

**“Third World Woman,” Family, and
Marriage: South Asian Diasporic Fiction as
a Site for Consolidation of the American
Nation-state**

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[**Abstract:** Reviewing four popular works of fiction—Samina Ali’s *Madras on Rainy Days*, Chitra Bannerji Divakaruni’s *Arranged Marriage*, Tanuja Desai Hidier’s *Born Confused*, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*—I ask the following two questions: What are the meanings of South Asian-American identities in the racial and ethnic imaginary of the U.S.? And, how do these meanings travel through class, gender, sexual, and cultural hierarchies in the U.S. as well as transnationally? Probing the cultural experiences dispersed among fictional narratives and comparing them with situations formulated in my own ethnographic work, I find the identity formations in the fictions to be untenable. What is being written is a story of cultural displacement, which evades the specificity of gender and depends on stereotypic propositions about America and South Asia.]

Introduction: Shifting Teleologies

In this paper, I review four popular, award-winning literary fictions: Samina Ali’s *Madras on Rainy Days* (2004), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Arranged Marriage* (1995), Tanuja Desai Hidier’s *Born Confused* (2002), and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003). I use these fictions as sites of possible ruptures in lived experiences of “second-generation” South Asian-Americans.¹ Here, I ask the

following two questions within the popular literary context: What are the meanings of South Asian-American identities in the U.S. racial and ethnic imaginary? And, how do these meanings travel through class, gender, sexual, and cultural hierarchies in the United States and transnationally? As a second-generation Bangladeshi-American woman, I am certainly sympathetic to the South Asian diasporic novels as theories of real ruptures in the lived experiences of South Asian-American wo/men. However, as I sociologically probe the dispersion of cultural experiences through the literary fictional narratives and compare them across situations within a set of lives in my own ethnographic work that explores the lives of South Asian-Americans (see Badruddoja, 2013), the identity formations portrayed in popular fictions seem untenable.²

Too often, popular literary fictions spawned by South Asian diasporic authors for consumption by both the diaspora and “western” (often read as “white”) mainstream are laden with Orientalist dualities. The “authentic” South Asian-American experience simply represents South Asia within tropes of “western” hegemonic structures, where “South Asian” and “American” are essentialized identities, never broken down into further specificity (see Grewal, 1993). Here, I briefly draw on the words of one of the women involved in my fieldwork (Badruddoja, 2013). Rupa—a Bangladeshi-Muslim-American woman—shares with me:

I remember having this discussion about the word “Jihad” [with my boyfriend] and I said, “Jihad doesn’t mean holy war. The actual word means struggle.” He said, “No . . . it is like this really war-mongering society.” I said, “No, that is not all it is.” It was interesting because I didn’t identify as Muslim [at the time], but I knew that was part of me somehow because I really felt it was an attack on my people and me. (pp. 195-196)

Insightfully, Rupa, problematizes the monolithic and linear notions of “home” and identity, both of which are often linked to a singular spatial category. Rupa begins to show us—unlike the linear teleologies followed by the characters of Ali, Divakaruni, Hidier, and Lahiri—that the nature of “second-generation” identities points to an “oscillation between post-colonial and racialized American subjectivities” (Visweswaran, 1993, 309). What is being written into the diasporic narratives is a story of cultural displacement, which evades the specificity of gender and depends on stereotypical propositions about America and South Asia (see Mani, 1993, 34). Indeed, the cultural displacement model plays a key role in perpetuating the cultural authority of the “west” (see Brady, 2002).

Samina Ali’s *Madras on Rainy Days*

As a way to journey into the lives of South Asian-American wo/men, I historically and theoretically situate our experiences by sharing a dominant framework that serves to pathologize our identities and experiences in the U.S. racial and ethnic imaginary, which is fraught with gender and class: the Orientalist or American Orientalist discourse.

As part of the Orientalist phantasmatic, I begin by citing from Samina Ali’s (2004) *Madras on Rainy Days*, a work praised by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, in order to examine how South Asian-American identity formations are fraught with American Orientalism. Layla, the second-generation protagonist, reveals:

I had faced this all my life, the way each country [United States and India] held a moral stance of the other. It was as though each nation had its own uniform and I wore the shirt of one, the trousers of the other, and both sides were shooting at me. . . . They exchanged hamburgers for chicken curry, combined Ayurvedic and modern medicine, and swapped yoga for aerobic. I had never witnessed such confused and beguiled lovers. (pp. 26–27)

The second-generation, then, are thought to occupy a liminal zone, one between Ali’s “hamburgers for chicken curry.” The second-generation represent this “unbridgeable cultural divide” between the falsely constructed imperialistic notions of the “east” versus the “west.” They are a conundrum or “American-Born-Confused-Desis” (ABCDs)! However, the literature (Prashad, 2000; Maira, 2002; Purkayastha, 2005; Badruddoja, 2013) demonstrates that South Asian-American wo/men are neither atomized individuals nor are they structural dopes. That is, they do their identity-work in multiple, cross-cutting, simultaneous, and contentious categories of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and culture!

We must, then, consider a couple of issues: What are the questions that need to be asked in order to critique Layla’s words? What are some of the sites of contention within the quote? First, it is absolutely imperative to consider what the division between America and South Asia implies here. The second question I ask—perhaps one even more imperative than the first—is, how does the division between South Asia and America affect the identity formations and performances of South Asian-Americans?

The central problem lies with Layla’s “torn between two cultures” rhetoric. From “confused and beguiled lovers,” the reader finds Ali’s protagonist Layla caught between parental desire for conformity with cultural norms that are at odds with her American (white) peers’ and her own uneasy integration (assimilation into whiteness is the

benchmark) into U.S. society. Layla finds herself struggling to know her place and her identity as an ABCD. Ali, then, frames Layla's journey from America to India (for a forced marriage, which Ali falsely conflates with arranged marriage) back to America (once the marriage fails) within the "east/west": tradition/modern discourse. Mani (1993) argues that the two-culture rhetoric has a long and complex history for third-world women, and its consequences bear thinking through:

Questions of tradition and modernity have, since the nineteenth century, been debated on the literal and figurative bodies of women. It comes as no surprise that the burden of negotiating the new world is borne disproportionately to women, whose behavior and desires, real or imagined, become the litmus test for the South Asian community's anxieties or sense of well-being. (pp. 34–45)

It should come as no surprise that the conflicting framing of Layla's identity lies in the tired narrative of choosing between family obligations and falling in love. It is here—between the nexus of family and love—that we discover that Samina Ali attributes Layla's self-questioning to her Americanness and her sense of duty and family responsibility to her Indianness. Samina Ali underscores this tension by oppositionally juxtaposing Layla with her pregnant cousin Henna, who has been gang-raped during a citywide *hartal*—government shutdown—in Hyderabad, India, meeting an untimely death, while Layla escapes from her marriage and returns to the land of the free (and individuality) with her American passport, ready to begin life once again—a normal life: “The wind rose, lifting my veil like ravens' wings. Layla. Darkness. So I was. My body hidden and safe under the chador [a long shawl], *belonging only to me*” (p. 307). The implication here is that this lens establishes the view that South Asian-American women are part of a strict, inflexible, patriarchal, extended South Asian family, and the “westernized” second-generation offspring have no choice but to rebel against their own culture—the classic *Masala-itis* rebel imagery (see Puar, 1994). Layla portrays the anomalous “Third-World Woman” (Mohanty, 1988; Grewal, 1993: 233). The broader context in which Layla unhappiness is embedded contains the family as the center of conflict between South Asia and America—South Asia imagined as the ultimate site of failure, and America conceived as the sole answer to all her problems (Grewal, 1993, p. 235). The opinions of Grewal (1993), who considers living in South Asia and being South Asian means inhabiting a “combat zone, a zone of warfare” (p. 235); and of Mani (1993) who holds that “Americanness . . . is simply an unambivalent index of cultural difference, even superiority” (p. 36) both seem to be apt here. Clearly, Ali uses a Euro-American epistemology to formulate the subject of feminism. Minh-ha (1989) calls this portrayal one of “specialness” rather than one of difference,

suggesting a division between “I-who-have-made-it and You-who cannot-make-it” (pp. 86–87). Ali’s work demonstrates a rigid socio-cognitive framework from which its world is unable either to escape or to break away from compartmentalizing bodies, or reading bodies in multiple ways (Zerubavel 1991, 121).

The empirical reality is that while American Orientalism can begin to help us understand gendered and sexualized discourses of assimilation and racism faced by South Asian-Americans, Orientalism is simply not enough to explain the complexities of our lives (see Badruddoja, 2013). The words of two of my informants—Padmini and Rita—in the context of romantic relationships and marriage are helpful here. Padmini describes why it was important for her to have her parents’ involvement in her selection of a partner: “It was something . . . prominent in my mind [to marry] someone who can understand the language [my parents] speak . . . I was looking for somebody who knew their food and who knew their mannerisms” (p. 180). And Rita fascinates me by submerging the image of universal arranged marriage, challenging the Orientalist cultural conquest:

It’s not like where within a couple of days you decide if you want to marry him and then there is an engagement. It’s not like that. Still, in an American’s eyes [read as “white”], it’s arranged. But what’s strange about it is if it were two Americans meeting through their parents, it wouldn’t be arranged. It would be a setup; it would be like a blind date! (p.185)

Clearly, the reasons for wanting to be part of a tightly-knit community and of intricate marriage network are not necessarily intrinsic to the culture and tradition of these women; rather, they are part of their identity formation developed in the South Asian-American context (see also Ramji, 2003). Ali’s Layla, on the other hand, portrays the anomalous “Third-World Woman” à la Mohanty (1988), and Ali falsely conflates forced marriage with arranged marriage. Simply put, Ali succeeds in binding South Asian women into a monolithic stereotype: Permissive women who are forced to forgo their individual desires, or who must leave their families behind if they choose to realize their dreams. Indeed, the practice of arranged marriage is highly problematic, raising questions of choice, economic production, reproduction, and the role of women in the society at large. However, collectively, the women’s voices and stories about dating and marriage in my study complicate the picture of arranged-marriage process, revealing many nuances operative in actual practice.

It is interesting to inquire why “westernization” is the expression of choice leveled against the “third world” and used to bolster the ABCD identity formation. Narayan explains that the answer lies in colonial history. Contrasting self-definitions of “western culture” and

the “indigenous national culture” of colonies were constructed via political conflicts between colonialism and national movements (1997, pp. 14–21). Within gendered, colonial, and nation-state contexts, South Asian women are subscribed to a dichotomy between the “material west” and the “spiritual east,” and, like Layla, they are expected to embrace their role as “repositories of a national spiritual essence” (p.19). The danger here is that the language used to produce literature extends experiences in time and space. Brady writes:

Literature thrives on the intersection between shaping powers of language and the productive powers of space. Literature attends to affect an environment; it uses space and spatial processes metaphorically to suggest emotions, insights, concepts, characters. It also shapes the way spaces are perceived, understood, and ultimately produced. Thus literature illustrates and enlarges the shaping force of narrative in the production of space, highlighting the discursiveness of space, its dependence on cultural mediation. (2002, p. 8)

As a result, Layla’s body becomes a “transcolonial zone” for the reader. Layla reproduces a circulation of narratives across the Atlantic, from “east” (production—the storyteller) to “West” (consumer—the reader), while Layla becomes the site of exchange between South Asia and the United States, serving as the location of “transcolonial transmission.”

Here one may ask: Why does the material/spiritual dichotomy pose a challenge to the identities of South-Asian Americans? The binary lens leads to the naturalization of South Asian traditions, American freedom, and the uncritical acceptance of generalized assumptions. The South Asia versus America metanarrative not only prompts a reductive tabloid interpretation, but also prohibits readers from engaging in alternate readings that might highlight the wealth and complexity of the material. A passage from Zainab Ali’s (1993) essay, entitled “Becoming Agents of Our Identity” may shed some light here:

This is the first of many incidents in which I have felt like I am sitting on the border of two culture[s] and religions. This position invariably forces me into feelings of disjunction because I must choose between two cultural practices. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that I am able to choose to which side of the fence I want to jump: I have no choice. Rather, I am disjointed from both my Islamic culture and my Urdu language, and my—yes, it is mine also—Western culture and English language. Which do I use to express myself? Which becomes my identity? (p. 238)

A reductive reading of Zainab Ali’s words positions Zainab as confused, torn, and soul-searching for her identity. A less monolithic assessment, on the other hand, allows the recognition that the contours of her struggles are fundamentally shaped by her class position and gender.

To Samina Ali’s credit, she develops a complex representation of women’s agency within the constructs of gender, class, and sexuality. Even though there are many different stories of arrival and survival in the accounts of South Asian women, especially due to the idioms of class privilege among post-1965 immigrants from South Asia (see Visweswaran, 1993). “There is no rupture,” says Mani, “in patriarchal power with migration, merely its reconfiguration, the consequences of diaspora are specifiably different for men and women” (Mani, 1993, pp. 33–34). This means that class benefits are tempered by femaleness. Layla finds ways to host a white, male lover who had no problems sneaking into her bedroom because she did not have the courage to sneak out of her parents’ home in the middle of the night. Samina Ali also vividly illustrates Layla’s efforts in terminating her pregnancy from that relationship soon after she arrives in India for her marriage. The sexual experimentation between Layla and her female cousin Henna also shows the ways in which Layla manipulates the dynamics of gender and culture in multiple ways.

It may be useful to explore two other popular fictions: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Arranged Marriage* (1995), and Tanuja Desai Hidier’s *Born Confused* (2002).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Arranged Marriage*

The voices of immigrant South Asian-American women in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s (1995) collection of short stories are indeed enticing, immediately drawing diasporic readers in. However, one is troubled by the organization of the gendered short stories under the metanarrative of “arranged marriage.” Similar to the tensions in Samina Ali’s work, one discovers two themes: Choosing between family obligations—read as passive—or falling in love—read as agentic. The short stories “The Word Love” and “The Bats” may be the most illuminating.

Divakaruni, in “The Word Love” (pp. 57–72), creates a tale about an immigrant, Hindu-Bengali woman living in California with her white, American boyfriend (yet another reductive story of assimilation). They purchase a “sagging sofa . . . together at a Berkeley garage sale” (p. 57) and the woman is often curled up on this sofa crying because she cannot tell her mother about her relationship. She is torn between a mother who will not understand:

You practice them out loud for days in front of the bathroom mirror, the words with which you’ll tell your mother [in Calcutta] that you’re living with a man. Sometime[s] the words are of confession and repentance. Sometime[s] they are angry, defiant. Sometimes they melt into a single, sighing sound. Love. You let the water run so he [the boyfriend] won’t hear you and ask what those foreign phrases

[Bengali] you keep saying mean. ... You don't want to have to explain. (p. 57)

And a boyfriend who does not understand:

You tried to tell him about your mother, how she'd seen her husband's face for the first time at her wedding. How when he died, she had taken off her jewelry and put on a widow's white. . . . She lives in a different world. Can't you see that? She's never traveled more than a hundred miles from the village she was born in; she's never touched a cigarette or alcohol even though she lives in Calcutta, she's never watched a movie. (p. 58)

The protagonist in "The Word Love" finds herself unable to live in silence and soon informs her mother that she is living with a white, American man and about the prospect of her marrying this man. The woman is immediately disowned:

All through the next month you try to reach her. You call. The ayah [maid-servant] answers. She sounds frightened when she hears your voice. Memsaab [Madame/lady of the house] has told her not to speak to you, or else she'll lose her job. "She had the lawyer over yesterday to change her will. What did you do, Missy baba, that was so bad?" (p. 65)

Herein lies one of the problematic themes in *Arranged Marriage*. Divakaruni describes love and dating under the subtext of "modern"—a luxury that South Asian women cannot afford—and in opposition to the family or "tradition." At the moment of the mother's denial of her only daughter's existence, Divakaruni, in further articulating the relationship between the Bengali immigrant woman and her white, American boyfriend, continues to draw upon the commonly understood relationship between "east" or South Asian/"west" or American as family/individuality:

At first he was sympathetic. He held you when you lay sleepless at night. "Cry," he said. "Get it out of your system." Then, "It was bound to happen sooner or later. You must have known that. . . . You had to cut the umbilical cord sometime." You pulled away when he said things like that. What did he know, you thought, about families, about (yes) love. He'd left home the day he turned eighteen. He only called his mother on Mother's Day. (p. 68)

Divakaruni consistently uses binary terms to express the theme of family throughout her story as a discursive mechanism in which to situate the protagonist within a desire for stereotypical Americanization that is predicated on South Asianness as the "Other" (see Naber, 2006, p. 89). That is, Divakaruni deploys a cultural nationalist logic that represents the categories of "South Asian" and "American" in oppositional terms (see Naber, 2006).

My second-generation South Asian-American respondents (see Badruddoja, 2013) show that the choice is not between love and family, nor is it about South Asianness versus Americanness. Rather, both Rita and Ronica demonstrate how they creatively fuse love and family obligations by highlighting their agencies in the arranged marriage process. They do so by agreeing to meet men through *desi* matrimonial advertisements, but the women determine the rules of the meeting process. Rita says:

I told my mom that my rules are probably different than most people[‘s] who agree to this process. I told her I did not want to exchange pictures because I don’t want it to be based on looks. Second of all, I don’t want them to only pick someone for me to meet based on their bio-data. If I am going to give someone a chance, it is going to be everyone. This is not a job interview, and I am not going to date someone off of their résumé. (p. 185)

And Ronica says,

I don’t have a specific [way of meeting people]. I told my mom after a lot of coercion that I would meet someone in an arranged setting. ... The main reason I fight against it is because my parents won’t put an ad that is reflective of me. If they were to put down what is actually true, then I would be more into it. I don’t want to meet some guy who is going to be like “Who the fuck is this?” (p. 214)

And, unlike the protagonist’s mother who returns all the letters sent to her—“*Not accepted. Return to Sender*” (p. 69), Rupa’s parents, while withdrawing tuition support after discovering that she was dating a white, Christian, American man and that they were living together in a campus apartment, continued to call her to encourage her to leave her boyfriend. Simultaneously, Rupa also managed to stay connected with her family while maintaining intimate ties with her boyfriend (p. 254).

Then, the women in my fieldwork clearly point to complex processes around nationalism and other forms of identities by rupturing dichotomies of Orientalism and “modernity”: family obligations versus individual desires/arranged marriage versus love/traditional versus modern/South Asian versus American. My research participants express themes of family, gender, and sexuality multidimensionally.

Next, too often, domestic violence and women’s inabilities to leave their abusers are seen as a direct consequence of the South Asian patriarchal arranged-marriage system, coupled with the devaluation of South Asian women as both citizens and human beings, or as Mohanty’s *Third-World Woman* (1988). In the short story “The Bats” (pp. 1–16), the young female protagonist notices a bruise on her mother’s face:

One morning when she was getting me ready for school, braiding my

hair into the slick, tight pigtails that I disliked because it always hung stiffly down my back, I noticed something funny about her face. Not the dark circles under her eye. Those were always there. It was high up on her cheek, a yellow blotch with its edge turning purple. It looked like my knee did after I bumped into the chipped mahogany dresser next to our bed last month. (p. 2)

A handful of pages into the story, the girl and her mother secretly leave Calcutta indefinitely to live with the mother's uncle in his village home.

Divakaruni unfolds a wonderfully emotional relationship between the girl and her old great uncle or "Grandpa-Uncle." Just as the girl begins to develop a twinkle in her eyes—a twinkle she had lost while living at home in Calcutta where "things fell a lot when Father was around, maybe because he was so large" (p. 2)—her mother was waiting for her on the porch with an envelope in her hands. She softly says, "It's from him. . . . He wants us to come back. He promises it won't happen again" (p. 11). Grandpa-Uncle falls to the steps and asks my mother, "How did he know where you were?" (p. 11) The girl's mother defensively replies, "I wrote to him. . . . I couldn't stand it, the stares and whispers of the women. . . . The loneliness of being without him" (pp. 11–12). The girl and the mother return home to Calcutta, but they move whenever they have to, return home, and then move again—the ongoing and vicious cycle of domestic violence appropriately wraps the end of the story.

The tale is far too real for many married women, and Divakaruni astutely draws upon the *Cycle of Violence* from tension to battering to honeymoon (Shepard and Pence, 1999). But, are "western" women less tolerant of domestic violence than South Asian women? A vast number of studies show that spousal abuse supersedes racial, class, and cultural boundaries; domestic violence is just as much a problem among Americans as among South Asian women (see Bergen, 1998; Shepard and Pence, 1999; and Abraham, 2000). Domestic violence does not happen in a vacuum, and the experience of domestic violence simply cannot be organized under one overarching narrative, such as arranged marriage. Doing so only serves to reinforce common stereotypes about South Asian women—exotic/erotic, passive/demure, dutiful/reserved, manipulative/calculative, asexual/frigid, traditional/old fashioned, conservative/politically unaware, dependent/faithful, inarticulate/incompetent, loud/stupid, and slavish/subservient (Dasgupta and Warriar, 1996)—rendering South Asian women's tolerance of battering as passivity, deep repression, and denial.

Without a doubt, Divakaruni probes numerous themes that are relevant to many South Asian women's lives. The award-winning fiction is well-written, thoughtful, and entertaining and presents

numerous moments of intense identification between the characters and South Asian women readers (especially Hindu-Bengali women). However, Divakaruni fails to overcome the stereotype of passive South Asian women and leaves her characters with little or no room to express agency. Moreover, Divakaruni describes several thematic issues in *Arranged Marriage* that simultaneously affect American (read as “white” and “western”) women. Perhaps in different permutations, the meta-concepts of marriage and family obligations are everyday struggles for white women also (see Hochschild and Machung, 1990).

Indeed, the scope of Divakaruni’s collection of stories was not meant to encompass gendered forms of whiteness, but, like Samina Ali, Divakaruni also traps South Asian women into a monolithic Third-World Woman stereotype. *Arranged Marriage* provides a solid platform in which to render arranged marriage as a traditional, patriarchal, and “backward” practice—a singular and monolithic pedagogy. The overall message Divakaruni conveys is that arranged marriage is an intrusive practice, and the end results are that South Asian women are cloaked by tradition; women are trapped in loveless marriages; and there are stark, irreconcilable differences between women’s individual desires and their family obligations. Divakaruni jettisons the opportunity of structural change in the marriage system, effacing the potential of arranged marriages for many South Asians, including the second-generation in America.

Tanuja Desai Hidier’s *Born Confused*

Tanuja Desai Hidier (2002) offers another banal ABCD culture-clash discourse in *Born Confused* to enshroud the coming of age and self-discovery of a second-generation South Asian-American woman, Dimple Lala.

With great nostalgia, Hidier beautifully captures desi meals of “[S]pinach with nymph-finger cloves of garlic . . . a vat of cucumber *raita*, the two percent yoghurt thickened with sour cream . . . lamb curry, the pieces melting tenderly off the bone . . . deep bowls of kheer, coronated with crush[ed] pistachios and strands of saffron ” (pp. 76–77). However, Hidier is unable to remove herself from an Orientalist cultural conquest by opening her debut and award-winning novel with Dimple in a breached position in her mother’s womb:

I guess the whole mess started around my birthday. Amendment: my first birthday. I was born turned around, and apparently was holding my head in my hand in such a way that resulted in twelve treacherous hours of painful labor for my mother to eject me. My mom said she imagined I was trying to sort out some great philosophical quandary. . . . But I think that was a polite way of saying I looked like I didn’t get it. Born backwards and clueless.

In other words, born confused. (p. 1)

Meaning, Dimple's life ahead will consist of a series of events that will leave her feeling misplaced and confused.

Hidier richly describes the pain of going through adolescence in brown skin, with black-haired oily pigtails, and a shalwar-kameez-wearing mother—all while having a beautiful and popular white, blond-haired best friend, Gwyn—in a white middle-class suburb of New Jersey. Like Samina Ali's protagonist Layla, Dimple does not fit into the white mainstream: "The day I wore my hair in braids everyone yelled *Hey, Pocahontas*, and did that ahh-baah- baah-baah lip-slap at recess. You would have gotten a perm soon after as well" (p. 3). Here, Dimple uses the language of oppositional binaries to talk about her relationship with her best friend, Gwyn: "In our twosome, I was 'the other one'—you know, the one the boy doesn't remember two second[s] after delivering the pizza. The too-curvy, clumsy . . . wall-flower" (p. 2). As a result, Hidier develops a character oblivious to her Hindu-Indian cultural heritage. Unlike my respondents who are fluent in spoken Bengali (see Badruddoja, 2013), Dimple is unable to speak even broken Marathi:

I didn't know enough [Marathi] to get me to the other side of the room. . . . This was Dadaji's constant sore point with my parents . . . how could they have been so cruel as to cut off their own flesh and blood from one another through this ultimate act of linguistic negligence? (p. 13)

Like Layla, Dimple is yet another ABCD conundrum (see pp. 86–89).

To be clear, I am not attempting to discount the pains associated with being part of the American racial and ethnic landscapes as a South Asian-American. As a child of over-educated immigrant Bangladeshi-Muslim parents, I am far too aware of the "restrictions" involved growing up brown and Muslim in white, Christian, working-class suburban Green Bay, Wisconsin, and Elgin, Illinois. Neeta Puri (2004) shares a childhood memory of "Othering" in Indiana. Puri describes a conversation with her teacher in grade school after a violent attack on Sikhs in India in 1984:

"Where is your Uncle Goor-teep from?"

I realized that I was angry at her for mispronouncing his name and my name, but I didn't know what to do. After all, what does a brown child say to a white woman with authority?

"467 Lakewood Avenue."

"Well, I didn't hear anything about that or read it in the papers," she said. "Are you sure?"

I looked at her angry, and said, "Yes, I'm sure."

. . . The teacher then asked, "Do you mean what happened in In-

dee-yuh this past week?”

“Maybe.” I honestly wasn’t sure.

“Well, that’s a completely different problem,” she said, speaking slowly. Turning to the rest of the class, she said. “In-dee-yuh is a place where people are really wild. They kill each other all the time.” (p. 23)

Nevertheless, if we accept the conflation of modernity with America and tradition with South Asia, then it will be impossible to account for the various women’s liberation movements in South Asia along with the struggles women in America face in keeping their families together.

While Hidier is successful in breaking away from the assimilationist model-minority epistemology at moments, she systematically uses the points of egress to support ontologies that serve to reify the meanings of arranged marriage à la Divakaruni versus America as the land of the free, the only place women are able to live their lives as they choose à la Ali. Consider the words of Kavita, Dimple’s newly arrived cousin from India, as she shares her thoughts about Sangita, her soon-to-be-married sister:

That’s how this kind of marriage [arranged] works, Dimple. . . . I’ve seen cases where it works out, though I suppose you never really know; the divorce rate is low in India, but so is the speaking-up rate when it comes to women (p. 83). . . . You know, Dimple, they say in the East you love the person you marry and in the West you marry the person you love. (p. 85)

Positioning herself as representative of America and freedom and in opposition to her sister Sangita, who is India and trapped, Kavita keeps on with her analysis:

I guess all this talk about the wedding just made me a little sad. . . . My life is so unlike Sangita’s. . . . I just worry sometimes that my sister has a lot of pressure on her because of my behavior. . . . It’s . . . not staying in India and meeting a nice boy and not getting too overqualified to be a perfect wife. Which is exactly what Sangita’s doing: settling in Mumbai and giving up on half her interests. (pp. 82–83)

Dhingra (2007) brings focus to the issue here:

So much of the discourse on ethnicity . . . refers to American culture as modern and as prioritizing the individual relative to a traditional and constraining immigrant heritage. This discursive dichotomy conceals the cultural conservatisms found in America, including the constraints placed on women and the rise of overt religiosity. Yet Asian Americans themselves often interpret their experiences within this framework. (pp. 2-3)

The redundant binary family versus love and obligatory sacrifices

versus independence and individuality logic becomes a central discursive mechanism to understand essentialized cultural representations of India and America and this is embedded in the popular imaginations of both diasporic and mainstream readers.

Hidier stubbornly continues to use Kavita as a medium that ignores the specificities of race, gender, culture, religion, class, and immigration. Kavita's entry into American higher education provides her with a venue in which to reject an arranged marriage and foster a meaningful lesbian relationship. While an immigrant identity may take a back seat in queer spaces, queers of color are ignored, feared, or fetishized in the U.S. As a queer Hindu-Bengali-American woman, my respondent Ronica recounts how her "coming out" process was framed within the confines of a Eurocentric sexual agenda (Badruddoja, 2008):

When I first came out as being queer, I felt excluded from the queer community because I didn't really know Asian people, South Asian people, or people of color that were queer . . . The dominant discourse in the queer community is based around white people and that's really alienating . . . (p.173)

Kawale's (2003) work within the South Asian lesbian community in Britain has an apt application here:

One of my interviewees . . . [was] asked [by] the white (male) bouncer . . . whether [she was] aware it was gay night . . . [My interviewee] interpreted this . . . as a racism driven by the assumption that 'South Asian women can't be lesbians,' especially if they have long hair. (p. 185)

Both Ronica and Kawale's words begin to point to their concerns with queer diasporic South Asians lacking a safe place to articulate their cultures. Both problematize the powerful role of the white gaze in queer activism and theory. Indeed, in the context of assimilation, queer immigrants have had to think through their cultural, political, religious, and sexual identities.

Next, Hidier effaces the importance of rupturing heteronormativity by using Kavita's lesbian partnership to mark arranged marriage as an oppressive act, a daughter's obligation to her family as superseding her own desires, and living in America means that *all* women can realize their dreams. Unlike some of the women in my study who participated in the arranged marriage process (Badruddoja, 2013), Dimple describes her potential mate, Karsh Kapoor, as a geeky computer scientist from India—"If he had a marital ad, it would have said this: 'strikingly average guy seeks fashion consultant'" (p. 102)—and refuses to entertain the relationship any further. Rita, one of my respondents, on the other hand says, "We talked for two and a half hours . . . We talked about not very generic things. It was almost like we had known each

other . . . I had kind of felt something” (Badrudjoja, 2013, p. 197). Through Dimple, Hidier labels South Asia and South Asians as “backward”: “I’d rather stay home and contemplate the missing socks in the dryer than hit the town for a supposedly wild night out (not) with what was sure to be a bunch of uncle[s] and aunties” (p. 149). The culture clash discourse draws on Orientalist descriptions of gendered South Asian cultural norms, implying that there is a single way a marriage can be arranged—lack of choice—and there is a single type of man to be married off to—a husband who controls his wife’s time, space, and body.

Dimple soon discovers Karsh’s alter ego, a DJ at a New York City club. Hidier astutely describes the New York City bhangra scene, connecting with Prashad’s (2000) and Maira’s (2002) findings. Hidier examines the nightclubs as spaces that break down the South Asia/America duality as Dimple explores the remix parties and finds new ways to (re-)negotiate her cultural identity. Karsh confides in Dimple: “That’s what I love about clubs. . . . It’s all about the dynamic— music plays the people and people play the music. . . . You’re not alone. Your story, our families. It’s yours, it’s mine” (p. 181). Here, on one hand, Hidier, like my respondent Rita, subverts the arranged marriage stereotype by breaking down Dimple’s preconceptions of Karsh— Dimple discovers that he is not a “geek,” but a DJ in an alternate cultural space. However, on the other hand, Dimple finds Karsh attractive and desirable because he is now in a role that her parents would disapprove of and never expect of Karsh—“the most unsuitable suitable boy” (p. 95). Karsh no longer represents “backward” India, but, rather, Dimple finds him to be a progressive “Americanized” Indian. In other words, South Asian-American culture is localized in an imagined “true” South Asian culture that erupts out of the official discourses of U.S. state and corporate media and the notion of a universalized abstract American citizen (hegemonic U.S. nationalism), the pressures of assimilation, and the gendered racialization of South Asian women (and men) (see Naber, 2006, p. 88). Indeed, the Oriental phantasmatic is vibrantly alive. In the end, while Hidier does not wholly render arranged marriage as static and, in some instances, welcomes the potential of arranged marriages for second-generation South Asian-American women, she does so within the context of American modernity.

We need now to turn to Pulitzer-prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri and her novel *The Namesake* (2003).

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*

Like Hidier, Jhumpa Lahiri is certainly sagacious in capturing the nuances of both the South Asian immigrant and Hindu-Bengali life in

America, from lunch and dinner parties with *chingri maacher kofta* or shrimp cutlets swiftly lifted up from hot oil and left to rest in disposable foiled trays—“The families drop by at one another’s homes on Sunday afternoons. They drink tea with sugar and evaporated milk and eat shrimp cutlets fried in saucepans” (p. 38)—to the assumption that all South Asians are related to each other to some degree—the protagonist Gogol Ganguli’s kindergarten principal Candace Lapidus “Shakes Ashoke’s [Gogol’s dad’s] hand and tells him that there are two other Indian children at the school, Jayadev Modi in third grade and Rekha Saxena in fifth. Perhaps the Ganguli’s know them” (p. 57)

Lahiri also deeply entangles the reader with the notion of assimilation, the pains of growing up brown in white suburbia. Gogol, like the women who chose to participate in my study (Badruddoja, 2013), simply wanted to be an unmarked American. After boarding a flight to return home to Boston from a family trip to India, Gogol experiences relief:

He knows his mother will sit silently. . . . But for Gogol, relief quickly replaces any lingering sadness. . . . [He] asks the British Airways stewardess for a glass of orange juice. With relief he puts on his headset to watch *The Big Chill* and listen to top- forty songs all the way home. (p. 87)

Nupur Chaudhury’s remark is relevant here:

When I was younger, I used to forget that I was Indian. I used to think that being Indian never came up for me. I now realize that I didn’t let it come up for me. I would never search from my Indian-ness. I realize now that what I would do was push it away. I never found my Indian-ness to be of any importance. (p. 34)

I can still remember my own sense of relief boarding a flight from Dhaka-Zia International Airport to Chicago O’Hare International Airport and tearing open a packaged meal that would not make my stomach do acrobatic flips. The packaged meal was symbolic. It served to reestablish my Americanness and minimize my South Asianness.

My own field-studies show that the onset of early adulthood proves to be a turning point for many South Asians, where they could no longer amputate their heritage from their sense of self (Badruddoja, 2013). Once again, Chaudhury (2004) provides critical insight:

I returned to my private school for my senior year with a different outlook. I threw out the school’s required summer reading list, and in its place I invented my own. A summer reading list full of books that I could relate to. As an Indian. As a Hindu. . . . My self-imposed reading list was full of books that pertained to me (p. 37)

Similarly, the women in my study (Badruddoja, 2013) argued that they

began to develop a strong sense of cultural self as they entered early adulthood, a critical difference compared to their childhoods. A number of women began to rework their “Otherness” through personal self-projects that served to awaken their desi pride. Noopur says:

At one time, I almost did shun being Indian. And I took that approach for a very long time. It was probably in college when I made [desi] friends and I realized that I do have this culture in me and I do enjoy being who I am and being able to express it. (p. 237)

Sinha (1998) finds that groups in college settings actively solicit members and try to build community by emphasizing a collective history and common issues based on experiences in the United States. Clearly, my respondents chose to abide by family expectations and develop pride in their cultural heritage and practices.

Lahiri’s Gogol, on the contrary, quietly suffers a lifelong identity crisis. Lahiri imaginatively uses Gogol’s name as the vehicle in which to take her readers through his journey of cultural and self-conflict as an ABCD, an identity that, one may argue, is pathological. When Gogol was born, his parents Ashima and Ashoke Ganguli did not have a name ready for him at the hospital in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Ashima and Ashoke were patiently waiting for a letter from India, which contained an auspicious name for the Gangulis’ firstborn. The letter never arrived.

On the last day of the Gangulis’ stay at the hospital, Ashoke chooses a temporary name to put on the birth certificate, “Gogol.” While Gogol’s name is legally “Gogol,” his family considers it to be his *dak naam* or nickname and his *bhalo naam* or formal name to be Nikhil. Gogol hates his name because it has nothing to do with who he is. Gogol thinks his name is absurd and obscure—neither Indian nor American. When Gogol discovers that he is named after the Russian author Nikolai Gogol, he feels even more disconnected from his life: “He hates having to [sic] living with it. With a pet name turned good name, day after day, second after second. . . . What dismays him most is the irrelevance of it all” (p. 76).

[A tension and conflict that arises between Gogol and his alter ego, Nikhil, becomes a persistent theme in the novel, serving as a paradigm of the ABCD construct. After his SATs, Gogol meets up with some friends to drive up to a college party. Gogol meets a girl there:

But he doesn’t want to tell Kim his name. He doesn’t want to endure her reaction, to watch her lovely blue eyes grow wide. He wishes there were another name he could use . . . But then he realizes there’s no need to lie. . . . He remembers the other name that had once been chosen for him, the one that should have been. “I’m Nikhil,” he says for the first time in his life. (pp. 95–96)

Gogol legally changes his name from Gogol Ganguli to Nikhil Ganguli before his freshman year at Yale is about to begin (p. 97):

There is only one complication: he doesn't feel like Nikhil. Part of the problem is that the people who now know him as Nikhil have no idea that he used to be Gogol. . . . Even more startling is when those who normally call him Gogol refer to him as Nikhil. (pp. 105–106)

Lahiri's conceptual framework—the fantasy of assimilation—is explicitly revealed and clarified shortly after the name-change takes place:

Gogol has never heard the term ABCD. He eventually gathers that it stands for “American-born confused deshi.” In other words, him. He learns that C could also stand for “conflicted.” He knows that deshi, a generic word for “countryman,” means “Indian,” knows that his parents and all of their friends always refer to India simply as desh. He thinks of it as Americans do, as India. (p. 118)

Lahiri simply ignores the long and problematic process of South Asian immigration and the fact that the second-generation has found the promises of unmarked citizenship elusive at best. Mohanty (1993) writes, “An American passport can open many doors. However, just carrying an American passport is no insurance against racism and unequal and unjust treatment within the U.S.” (p. 354). In this context, it is difficult to understand the ease with which Bharati Mukherjee claims that she is “American” (see Visweswaran, 1993; Grewal, 1994).

Years later, Ashoke explains to his son how his name, Gogol, came to be. Ashoke survived a deadly train accident on the way to Jamshedpur in his early twenties; he was reading Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat* at the time. Ashoke was one of the few mangled survivors among hundreds of dead passengers lying on the West Bengal countryside (p.123). As Ashoke revisits “the night that had nearly taken his life, and the book that had saved him, and the year afterward, when he'd been unable to move” (p. 123), Gogol sits there, “struggling to absorb the information, feeling awkward, oddly ashamed, at fault” (p. 124). Gogol once again feels confused about his name:

And suddenly the sound of his pet name, uttered by his father as he has been accustomed to hearing it all his life, means something completely new, bound up with a catastrophe he has unwittingly embodied for years. (p. 124)

Does Gogol embody his father's potential death or Ashoke's life that followed? The ongoing back-and-forth identification between the two names indicates Gogol's state of mind, his sense of self, and his connection (or lack thereof) to his heritage.

Gogol continues to feel empty, confused, and disconnected from

his own life until his parents reintroduce him to a childhood friend, Moushumi, as a potential marriage partner. Gogol, while hesitant about meeting Moushumi under the pressures of marriage, immediately conjures up warmth during their initial meeting at a small local bar in Manhattan:

He struggles but fails to recall her presence at Pemberton Road; still, he is secretly pleased that she has seen those rooms, tasted his mother’s cooking, washed her hands in the bathroom, however long ago. (p. 200)

Gogol can share things with Moushumi that he has never been able to share with any other woman. Like many of my respondents (Badruddoja, 2013), Gogol feels great comfort in being able to talk about pujas, *mishti* or sweets, and share secrets in public by speaking in Bengali with Moushumi. The intimate relationship between Gogol and Moushumi provides some hope to readers in that Gogol will be able to redeem himself from his cultural identity crisis. But Lahiri quickly dismisses Gogol and Moushumi’s arranged courtship and marriage as a function of ontological security rather than love:

They had both acted on the same impulse, that was their mistake. They had both sought comfort in each other, and in their shared world, perhaps for the sake of novelty, or out of the fear that that world was slowly dying. (p. 284)

Near the end of the novel, Moushumi has an affair and their marriage breaks apart:

[H]e wonders how he’s arrived at all this: that he is thirty-two years old, and already married and divorced. His time with her seems like a permanent part of him that no longer has any relevance, or currency. As if that time were a name he’d ceased to use. (p. 284)

The female protagonist Moushumi is another redundant, monolithic ABCD. Moushumi simply falls short in addressing the gendered nature of culture in the South Asian diaspora:

Immersing herself in a third language [at Brown], a third culture, had been her refuge—she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever. (p. 214)

Perhaps this repression was a liberty Lahiri thought she could allow by constructing a male character at the center of the novel. Unlike the linear teleology followed by Gogol and Moushumi, the women, my fieldwork attests, break apart the ABCD conundrum and reject models of assimilation along with ethnic enclave identity models. The question

is not about assimilation, ethnic enclaves, or anything in between. Rather, the question lies in the ways South Asian-Americans collapse the one-dimensional multicultural model by producing multiple identities simultaneously, validating the categories that define human visibility as well as invisibility. *The Namesake*, along with the other texts critically reviewed here, represents South Asia within tropes of western hegemonic structure (see Grewal, 1993, pp. 226–36).

Conclusion: Intervening the American Nation-State

One is forced to the conclusion that American Orientalism places and reads bodies within hierarchical binary codes, where one has to belong to either/or categories. The ideological hierarchy posed by Orientalism works within binary codes and allows no values in between: “[A] strict relationship of black and white, good and bad, and us and them is established” (Jain, 2005: 2; see also Pigg, 1996: 163–64). The discourse is characteristic of the mindset of anorexics and bulimics who are obsessed “with maintaining a rigidly bounded self” (Zerubavel, 1991, p. 51). Those who do not fit the binary scheme—the hybrid, for instance—“will be excluded even from simple exclusion” (Jain, 2005, p 2). Spivak (1988) rightly argues that the traditional ways of reading texts and the traditional canon of knowledge leave out many important voices from ‘Other’ Worlds. The community, media, and psychological discourse are clear: the second-generation South Asian-Americans have no recognized place in society; they are the ABCD conundrum.

However, the women in my fieldwork show that Orientalist descriptions are not adequate to explain their lives. Kim’s (1982) view of American-born Asian (East Asian—mostly Chinese and Japanese and some Filipino) authors is insightful:

For the American-born Asian, the “choice” between Asia and America was false because it was in reality a choice between yellow and white. When “Asia” was chosen, it was because “American,” or white doors seemed closed. Even the superficially practical solution to this externally imposed cultural conflict, suggested frequently by social psychologists . . . was a false one because it assumes permanent and immutable inferiority to whites on the basis of race. (p. 58)

The static composite identity of South Asians as a group is certainly a false one because identities, in general, are continuously shaped and defined. My research subjects’ formation of identities (individual or collective) demands flexibility rather than imposition of rigid categories. Jain (2005) argues that many concepts—like “ambiguity”—originally related to the marginalized, became core concepts, and thus the discourse of difference itself works as a dispositive—“a repressive

(power) structure that governs and excludes” (p. 1). But, in identity work, the idea of mobility translates into having many faces and facets instead of being limited to a fixed role/identity (Jain, 2005, p. 3).

The diasporic novels I review here implicate themselves in the project of empire and the consolidation of the American nation-state. Vindicating and challenging the imagined contours of the American nation-state. One can argue that the authors’ works, positioned as representing the “authentic” South Asian-American experience, actually represent South Asia within tropes of “western” hegemonic structures where the “South Asian” and “American” are essentialized identities, never broken down into finer specificity. The conclusions of my field work prove that, contrary to the clash-of-culture thesis, my respondents have not abandoned their cultural traditions; they have, rather, re-defined them. My research, then, serves to rupture and shift a paradigm that serves falsely and unidimensionally to frame our experiences as South Asian-Americans. Identity derives from the complex web of social relations and the contexts that frame them. The novels, ignoring the complex narratives of authentic selves, serve, substantially, to reinforce American Orientalism, failing to resist essentialist and racialized notions of what it means to be a South Asian in America.

Indeed, there is a call for broadening the range of “Others,” highlighting the various discourses deployed to construct “Otherness,” and a need for analyzing the politics of difference. Reconfiguring the boundaries of identity may seem infeasible and even unfashionable. But in view of anti-immigrant policies, like Arizona’s SB 1070 wherein Jan Brewer’s “reasonable suspicion” requires sharing phenotypic characteristics with Dora the Explorer, and when political speeches, like Sharron Angle’s, who says “I don’t know that all of you are Latino. Some of you look a little more Asian to me,” the diasporic novel could render a greater service by paying greater attention to the complexity of immigrant women’s lives in this great republic of letters.

Notes

1. In this paper, the term “second-generation” refers to those who are either U.S.-born or arrived here by the age of 4, were primarily raised in the U.S., and have at least one foreign-born parent.

2. The research on which *Eyes of the Storms* is based on focuses on the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, citizenship, and nationalism among contemporary South Asian-Americans. In the book, I explore the perceptions of “second-generation” South Asian-American women about daily social and cultural practices in the U.S. and how they view themselves in comparison to broader American society. I did this by engaging in a yearlong feminist ethnographic study with a nationwide sample of 25 women in the U.S. I spent a day in the life of each woman, eating, drinking,

and talking about work, partners, families, food, clothing, music, and how they feel about being children of immigrants, among other things. In the book, I address the ways in which an often invisible and marginalized group accepts, manipulates, and resists hegemonic powers.

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