback from lecturers. Divakaruni attempts to portray her characters through any written medium she can use, and although the result is somewhat over-sentimentalised and unsatisfactory, it still constitutes an interesting literary experiment.

Almost as if in response to the criticism in Chapter One of this thesis regarding the lack of use of a montage motif in short story collections, two of the short story collections published in 2001 have moved from unrelated short stories to loosely connected ones. Umrigar's Bombay Time tells of Parsi residents in an apartment block who know each other well, and who all come together in the final chapter, overtly to celebrate a wedding, but also to celebrate their survival, strength, and solidarity despite the tragedies in their lives.[8]

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[7] Heinrich F. Plett, eds., Intertextuality. Research in Text Theory (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991) 51.
[8] Reviewers have pointed out that this theme of Parsi residents in an apartment block has already been used by Rohinton Mistry in Tales from Firozsha Baag (1987). The theme of the residents in an apartment block appears to be gaining in popularity and is also used by Manil Suri in The Death of Vishnu (2002) writing of Indian residents in a Bombay apartment block.

The other short story collection which approximates a montage is Naqvi's second collection, Dying in a Strange Country, where the characters in the various tales are linked by some degree of kinship to one central character who appears in a number of the stories. This use of the montage form contributes significantly to the sense of community in the writings of South Asian women writers, and is instrumental in removing the focus of the works from the theme of the solitary tragic victim character which has been all too prevalent. The other form of stylistic experiment which is found in Anita Nair's novel also contains some degree of intertextuality. The protagonist of Ladies Coupe takes a train journey which is also a journey of self-discovery for her. On the train, her life story as well as the stories of five other women are shared. This is slightly reminiscent of Anjana Appachana's Listening Now (1998) with its six main women characters telling and retelling their life stories as well as the story of the main protagonist.

It appears that the exoticism of South Asia is on the decrease, and telling the tales of relatively ordinary people leading ordinary lives is a trend increasing in popularity. (It could, of course, be argued that the ordinary lives of ordinary people in what is perceived to be a remote and exotic setting could in itself be read as exotic. However, exoticism does not appear to be part of the authorial intent.) There has not been much use of mythology in the recent publications by South Asian women writers, nor much use of magical realism either, but the role of the storyteller has been reinforced in the widespread use of the literary device of the tale-within-a-tale.

In Bombay Time for example, characters tell their own life stories but their memories also contain the stories of their neighbours' lives, and so these stories overlap again and again. As each character takes a turn to become the storyteller, the sense of stories being told and retold becomes increasingly strong. In Dying in a Strange Country, the tale-within-a-tale is more linear with Naqvi the author telling of Zenab the protagonist telling of her mother telling her how to cook a certain dish. In these writings, aunts, mothers and grandmothers telling stories of the family to their younger relatives is a very regular feature. It is, of course, a regular feature in women's fiction in general and not peculiar to South Asian women writers. Story- telling by women, as was pointed out

in Chapter Three, has much to do with the subject seizing the initiative and taking on the power to control and shape rather than continuing to remain just a subject.

Although readers, as we have seen in Chapter Four, and particularly diasporic South Asian women readers, may regard South Asian women writers as representatives of the culture to some extent, it does not appear that any of the new literature attempts to play the role of the emissary. Authors are more inclined to be storytellers, telling stories in order to share memories and to record and commemorate a way of life they have witnessed and known before emigrating westwards. It could perhaps be due to the clearly increasing numbers of books written by South Asian women writers as well as to their increasing visibility on the bookshelves and literary scene, that the new literature stakes a minimal claim in the politics of representation and only purports to examine and describe their little corner of South Asia. In this sense, the homogenised portrayal of South Asia has begun to be slightly diluted as more and more books are published, revealing more and more facets of the diversity of the Indian subcontinent.

If the publications in 2001 and 2002 are any indicators of the literary pattern, then there appears to be a gradual departure from the heavy-handed exoticism of South Asian culture and characters. These works of fiction appear to contain more by way of poignancy than tragedy. This would be a most welcome development if it could be properly sustained as it has the potential to lift the genre out of the rut of equating womanhood with automatic victimhood. However, it would be prudent to reserve judgement until more of this new pattern can be observed as the trend of positing women as victims could all too easily re-emerge.

Victimhood, as has been discussed over four chapters of this thesis, has been a characteristic of the genre and one of its strongest marketing features. It has been seen that whether portraying women characters as submitting or rebelling, South Asian women writers have been inclined to present them as definite victims, suffering oppression, injustices, discrimination, and alienation at the hands of their own communities. There is little doubt that this sense of perpetual victimhood does find its roots in the history of the region, to some extent.

> "In India, the victim-victimizer syndrome is perpetuated by both structural and behavioural violence because of two factors – colonialism and the deep-rooted traditional past. While colonisation tried to reinforce itself by creating the myth of White superiority, the traditional outlook institutionalised exploitation and legitimised oppression and iniquities."[9]

However, the over-emphasis of the victimhood position in the literature has led to a rather black-and-white portrayal of circumstances, depicting a series of oppressed South Asian women characters. It has been at the expense of many other possible themes, and it is therefore heartening to observe that although many of the recent publications do discuss the difficulties of life for South Asian women, they seem less inclined to consign women to victimhood simply because they are women.

An author who insistently emphasises the theme of the victimhood of women is Divakaruni. One critic observes that "the reason Divakaruni is so successful is that she has distilled the diasporic experience into a formula, she has unlocked the secret of American TV soap and mixed it with recognisable desi flavours."[10] It would be deplorable if South Asian women writers were to feel encouraged to produce third rate writings simply because of some initial literary success or popularity. However, it is to be hoped that writers will remain committed to the pursuit of good literary output rather than distil experiences into formulas for mercenary reasons.

It had been observed (and discussed in Chapter Three) that issues of identity were very differently handled by home and diasporic authors. Home authors have tended to concentrate on the development of the self and the discovery of one's identity, whereas for the diasporic authors, identity has always necessarily been defined in relation (or in reaction) to an other identity, a mainstream identity. For diasporic authors, the difficulty has always been the balance between two sets of ethics and expectations, two sets of loyalties, and two different cultures. However, interestingly enough, some of the new publications by diasporic authors have been less inclined to depict a conflict of identities. The differences in the two cultures are still carefully observed and commented upon, but rather than portraying them as coming in head-on

[9] Usha Bande, Victim Consciousness in Indian-English Novel (Jalandhar, India: ABS, 1997) xvi.
[10] Shoma Chaudhury, "The Vine of Desire. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni." 14 Mar 2002. Tehelka. Online. 22 Mar 2002.

collisions, the new writings seem to set the Eastern and Western cultures side by side for juxtaposition rather than contrast.

In Divakaruni's 1997 collection of short stories, Arranged Marriage, there is an implicit but insistent sense of diasporic South Asian protagonists being torn by wanting to practise an Indian way of life but being submerged in the American ways. In Lahiri's 1999 prize winning collection, Interpreter of Maladies, there was the creation of a Mrs Sen, who used a strange, curved knife brought from India, missed fresh fish, was afraid of driving, missed her family, and generally suffered the (stereo)typical problems of South Asian immigrants to USA. In these writings, whether portraying an embrace or a fear of the Western culture on the part of South Asian immigrants, the two cultures have always been set up as being in opposition to each other. However, in Naqvi's 2001 Dying in a Strange Country, also a collection of stories about South Asian immigrants to USA, protagonists are depicted as learning to compromise and reconcile the differences in two cultures. It does not neglect to make clear that Pakistani immigrants experience America quite differently from those in the mainstream society, but Naqvi presents protagonists learning to accept kosher meat in place of halal meat in emergencies, to try to send their children for Koran classes as regularly as possible, to cook spaghetti in Pakistani as well as Italian sauces, in short, to balance a duality of identity.

In Naqvi's stories, there is a gentleness of negotiation in the daily lives of its protagonists rather than a despairing over the differences. Equally, traditional or conservative idea(l)s no longer seem wholly incompatible with modern ones. The protagonists who return to Pakistan for visits realise, even as they soak up home comforts, that they are subtly changed, having incorporated elements of Westernisation even as they remain proudly Pakistani. The search for identity, as portrayed by diasporic South Asian women writers, therefore seems to be maturing and mellowing into a negotiation, where it is not necessary to be exclusively one or the other, and is more viable to be a hybrid product of several cultures. In Elaine Showalter's terms, South Asian women writers have indeed arrived at the 3rd phase of development in their literary subculture; the phase of self-discovery, where the discoveries are increasingly open-ended and open to cultural negotiation.

As far as the marketing of books go, it is a surprising discovery that these latest publications contain little by way of the single image of a unhappy South Asian woman on the front cover. It may be a coincidence, but few of the book jackets of the books listed in the table even have the cultural coding of images such as saris and etc. It would be premature to conclude from this that the marketing of these books have changed drastically in theme, but as far as can be ascertained, few of the book jackets appear to be exploiting the exotica of South Asian women writers. Quite unlike the covers of novels like Arranged Marriage, Difficult Daughters, What the Body Remnembers, and Ancient Promises (which were studied in the previous chapter), the tragic female victim is not so strongly in evidence on the jackets of the 2001 and 2002 publications. The genre appears to be moving from angst over South Asian identity to a celebration of a healthy and encompassing hybridity. It remains to be seen to what extent this apparently happy and wholesome hybridity is a reflection of the changes over time or merely a backlash to the laments of the previous writers.

## Additional Thoughts

It has been contended (as the Introduction chapter had mentioned) that although geographically, South Asia is clearly delineated as consisting of seven countries, the classification is a "strained construct."[11] The reasoning behind this contention is that the term 'South Asia' implies a common identity, bringing together diverse peoples on the basis of a shared history and a cultural, political, and economic interdependency, when in reality, the union is a tenuous reality at the best of times.[12] It could therefore logically be further contended that Indian Literature in English is able to stand on its own, given not only the fact that Indian writers have been so dominant on the literary front, but also the fact that India claims three-quarters of the population as well as the land area of South Asia.

However, given the shared colonial legacy of South Asia, the common problems facing women writers who wish to write and publish in English, and the similarity of the

[11] Lavina Dhingra Shankar, and Rajini Srikanth, eds., A Part, Yet Apart. South Asians in Asian America (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998) 2.
[12] Ibid.

diasporic experiences amongst South Asians living in Western countries, it would be doing this body of literature a definite disservice to separate South Asian literature from or limit it to Indian literature. The dominance of Indian writers in South Asian writings is to be expected, but this in no way invalidates or detracts from the importance of hearing the voices of other South Asian writers. Moreover, as H.L. Moore warns,

> "the ruling or dominant group in society always present their culture both as natural and as the culture of the whole society.....the plurality of culture and the existence of alternative interpretations and values are not usually emphasised in the symbolic analysis of space, or indeed in the symbolic analysis of any form of cultural representation."[13]

Therefore, if the homogenisation of South Asia is to be avoided, if the 'plurality of culture' and cultural representation is to be retained and optimised, there needs to be an increase in the literary input from the writers of South Asia apart from those from India, rather than any distancing of Indian Literature from South Asian Literature.

An observation of the table of publications in 2001 and 2002 (in the first section) reveals that the dominance of the South Asian literature written in English by the Indian women writers continues. It is therefore a welcome development to have had a Nepali author publishing a novel in English for the first time, and it is to be hoped that this will inspire further efforts from other Nepali writers. It is also heartening to see more Pakistani women writers joining the ranks of South Asian women writers. There have, in the past, been several Sri Lankan women writers too, but of late, the literary output in English by Sri Lankans seem predominantly from the men writers.[14] There still remains a dearth of Bangladeshi women writers writing in English. In general however, the dominance of Indian writers over South Asian women's writings in English is both undeniable and unfortunately unrepresentative of South Asia. Although much is now being done to promote Indian writers writing in English, perhaps further efforts are required to promote the publications of women's writings in English in other parts of South Asia. It is curious that although there are fairly large diasporic communities of Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans in Western countries, there is still a relatively loud silence on the part of their women writers.

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[13] H.L. Moore, Space, Text and Gender: An Anthropological Study of the Marakwet of Kenya (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 74.

[14] Examples of these would include Romesh Gunasekera, Carl Muller, Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai.

South Asian women's literature is still relatively young as a literary subculture and it goes without saying that more research in this field is still required. Because South Asian women's writings still fall into the category of Third World Women's writings, it would be extremely useful to have comparative work done on contemporary literatures in English such as those written by women in the Middle East, East Asia, and South East Asia. It would also be useful to have more research on the literature depicting the diasporic experiences of other immigrants from other cultures. With regard to the literature by ethnic minorities, it may also be useful to juxtapose the literature of South Asian women writers with that of African American women writers, especially because the latter have had a slightly longer literary history and it would be interesting to observe if the pattern of literary development would have similarities. Another interesting thread to follow in the research would be to compare writings by South Asian women in translation, and observe the differences between the emphasis of the literature as well as in the handling of issues.

On a final note, in turn taking on the role of the storyteller, I wish to conclude this thesis with a short story. In a recent novel by a South Asian woman writer, there was a lively discussion between two characters on the colour of the pet fish on display.[15] One character was of the opinion that the fish was "green, with a tint of violet." The other suggested it was the sunlight reflecting off glass and water. The first character then drew the curtains and insisted they were still green. Her friend replied that she thought they were "blue, a copper-sulphate blue, with flecks of silver." The first continued to hold fast to her opinion and called them "a brilliant jealous green!" Listening to the two women's discussion was a little girl, who when asked, replied that the fish are "mango-coloured."

This image of the mango-coloured fish taps easily into existing cultural codes and practical experiences to improve the process of understanding and identification. Such a comparison captures the essence of the strategy employed by the best of the South Asian women writers to depict their world in a language not designed for such depiction. Their writings need to provide vivid, evocative descriptions which free rather than fetter the imagination, encouraging different facets of perception, allowing each

reader to bring the benefit of personal experiences to the understanding of this coded literature. In concluding this thesis with the story of the mango-coloured fish which was first related by another, I find myself joining in the circuit of the tale-within-a-tale. It is my personal hope that many more South Asian women writers will produce "mango-coloured" novels; novels making the South Asian culture accessible to readers from all other cultures, written in a manner which will steadfastly refuse to compromise on the diversity and intricacy of the culture.

[15] Kavery Nambisan, The Mango-Coloured Fish (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998)

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## APPENDIX ONE

### List of Contemporary South Asian Women's Literature in English

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