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**TOWARDS A TRANSNATIONAL FEMINIST AESTHETIC: AN
ANALYSIS OF SELECTED PROSE WRITING BY WOMEN OF
THE SOUTH ASIAN DIASPORA**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

of

RHODES UNIVERSITY

by

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May 2006

Abstract

This thesis argues that women writers of the South Asian diaspora are inscribing a literary aesthetic which is recognisably feminist. In recent decades women of the South Asian diaspora have risen to the forefront of the global literary and publishing arena, winning acclaim for their endeavours. The scope of this literature is wide, in terms of themes, styles, genres, and geographic location. Prose works range from grave novelistic explorations of female subjectivity to short story collections intent on capturing historical injustices and the experiences of migration. The thesis demonstrates, through close readings and comparative frameworks, that an overarching pattern of common aesthetic elements is deployed in this literature. This deployment is regarded as a transnational feminist practice.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the Andrew Mellon Foundation for generous funding in the form a Mellon Doctoral Scholarship at the outset of this project.

I am indebted to the Association of Commonwealth Universities for a Split-Site Doctoral Scholarship which made it possible for me to enrol at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, for a year.

Many thanks to Dr Dan Wylie, my supervisor and mentor at Rhodes University, for unswerving encouragement, kindness and care.

Sincere gratitude to Dr Amina Yaqin, my supervisor at SOAS, University of London, for expert guidance and meticulous feedback.

I am very grateful to the assistance rendered by Dr Betty Govinden, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, who kindly supplied manuscripts, inspiring scholarship and collegial support.

Thank you to the staff at NELM, in particular Crystal Warren, for prompt and invaluable assistance.

To my friends and family, especially my exceptional father and amazing brother, thank you all for your love and faith.

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Introduction

“Culture and the aesthetic forms it contains derive from historical experience”

(Said 1994: xxiv)

The history of the South Asian diaspora and the cultures to which it has given rise are both areas of scholarship which are currently being fervently developed. As more and more migrants leave the South Asian subcontinent in search of a better quality of life, and as existing diasporic communities around the world grow in number and influence, the aesthetic forms born of this diasporic experience burgeon and come to the attention of the academy. The multiplicity of migratory routes and diasporic conditions has resulted in a cornucopia of aesthetic forms. From music, cinema, and theatre, to journalism and literature, the voices of South Asian immigrants are being heard across the globe. One such aesthetic form is writing by women of the South Asian diaspora. This rich and flourishing body of writing, although transnational and diverse in terms of historical and cultural specificities, shares a common aesthetic pattern. This aesthetic pattern and its significance for women’s writing, diaspora studies, and literary studies in general, has yet to be comprehensively examined and theorised. It is the principal aim of this thesis to describe this transnational feminist aesthetic through an examination of prose writing by women of the South Asian diaspora.

But why study *this* literature? What are its specific values and resonances that make it worthy of study? One answer is a deep personal involvement in many of the issues raised in this literature. As Edward Said indicates, historical experience is at the root of culture and its aesthetic forms. I believe the same is true of academic

scholarship. Believing in the transformative value of literature, and being a South Asian diasporic woman, the significance of this literature was not lost on me. My personal history of diasporic dislocation and gender oppression prompted my recognition of the value of this women's writing. Having spent the first eighteen years of my life in a traditional Indian diasporic community, I have first-hand experience of the sort of gender discrimination represented in this literature. Indeed, to pursue an academic career, to write this thesis, I have had to repudiate the prescribed role of dutiful Hindu wife and mother. Like many of the protagonists in this literature, I feel the tensions of multiple affiliations. The chosen path through the interstices in this matrix of cultural attachments is a rocky and treacherous one, but this literature offers a firm and affirming guide.

Pierre Bourdieu points out that the value of literary and cultural works is often generated through the structures of belief:

The sociology of ... literature has to take as its object not only the material production but also the symbolic production of the work i.e. the production of the value of the work or, which amounts to the same thing, of belief in the value of the work.

(Bourdieu 1993: 37)

A second reason for this study is a belief in the symbolic value of this literature. That is, these texts alter the lives of its writers and readers, and if those readers are South Asian women then the value is that much higher. This literature is a platform for South Asian diasporic women to perform, interrogate, inscribe and imbibe empowered subjectivities. In an increasingly confusing world, with a criss-cross of economies, intersecting systems of meaning, and fragmented identities, the imaginative representation of subjectivity offers a comforting reflection. The ongoing

process of exploring subjectivity, working out one's home, place, position, and so on, is admirably represented in this literature. A third reason is the exemplification of the processes of globalisation offered by this literature. Not only is the South Asian diaspora complexly depicted, but this study reveals how this literature is helpful in throwing light on the experiences of other diasporic communities and minority groups. The advent of globalisation in the twenty-first century has caused consternation and wide-scale debate within academic disciplines. This body of literature adds a crucial perspective to those debates, and furthers our understanding of the cultural juggernaut driven by the complex machinations of globalisation.

This thesis does not pretend to be an exhaustive study of literature by women of the South Asian diaspora. First, the texts are too numerous to have covered them all in this study but the SAUNET Bookshelf website (<http://www.sawnet.org/books/fiction.php>) serves as a useful resource for up-to-date lists and bibliographies, although sadly no South African South Asian women writers appear on this site. Second, only prose writing is covered by this study. There are many texts being produced in other genres, for example, journalese (Shoba De, Devi Sankaree Govender), theatre (Krijay Govender, Muthal Naidoo), and poetry (Meena Alexander, Sobhna Poona). But it is the prose narratives which display the strongest tendency to inscribe empowered female subjectivities, through the use of common aesthetic elements. Hence, I concentrate on a limited number of exemplary prose texts. Ideally, each diasporic location should be historicised in detail to obviate the risk of homogenising the South Asian diaspora. Here, primarily, the South African socio-historical context is examined in some detail in order to rectify the exclusion of South African South Asian women's writing from international scholarship on the

South Asian diaspora. The above limitations to the study suggest fodder for future research projects in an ever-broadening and increasingly germane field. The changing face of modernity, the impact of globalisation on culture and identity, and the persistence of patriarchal forms of oppression demand that such research be undertaken.

This body of work, it will be argued, displays an overarching aesthetic – a distinctive combination of formal and stylistic elements. This thesis aims to show that an informal guild exists amongst women writers from the South Asian diaspora. This guild, however tenuous in formal organisational or overtly articulated terms, exhibits, in literary terms, a transnational feminist practice. In describing this women's writing, similarities and significant differences, as well as its literary lineage, are elucidated. The aesthetic is not presented as a precise framework with strict normative elements. Rather, the pattern is offered as a spectrum with varying degrees of involvement from the various texts studied. The aesthetic elements themselves are broad, and manifest differently in different texts. I suggest that the aesthetic pattern be regarded as a descriptive classificatory tool which does not foreclose any other literary taxonomy that might apply.

An analysis of this aesthetic reveals, first, an alternative feminism at work, one in which previously silenced subjects have found eloquent voices to enunciate themes and concerns specific to their gender and culture. Second, it will explicate the dilemma of the diasporic writer who walks a tight-rope between two (possibly more) cultures.

As the title indicates, the thesis will *describe* a transnational feminist aesthetic by *analysing* selected prose narratives by women writers of the South Asian diaspora. This process of describing through analysis will be organised in the following way. Each chapter covers a few writers situated in different diasporic locations, that is, in different geo-political and historical contexts. The chapters are structured generically (each deals with a different form of prose narrative), and are informed by theoretical paradigms appropriate to the particular genre. The first section of each chapter engages with the relevant theoretical and generic arguments. The second section goes on to demonstrate in detail the aesthetic pattern at work in a selected text. The third and final section then extrapolates to compare a selection of texts: special attention is given to the differences between writers from 'developed' countries such as Canada, the United States of America and the United Kingdom, and a 'developing' country such as South Africa. Particular attention will be paid to how different authors diverge and converge in their use of the aesthetic pattern. The organising principle running through the chapters is the argument that, local differences notwithstanding, a transnational, feminist aesthetic is being inscribed by women writers of the South Asian diaspora.

Chapter One introduces the main arguments, key issues, and context of the study. Thereafter the aesthetic pattern is presented and explained.

Chapter Two looks at women's life-writing. Recent scholarly debates about life-writing and fiction, the reading of autobiographical texts as part of new ethnographic projects, and literary self-representation and its relationship to

subjectivity are examined. The use of life-writing, especially the elements of memory and nostalgia, by South Asian diasporic women writers is appraised.

Chapter Three examines novels. The appropriation of the novel form, especially the *bildungsroman*, by women writers of the South Asian diaspora is theorised. A literary lineage of the South Asian diasporic women's novel is mapped out. In particular, the use of the novel form as a canvas for etching transformed or enabled female subjectivities is assessed.

Chapter Four focuses on short stories. The specific utilisation of the compressed narrative form by South Asian diasporic women writers is highlighted. This chapter pays particular attention to the perspectives and stylistic innovations contributed by South African South Asian women short story writers.

Chapter Five looks at the recent advent of the popular romance novel by women writers of the South Asian diaspora. This deployment of an economically successful, but what is considered an 'inferior' literary genre is questioned. The feminist potential of romance novels is explored, as well as the charges of exoticisation and cultural packaging which have been levelled at the authors.

A Note on Terminology

The following are problematic terms used consistently and advisedly in the thesis. To avoid repeated clarification and definition a note is offered here.

Woman: refers to both sex and gender; not a homogeneous term as it is partially culturally constructed; imbricated with categories such as race, class and religion.

Traditional: refers to practices which originate in and are still largely prevalent in South Asia; in some instances the term refers to orthodox cultural practices; the term is not meant to suggest pure origins or homogeneity.

Western: refers to what is indigenous to the metropolitan centres of mainly the UK, Western Europe and the USA; used heuristically and not because of a belief in an essential dichotomy between 'east' and 'west', 'orient' and 'occident', etc.

Patriarchy: refers to a system of social and cultural structures designed for/having the effect of controlling and subjugating women; systems vary from culture to culture; women are sometimes complicit in the structures.

Home: usually refers to the adopted or diasporic home; it is possible have many homes simultaneously.

Homeland: refers to the migrant's country and culture of origin; the single land of one's birth and initial affiliations.

Difference: does not refer to opposition, nor is it predicated on a fixed binarism; refers to multiplicity and can be integrated into a whole.

Chapter One

Argument, Key Issues, and Presentation of the Aesthetic Pattern

Section 1: Context, Limits, Aims

This thesis argues that women writers of the South Asian diaspora are inscribing a literary aesthetic which is recognisably feminist. In recent decades women of the South Asian diaspora have risen to the forefront of the global literary and publishing arena, winning acclaim for their endeavours. The scope of this literature is wide in terms of themes, styles, genres, and geographic location. Works range from grave novelistic explorations of female subjectivity, such as Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989a), to short story collections intent on capturing historical injustices, such as Jayaprada Reddy's *On the Fringe of Dreamtime and Other Stories* (1987), and Farida Karodia's *Against an African Sky and Other Stories* (1995). There has also been a rise in the production of autobiographies and memoirs which recount personal experiences of migration and female oppression, for example, Meena Alexander's *Fault Lines* (1992) and Sudha Koul's *Tiger Ladies: A Memoir of Kashmir* (2002). Other writers have opted for a contemporary re-scripting of the *bildungsroman* with either comic flair, such as Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996), or with elegant restraint, such as Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003). Writers have even ventured into the terrain of fantasy and utopian modes of writing. Suniti Namjoshi has received much critical attention for her texts which incorporate fables, fantasy and oral traditions to portray feminist utopias and lesbian relationships. The romance genre has also been appropriated by South Asian women writers. This genre has allowed writers to enter a popular literary

domain where they can still address culturally specific themes. Successful romance novels have been produced by Bharati Kirchner, *Shiva Dancing* (1998) and *Sharmila's Book* (1999), and more recently, Praba Moodley, *The Heart Knows No Colour* (2003). The grand epic novel, spanning generations and recording influential historical events, has been taken on by writers such as Shauna Singh Baldwin *What the Body Remembers* (1999) and Rani Manicka, *The Rice Mother* (2002), while younger generation authors have produced trendy, adolescent novels which deal with the dilemmas of diaspora, for example, Tanuja Desai Hidier's *Born Confused* (2002) and Ameena Meer's *Bombay Talkie* (1994).

The authors mentioned have widely divergent connections to South Asia. They are of Pakistani, Indian, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi or Kashmiri origin, and their religious and ethnic affiliations differ accordingly. Some are migrants themselves while others are descendents of colonial migrants. They now reside in far-flung diasporic locations: the USA, the UK, South Africa, Malaysia, and Canada. These writers also comprise a broad spectrum in terms of education and class background. The literature produced by these writers is therefore manifold, but significant similarities in narrative structural forms, thematic concerns and political orientation are also evident within this literature. This thesis selects just one portion of this vast literary corpus, that portion which can at once be described as transnational and feminist. The similarities identified across a range of narrative prose forms - novels, short stories, autobiographies, memoirs and romance novels - constitute what I shall call a transnational feminist aesthetic. This literature is examined as a site of cultural production where these writers imaginatively construct subjects who grapple with dislocation, adaptation, hybridisation and the legacy of oppressive traditions.

Imbricated in these themes of diaspora, is a prevailing engagement with feminist issues, such as the physical and mental abuse of daughters-in-law in traditional South Asian family structures. In addition to assessing the resistance this literature poses to hegemonic social and cultural formations, attention is paid to the risks, for instance, of self-exoticisation, inherent in this type of cultural representation and feminist polemic.

The thesis restricts its focus to literature by women writers who originate in South Asia. The region is comprised of different nations: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Sometimes, Afghanistan and Tibet are also included in this geographical marker. Although extremely diverse in terms of history, culture, and geography, these nations have come to be regarded as one geo-economic region by economists, scholars, politicians, and journalists. For instance, transnational corporations and networks, such as the World Bank, whose primary interest in the region is economic, determine the definition and delineation of the region according to resources and poverty levels. The region is rife with conflict, for example the territorial dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, but it is still recognised by academic institutions and scholars as a generally unified area which forms the basis for research projects and Area Studies courses.¹ Cultural institutions and networks, while not ignoring the vast differences within the region, acknowledge the region as integrated to some extent. There are countless websites and search engines on the World Wide Web dedicated to the region and to its diasporas. However, a website such as South Asia.Network, has seventy-two weblinks and two hundred and fifty-two categories in its database, testifying to the heterogeneity of the region.

The perception of the region as unified has its basis firstly and obviously in geography. Anthropologist Sandhya Shukla, whose main area of study is the diasporas of South Asia, insists that the term South Asia is “a geographical reference that does not have nation or religion in its root meaning [and which] constructs a highly provisional language” (2001: 553). But, as transnational and local writers and scholars reveal, the perception is also a cultural one, rooted in commonalities of belief, social structures, and tradition. For instance, the ubiquitously popular Bollywood feature film is watched by millions in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and has as much appeal in diverse diasporic communities around the globe. Other common cultural practices are arranged marriages and the concept of *dharma* which are pervasive in the region, irrespective of religion, class, or caste. *Dharma* is not aligned with a specific belief or act of worship but is better described as a code of conduct acceptable to a community. Embedded in this code of conduct is the “concept of *pativrata*, of the *dharma* towards the husband, the law of unquestioning obedience and fidelity in a marital relationship” (Jain and Agarwal 2002: 79-80). These commonalities, amongst others, are reflected in the literature examined in this thesis. For migrants, and residents of the region who are mindful of similarities, the term South Asia does provide a provisional language to refer to the region as a cultural nexus, and to talk about pertinent issues in a manner which is not divisive or confrontational. Nevertheless, the danger of the term flattening a diverse range of backgrounds or falsely homogenising ethnicity is a real one. The term is therefore used cautiously in this thesis when drawing links between authors with a shared historical ‘home’. Rather, the term gains its purchase from the commonalities expressed in the literature: the shared feminist concerns and a similar engagement with the poetics of displacement.

The first record of wide-scale migration from South Asia dates to the eighteenth century when the Dutch East India Company is known to have taken Indian slaves from Malabar, Coramandel and Bengal to Mauritius. With the abolition of slavery in the vast British Empire in 1833, a new demand for cheap labour was created. The next big wave of migration took place in the years 1844 to 1941 when British colonialists transported free labourers from South India to Malaysia to work on the rubber plantations. British colonialists also devised the Indentured Labour System which imposed contractual conditions upon the labourers who were recruited and transported to the colonies to work on sugar cane fields. Between 1860 and 1911 about 150 000 labourers and traders migrated from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat to the British colony, Natal, in South Africa. Indentured labourers from Punjab were also transported to Fiji to work on the sugar cane fields from 1879 to 1920. The demand for sugar in the west was so huge that, during the nineteenth century, more than half a million British Indians arrived in the Caribbean. They went to British Guiana, Trinidad, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, Suriname, Martinique, St. Lucia, Grenada and St. Vincent to work the sugar cane fields.ⁱⁱ

Not all migrants during this first phase of the South Asian diaspora were labourers. In the case of South Africa, the indentured labourers were followed by traders from, first, Mauritius, and then Gujarat. Furthermore, conditions for migrants in their respective diasporic locations differed greatly according to the local politics, the specific labour conditions of that location, and the class, caste, religion and gender of the migrants themselves. For example, migrants to Malaysia later experienced the Japanese occupation of Malaysia during the Second World War, and in South Africa, migrants who decided to settle permanently in South Africa were subject to anti-Indian laws and then to the infamous *apartheid* regime.

A second phase of the South Asian diaspora occurred in the twentieth century when South Asian migrants struck out for new locations in the USA, Canada, and the UK, in search of employment and better living conditions. In the middle of the twentieth century many South Asian migrants provided the labour that helped the reconstruction of war-torn Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. Substantial immigration to the UK dates principally from the 1950s and 1960s when the UK government encouraged immigration as a means of addressing labour shortages. Many people of South Asian descent also entered the UK as refugees from Kenya, Malawi or Uganda in the 1960s and 1970s. Prior to the Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1963, all Commonwealth citizens could enter and stay in the UK freely. During the 1960s, the UK government became concerned about the possible effect of large-scale immigration to the UK from the former colonies, and this concern culminated in the Immigration Act of 1971 which severely restricted rights of access to the UK, but as refugees; the African South Asians were accepted.

In the USA the first significant presence of South Asians can be traced back a hundred years when peasants from Punjab appeared on the west coast, seeking work in Washington's lumber mills and California's vast agricultural fields. In 1907, these early migrants were the victims of a racial riot in Bellingham, Washington, and henceforth concerted attempts were made by the Asiatic Exclusion League and other associations to prevent further immigration from India into the USA. The contemporary phase of migration to the USA has been made possible by the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 which allowed immigration from South Asian countries and which introduced family-reunification clauses into immigration legislation. The immigrants of the post-1965 era were educated, ambitious, and

upwardly mobile. Their children have now reached early adulthood and are joining the American workforce and tertiary education populations in increasing numbers. In Canada, South Asian immigration began with mainly Sikh men from the Punjab seeking employment in the sawmill industry in the early years of the twentieth century. But during the course of the twentieth century the influx of South Asians became more diverse: Hindus from Gujarat, Bombay and Delhi; Muslims from Pakistan and Bangladesh; Christians from Bangladesh; Parsis from Bombay; and Buddhists from Sri Lanka.ⁱⁱⁱ

In contrast to the nineteenth-century migrants, in recent years an increasing number of migrants have been professionals and academics, or scholars in search of tertiary education and training. But the mass import of skilled and unskilled labour from South Asia continues, as is evident by the large number of South Asian labourers in the Middle East. At the same time, as migration from South Asia continues, many of the first-phase diasporic communities are now populated by third-generation and fourth-generation South Asians. Moreover, many of today's diasporic South Asians are able to sponsor their relatives who wish to migrate, thus increasing diasporic populations, and they are also a lot more mobile than the first-phase migrants, making regular family trips to South Asia. Developments in technology, the growth of the mass media, and the advent of the World Wide Web connects immigrants with their homelands and with each other. So, despite the heterogeneity of the South Asian diaspora, its members are able to construct for themselves an integrated though evolving identity as transnational South Asians.

The women writers of the South Asian diaspora who have found prominence in recent decades are either second-phase immigrants, migrants who divide their lives

between far-flung homes (for example, Anita Desai, who lives in India, the UK and Germany), or descendants from first-phase immigrants, as is the case in South Africa (for example, Praba Moodley, who lives in Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa). The most prolific diasporic locations, in terms of this literary activity, are the USA, the UK, and Canada. In these countries, where the most successful publishing houses are located, and where the largest readership of English literature can be found, these writers have flourished and have won critical and popular acclaim. Notwithstanding the ascendancy of the metropolitan centres, writers from other diasporic locations such as South Africa and Malaysia share similarities in theme, technique, and merit, with their occidental sisters.

This thesis limits its focus to women writers. As will be argued in the following section, the selected literature by women writers of the South Asian diaspora exhibits a feminist commitment and a collective aesthetic which sets it apart from literature by male South Asian diasporic writers in general. This is not to say that all writing by women of the South Asian diaspora is exclusively feminist, nor that it all conforms to the aesthetic which is being described. Anita Desai's fiction, for example, covers a wide range of topics, sometimes extending beyond the ambit of South Asia or the South Asian diaspora. Desai also, in addition to creating compelling female characters, often focuses on the male psyche or the male diasporic experience, as in *Fasting, Feasting* (2000). In addition, there are male authors, albeit rarely, who employ elements of the aesthetic. Rohinton Mistry's transgressive and affirmative representation of widowhood in the short story "Condolence Visit" from his collection *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987) is one such noteworthy instance.

The thesis also restricts itself to the analysis of prose writing. This limit is set for two reasons. First, women writers of the South Asian diaspora who have published substantially and who have achieved recognition in recent decades have tended, on the whole, to write prose narratives. The favoured genres are short stories, novels, autobiographies, memoirs, and romance novels. Second, the thesis examines how the literary aesthetic employed to construct these narratives is specifically devised to inscribe liberated or empowered female subjectivities. Elleke Boehmer's *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (2005b) focuses on this literary strategy of "postcolonial women writers ... [being] intent upon speaking their identity through narrative" (190). This crucial link between the prose form of narrative and its interrogation and inscription of female subjectivities is explored in some detail in the thesis.

The final delineation of the thesis is the time frame. Works from the 1980s to the present only are selected for detailed analysis. It is largely in the last two decades that this literature has come into its own. This is due to a number of reasons, the most obvious being that there are now more women writers in English in the South Asian diaspora than ever before. A cursory glance at the South Asian Women Writers' (SAWNET) Bookshelf web page reveals that out of the seventy-odd writers listed, more than half are indicated as living in a diasporic location.^{iv} Needless to say, there are many examples of feminist literature produced by South Asian diasporic women writers before the 1980s. There are examples which date back to the colonial era, for example, Cornelia Sorabji's career memoir *India Calling* (1935, 2004): Sorabji studied law at Oxford and then became an advocate for women in *pardah*. However, it is only in the literature produced from the 1980s to the present that an overt pattern

of aesthetic elements is discernable. Another reason for this time frame is that it is only since the 1980s that these authors have become so widely published and read, and have received popular recognition and accolades from the academy alike. The numerous prestigious literary awards won by women of the South Asian diaspora is testimony to their eminent status in local and global literary arenas. In 1993 Githa Hariharan won the Commonwealth Prize for Best First Novel for her novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's debut collection of short stories *Arranged Marriage* (1995) won the American Book Award, the Bay Areas Book Reviewers' Award and the PEN Oakland Award in 1996. Another debut short story collection, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the coveted Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000. Further north, in Canada, Shauna Baldwin Singh's *What the Body Remembers* (1999) was a huge success, winning the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the Canada/Caribbean region, and being longlisted for the Orange Prize in fiction. Singh has also won the national Shastri Award for English prose in India. Prior to the publishing of her best-seller novel in 1999, Singh was the recipient of the 1995 Writer's Union of Canada Award for short prose and the 1997 Canadian Literary Award. More recently, British/Bangladeshi author, Monica Ali, made headlines when *Brick Lane* (2003) was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. These awards have increased the visibility and credibility of these writers, whilst rendering them sure-fire investments for publishers.

Such restrictions and delineation of focus as outlined above can have a two-fold effect: it can sharpen the focus, or it can result in the ghettoisation or exoticisation of this literature. Grouping literature by women of the South Asian diaspora in this way can be viewed as an imposition of a category, a labelling which

serves to set this literature apart and reinstate its authors as 'other' to mainstream, western, white, male (and female) authors. In other words, this study may be accused of reviving the colonialist binarisms which postcolonial and feminist scholars have laboured against. Indeed, this is a criticism which has already been levelled against some of these authors themselves. Accused of a new kind of orientalism, these authors have been described as merely trendy, flash-in-the-pan exhibitionists with very little literary merit, who are exploiting their traditional cultures and their status as 'Others' within the diasporic location. Sara Suleri has been quoted as saying, at the South Asian Literary Festival in Washington DC in 2001, "I would be of the notion that South Asia is hip and can attract publishers ... Those fashions come and die, and in five years, we will be hunting for Tasmanian writers".^v This thesis attempts to reveal those exploitative, self-exoticising tendencies which give this literature the reputation of being merely fashionable, whilst at the same time remarking on the lasting literary, political and social value of the literature.

The individual and collective literary merits of these writers are therefore a chief consideration, as are their tendencies to package cultural information for western consumption. As for the possible charge of ghettoisation, the authors and the literature are, in the first instance, responsible for this categorisation. A pattern of shared aesthetic elements *exists* within this literature, and it remains for this pattern to be described, examined and theorised. Some of the authors acknowledge and even champion this form of association, calling for more overt forms of networking. For example, Divakaruni, in an interview, strongly advocated "a writing community" of South Asian women who support, teach and endorse one another (Kamath: 1999 n.p.).

The notion of a separate women's writing or a women's literary tradition has also come under attack. Some schools of feminism see this type of separatism on the part of literary critics (continuing the practice of defining women's writing against male authored texts) as counter-productive, and authors who focus primarily on women's issues are criticised for perpetuating victimhood amongst women.

Nevertheless, this thesis aims to show that an informal guild exists, consisting of women writers from the South Asian diaspora. This guild, however tenuous in formal organisation, exhibits, in literary terms, a transnational feminist practice. It also aims to describe the literary aesthetic which binds these authors, revealing its overarching similarities and significant differences, as well as its literary lineage. This description will not only show an alternative feminism at work, one in which previously silenced subjects have found eloquent voices to enunciate themes and concerns specific to their gender, but it will also elucidate the dilemma of the diasporic writer who walks a tight-rope between two (possibly more) cultures. In addition, the pitfalls and shortcomings of such an aesthetic will be considered. In Section Two, I will examine and historicise the notion of women's writing, and attempt to justify my use of such a, possibly anachronistic, analytical tool.

Section 2: Key Issues

In outlining the context and the argument in the previous section, a number of key concepts have been raised and need to be clearly defined and explained. I want to raise three main questions and then offer a discursive answer to each of them:

1. What is understood by the term *transnational*? How does it relate to diaspora? How has it been theorised and what light does this theory shed on literature by women of the South Asian diaspora?
2. In the context of this thesis what does *feminist* mean, and how is the concept of women's writing being used?
3. What is meant by the term *aesthetic*? How does the term explicate the notion of cultural production, and the link between literary prose narratives and subjectivity?

Transnationalism and Diaspora

The terms transnational and diaspora have been used ubiquitously thus far to describe the writers, the subjects of their narratives and the aesthetic being described. These terms require clarification and definition. To explain their theoretical and interventionist usage in this thesis I draw from the work of social anthropologists, Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen.

Vertovec and Cohen, in the introduction to their book *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism* (2001) explore the "triadic relationship" (xiii) between migration, diaspora and transnationalism which they regard as a complex causal relationship. They observe the growth of diasporic populations' relation to nation states and recognise that policy makers see "multiculturalism as a threat to nation-building strategies" (*ibid.*). In contrast, they see that "diasporic strategies are also a response to the hostility of long-settled populations and a positive means of bridging national and transnational economies, cultures and societies" (*ibid.*). They base this view on their analysis of patterns of migration in the last thirty years. They conclude

that technology makes it possible for migrants “to have multiple localities and multiple identities, though these are sometimes challenged by local demands for cultural conformity and political loyalty” (2001: xvi). In the earlier discussion about the South Asian diaspora, it was noted that South Asian immigrants in the present day, because of growing prosperity and developments in technology, are able to maintain closer links with their homelands and with other South Asian immigrants in various nations around the globe, thus establishing an integrated, though provisional South Asian diasporic cultural identity.

Unlike Vertovec and Cohen, Paul Gilroy uses metaphorical language which alludes to the etymology of the word diaspora, to point out how complexly positioned the diasporic subject is in terms of the cultural forces which shape him or her:

It posits important tensions between here and there, then and now, between seed in the bag, the packet or the pocket and seed in the ground, the fruit or the body.

(Gilroy 2001: 208-209)

For Gilroy, the diaspora re-shapes how space and time are conceived in theories of cultural identity. The seeds in the pod are similar but when they travel through space and time and germinate in different locations with different, often adverse, conditions, they may differ as to how they grow. In this organic capacity for change and what he calls the “sameness within differentiation and the differentiation within sameness” (209), Gilroy sees the de-stabilising and subversive effects of diaspora. Both Vertovec and Cohen’s prosaic definition, and Gilroy’s more flamboyant one, point to the heterogeneity and tensions of diasporic cultures, which nonetheless cohere. Stuart Hall describes this succinctly as “Difference ... in and alongside continuity” (2001: 227). The literature by women of the South Asian diaspora is concerned with these tensions which impinge on the diasporic subject: the tensions between homeland and

diasporic location, between the local and the global, between the modern and the traditional. Mainly, these tensions are positively represented as creating choices which result in self-determining processes. Avta Brah, in her theorising of the concept of diaspora, has repeatedly asserted that “diaspora signals these processes of *multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries*” (1996: 194; emphasis in original). This multi-locationality of the diasporic subject, the seed whose root system traverses nations, continents and oceans, is the condition which gives rise to the feminist probing and articulations found in this literature.

Vertovec and Cohen begin their discussion of transnationalism by historicising the term. The term came into use in the study of “international relations in the context of the growth of international organisations and particularly relations between non-governmental bodies” (2001: xx). A distinction is made between the terms international and transnational: international refers to relations between state representatives or governments; and transnational refers to relations between citizens of different nation states. The interventionist nature of transnational relations or formations is highlighted by Vertovec and Cohen: transnationalism implies that “boundaries are being crossed, rather than maintained or negotiated”, and this results in a reconstruction of “the network of ties and associations that bind people, places and transactions together” (2001: xx-xxi). The formation of a South Asian diasporic identity can be attributed to such transnational relations, especially those conducted through the mass media or the World Wide Web. In brief, Vertovec and Cohen view transnationalism as a series of processes and sites for dynamic social and cultural change.

As a mode of cultural reproduction, Vertovec and Cohen argue, transnationalism results in the “fluidity of constructed styles, social institutions and everyday practices” which are described in terms of “syncretism, creolization, bricolage, cultural translation, and hybridity” (2001: xxiii). This positive effect of transnationalism is pertinent for my argument that women writers of the South Asian diaspora are engaged in constructing female subjectivities who grapple with dislocation and adaptation, and with the legacy of oppressive traditions. In other words, this literature captures the paradox which faces the female diasporic subject – the paradox of cultural continuity and change. But rather than disabling the subject, this paradox is shown to be enabling, as female subjects are represented as determining what will continue and what will change.

Vertovec and Cohen also provides a similar delineation for the term diaspora. Despite necessary overlaps with the account of transnationalism, this description of diaspora is helpful. Initially, Vertovec defines diaspora as

any population which is considered ‘deterritorialised’ or ‘transnational’ – that is, which has originated in a land other than which it currently resides, and whose social, economic and political networks cross the borders of nation-states, or indeed, span the globe.

(Vertovec and Cohen 2001: xvi)

The revitalisation of the term in recent years, according to Vertovec, is due to it being “a positive way of constituting a ‘hybrid’ cultural and political identity” (2001: xvii). So, the term diaspora, which was once used to connote exile and persecution, has now been positively re-defined to describe the site of hybrid subjectivities. However, Vertovec and Cohen do warn against the danger of misusing the term or using it too loosely. Qualifying adjectives, such as labour-diaspora, or South Asian diaspora,

contribute to the typologising and comparison of different diasporas. In light of the reinvention of the term, Vertovec and Cohen proffer three main meanings of diaspora.

First, diaspora may be regarded as a social form, that is, diaspora as an historical term which describes a social category with specific traits (2001: xvii). Second, diaspora may be regarded as a type of consciousness, that is, a focus on the “variety of experience, a state of mind and a sense of identity” among transnational communities, which is marked by a “dual or paradoxical nature” (2001: xviii). Here Vertovec is referring to the negative or positive identifications which a diasporic subject experiences. The diasporic subject might experience racism or exclusion and at the same time experience an affiliation with an historical heritage or contemporary world forces. There are many manifestations of diaspora as a type of consciousness in literature by women of the South Asian diaspora. For example, in *Brick Lane* (2003) Monica Ali examines Islamic fundamentalism amongst Bengali youths in London who declare their Britishness whilst simultaneously agitating against racism under the appellation the “Bengali Tigers”. Vertovec explains that these negative or positive identifications do not always consolidate identity. What may result are “fractured memories” or “a multiplicity of histories, ‘communities’ and selves”. This “multiplicity” used to be viewed as schizophrenic or pathological but it is being “redefined by diasporic individuals as a source of adaptive strength” (2001: xviii). Once more, Vertovec and Cohen choose to highlight the positive side of the schisms in diasporic consciousness. Arjun Appadurai, on the other hand, seems alarmed by what he calls “deterritorialization” by groups who “increasingly operate in ways that transcend specific territorial boundaries and identities”, in other words transnational or diasporic subjects (2000: 191). He calls for a radical disciplinary shift within

anthropology to cope with this phenomenon. Appadurai stresses, in this call, the role of the imagination: “the imagination has now acquired a singular new power in social life” (2001: 196-7). While it might be the case that ethnography must now look at these “complex, partly imagined lives” in a “deterritorialized” world (2001: 199), it seems myopic of Appadurai to suggest that the imagination has not always played a huge role in the fabrication of social lives. However, the very real danger of deterritorialized individuals and the manipulation of the imagination are more than apparent in the activities of transnational terrorist organisations.

Third, Vertovec and Cohen define diaspora as a mode of cultural production, that is seen as

the world-wide flow of cultural objects, images and meanings, resulting in variegated processes of creolization, back-and-forth transferences, mutual influences, new contestations, negotiations and constant transformations.

(2001: xviii)

This anti-essentialist and constructivist understanding of the nature of diaspora (more or less a reiteration of the definition of transnational as a mode of cultural production) is extremely useful to my argument regarding feminist cultural production by women of the South Asian diaspora. Drawing on diverse cultural resources themselves, these writers describe subjects in complex and complicated networks of cultural influence.

To summarise then, the term transnationalism, in its simplest guise, refers to the relations between citizens of different nation states, and the networks which link them. When used thus as an adjective to describe a feminist aesthetic, the term then points to the aesthetic being located in various nations across the globe. Diaspora, in its basic form, refers to a population which has originated in a land other than which it

currently resides. Used in this sense in the thesis, diaspora refers to the various populations of South Asians resident in different nations across the globe. But what the scholars mentioned in the above discussion emphasise is that transnationalism and diaspora, because of heterogeneity and diversity, give rise to a site for dynamic social and cultural change. At the same time, continuity is a necessary feature of this site. The co-existence of change and continuity then is also a defining element of transnationalism and diaspora. The tensions and struggles which arise from this paradox have a radical impact on the construction of female subjectivities as represented in this literature. Thus transnational and diaspora come to refer to not only the geographic multi-locationality of the feminist aesthetic, but also to its subversive nature.

Women's Writing and Feminism

In order to define the strand of feminism which is distinct to women writers of the South Asian diaspora, a few selected moments in feminist theory and practice that are relevant to this thesis will be highlighted and discussed. In short, the rationale here is that some aspects of western feminist literary theory are indispensable for this project, if criticism of them is borne in mind, and the developments of postcolonial feminism and transnational feminism are used in tandem with 'mainstream' feminist theory to describe a yet distinctive feminist literary aesthetic. Rather than reject one school out of hand or become partisan to any particular tradition, the most appropriate and enabling theoretical tools are selected and then synthesised.

Elaine Showalter's formulation of a distinct women's writing is valuable in understanding the categorisation of the literature under review. In her first major

work *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977), Showalter traces a female literary tradition from the 1840s to the 1970s. This tradition, Showalter asserts, is comprised of three historical phases: the feminine, the feminist, and the female. She describes the feminine phase as one of imitation, the feminist as one of protest, and the female phase is described as “a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward, freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity” (Showalter 1977: 13). The most significant achievement of this seminal work is that it addressed, and redressed, a noticeable neglect in literary studies. The works of lesser-known female writers were acknowledged, and the works of well-known female writers were revisited with attentive vigour. Henceforth, within the academy, the world of literary endeavour could not be perceived as a male domain.

At first glance, Showalter’s focus seems narrow and essentialist, based on what Chandra Mohanty describes as an “assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location” (Mohanty 1993: 392). In describing a female literary tradition of only British and mainly white, middle-class writers, and ignoring altogether the impact of imperialism on this tradition (even though the historical period covered in the book coincides with the main span of British imperialism), Showalter’s theory itself becomes imperialist. In “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1995) Gayatri Spivak mounts an attack on western feminist theory which could very well be a direct response to Showalter’s text:

It seems particularly unfortunate when the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism. A basically isolationist admiration

for the literature of the female subject in Europe and Anglo-America establishes the high feminist norm.

(Spivak 1995: 269)

This “high feminist norm”, as Mohanty has stated, universalises the notion *woman*, and, I argue, by extension, women’s writing. Other scholars who have received similar (and voluble) criticism are Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. Their 1979 text, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, also sets up a distinctively female literary tradition which is characterised by its bold reaction to patriarchal authority. Not only do Gilbert and Gubar over-emphasise the reactionary quality of women’s writing, they also privilege a white, western, middle-class subjectivity in their theorising. Susie Tharu and K Lalitha have remarked on their short-sightedness:

Gilbert and Gubar fix – and universalise – women and literary creativity in the image of the high subjectivist aesthetics of nineteenth-century Europe. History or geography can only touch their schemes tangentially as incident or as locale. Patriarchal ideology seems to bear no relation to class, race, or empire.

(Tharu and Lalitha 1991: 21)

The irony, of course, is that the title of their book refers to the Creole woman from the colonies who is the bestial, self-destructive ‘Other’ to the rational, self-determining Jane Eyre. In Gilbert and Gubar’s psychological reading of women’s literature, they would interpret the figure of Bertha Mason as a sign of Charlotte Brontë’s “uneasiness about literary creativity” – the madwoman is “usually in some sense the author’s double, an image of her own anxiety and rage” (1979: 78). On the other hand, Jean Rhys’s re-representation of Bertha Mason in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) maintains Bertha’s humanity, and indeed her sanity. Bertha Mason, however autobiographical the character may be, is accorded an autonomous subjectivity and

even the role of critic of imperialism by Rhys, whereas, as Spivak argues, neither Brontë, nor Gilbert and Gubar, accord Bertha Mason's subjectivity as colonised, female 'Other' the attention it deserves (Spivak 1995: 271). In formulating a theory about women's writing, Gilbert and Gubar do not venture beyond the confines of a white, middle class, western subjectivity, even when the literature presents them with fascinating *others*.

While bearing these critiques in mind, what is pertinent and enduringly valuable about Showalter's formulation of a female literary tradition is her description of the female phase as "a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward, freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity" (1977: 13). If this description is applied in a specific cultural and historical context, and not just read as the individual writer's search for self, it captures a valuable and formidable moment in feminist literary endeavour. The literature by women writers of the South Asian diaspora can, I argue, be characterised in terms of an analogous "female phase". But in historicising this literature, it is useful also to consider what elements of *imitation* (the feminine phase), of say classical South Asian literature, nineteenth century women's novels, or contemporary romance fiction are utilised by these writers, and what elements of *protest* (the feminist phase) are evident in their works.

Showalter went on to develop a theory which defines the "unique difference of women's writing" (1985: 249). Her essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (1985) describes a new mode of feminist criticism which studies "women *as writers*"

(Showalter 1985: 248). Here Showalter attempts to describe this mode of feminist criticism, which she terms “gynocritics”:

... its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition.

(Showalter 1985: 248)

Already, from this cursory description of this mode of feminist criticism, it is apparent why Showalter’s approach is pertinent. In order to describe a feminist literary aesthetic, the initial step is to study the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women – in this case that of the South Asian diaspora. Thereafter, the creative processes of these writers, their personal and collective careers, and a historicisation of this corpus of literature are incorporated into the description.

Showalter’s formulation of gynocritics is based on her exploration of four models of gender differentiation: the organic or biological model; the linguistic model; the psychoanalytic model; and the cultural model. The cultural model is the most influential – it describes the links between “women’s body, language, and psyche but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur” (1985: 259). Showalter asserts that a woman’s identity as a woman is to a large extent determined by her cultural context: “The ways in which women conceptualise their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions are intricately linked to their cultural environments” (1985: 259). Through this model Showalter acknowledges class, racial, national and historical differences between women, but she also asserts that a focus on women’s culture “redefines women’s activities and goals from a woman-centred point of view. ... The term implies an assertion of equality and awareness of sisterhood, the communality of women” (1985: 260-1). Viewed this

way, through the lens of Showalter's cultural model, women's writing is primarily about resisting cultural marginalisation and restraint, in favour of emancipated and empowered lives.

Useful as it is, such a cultural model could lead to a misplaced emphasis on the political imperatives and efficacy of women's writing. Rajeswari Rajan rightly points out the dangers of over-emphasising the political in women's writing, at the expense of its everyday and commonplace (and arguably, more effective) influence and value:

Surely women's writing must be viewed within, and as an aspect of, social practice as much as without it and as a form of resistance. Paradoxically, therefore, the attempt to stress the political in women's writing results in its divorce from historical everydayness and its attainment to the status of a heroic exceptionality.

(Rajan 1993: 3).

Rajan is arguing against the reifying of women's writing, setting it up as revolutionary or liberatory on an elevated political platform, and regarding it as primarily oppositional. So, rather than view women's writing as uniquely different or women as belonging to a discrete women's culture, as Showalter's theory implies, Rajan suggests that it is more useful and valuable to regard literature by women as both resistant and integral to the cultures they represent. An examination of writing by women of the South Asian diaspora has to, at times, look beyond "women's cultural situation" (Showalter 1985: 266) to other factors which determine meaning in the text. Notwithstanding its concern with women's issues, writing by women of the South Asian diaspora is not just a by-product of sexism or a reactive political discourse.

Showalter's lasting contribution to feminist criticism is to place emphasis on "scholarship concerned with woman as the producer of textual meaning, [and] with the history, themes, genres and structures of literatures by women" (1985: 128). Here, refinements of earlier programmatic statements are evident in Showalter's use of the plural "literatures" and the attention given to "history and structures of literatures by women". Most importantly, the emphasis is on the woman writer as agent, and the analysis of the aesthetics ("themes, structures, genres") of women's writing. It is significant that in a revised edition of *A Literature of Their Own* (1999) Showalter displays this extended form of gynocriticism by adding a chapter which looks briefly at "the work of contemporary black, Caribbean, and Asian women novelists in Britain" (1999: xxv). What is also valuable about gynocriticism is that it shifts the focus from the past and past injustices, to the present and present achievements, to shine a spotlight on "the newly visible world of female culture" (Showalter 1985: 131). This spotlight should also illuminate the differences within female culture and women's writing. Nevertheless, Showalter's formulation of gynocritics points to the necessity of examining history, structure, themes, genre and the role of the writer as agent, if the project of describing the achievement of South Asian diasporic women's writing is to be accomplished.

Showalter's concern with women's language is an advance in western feminism which postcolonial feminist scholars seem largely to have ignored. Trinh T. Minh-ha's call for the "the unlearning of institutionalized language" (1995: 264) is not dissimilar to Showalter's plea, in her formulation of the linguistic model, for language to be purged of sexism (1985: 252-6). Women writers were warned, by Minh-ha to not use the language of patriarchy for their critical and creative

endeavours, and a separate and distinctively female literary tradition was advocated. Similarly, Julia Kristeva, in her overview of feminist theory, in “Women’s Time” (1986), describes a “third phase” in feminist theory which is primarily concerned with the construction of female subjectivity through language. Informed by poststructuralist theories of language, Kristeva, and other French feminists (Hélène Cixous, for example), argued that language privileges the ‘masculine’ and suppresses the ‘feminine’. It is for this reason that Cixous made the controversial appeal to women to “write the body”:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.

(Cixous 1975: 245)

Cixous’s theory of *écriture féminine* was strongly denounced for reinstating biological determinism as the basis for gender difference, but in fact, what Cixous is arguing for is women’s re-creation in language of “their own original relationship with the excluded and negated subjectivity located in their bodies” (Ashcroft 1989: 28). Although Cixous tends to ignore historicised cultural inflections and to generalise about ‘femaleness’ and the ‘female body’, she is astute in pointing out that the act of writing itself is a form of recovery. For many South Asian women, to write about intersubjective female relationships, women’s bodies and female sexuality, is an attempt to reclaim an autonomous relationship with their bodies and with each other. This agency with relation to the constitution of subjectivity in language, so championed by western and postcolonial feminists alike, is one of the principal themes in writing by women of the South Asian diaspora.

I argue that Showalter is overly optimistic in her declaration of a “newly visible world of female culture” (1985: 260), especially when one considers the invisibility or silence of so many women around the world in the early 1980s (or, for that matter, today), when Showalter was formulating her theory of women’s writing. The main thrust of postcolonial feminist theorising is that “female culture” is heterogeneous. A single, unitary, homogeneous ‘woman’ does not exist. The status and treatment of women varies from culture to culture, and within cultures class, caste, education, marital status, sexuality, fertility, religion, skin colour - to mention just the obvious factors - further determine the position of women within that specific context. In the last two decades scholars, in particular, feminist literary critics, have come to appreciate an intersection between feminist theory and postcolonial studies which insists on the primacy of the notion of ‘difference’. Firdous Azim, for example, re-writes the history of the English novel by focusing on categories of subjective and social division within novels. In her book *The Colonial Rise of the Novel* (1993), Azim shows how the birth of the novel coincided with the European colonial project and how it partook of and was part of a discursive field concerned with the construction of a universal and homogenous male subject. As a feminist literary critic, she therefore argues for the “notion of gender differentiation to include other fragmenting categories that cross over and augment the gender hierarchies” of that time (Azim 1993: 215). These gender differences, and “other fragmenting categories” not only explode the notion of a universal and homogenous male subject, but that of a universal female subject too.

As mentioned earlier, in the late 1980s, western feminist scholars, like Elaine Showalter, were strongly criticised for universalising the term ‘woman’ and imposing

a western framework (with a western critical subject) on all feminist scholarship. It was at this key moment that a momentous intersection between feminist studies and postcolonial studies occurred. Postcolonial studies, which has served to critique colonial and neo-colonial practices, with its multi-disciplinary approach took on western feminist theory for its neglect of historical and racial nuances, and its big-sister approach to different feminisms. Similarly, some feminist scholars demanded a greater focus on gender within postcolonial studies which tended to spotlight race and ignore other categories of subjectivity. The result of this intersection, or collision, was the birth of feminist postcolonial thought.

Thus Chandra Mohanty strongly advocated “strategic coalitions across class, race, and national boundaries”, to resist the “global hegemony of Western scholarship” (1993: 389, 391). Scholars were urged by Mohanty to consider global economic and political frameworks; more specifically, she called for the examination of economic relations between “First World Woman” and “Third World Woman” (1993: 391). Some twenty years on, we can see that she pre-empted the route transnational feminist practitioners would take. Advancements in feminist scholarly practice reflect this conceptual shift, and certainly the creative writing by women of the South Asian diaspora depicts transnational women in various economic and cultural positions. A fine example of such an exploration of women’s relative economic positions is found in Ali’s *Brick Lane* (2003), which represents diasporic Bangladeshi women both as factory workers and entrepreneurs in the UK, as well as the plight of impoverished women in Bangladesh who are driven to prostitution.

In addition to promoting the move away from Eurocentric theorising, and problematising the category 'woman', postcolonial feminist scholars also re-defined the notion of 'difference'. Trinh Minh-ha defines difference as "not opposed to sameness, nor synonymous with separateness ... [D]ifference is not what makes conflicts. It is beyond and alongside conflict ... Difference can be a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance" (1995: 372-373). Here, in an anti-essentialist move, Minh-ha is saying that difference is not opposition, not predicated on a fixed binarism. Her view is not dissimilar to Kristeva's (earlier) view of the multiplicity of the self pointing to a process of identification which integrates difference. Kristeva describes the self's "capacity to explore the entire range of meanings possible, including those which create meaning and those which multiply it, pulverize it and make it new" (1974: 99). For the diasporic consciousness intent on synthesising different cultures, geographies and political loyalties, the key challenge, as indicated in the literature, is contending with "[D]ifference ... in and alongside continuity" (Hall 2001: 227).

Within the literature of the South Asian diaspora this paradox of cultural continuity alongside cultural change is passionately and convincingly evoked. Differences between the homeland and the diasporic home pose serious challenges to the migrant, and the process of adaptation and assimilation is fraught with the tensions of these differences. Besides recording these processes, the authors focus on the self's "capacity to explore the entire range of meanings possible" (Kristeva 1974: 99) in order to forge new subjectivities. The notion of 'difference' is also crucial when considering the diversity within this putative category of writing. These writers are of diverse ethnic, religious, caste, linguistic and racial backgrounds. They have migrated

to different diasporic locations, under very different conditions, where they are confronted with further geographic, climatic, culinary, linguistic, political and economic differences. Therefore, obvious differences in the treatment of similar themes are evident. Furthermore, they experience the differentiation of gender within patriarchy in their traditional cultures and in the cultures of their host communities. Again the feminist concerns may be similar, but the emphases and renderings of feminist themes differ from one author to the next, and from one diasporic location to another. What these works undoubtedly do have in common is the desire to represent female subjects who are struggling to integrate these differences.

The warnings of postcolonial feminist pioneers did not go unheeded. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, in their 1994 work *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, tackle many of the issues raised by Mohanty, Minh-ha *et al.* Grewal and Kaplan continue the interrogations against the hegemony of mainstream, western theory, but they do this by affirming differences between feminist scholars, and then by widening the lens and moving beyond ‘First World’/‘Third World’ binarisms to consider feminism in a new global terrain. In this way Grewal and Kaplan have posited a significant advance on the foundational work of earlier feminist scholars who began by considering specific cultural contexts and the significance of difference. In particular, Grewal and Kaplan examine “how postmodernisms and postcolonialisms are variously deployed by feminists and others in different locations”, and this provides them “with an opportunity to trace the direction and flows of information and ‘theory’ in transnational cultural production and reception” (1994: 2). Grewal and Kaplan’s transnational feminist practice informs my approach to this literature. To reiterate, these are writers who themselves are multiply positioned, and their writing reflects this multiplicity and cross-

fertilisation of information. This writing often inscribes transnational female subjects who are in a state of flux, defiant of being pinned down, either physically or culturally. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989a) is one such subject who constantly metamorphoses in the course of the novel as her migratory path progresses further west. Also, Grewal and Kaplan's consideration of transnational cultural *production* has stimulated an auxiliary concern about popular prose writing by women of the South Asian diaspora, such as the romance novel, and the commodification of South Asian culture they contain (See Chapter Five).

In addition to offering a challenge to one of the bulwarks of modernity, the discourses of nationalism and national identities, this literature and its specific feminist concerns can be productively compared to the literary and feminist strategies of other diasporic women writers, for example, the literature by women of the African diaspora. Gina Wisker's book *Post-colonial and African-American Women's Writing: A Critical Introduction* (2000) is an example of such transnational feminist comparative literary criticism. In this book Wisker devotes a chapter to "Writing by Women from the Indian Sub-Continent" which includes a section on "Diasporan Writers". Elleke Boehmer's latest critical work, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narration in the Postcolonial Nation* (2005b) strongly supports this kind of transnational feminist practice which

involves making constant negotiations between and across boundaries, and between the particular and the universal, in order to address the dyssymmetries of power that impact on women's lives.

(Boehmer 2005b: 191)

Transnational feminist practitioners, according to Grewal and Kaplan, are guided by “empathy”, “solidarity and coalition” (1994: 5). Although not entirely clear on the nature of subject matter and the practical details of “solidarity and coalition”, their stance is valuable and progressive for feminist studies because they emphasise the importance of different locations and diverse affiliations within a global framework. A self-proclaimed and proselytising transnational feminist practitioner, Constance S. Richards, clarifies this stance in the preface to her work *On the Winds and Waves of Imagination: Transnational Feminism and Literature* (2000):

A transnational feminist approach to literature must be able to address how gender collides with race, national origin, and class in women’s oppression and how women participate in and resist their own oppression and the oppression of other women.

(Richards 2000: viii)

Although Richards’s definition of transnational feminism is a re-articulation of earlier formulations which recognised the concomitant categories of class, race, ethnicity, and religion as constituting subjectivity, she does posit an advance in that she points to the complicity of women in their own and others’ oppression. This complicity is a strong theme in the literature by women of the South Asian diaspora. In particular the relationships between mothers and daughters, and mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are played out in often harrowing detail.

Richards’s project, which comments on texts about “female self-construction of identity, the shifting alliances of identity politics, and the ability to strategically deploy subjectivities as an act of empathy and solidarity” (2000: xi), is an instructive example of transnational feminist practices. In her wide-ranging interrogation of identity construction in feminist literature, in which she sweeps from Virginia Woolf

to Zoë Wicomb and Alice Walker, she displays sensitivity to historical specificities, the tensions between local and global feminist concerns, and an appreciation of intersubjective female relationships. Richards's methods therefore strongly inform my own, which seek to comment on how women writers of the South Asian diaspora, either collectively or uniquely, represent female agency, female bonding and the impact of diaspora on female subjectivities.

In my usage, then, the term feminist describes the achievement of women writers of the South Asian diaspora who, in their respective cultural contexts, seek to resist and challenge patriarchal oppression through the act of writing. In their attempts to constitute subjectivity in language, these writers further the feminist aim of reclaiming women's autonomy. This literature is categorised as women's writing because it draws attention to women as producers of textual meaning. Further, this women's writing draws attention to both the differences *and* solidarity between women. Despite living in diverse locations across the globe, these writers nevertheless engage with a shared historical 'home', South Asia, and with distinct feminist concerns. The terms feminist and women's writing attain most purchase when the range of empowered female subjectivities, inscribed through the use of a common literary aesthetic which has been forged across national, cultural and historical boundaries, are considered.

Aesthetics

A clear exposition of the use of the term aesthetic is required in order to validate my argument that literature by women of the South Asian diaspora inscribes a transnational feminist literary aesthetic. It is constructive to trace the evolution of the

term from its original usage in ancient Greek philosophy, to its current usage in diaspora theory and feminist literary criticism. According to Terry Eagleton, the original Greek concept – *aisthesis* – which described the mechanics involved in creating conditions for sensuous perception, was part of “a discourse of the body, and in its first formulation referred to the whole region of human perception and sensation” (Eagleton 1990: 13). However, within literary studies the term is most commonly associated with a nineteenth century European movement, mainly in France, concerned with the supreme value of art and its detachment from life. Art was considered to have no moral, religious, political, or educational purpose. The French writer Théophile Gautier popularised the doctrine ‘*l’art pour l’art*’ (‘art for art’s sake’) in the early nineteenth century, and this doctrine was taken up by Symbolist poets and painters, and writers such as Gustav Flaubert. This movement also flourished in England in the late nineteenth century, where an emphasis on form rather than content in art remained influential. Eagleton sums up this particular usage of the concept as follows:

Art was extricated from the material practices, social relations and ideological meanings in which it is always caught up, and raised to the status of a solitary fetish.

(1990: 21)

The idea behind the nineteenth century movement developed from eighteenth century philosophical thought on the subject of beauty. German philosopher Immanuel Kant's view that objects can only be judged by their own criteria and not by anything external to them, outlined in his major work *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), elevated aesthetics above the mere sensations of the human body (*aesthesis*). For Kant, aesthetic appreciation of beauty - or “taste” as he referred to it - is to be

distinguished from other pleasures by virtue of its being disinterested. Kant argued that taste

is the ability to judge an object, or way of presenting it, by means of liking or disliking devoid of all interest. The object of such a liking is called beautiful.

(Kant 1790: 53)

This notion, that “taste for the beautiful is disinterested and free, since we are not compelled to give our approval by an interest, whether of sense or reason” (Kant 1790: 52), led to the reifying of beauty in art and the perceived split between life and art, which prevailed amongst aestheticians in the nineteenth century. For most of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century aesthetics was associated with what is perceived as fine, beautiful, and of good taste, hence the term’s collusion with the concepts of ‘high’ or ‘elite’ culture.

In recent scholarship, however, postcolonial and postmodernist theories in particular, the term aesthetics has come full circle to be rejoined with the mundane and the material. In the age of mass media and popular culture, the move has been away from treating the concept as a detached appreciation of an object towards an understanding of how art forms are consumed and created in a popular context. The ideological crucibles in which art is created are now part of the concern of aestheticians. For example, the role of art in the imperialist projects of Europe and in the emancipation of previously subjugated peoples, is now the subject of critical enquiry for scholars concerned with aesthetics. Aesthetics is no longer the domain of the elite or the innocent.

One of the most influential twentieth century scholars on the subject of aesthetics is Pierre Bourdieu. His collection of essays *The Field of Cultural*

Production: Essays on Art and Literature (1993) addresses many of the key issues that have preoccupied literary, art, and cultural criticism in the late twentieth century: aesthetic value and judgement, the social contexts of cultural practice, the role of intellectuals and artists, and the structures of literary and artistic authority. His earlier book, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984), a response to the Kantian aesthetic of disinterest, offers a powerful explication of ‘taste’, in all its meanings from preferences in art, fashion, and furniture to taste in food. In this work Bourdieu interrogates ‘taste’ as an elitist, social tool of domination, and by doing so he exposes the role aesthetics plays in power relations. In this view, the term aesthetics is no longer divorced from the social conditions of production, circulation, and consumption of artistic works. Further, according to Bourdieu, literary works may be viewed as “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1999: 188), which, like economic capital, is exchanged and interchanged according to social relations of power. In other words, the symbolic power of literature is used to create and legitimate (and challenge) social hierarchies. For the purposes of this thesis, the notion that aesthetics is constitutive of symbolic capital is fundamental. It points to the power of literature to bring about social change, and moreover it points to the marriage of beauty and politics in art.

Another contemporary scholar who is concerned with the role of aesthetics in social and cultural production is Paul Willis. Willis focuses on “symbolic creativity” as integral to everyday life, “the daily production and reproduction of human existence” (1990: 9). He is adamant that “symbolic creativity” is not confined to “a free-floating, imaginative realm” populated by “useless things” and “art for art’s sake” (1990: 10). In bridging the cleavage between art and life, Willis recognises a

basic imaginative capacity for creating meaning, identities and worlds. Closely related to and building on the concept of “symbolic creativity” is Willis’s exposition of “grounded aesthetics”:

This is the creative element in a process whereby meanings are attributed to symbols and practices and where symbols and practices are selected, reselected, highlighted and recomposed to resonate further appropriated and particularised meanings. ... Grounded aesthetics are the yeast of common culture.

(Willis 1990: 21)

Willis’s emphasis is on the dynamics of culture, the rising of new cultural forms and the power of symbolic activities. But this new formulation of aesthetics does not altogether discard “principles of beauty”; rather, Willis regards principles of beauty as “qualities of symbolic activities rather than as qualities of things; as ordinary aspects of common culture, rather than as extraordinary aspects of uncommon culture” (1990: 22). In this way, Willis rescues the term aesthetic from its association with elite forms and ideological hegemony. Most pertinent is Willis’s connection between identity and “grounded aesthetics”, which he claims can be crucial to creating and sustaining individual and group identities and “even to cultural survival of identity itself” (1990: 2). I argue, drawing on this conception of aesthetics, that literature by women of the South Asian diaspora, is a form of “grounded aesthetics”. Closely linked to lived reality and the minutiae of everyday life, this literature is a means of coming to terms with cultural dislocation. By combining the principles of literary aesthetics with the social and political imperatives of diaspora and feminism, this literature inscribes a distinct transnational feminist aesthetic.

Miki Flockemann, a South African literary scholar, also uses Willis's theory of "grounded aesthetics" as a basis for her description of a specific diasporic women's literary strategy:

the aesthetics of transformation is concerned primarily with representations of transformative processes in relation to gendered subjectivities, geo-political identities and hegemonic language and knowledge systems.

(Flockemann 1998: 9)

Flockemann explains that such literary representations of transformative processes offer utopian glimpses of an alternative world. These representations, for example of empowered female subjectivities, have substantial contestatory and liberatory value for both writer and reader. Most crucially for my argument, Flockemann views "the textual strategies employed here, particularly in relation to symbolic acts of creativity as a form of personal and cultural survival" (1998: 12-13). Taking this as a conceptualisation of the term aesthetic furthers the argument that women writers of the South Asian diaspora represent transformative processes through acts of "symbolic creativity". In narrating the experiences of diaspora the writers represent transformation, and the act of writing is in itself a form of cultural transformation for these women writers. Their "symbolic creativity" is a form of survival, a means of coming to terms with their changing worlds and identities, and in doing so, a distinct aesthetic is invoked and inscribed.

Specifically, within diaspora theory the marrying of aesthetics and politics is highly significant for the understanding of cultural production and identity. Paul

Gilroy suggests that, when studying diasporic communities, we should re-think

cultural expression not simply as a succession of literary tropes and genres, but as a philosophical discourse which refuses the modern, occidental separation of ethics and aesthetics, culture and politics. (Gilroy 2001: 12)

For Gilroy, the term aesthetics combines an evaluation of literary tropes and genres, ethics, culture and politics. Like Willis and Flockemann, Gilroy sees aesthetics as intrinsically linked to cultural identity: “The aesthetic experience is not just a compensatory one, but a favoured vehicle for communal self-development” (Gilroy 1993:124). Although chiefly concerned with the expressive forms of diasporic communities, Gilroy echoes Willis’s sentiment about the relationship between art and life:

In contradistinction to the Enlightenment assumption of a fundamental separation between art and life, these expressive forms reiterate the continuity of life and art. They celebrate the grounding of the aesthetic with other dimensions of social life.

(Gilroy 1993: 57)

Together with other diaspora scholars such as Steven Vertovec, Robin Cohen and Stuart Hall, Gilroy’s primary focus and source of scholarly excitement is the syncretism, creolisation, bricolage, cultural translation, and hybridity which diaspora makes possible. Susheila Nasta also celebrates the creative fecundity of diaspora, referring to “the heroic potential of migrancy as a metaphor for a ‘new’ form of aesthetic freedom” (Nasta 2002: 4). Central to this thesis is the view that women writers of the South Asian diaspora exhibit a new form of aesthetic freedom by fulfilling the heroic potential of migrancy. That is to say, they collapse the boundaries between art and life with their personalised fiction, and they transform their dislocation into courageous defiance.

Tharu and Lalitha, champions of Indian women’s writing, also use the term aesthetic in a similar but much broader way in their introduction to *Women Writing India: 600 BC to the early 20th century* (1991). They believe that their anthology initiates the development of an aesthetic which

... does not lessen discontinuity, dispossession, or marginality but dramatizes and clarifies it. It is an aesthetic that must undo the strict distinctions between the literary and the social text, abdicate the imperious functions it has been charged with over the last century and a half, and redesign itself to orchestrate contradictions and cherish the agonistic forms of insurgency and resistance. The promise it holds out is that of a critical practice that is by no means restricted to literature ... It is also an aesthetic that holds the promise of the many worlds that will appear as the old universalism fades and begins to look dull and simplistic ...

(Tharu & Lalitha 1991: 36)

They too dismantle the divide between art and life and stress the political promise of aesthetics. More especially, Tharu and Lalitha see scholarly discourse (their own in particular), as well as creative writing, as aesthetic forms. Their use of the term is akin to the notion of a literary tradition, and it is used here so broadly as to suggest that it is an umbrella term for all Indian women's writing from 600 BC onwards, as well as the criticism it generates. The difference between a literary tradition and aesthetics, according to Tharu and Lalitha's formulation, is the interventionist nature of aesthetics. They argue that aesthetic forms are made, by their creators, to perform a whole range of political activities. However, Tharu and Lalitha are silent on the subject of literary activities, the principles of beauty which also constitute an aesthetic form. The lesson to be learnt from Tharu and Lalitha's lapse of rigour is to remember that the term incorporates both the political and the *literary*.

It is through the manipulation of literary devices, the stylistic elements of narrative, that authors create literature with the potential for political insurgency, rather than mere propaganda with literary pretensions. Rajeswari Rajan voiced a similar criticism of Tharu and Lalitha in her review of the anthology:

One of the most insistent beliefs that informs this project [Tharu and Lalitha's] is the declaration that the recovery of women's writing, feminist literary criticism, and

writing by women itself, are political rather than aesthetic activities. The unrelenting opposition that the editors maintain between the aesthetic and the political as separate cognitive structures plays not only into the opposition dominant/subaltern, but also into other oppositions between form and content, scripts and life-stories, literary conventions and reality, art and experience, even “writing” and women, which are made to correspond to it.

(Rajan 1993: 2)

Rajan is perhaps too harsh when she accuses Tharu and Lalitha of relentlessly separating aesthetics and politics, because the gist of their formulation of aesthetics is precisely to wed aesthetics and politics; their anthology of Indian women’s writing signals the recognition of an aesthetic of immense political influence. Rather, Tharu and Lalitha’s failure is to not express exactly what they mean by aesthetic and how it comes to have such political value. They give no literary details of the aesthetic itself but hold only a spotlight over its potential for political change.

This thesis hopes to address this lapse. As I use the term, then, aesthetic refers to a literary strategy, comprised of a pattern of stylistic devices combined with political inclinations, which together construct prose narratives. These prose narratives are the result of “symbolic creativity” which is at the root of cultural production and which engages with social reality. The aesthetic forms which constitute culture marry art and life, the beautiful and the political. The literary strategy of the women writers of the South Asian diaspora inscribes an aesthetic which is assessed according to principles of literary worth and political efficacy. This aesthetic, despite varying inflections, has a discernible pattern which has yet to be critically described.

Section 3: The Aesthetic Pattern

What follows is a brief presentation of the South Asian transnational, feminist aesthetic. Based on a reading of autobiographies, memoirs, novels, and short stories by authors from the USA, the UK, Canada and South Africa, these are the aesthetic elements (with some overlap) which I have identified as common to many of these works:

1. autobiographical or memoir mode of writing, use of memory and nostalgia

Much of this literature is drawn from personal experiences and deeply intimate concerns. Thus it often relies on personal memory and lived reality, and sometimes on the synthesising of facts, events, people, settings from the author's own life, with imagined/fictional characters and events. This overt blending of fiction with autobiography results in a hybrid literary form which has found particular favour amongst some South Asian diasporic women writers.

Often these narratives are told with grand narratives of colonialism and partition in the background. In the South African context the most common grand narrative is *apartheid*. Many of the memoirs and autobiographies make conscious use of memory, for example, the insertion of childhood anecdotes. These are intimate narratives, which sometimes give the impression that they have purgative value, as well as operating as a record or a tribute. This personal element affects the tone of the writing, imbuing it sometimes with a mournful or wistful mood, and sometimes with a celebratory, commemorative mood.

2. *everyday sensuous imagery, domestic scenes and spaces*

Constituting a form of “grounded aesthetics”, this literature highlights small objects and events, everyday social relations and the beauty of the mundane. The richness of home living and the domestic spaces of women are evoked. In these spaces women are shown to have knowledge, expertise, traditional skills, here they are free from oppression, albeit temporarily. These spaces are offered in contrast to other male-dominated, often public, spheres where women are either silenced and abused, or complicit in the structures which suffocate their gender. Also, because many of the characters are diasporic subjects, there is a strong emphasis on mobility, movement through space, movement from location to location.

3. *praise of female relatives, especially the older female figure who is revered, even mythologised, family structures and dynamics*

In what might be described as a typical feature of women’s writing, these authors represent female characters with strength, wisdom, capacity for suffering and a talent for storytelling. Sometimes the praise or reverence is in the form of characterisation (the older female relative, usually a grandmother or widowed aunt is mentor to the female protagonist), sometimes it takes the form of overt tribute to an actual relative, living or dead. Also, power dynamics within the traditional patriarchal family structures come under the spotlight. In particular, woman-to-woman relationships within families are intensely dramatised.

4. *the use of mythology, ancient literature, traditional religious practices, descriptions of ritual and ceremony*

This is used effectively, sometimes effusively to capture the richness of a culture, and to enact its preservation, to allude to esoteric concerns, to set up contrasts, or to zoom in on sensory details. The themes of cultural continuation and perpetuation are thus highlighted. Often in this literature references are made to deities, local legends, ancient myths, Hindu or Islamic scriptures or musical traditions. These embedded narratives are not mere backdrops to the main narrative. They are interwoven with the narratives of the characters' lives, they have an aetiological or ethnographic value, and they reveal the tentacles which bind South Asian women to their cultural origins. In many instances, storytelling itself is thematised in these narratives. There are writers who emphasise their South Asian literary influences, thereby affirming and elucidating their traditional homes. In some instances when the descriptions or intertextuality have been unsubtle and intrusive in terms of the narrative, these authors have been accused of cultural commodification and exoticisation.

5. *the theme of marriage, the woman's body and female sexuality*

The prevalence of this theme is indicative of the feminist commitment of the literature. There are countless narratives of varying lengths and merits which detail the hardship, and often the horrors, of arranged marriages. The woman's body as a site of control and violence is vividly and emotively portrayed, for example through the relationship between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law, who, in contrast to the revered grandmother or aunt, has become a stock 'baddie' character in this literature and a symbol of the internalisation of patriarchal law and complicity.



6. *cultural continuity or the preservation of a cultural heritage versus change, dislocation and adaptation in the diasporic location, the paradox of continuity and change*

Some of this literature reveals a profound anxiety about dislocation and adaptation to the host culture. Here the primary focus is the diasporic condition, and gender becomes a secondary but imbricated consideration. The diasporic subject, as represented in this literature, suffers from the tension caused by multiple affiliations but is also shown to develop in new and invigorating ways as a result of this multiplicity.

These formal and stylistic elements are used in the thesis as a basis for the description of an overarching aesthetic in this body of literature. They are also used to organise and shape readings of both individual texts and contrapuntal readings of groups of texts. Hopefully, the end result of this description and analysis will be a convincing and comprehensive academic inauguration of a vigorous and feisty literary cache which is rapidly assuming a position of prominence in the global literary arena.

End Notes

ⁱ For example: the Department of South Asia, Faculty of Languages and Cultures, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; the History of the South Asian Diaspora course offered at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut; the archive, Publications on Language and Culture of Indian/South Asians in the United States, compiled by the Center for India Studies, Stony Brook University; the SAJA Stylebook for Covering South Asia & the South Asian Diaspora, a project based at Columbia University; and the literary archive, South Asian Diaspora literature in English compiled by Irene Joshi at the University of Washington Libraries.

ⁱⁱ For historical sources see: (<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/SouthAsia/overview.html>); <http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/epc/wshn/number21.html> (World Sugar History Newsletter)

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.lib.Berkeley.edu/SSEAL/SouthAsia/overview.html>
asia (Accessed 5 May 2004).

^{iv} SAUNET Bookshelf web page <http://www.sawnet.org/books/authors.php>
(Accessed 6 June 2003).

^v Sara Suleri quoted in Thrupkaew, Noy. 2002. "The God of Literary Trends", *AlterNet*. Posted June 24, 2002. (<http://www.alternet.org/story/13448>) (Accessed 4 May 2003).

Chapter Two

Life-Writing: Migrating Selves

Section 1: Women's Life-Writing

Women writers have made a huge impact on the previously male-dominated genre of life-writing.¹ Even though the genre itself is now difficult to define because of its overlap with other forms of fictional and non-fictional writing, it can be situated on “the borderline between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary” (Cosslett, Lury & Summerfield 2000: 1). In the past, however, the genre was largely associated with the centrally situated male subject of western humanism who made public his life-story and achievements. The teleology underpinning such normative life-writing was the authoritative attainment of a coherent, triumphant, individual selfhood. Sidonie Smith has commented on how women's life-writing is a counter-claim of authority:

The mythologies of gender conflate human and male figures of selfhood, aligning male selfhood with culturally valued stories. Autobiography is itself one of the forms of selfhood constituting the idea of man and in turn promoting that idea. Choosing to write autobiography, therefore, she unmasks her transgressive desire for cultural and literary authority.

(Smith 1987: 50)

Smith's comment is valuable because it does not point to inherent differences between men's and women's life-writing, but rather to the appropriation of the genre by women writers. Women writers, by experimenting with the genre, have shifted the focus to:

emotional and intellectual growth; fragmented subjectivities; communal rather than personal identities; the biographies of others; the everyday and the mundane; various categories of identity such as race, and sexuality; and they have introduced some of the conventions of fiction to life-writing, for example, the use of myth and symbolism. These modifications have led to the liminal positioning of the genre in current life-writing theories, which in turn makes it an ideal form of self-expression for women writers whose aesthetic combines the literary and the political, the personal and the social.

Among women writers of the South Asian diaspora life-writing is one of the most popular modes of expression.ⁱⁱ A number of autobiographies, memoirs, and novels based on lived experience have been produced by South Asian women writers in recent years. At the same time, within feminist and postcolonial literary theory, there has been an upsurge in interest in life-writing practices, mainly because of their significance in the processes of subject formation. Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir recognises the reasons for this increased interest in life-writing which captures and addresses

... the status of the subject, the relations and representations of ethnicity and gender, and perhaps most importantly questions the individual's relationship with the past.

(Gudmundsdóttir 2003: 1)

For women writers of the South Asian diaspora the above three issues are of major concern. The writing of an autobiography can be seen as a desire for a self-determined identity and for literary authority. By writing her own story, the woman writer takes charge of her subjectivity and is able to resist imposed subject positions. Through the narration of her own life-story, the stereotypical gender and ethnic roles of

traditional South Asian cultures are explored, challenged, rejected and negotiated by the author. In addition, these writers represent their migration, or the migration of their ancestors, from South Asia to their respective diasporic locations, and the resulting cultural dislocation, as a central shaping force in their lives. As a result, their relationships with their past homes and their present homes feature prominently in their life-stories. They use elements of the aesthetic pattern, such as praise of female relatives, to recreate their pasts and their 'homelands' in a dual project of critique and commemoration. This retrospective strand of the narrative is often placed alongside, and acts as a precursor to their accounts of adaptation to and integration into their diasporic communities. More often than not, these narratives end with the author taking up her self-defined and often painfully negotiated position as a transnational subject.

It must be remembered though that the transnational subject is culturally multiply-located and is grappling with the paradox of continuity and change. Added to this is the gendered subjectivity of the woman writer who seeks to resist patriarchal oppression and attain autonomy through her writing, not only for herself but also for a community of women like herself the world over. This specific and dynamic subjectivity has enormous impact on the genre of life-writing, which was previously dedicated to the "unfolding of a coherent self over time and on the singularity of the individual life" (Boehmer 2005b: 68). As argued above, the genre has been expanded and re-shaped to address the mundane and the sensuous, the relational and the communal, and to understand the self "both intellectually and emotionally" (Govinden 1995: 170). Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield comment on this effect of female subjectivity on the genre:

The introduction of women's texts into the canon inevitably unsettled and problematised the genre: if women have more relational, or more fragmented selves, if they have difficulties with subjecthood ... their stories will take a different shape [to male autobiographies]. Their selfhood and what it can report will not be so simple: fiction, and the biographies of others, will enter into their 'autobiographies'.

(Cosslett, Lury & Summerfield 2000: 2)

Although I cannot take on board that the above comments apply to only women's life-writing,ⁱⁱⁱ in this chapter I will explore how women writers of the South Asian diaspora employ an overarching aesthetic to forge their own (and not necessarily exclusive) form of life-writing which portrays "fragmented selves" and which incorporates "fiction, and the biographies of others". It will be shown how these writers, engaging with the different strands of life-writing in order to address common issues of subjectivity, migration and transnationalism, unmask their "transgressive desire for cultural and literary authority" (Smith 1987: 50). Variations in the deployment of the aesthetic pattern must also be noted, since they reveal the historical and cultural specificities of the different diasporic locations, as well as the individual lives and imaginations of these writers. In the case of modifications to the genre of life-writing, the contributions of women writers is viewed, in feminist terms, as "counterlaw, or *outlaw*" which enables a "deconstruction of the 'master' genres, revealing power dynamics embedded in literary production, distribution and reception" (Kaplan 1992: 119). In short, life-writing by women of the South Asian diaspora contributes to the three areas of feminist intervention mapped out by Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield: the questioning of universalist assumptions that have unsettled the definition of the literary genre 'autobiography'; the feminist insistence that 'the personal is political'; and a concern with the importance of

further categories of difference such as race, class, sexual orientation, nationality and age (2000: 2-3).

For the purposes of this chapter, I have selected Meena Alexander's text, *Fault Lines: A Memoir by Meena Alexander* (1992),^{iv} for close reading (henceforth *FL*). This close reading comprises Section Two of the chapter. In Section Three there is a wider discussion of life-writing by women of the South Asian diaspora, namely, Jayapraga Reddy, Zuleikha Mayat, Mira Kamdar, Sudha Koul and Sara Suleri. The close reading of *Fault Lines* is exemplary of the current life-writing theory which addresses the alternative and innovative forms of life-writing by women which have proliferated in recent years, and of the aesthetic pattern in South Asian diasporic women's writing outlined in the previous chapter.

Section 2: Meena Alexander: The Fractured Subject of Fault Lines

Alexander's text contains all of the aesthetic elements mapped out in Chapter One: she uses an autobiographical style of writing, exploring the potential and limitations of a self-representing narrative based on memory; she represents female relatives and her relationships with them using an overtly feminist discourse; she wrestles with the themes of marriage, the woman's body and female sexuality in an attempt to define her own gender identity, again using the language of feminism;^v she includes everyday sensuous imagery and descriptions of domestic scenes and spaces; she incorporates mythology and classical Indian literature into her narrative; and she foregrounds her anxiety about the

dislocation wrought by migration, grappling with the paradox of continuity and change, and the challenge of adaptation to her diasporic location. Moreover, Alexander's form of life-writing is distinct and innovative because it incorporates: the emotional and the intellectual; the biographies of others, namely, her mother's; the everyday and the mundane, especially in the anecdotes of childhood; a record of communal, rather than only personal, struggle; various categories of identity such as race and ethnicity; and the story of a fractured rather than a coherent, rational subjectivity.

The memoir is divided into thirteen sections which detail Alexander's life from her childhood in Kerala to her present life as a poet, writer, wife and mother in New York. The text includes poems by the author and photographs of family members and herself. The narrative is not chronological as it jumps back and forth in time, making ample use of analepsis and prolepsis. The narrative also moves between Alexander's spiritual home, Tiruvella, what she calls her "nadu, the dark soil of self" (*FL* 1992: 23), and various other locations in India, Khartoum in Sudan, and in the USA. Underlying this seemingly haphazard structure, is an account of a shaky yet determined progression from childhood, through adolescence, through to adulthood, and the present moment of writing, what Laura Marcus calls the "enlightened present moment" in life-writing, which asserts a supreme perspective and consciousness (1994: 168). The narrative opens with Alexander being propositioned to write this memoir by a publisher friend in Manhattan, and it closes with her returning to Kerala, to her parents' home, having neared its completion. She describes this return as the beginning of a new phase in her life:

The old exilic notions are gone. ... In the long circling fall of the plane, controlled by wingspan and engine power, she holds tight to her daughter's hand and breathes again, slowly, as if beginning again, all over again.

(FL 1992: 205)

- For Alexander, writing her memoir forced her to confront not only her past, but also her painful relationship with her past, and her imaginary constructions of that past. She had to write this narrative to begin again, to create an identity, however fragmented, and to possess a sense of self which is at peace with its migrations, its sex, gender, ethnicity, embodiment and relationships with others.^{vi}

Autobiographical or memoir mode of writing, use of memory and nostalgia

When confronted with the task of writing her memoir, Alexander, a poet from Kerala in India who has traveled via Sudan and England to the island of Manhattan where she now resides, finds herself fragmenting into many selves, a process she experiences as a terrifying kind of liberation:

Night after night, I ask myself the question. What might it mean to look at myself straight, see myself? How many different gazes would that need? And what to do with the crookedness of flesh, thrown back at the eyes? The more I thought about it, the less sense any of it seemed to make. My voice splintered in my ears into a cacophony: whispering cadences, shouts, moans, the quick delight of bodily pleasure, all rising up as if the condition of being fractured has freed selves jammed into my skin, multiple beings locked into the journeys of one body.

(FL 1992: 2)

The task of looking back at her disparate selves and organising the material of her many lives into one narrative, proves daunting and disturbing. The prospect of composing her life-story into an autobiographical text does not bring her comfort or security. Rather she

feels cast adrift and alienated, “a woman cracked by multiple migrations” (*FL* 1992: 3). Alexander feels that as a migrant and a woman, she is without clear definitions, without strong connections to a place or a culture. Using this central trope of a geographical fault line, Alexander sets out to represent this heterogeneity in her text.^{vii} Significantly, she focuses on the “discomposure” (Summerfield 2000: 93) of her life,^{viii} showing the conflicting discourses which shape it, and its connectedness to other lives. Perhaps most importantly, she reflects on the process of writing her life-story, engaging with the pitfalls of constructing a narrative which relies on memory:

As I make up a katha. A story of my life, the lives before me, around me, weave into a net without which I would drop ceaselessly. They keep me within range of difficult truths, the exhilarating dangers of memory.

(*FL* 1992: 5)

Alexander’s account of how she came to write this memoir and how she arrived at this point in her life, is not a happy one. She is, at the outset of the project, and at various other points in her life prior to writing the memoir, unable to look at herself. She is also unable to speak in her own, authentic voice. She gives, as a main reason for these disabilities, her problematic relationship with the past. Trying to reconcile the past and the present results in a fracturing of self as she is pulled in two directions:

To enter that mist, I put out both hands as far as they will reach. My right hand reaches through the mirror with no back, into a ghostly past, a ceaseless atmosphere that shimmers in me even as I live and move. ... But my left hand stretches into the present. With it I feel out a space for my living body.

(*FL* 1992: 7)

Her past in Tiruvella haunts her with its beauty and paradisiacal qualities, especially when she considers her traumatic separation from it. In recalling her idyllic childhood there she also recounts the narrative of the European colonisation of India. Her first descriptions of Tiruvella include a contextualising account of how the Portuguese “set fire to an entire ship, all souls on board, as a sign to the Indian princes not to oppose them later”, and another of how the British “shot hundreds of unarmed men, women, and children, who had congregated for a meeting in Jalianwalabagh” (*FL* 1992: 7-8).

Alexander returns to the topic of colonisation again and again in her narrative,^{ix} creating a grand or shadow narrative of oppression and restriction which strongly impacts on the narrative of her life. Often life-writing by South Asian diasporic women contains these grand narratives of colonialism and partition in the background; in the South African context the grand narrative is *apartheid*,^x as these writers address wider communal or even national issues of racism, violence, oppression and injustice.

Despite the shadow of colonialism, Alexander uses this memory of a “shining past” (*FL* 1992: 201) to anchor herself, to root herself in the face of many migrations, and as an inspiration for her poetry. But as she writes her memoir she begins to realise that that construct has to be re-evaluated. Later, during the course of an imaginary and pivotal conversation with a friend, she finally shatters this memory which had been a crutch to her for so long, but which she had outgrown in her new life in Manhattan: “‘It’s as if in all these years as a poet I had carried a simple shining geography around with me: a house with a courtyard where I grew up in Tiruvella. ...’” (*FL* 1992: 197). She continues to explain this relationship of dependency to the imaginary friend, and finally she accepts

that this past has to be discarded and a new one imagined through the act of writing this memoir:

'It worked for a while and quite beautifully. It was a usable past for me in poetry. ... It's all exploded now into little bits: house, courtyard, well, guava tree, bowl, pitcher. Just words really like subway track, newspaper, bread, water.'

(*FL* 1992: 200-201)

Alexander experienced a crisis in which she was unable to see or articulate herself. The crisis, precipitated by the writing of her life-story, and caused by the opposing cultural forces which shape her, is alleviated by the forging of a new relationship with the past, and an easier acceptance of the present. The resolution,^{xi} according to Alexander, is the recognition of multiple selves, and an appreciation of the roles of both the past and the present in the formation of subjectivity:

But as my shining past fractures, never to be reassembled, ethnicity enters. And with it a different sort of priority. Perhaps one that is more fitting. So I wear it as I descend the underground steps and feel this too is mine, this purgatory, this presence. My ethnicity as an Indian American or in broader terms, an Asian American, the gateway it seems to me now to a life in letters, depends upon, indeed requires, a resolute fracturing of sense: a splintering of older ways of being, ways of holding that might have made the mind think itself, intact, innocent, without presumption. Now it may well be, indeed it probably is the case that talk of wholeness and innocence and all that really doesn't make sense, or if it does only as a trope for the mind that casts back wherever it is and whenever for a beforeness that is integral in precisely the ways that only a past can be. After all it is in the nature of a present time to invade, to confront, to seize. It is the present that bodies forth otherness.

(*FL* 1992: 201-202)

To write a memoir - that is, “to invade, to confront, to seize” in the present - is for Alexander an act of empowerment and liberation. To finally be able to see her reflection which is comprised of myriad selves is a testament to the power of the life-writing process which offers a “kind of liberation ... since it is the ultimate tool for self-representation: telling your own story, giving birth to yourself, and thereby claiming agency and uniqueness” (Gudmundsdóttir 2003: 128). What is more, Alexander’s particular use of memory and representation of her relationship with the past problematises their use in life-writing. The past and memory, Alexander shows us, are not simple resources to dip into whilst producing a memoir; they are in fact constructs to be dismantled and interrogated, through the process of writing, in order to achieve empowerment and liberation in the present.

Praise of female relatives, especially the older female figure who is revered, even mythologised, family structures and dynamics

Another aesthetic element from the overarching pattern employed by Alexander is her representation of female relatives and her interrogation of the highly formative relationships she has with them. Tess Cosslett has observed, in contemporary women’s autobiographies, a “feminist-inspired move ... to construct a matrilineage for their protagonists” (2000: 142). In life-writing by South Asian diasporic women this “feminist-inspired move” is prevalent^{xii} because of the empowered female subjectivities, and links to ‘home’ and the past which are thus inscribed. As the floundering author at the outset of her memoir, Alexander finds succour in the notion of a matrilineage. This positioning, both in a line of women and in Tiruvella, initially gives Alexander the

“simple shining geography” (*FL* 1992: 197) she requires to cope with her sense of diasporic dislocation:

That’s all I am, a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times she can connect nothing with nothing. Her words are all askew. And so I tormented myself on summer nights, and in the chill wind of autumn, tossing back and forth, worrying myself sick. Till my mind slipped back to my mother – amma – she who gave birth to me, and to amma’s amma, my veliammechi, grandmother Kunju, drawing me back into the darkness of the Tiruvella house with its cool bedrooms and coiled verandahs: the shelter of memory.

(*FL* 1992: 3)

But this positioning becomes untenable for Alexander when she finds herself interrogating her relationship with the past as a result of writing this memoir. A significant element of that past is Alexander’s image of “female power” (*FL* 1992: 201) in the form of her grandmother. Alexander’s portrait of her maternal grandmother, Kunju, the female power who inspired her poetry, is a fictionalised construct. In the first section Alexander tells us that she did not know Kunju, who had died seven years before Alexander’s birth, yet she feels compelled to tell a story about her. In this portrait, composed of facts and imagined elements, Kunju is described as a strong-willed, beautiful, intelligent, respected pillar of the society. As a young woman she fights for the right to an education, resists an arranged marriage and marries a man of her choosing. She later becomes an ardent nationalist and a supporter of Mahatma Gandhi, and then a zealous social worker and local politician, championing the cause of women’s education. At the end of this detailed and somewhat glorified portrait, Alexander surprisingly

confides that this portrait is mainly a product of her imagination, fuelled by her own desires for a coherent and liberated subjectivity:

I was filled with longing for an ancestral figure who would allow my mouth to open, permit me to speak. I skipped a whole ring of life and made up a grandmother figure, part ghost, part flesh. She was drawn over what I had learnt of grandmother Kunju. I imaged her: a sensitive, cultured woman; a woman who had a tradition, and a history – precisely what I lacked ...

(*FL* 1992: 15)

Further on the same page, Alexander wonders what Kunju would make of her, her migrant granddaughter who had become a writer in New York. Alexander casts herself as ‘other’ to Kunju’s imagined elegance, competence and security, describing herself in contrast as “a dusty tattered thing”, and as “a woman with no fixed place, a creature struggling to make herself up in a new world” (*FL* 1992: 15). Even if it were just by association, such a “female power” would allow her “mouth to open” (*FL* 1992: 201). By relating herself to such a woman as the mythologised Kunju, Alexander expresses her desire to be like Kunju, a woman who carved her own niche in society. This construction of a revered grandmother is part of Alexander’s quest for an empowered gendered subjectivity. It also points to Alexander’s possible fictionalising of self, by way of artistic counterpoint.

However, this representation of a matrilineage is not always positive.^{xiii} Kunju’s neglect of Alexander’s mother (amma) is given as the possible reason for amma’s conservative views on the role of women.

In her later years, in fierce reparation, as if the past might be done over again in the rearing of a daughter, amma brought me and my sisters up in the strict belief that women should stay at home.

(*FL* 1992: 14)

Alexander's criticism is aimed here at both Kunju and amma, the former for her extremely progressive, feminist stance which caused her to neglect her daughter, and the latter for her extreme traditionalist reaction to Kunju's shortcomings as a mother. The construct of Kunju and criticism of both grandmother and mother is indicative of the complexity of Alexander's relationships with her female relatives; she oscillates between admiration and antagonism. Also, the preoccupation with matrilineage and relationships with female relatives is not confined to Alexander's memoir. Cosslett tells us that in contemporary women's life-writing "the identity of the subject is assumed to be dependent on or in relation to the identities of her female ancestors" (2000: 142).

This tendency in women's life-writing to focus on intersubjective relationships with female relatives is most evident in Alexander's representation of her relationship with her mother, amma. As mentioned earlier, when Alexander is forced to confront her fractured subjectivity, she finds comfort in the notion of a matrilineage. Her mind takes hold of an image of a line of women from her ancestral home in Kerala, beginning with her amma. Alexander's relationship with amma is a complex, contradictory one which preoccupies her at every stage in the narrative. This depiction of a difficult and intense mother-daughter relationship is not unique to Alexander's text.^{xiv} It conforms to a pattern which Gudmundsdóttir has identified in her survey of women's autobiography: "They are characterized by comfort, struggle, violent feelings, contradictions in the constant

oscillation between identification and alienation” (2003: 127). Also, the portrayal of this relationship functions as a springboard for many of Alexander’s feminist interventions into the strait-jacketing female roles of traditional Keralan culture.

Certainly, Alexander succeeds in conveying the contradictions and oscillations in her relationship with amma. She tells us at the beginning of the narrative, when she is laying out the difficulties of confronting the self for the purposes of writing a memoir, that she has no identity separate from her mother:

Ever since I can remember, amma and I have been raveled together in net after net of time. What was pulled apart at my birth has tensed and knotted up. Without her, I would not be, not even in someone else’s memory. I would be a stitch with no time, capless, gloveless, sans eyes sans nose sans the lot. Lacking her I cannot picture what I might be.

(*FL* 1992: 7)

But during the course of the narrative we learn of Alexander’s antipathy and alienation from her mother who comes to symbolise the traditional Indian woman - obedient, subservient and, ultimately, complicit in her daughter’s oppression. Alexander’s adolescent journal, kept in Khartoum, reveals this estrangement:

These lines tell the misery I went through:

“If you want me to live as a woman, why educate me?”

“Why not kill me if you want to dictate my life?”

“God, why teach me to write?”

The invocation to God in the last was not to any idea of God, but rather a desperate cry aimed at my mother. The fault lay in the tension I felt between the claims of my intelligence – what my father had taught me to honor, what allowed me to live my life – and the requirements of femininity my mother had been born and bred to.

(*FL* 1992: 102)

Here we see another fracture in Alexander's subjectivity. Besides being torn between her current location and 'home', Tiruvella, she is also ruptured by the liberatory force of an education and her talent as a writer, and the forces of traditional Indian culture, symbolised in this narrative by her mother. It is at this stage in her life that Alexander begins to understand the full weight of her sex and gender. With awakening sexuality and bodily awareness, and growing aspirations as a poet, she begins to question the traditions which have bound and shaped her subjectivity: the "narrow gate ... of an arranged marriage" (*FL* 1992: 102); the covering of the female body in appropriate attire (*FL* 1992: 104-6); and the victimisation of women who transgress the bounds of accepted sexual behaviour (*FL* 1992: 106). Amma is a champion of arranged marriages, she displays appropriate personal modesty, and she operates within the bounds of accepted sexual behaviour.

In creating a biography of amma, Alexander records her own painful rebellion against the "requirements of femininity". There is a compelling anguished tone to this aspect of the memoir which is conveyed most poignantly through Alexander's imagery of her gendered body. To capture the constraints she experiences as a woman, she uses the recurring image of her mouth being sealed or bound shut: "how would the bandages drop from my mouth" (*FL* 1992: 16); "I was one of those women, mouths taped over, choking on her own flesh" (*FL* 1992: 161). Later this gives way to the image of a woman who can "write the truth of the body, pitted, flawed, unfinished" (*FL* 1992: 121); the rhetoric of oppression gives way to the poetics of *écriture féminine*. Alexander reclaims through writing her "own original relationship with the excluded and negated subjectivity located

in [her body]" (Ashcroft 1989: 28). In one of the poems included in the memoir, "Night-Scene, the Garden" (*FL* 1992: 129-13), she describes writing as a visceral process which leads to rebirth and renewal.

Come, ferocious alphabets of flesh
Splinter and raze my page

That out of the dumb
And bleeding part of me

I may claim
my heritage.

The green tree
Battered on despair
Cast free

The green roots kindled
To cacophony.

The first three stanzas of the poem comprise Alexander's anguished apostrophe to embodied language, the "alphabets of the flesh" which are wrung out of her previously silenced and suffering body. The initial fracture or splinter caused by such trauma is expunged by the renewal and freedom which writing affords. She is the "green tree" in the garden at night, laying claim to her heritage. The next two stanzas trace her trajectory from despair to freedom to cacophony. No longer silenced, Alexander is able to articulate her embodied subjectivity through the timbre of writing, albeit a dissonant, discordant timbre.

To further express her distress and resistance to oppressive gender roles, Alexander relates a childhood anecdote about women who jump into wells, again evoking a recurring image of great emotive impact. She tells of how, as a child, she was puzzled by this phenomenon until servants in her grandfather's house explained that the young women had killed themselves because of the shame and dishonour of being unmarried and pregnant. Alexander is haunted by the image of young, healthy and beautiful women floating in a well into which they had jumped (or been pushed). She is moved by the tragedy and injustice of a social system which associates female sexuality with shame, and death:

Sex and death were spliced and fitted into each other, quite precisely: like the milk-white flesh curved into the shell of a tender coconut as it hung on the tree; ...And shame lit the image. It was what women had to feel. Part of being, not doing. Part of one's very flesh.

(*FL* 1992: 110)

But Alexander wants to have no part of this "being". She will not feel shame for her woman's body and, contrary to her mother's hopes, the eighteen-year-old Alexander refuses to be "drawn back into the web of traditional life" (*FL* 1992: 135). Amma's plans for her to study at Madras University and for an arranged marriage are thwarted, and Alexander continues on her path of defiance and transgression.

In the rest of the narrative we see Alexander trying to relieve herself of the burden of this "mother-weight" (*FL* 1992: 163). However, Alexander does not just simply reject her mother. We know already that Alexander considers her subjectivity as inextricably bound up with her mother's when she writes this memoir. As a child she adored her

mother and was very protective of her. As a teenager and a young adult she despised her and regarded her as an oppressive force. As an adult and an established writer, Alexander undertakes a project of recuperation. The final section of the memoir offers an even deeper exploration of this relationship, incorporating an element of biography, as Alexander allows amma to tell part of her own life-story.

The irony of this move by Alexander cannot be lost on the reader. It is through the process of writing that Alexander achieves empathy and even admiration for amma, although earlier in her life, amma had been an obstacle to her writing. In some ways, Alexander's determination to write can be read as her attempt to escape her mother and the female oppression and repression which she symbolised. Domna Stanton tells us that writing, "places the female writer in contradiction to the dominant definition of woman and casts her as the usurper of male prerogatives" (1987: 13). For Alexander, freeing herself from the "dominant definition of woman" which her mother tried to impose on her is of primary importance. Usurping "male prerogatives" appears to be a secondary (and less articulated) motivation for Alexander. Just as writing helped her free herself from her mythologised, idealised image of home, writing also gives her the power of self-definition, and thus the tool with which to recast her relationship with her mother. In the final section Alexander narrates amma's story of her arranged marriage and her wedding day. The result of this story-within-a-story is that both Alexander and the reader see amma, for the first time, as a person in her own right, not just as Alexander's stereotypical mother. Cosslett has noted the effectiveness of the narrative strategies used by women autobiographers who include their mother's stories in their own:

The fictional exploration of her [the mother's] thoughts both credit her with her own subjectivity, emphasizing her separateness, and paradoxically, bring her nearer to the daughter who can sympathise and identify with the mother as a young woman, before she became a mother. (Cosslett 2000: 145)

Indeed, the interweaving of amma's biography with her own serves to represent the unique and powerful subjectivities of both, very different women. Alexander's achievement here is the restoration of subjectivity to amma, and thereby, a deeper understanding of her mother. Also, representing her thorny relationship with her mother gives Alexander the opportunity to explore her own embodied subjectivity. Seeing herself as the antithesis of amma, a passive traditional Indian woman, Alexander gives herself the platform (or fighting ring) to wrestle repeatedly with the themes of arranged marriages, prescribed female roles, and writing as a means of escape from imposed gender identities. Further, this deeply personal and emotional aspect of the memoir, conveyed in part through startling visceral imagery, is an innovative and exciting modification to the life-writing genre.

Everyday sensuous imagery, domestic scenes and spaces

Alexander's inclusion of everyday, sensuous imagery and descriptions of domestic scenes and spaces particularly evokes her ancestral home, Tiruvella. These detailed and evocative descriptions constitute the "simple shining geography" (FL 1992: 197) which Alexander holds onto to sustain herself during periods of transition and upheaval. But even though this image of the past has to be exploded for Alexander to fully embrace her new subjectivity, its fragments still have value and a place in her narrative, with the proviso that they are taken "only as a trope for the mind that casts back wherever it is and

whenever for a beforeness that is integral in precisely the ways that only a past can be” (*FL* 1992: 202). This trope, an image of a home, a domestic scene of bliss and childhood innocence, is partly an imaginative construct, partly the lived experience of a younger Alexander, mediated to us now through the lens of her diasporic subjectivity. Salman Rushdie is fascinated by this tendency on the part of the migrant to re-image the minutiae of a past life:

... the mundane acquired numinous qualities...The broken pots of antiquity, from which the past can sometimes, but always provisionally, be reconstructed, are exciting to discover, even if they are pieces of the most quotidian objects.

(Rushdie 1992: 12)

Alexander shares Rushdie’s belief that the past can be reconstructed, but always provisionally. Hence, even in these commonplace descriptions, there is an undertone of suspicion as Alexander questions the reliability of her memory and her current need for a mythologised home.

Alexander describes how she is drawn into the past, and transported to “Tiruvella, where amma’s house stands” (*FL* 1992: 7), a small town in Kerala on the west coast of India. The descriptions of Tiruvella are idyllic, paradisiacal (even including the archetypal serpent) with her grandfather, Illya, assuming god-like proportions in Alexander’s personal theogonic myth:

I think of the Tiruvella house, the courtyard, the clear blue of the premonsoon sky, as filled with the spirit of my grandfather. It is where I trace my beginning. Even now, in New York City, I dream of the sparrow and the coil crying together in the guava tree, the blunt knocks of the woodpecker’s beak on the day of my grandfather’s death. I see

the dry holes under the frangipani tree where the cobras crawled, seeking refuge from the terrible heat of noon-day.

(*FL* 1992: 8)

This passage reveals Alexander's awareness, and appreciation, of the "symbolic creativity" (Willis 1990: 10) of this everyday scene. Its aesthetic impact on her is so profound that the beauty and the significance of the mundane find their way into her current dreams. The weather, the birds, the trees in the garden, even the snakes, are redolent of a past state of glory, which she has now lost. These descriptions of her childhood in Tiruvella are often juxtaposed with descriptions of Alexander's life in New York. By comparison, the urban setting is portrayed as harsh and sterile. Her new diasporic home in Manhattan seems somehow lack-lustre and unwelcoming compared to the richness and fecundity of the Tiruvella household and garden of her childhood which Alexander regards as "the closest we get to any possible paradise" (*FL* 1992: 38).

Through the descriptions of Tiruvella, Alexander also explores other themes such as class and gender roles. We learn that she spent a substantial proportion of her time in the care of servants like Marya, "a new junior ayah" (*FL* 1992: 40) who was an icon of female beauty in Tiruvella, and of Chedthi and Chinna, the senior ayahs. Alexander recalls how she mixed with other classes: "In my early childhood in Tiruvella I could play with the children of the servants or watch the workmen sweating with the effort of laying the railway line" (*FL* 1992: 51). It is from these servants that she learns about the women who jump into wells. Alexander conveys this scene of revelation and loss of childhood innocence with casual dexterity, incorporating domestic vignettes and sensory details into the tense dialogue about transgressive sexuality:

Who discovered them? Why did they leap in? Eyes turned downwards, Marya would never tell. Nor would Chinna. Finally Bhaskaran blurted:

‘The shame of it, Meenamol. The utter shame,’ and he gulped. He poked with a little stick at the ash that lay at his feet, at the shimmering fish scales Govindan the cook had lopped off the parrot fish we had for dinner two nights earlier.

‘They were found with child,’ Chinna told me firmly, looking at me straight in the face. ‘They could not carry the dishonor.’

We were standing beside the well as she spoke. Marya of the beautiful breasts had a bar of Sunlight soap in her hand.

(*FL* 1992: 108)

Amongst the fish scales, the ash, and the Sunlight soap, Alexander learns of the shame and dishonour which attach to a woman who is pregnant outside of wedlock. The ruined woman’s only recourse is suicide. This chilling lesson haunts Alexander for years to come. Despite this fraternising with the servants in the courtyard of Tiruvella, Alexander is reminded by her elders, especially her grandmother, Mariamma, that she is the female child of land-owning Syrian Christians, and that for her, a class and gender role had already been mapped out generations before.

In the final section of the memoir, when Alexander coaxes amma to tell her story, we see amma selflessly at work in her domain, the “home as the universe of the accepted duty” (Chanfrault-Duchet 2000: 70), reinforcing the image of amma as a traditional Indian woman entrenched in *dharma* to her husband. These detailed descriptions of the minutiae of domestic life serve as both praise for her mother who “had learnt so well the constant necessity of turning away from oneself towards others” (*FL* 1992: 207), and as criticism for “the load of pain she had gathered into herself in her quest to live as a woman” (*FL* 1992: 14). For Alexander, her mother’s life, confined to the domestic

realm, is narrow, restricted, and more significantly, restricting in turn. Faced with a choice between “duty to the family and society on the one hand and freedom, femininity and intellectual development as a duty to herself on the other” (Chanfrault-Duchet 2000: 70), Alexander, unlike amma, has chosen duty to herself. Alexander ends the memoir with a sensuous descriptive passage of the Tiruvella garden at night, giving languorous details of an ancient incense tree. This “swelling incense tree with its hard brown fruit” (FL 1992: 226), like the “green tree” in her poem, is a symbol of Alexander’s strength, endurance, and fertility as both woman and writer. It is here that she finds “the peace of a place where there was no more marrying, no more taking in marriage” (*ibid.*).

Alexander’s use of everyday sensuous imagery and descriptions of domestic scenes shows the significance of the mundane in her life. Whether these images and descriptions form part of an idealised construction of the past, an interrogation of the patriarchal society of her childhood, or a criticism of her mother, they are a powerful means of narrating the personal and the emotional aspects of one’s otherwise humdrum life-story.

The use of mythology, ancient literature, traditional religious practices, descriptions of ritual and ceremony

Evoking a strong sense of community and cultural heritage, Alexander incorporates mythology and classical Indian literature into her memoir. She describes how her adored grandfather, Illya, would “make up his own tales with a special girl, Susikali, playing the heroine”^{xv} (FL 1992: 31). These made-up stories were a form of *katha*, tales “recited in a

deep singsong voice, in a formal standing position ...[or] told simply, with a child on one's knee" (*ibid.*). Illya's *kathas* have the texture and resonance of myths. They contain elements of local geography and lore:

Susikali had a knack for finding trouble. She raced through paddy fields in pursuit of rakshasis, those demon ladies with long black hair. Sometimes she stole food, or plucked the ripest mangoes in someone else's orchard and black birds chased her all the way up the Nilgiris. Sometimes she witnessed fearful things. She saw a man of God from Patananthita, a priest of great faith, pick up his cassock, tuck it into his waist, and chase after her. Or so it seemed at first. He had long iron nails held firmly in his hand. He swung a wooden mallet.

(*FL* 1992: 31)

In this *katha*, the *rakshasi* is violently attacked by the man of God. The subtext of this *katha* is clearly discernible. Susikali, the young heroine, is complicit with the man of God in the persecution of the *rakshasis* who are wild, free-spirited women. As can be expected the spell-bound Alexander identifies with the adventurous heroine, but there is a twist. The four-and-a-half-year-old Alexander is a budding feminist and she identifies with the female villain of the *katha*:

She didn't like the look on the face of the man of God. That much was clear. She was me. I was she, Susikali, exact replica of my four-and-a-half-year-old self granted the boon of magical powers. But I was also the rakshasi. I loved the fierce glitter of that mad woman, the power that let her leap over the rice fields swollen with water, bolt up the highest Indian mountain.

(*FL* 1992: 32)

Even though Alexander is grateful to Illya for entertaining her and nurturing her ripening imagination, she subtly weaves into her *katha* a feminist critique of Illya's

Susikali *kathas*. Both Susikali and the rakshasi transgress the bounds of traditional female roles, the latter in a more extreme way, and Alexander identifies with both female characters, delighting in their respective power and freedom. These characters of myth and folklore play an influential role in Alexander's self-definition as a woman who repudiates prescribed gender roles.

Alexander also synthesises Judeo-Christian mythology with classical Indian literature. She recalls first how Illya read to her the Malayalam or Hindi translation of the story of Adam and Eve from the Book of Genesis. Eve's burden reminds Alexander of another female character who suffers bitterly because of an inadvertent mistake. The character is Shakuntala, eponymous heroine of the famous play by Kalidasa, a poet and playwright from the city of Ujain in India who lived sometime around the fifth century AD.

And thinking of the hand of Awa [Eve], I thought too of Shakuntala, Kalidasa's heroine, whose sweet hand had touched her lover in the forest. ... Meanwhile how terribly she suffered, Shakuntala, her tears falling into the eyes of her beloved doe that followed her everywhere. And how Awa must have suffered with the weight of all that sin, forced to bear her children in terrible, gut-splitting pain. And how Shakuntala suffered blocked out from the gaze of her beloved.

(*FL* 1992: 42)

Not only does Alexander's splicing of two similar tales from different sources comment on the richness of her cultural heritage, but it also furthers her feminist project which is to expose the injustice of a social system (in this instance, two very different ones) which associates a woman's body and sexuality with shame and guilt, thus rendering her physically and emotionally vulnerable. Eve, the arch temptress, unleashes death and

destruction on humankind because of her wantonness, and the fantastically beautiful Shakuntala, who has sex out of wedlock, is punished for her transgression.

This subversive use of mythology and literature which would have been familiar to Alexander as a child is also effective in capturing the complexity of her Keralan, Syrian Christian, middle-class culture. As argued, these embedded narratives are not mere backdrops to the memoir. They are interwoven with the narrative of Alexander's life and they serve a thematic function too, as the feminist rendering of the myths and tales testify. Further, in the representation of Illya's *kathas* storytelling itself is thematised. In this way, Alexander employs this aesthetic element to also comment on the role of the imagination in her life. Through the fusion of related myths and literary material from different sources, which is then interwoven with her life-story, Alexander articulates not only a personal, but also a communal, concern with the ill treatment of women. In what might be termed a literary sleight of hand, Alexander uses the very fabric of her community - its myths and the cultural practices reflected therein - to critique its gender politics. In Alexander's personal memoir, the personal becomes political.^{xvi}

Cultural continuity or the preservation of a cultural heritage versus change, dislocation and adaptation in the diasporic location

Perhaps the most compelling use of an aesthetic element from the overarching pattern is to be found in Alexander's foregrounding of the anxiety wrought by migration and dislocation. For most of her narrative, Alexander grapples with the paradox of continuity

and change, and the challenge of adaptation to her diasporic location. Her first major upheaval occurs at the tender age of five when she leaves India for the first time for Sudan. For Alexander leaving her home was tantamount to a loss of self. Her only recourse was to imagine home, and delight in those secret, sustaining fantasies of home. But the profound sense of loss and displacement she experienced then stays with her, and even as an adult, married, pregnant and embarking on a new life by choice, she experiences migration as an injury to the self: “My two worlds, present and past, were torn apart, and I was the fault line, the crack that marked the dislocation” (*FL* 1992: 15).^{xvii}

For Alexander, her body becomes the site of dislocation. Just as she located the basis of female oppression in the female body, Alexander locates the pain and suffering of migration in her woman’s body:

Somehow, in my mind’s eye, the crossing of borders is bound up with the loss of substances, with the distinct pain of substantial loss: with the body that is bound over into death, with the body that splits open to give birth.

(*FL* 1992: 140)

Showalter’s formulation of a cultural model to explore the basis of gender differentiation is helpful in understanding Alexander’s linkage of the “women’s body, language, and psyche” (Showalter 1985: 259). Showalter asserts that a woman’s gendered identity is to a large extent determined by her cultural context: “The ways in which women conceptualise their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions are intricately linked to their cultural environments” (*ibid.*). Alexander’s cultural environment, whether it is the oppressive traditional environment in Kerala, or the alienating diasporic

environment in New York, is experienced through her body. Following H el ene Cixous’s appeal for women to “write the body” (Cixous 1975: 245), Alexander’s main project in the memoir is therefore the reclamation of the body through writing, which in turn facilitates the formation of an autonomous female subjectivity. Rosalind Jones sums up * criture feminine*’s main tenet: “female subjectivity is derived from women’s physiology and bodily instincts as they affect sexual experience and the unconscious” (Jones 1985: 362).^{xviii} Alexander’s belief that her female subjectivity is derived from her physiology as a woman is evident in her descriptions of herself as a body suffering the “distinct pain of substantial loss”. The substantial loss, in this case, is the loss incurred through migration.

The fracturing and the loss of self caused by migration result in Alexander’s seeking solace in her imagination. But Rushdie’s caveat, that the past can only be provisionally reconstructed (Rushdie 1992: 12), is not lost on Alexander. As Alexander painfully discovers, the image of her past home, the idyllic, emotionally charged, nostalgic image of Tiruvella, cannot continue to serve her as she negotiates a new subjectivity as an American citizen, a poet, a Manhattan, street-wise mother. In the course of that pivotal imagined conversation in a caf e in Manhattan, Alexander re-negotiates her relationship with her past and with her ‘homeland’. This new relationship gives equal weight to the past and to the present, and accommodates her disparate selves and fractured subjectivity. In coming to terms with the different notions of ‘home’, Alexander offers a lyrical answer to Chandra Mohanty’s question: “Is home a geographical space, an historical space, an emotional, sensory space?” (1993: 352):

What does it mean to carry one's house on one's back? I face myself squarely, wash my hands free of ink and think: the old notions of exile, that high estate, are gone; ...The voice tricks itself. History is maquillage. No homeland here.

But another voice replies as if heedless of the full frontal, shoulders-squared-over but: over and over again you fabricate a homeland, a sheltering space in the head. You can never escape into the ceaseless present that surrounds you. What you need in Frank O'Hara's words, is 'Grace / to be born and live as variously as possible'".

(*FL* 1992: 193)

Alexander accepts that her 'homeland' is a fabrication but she finds rapprochement in difference. This ability to "live as variously as possible", to accept the paradox of cultural continuity and change, has been described by Paul Gilroy as the "sameness within differentiation and the differentiation within sameness" (2001: 209). Gilroy, like other diaspora theorists such as Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, appreciates the destabilising and subversive effects of diaspora, the heterogeneity and tensions of diasporic cultures, which nonetheless cohere. But for Alexander, it is not enough to accept difference and slip into an easier relationship with past and present, to cobble together subjectivity from the fragments available to her. She still has to learn to live in her body and work out her "ethnicity in America" (*FL* 1992: 202).

Alexander's formulation of ethnicity transcends both past and present notions of 'home'. It seems to originate in the body, and it transcends the social discourses which govern the body. It also seems to defy the processes of fracturing which have been at the core of Alexander's narrative. In increasingly abstract terms, Alexander attempts to articulate her formulation of ethnicity:

Ethnicity for such as I am comes into being as a pressure, a violence from within that resists such fracturing. It is and is not fictive. It rests on the unknown that seizes you from behind, in darkness. In place of the hierarchy and authority and decorum that I learnt as an Indian woman, in place of purity and pollution, right hand for this, left hand for that, we have an ethnicity that breeds in the perpetual present, that will never be wholly spelt out.

(*FL* 1992: 202)

Alexander's new "ethnicity" supplants the traditional cultural forces which oppressed her before. In what is quite a muddled move, Alexander closes this section with a passage about the universal "struggle for social justice, for human dignity" (*FL* 1992: 203).

Perhaps her aim is to suggest that her new "ethnicity" is fuelled by the forces of social justice which transcend the hierarchies of race and gender, and class. Whatever the delineations of this "ethnicity" which Alexander assumes at this point in the narrative, she has, for the moment, moved beyond her obsession with home, the past, and how to live in her diasporic location, to a realm where the struggle for social justice "casts all our actions into relief, etches our lines into art" (*FL* 1992: 203).

In this realm of art, Alexander writes and wrestles, using the life-genre and various aesthetic elements to bring forth a memoir which incorporates: the emotional and the intellectual; the personal and the political; the mundane; myth and symbolic imagery; various categories of identity such as race and ethnicity; and most crucially, an autonomous yet fragmented, diasporic, female subjectivity.

Section 3: South Asian Diasporic Women's Life-Writing

Alexander's memoir is not the only text which exhibits elements of the aesthetic pattern outlined in Chapter One. There are numerous other examples of life-writing by women of the South Asian diaspora, which, to a lesser or greater degree, deal with: images of the past and the 'homeland'; the problematic use of memory in life-writing; female relatives and their influence on the author's subjectivity; a feminist questioning of traditional and changing gender roles; domestic scenes and activities which evoke the past 'home'; myths and rituals indigenous to the past 'home'; and the theme of migration and dislocation. This over-arching pattern persists despite differences in cultural and geographic location, religion, individual life trajectories, and distinctive writing styles. For example, Sudha Koul's text, *The Tiger Ladies: A Memoir of Kashmir* (2002), is suffused with a tone of nostalgia and longing, making its overall effect rather different from Alexander's painful self-examination, or from Sara Suleri's witty and ironic portrayal of her life and Pakistani politics in *Meatless Days* (1987).

Koul's narrative *The Tiger Ladies: A Memoir of Kashmir* (henceforth *TL*) describes a very intense and dependent relation with her past in Kashmir (she now lives in New Jersey, USA):

But I am fed at the gut by a long cord that goes over the oceans, over the mountains and finds nurture in a faraway valley. Try as I might, I have not been able to cut the connection and find anything else that satisfies my spirit and body as well as my own water and my own soil.

(*TL* 2002: 214)

Koul uses here a complex of images borrowed from biology, nature and the discourse of nationalism, to describe her relationship with Kashmir. First, she is a foetus born to its mother, Kashmir, but unable to cut the umbilical cord; then she is a plant of some kind, being nurtured by the water and soil of Kashmir. Unlike Alexander, Koul does not critically evaluate this relationship, and there is no crisis or point of re-negotiation. Throughout Koul's narrative she rather presents different ways in which the past is preserved for her. One of the most evocative representations of the perpetuation of culture is through the detailed descriptions of the preparation, consumption of and reverence for food:

I remember everything, and remember it well. I will inherit all the recipes, and I know just how to prepare them. Decades later I will put all my recollected recipes into a book for my children, and say to myself, 'What will they remember, when Kashmir is like Shangri-la, a matter of myth, an eternal vale, never to be seen again in this life?'

(*TL* 2002: 70)

For Koul the food of Kashmir, recreated in the present, is a means of cultural continuity and preservation. As Kashmir is being torn apart and destroyed by Muslim-Hindu violence, Koul is intent upon keeping Kashmir alive, albeit remotely in the form of food and a Shangri-la-like myth.

Sara Suleri, too, uses food as a trope in *Meatless Days* (henceforth *MD*). Most of her past in Pakistan is related through stories about food. Using her particular brand of quirky humour, Suleri tells a tale of sibling malice in the story of "what the kidney said" (*MD* 1987: 27). This moment, of discovering that the kidneys on her plate are indeed the organ in the body that "make pee", is a significant moment in the young Suleri's life as it

is her first experience of betrayal. In a typical stylistic gesture, Suleri transfers the betrayal from her sister, Ifat, to the kidneys, and thus food takes on a particular, sinister implication:

Betrayed by food, I let her go, and wept some watery tears into the kidney juice, which was designed anyway to evade cohesion, being thin and in its nature inexact. ... Then I ran out to the farthest corner of the garden, where I would later go to hide my shame of milking-time in a retch that refused to materialize.

(MD 1987: 26)

In the same section of the memoir, Suleri describes how she “had to go back to where [she] belonged and – past a thousand different mealtimes – try to reconstruct the parable of the *kapura*” (MD 1987: 24). As an adult living in New Haven, Suleri discovers from her sister, Tillat, that *kapura* are testicles. This revelation astounds her. However, it is not just her culinary sensibility which is affronted, but also her cultural identity as a Pakistani living in the USA which is also called into question:

I must have always known exactly what *kapura* are, because the conversation they provoked came accompanied with shocks of familiarity that typically attend a trade of solid information. What I had really wanted to reply, first to Tillat and then to my Pakistani friends was: yes, of course, who do you think I am, what else could they possibly be?

(MD 1987: 27)

Suleri’s seemingly innocuous anecdote belies an anxiety about her subjectivity. She had wanted to ask her companions, “... who do you think I am ...?”. Suleri suggests here that to be ignorant of the food of her homeland is in some way a betrayal of that homeland and her cultural heritage, and that betrayal calls into question her current subjectivity as a Pakistani immigrant in the USA.

Details of domestic life such as attitudes to food, its preparation and consumption, are thus closely linked to Suleri's subjectivity, as the title of her memoir suggests. Later in the section, the parable of the *kapura* takes on another function as Suleri extrapolates from her life to the life of her 'home' nation. Here Suleri uses the food trope to comment on the vicissitudes of Pakistani politics:

So, long before the *kapura* made its comeback in my life, we in Pakistan were bedmates with betrayal and learned how to take grim satisfaction from assessing the water table of our outrage. There were both lean times and meaty times, however; occasionally, body and food would sit happily at the same side of the conference table.

(MD 1987: 29)

Being misled about the true nature of *kapura* as a child triggers an association, for Suleri, between food and the betrayal of the Pakistani people at the time of Partition. The reaction of the infant national government was the implementation of severe and somewhat wanton decrees. Suleri mingles the mundane with the political by describing how decisions at national level affected everyday life in Pakistan. The meatless days of the title of the memoir were a result of a government decree shortly after Partition which forbade the sale of meat on two days out of every week "to conserve the national supply of goats and cattle" (MD 1987: 31). Suleri thus uses food to fashion her wry critique of the government of the day.

In *Meatless Days*, Suleri's use of this aesthetic element does not have the effect of sentimentalising her 'home', nor of expressing a profound sense of loss and nostalgia, as Koul's use of it did. Rather, Suleri's pointed style, idiosyncratic humour, and unusual use of metaphor enrich her memoir, interweaving complex anecdotes from the past with

commentary on national politics, gender roles, family dynamics and the process of migration to the USA.

Zuleikha Mayat, South African author of *A Treasure Trove of Memories: A Reflection on the Experiences of the People of Potchefstroom* (1996) (henceforth *TTM*), also displays a fascinating and complex relationship with the past. Mayat's narrative, more a memoir of a community than of the self,^{xix} recalls the arrival of her grandparents from India, and their settlement in the town of Potchefstroom, in the late nineteenth century, and then describes the life of her community in *apartheid* South Africa. Betty Govinden has identified two main and interconnected strands of memory in Mayat's narrative:

One is the memory of life lived in Potchefstroom and its world of the late nineteenth and early- and mid-twentieth century. The other is that of memory within memory: the remembrance, as the family settled in Potchefstroom, of life lived in India, their ancestral home, of their gradual adaptation to the land of their adoption, and of the feelings of ambivalence and acceptance that accompanied this.

(Govinden 2000: 177)

Mayat reconstructs from memory the story of her community's life in Potchefstroom. Embedded in this story is the community's memory of their homeland, India, and of their migration to South Africa.

In recognising the palimpsest of memory in her memoir, Mayat seems to acknowledge her "biculturalism", a term coined by Roger Bromley to describe diasporic literature:

The narratives are mostly produced by women and shaped by what might be called bi-culturalism in the sense that they are born of two worlds (or more), expressions of marginalisation which emerge from migrant experience and cultural border zones: plural and fractured voices, multiple personalities struggling with placelessness and the rootedness of old, hollowed-out belongings.

(Bromley 2000: 4)

Mayat's family, "born of two worlds" comes to occupy a marginalised position in Potchefstroom. The reason for this positioning is two-fold: they are migrants struggling with "placelessness"; and they are blacks in a white-dominated society.

For Mayat memory is also a political tool which gives voice to the history of a hitherto silenced community. Published in 1990, the year Nelson Mandela was released from prison, Mayat's narrative comes into being at the moment of the inception of the transformation process in South Africa. As part of a wider recuperative project, Mayat's reconstruction of the past has important political and social value in post-*apartheid* South Africa, as it is primarily concerned with describing the lives of a minority South Asian community in *apartheid* South Africa. Within that reconstruction is the trope of migration and diaspora, and the two strands become enmeshed as the forces of history bind them ever closer. In the following extract, Mayat is reacting to the threat of repatriation for Indian migrants who had made South Africa their home:

Go where? This was our country. Even our grandparents were buried here, and there were two more generations after mine. Sure, we had our roots in India, just as the whites had theirs in Europe. We had our culture, one that was richer and older than the one of the whites. Into a race, one has to be born. A culture is transmittable, it is capable of striking roots and spreading in alien soil, and it is so much a part of a people that without it, it leaves an impoverished skeletal community. (*TTM* 1990: 245)

For Mayat, excavating these past injustices (after the colonial era there were to be forced removals and the trauma of the Group Areas Act)^{xx} is an affirming gesture. Describing the adaptation of the migrants to their diasporic location, and their subsequent struggle to retain their hard-won, new 'home' is an act of commemoration for Mayat, as well as a comment on the import of the current moment (1990) of political transition in South Africa. Mayat writes this about her family's forced removal from Potchefstroom: "While the state was knocking nails in our coffins and demolishing all vestiges of our habitations, trying to obliterate signs of our existence from the history of the town, we started to strike new roots and build our lives again" (*TTM* 1990: 256). Whereas for Alexander, a mythologised past became a burden, and for Koul a preserved past is sustaining, for Mayat the reconstructed past is a declaration of freedom from, paradoxically, that very past.

This double dislocation of Indian immigrants in South Africa (from the 'homeland' and then within the new 'home') made the need for continuity even more urgent in this particular diasporic location. Women, according to Mayat, played the major role in preserving traditional cultural practices in the diasporic location. She describes how the women of her family used memory to keep the image of the past 'home' alive. These memories were transformed into stories, narrated by the women whilst performing domestic chores, extending their role of nurturers to that of educators as well:

It wasn't story telling, but a more sacred duty that mothers and aunts seemed to be performing. As sustainers of family traditions, we learnt the fundamentals of our faith

in their laps. Before being handed over to a teacher or Maulana, we already knew our kalimas duas and the Arabic alphabet.

(*TTM* 1990: 63)

In these vignettes, Mayat praises her female relatives, describes domestic scenes and everyday life, and expresses her positive view on the preservation of traditional cultural practices. She utilises these aesthetic elements further in order to create a portrait of her mother:

As custodians of family and community traditions, they were busy cooking, entertaining, sewing, arranging receptions and keeping daughters in tow. This was my mother's life too, when she had arrived from India, heavily cloaked in a burkha, but as long as I can remember, she was a picture in motion.

(*TTM* 1990: 158)

But Mayat's mother has also to adjust to life in South Africa and to her husband's assimilation into the host culture. But she is, like Alexander's amma, mindful of her prescribed gender role, and ironically change is first brought about for Mayat's mother through adherence to old traditions of wifely duty:

His... insistence that they sit at a table, and instead of the communal khooncha, eat from separate plates! All this was new to her. Daily she adapted to a new situation. She never protested nor questioned the pronouncements. To obey your husband was to win his love and confidence.

(*TTM* 1990: 71)

Dharma in this case leads to adaptation and cultural change. However, Mayat's mother is not hampered by traditions. As a result of the economic depression in South Africa, Mayat's mother decides to take off her *burkha* and help in the family shop in town, becoming the first Muslim businesswoman there to do this. She does this in addition to domestic chores such as cooking. Alexander, in the final section of *Fault Lines*, makes a

similar revelation about amma, when amma is allowed to tell her own story and thus expresses her strong will. Amma illustrates her secret strength of will with an anecdote about how she sold her valuable wedding sari and then donated the funds to a mission hospital and school.

In contrast to Suleri and Alexander, Mayat's narrative lacks a sustained feminist critique of gender roles. Instead, Mayat's intervention takes the form of a portrait of an adaptable, competent, transnational woman, a purveyor of traditional culture who is also capable of a defiant feminist gesture, stepping from the secluded, private world of the traditional Muslim woman, into the public, male world of trade and commerce.

Koul, too, focuses heavily on her female relatives, domestic spaces, and the traditions of nurturing in Kashmiri households. Her narrative abounds with sensuous details of food preparation and religious festivals. Her memoir begins with a spell-binding evocation of her grandmother, Dhanna, who in her youth performed a grueling penance of mythic proportions in order to successfully bear children:

One night Dhanna has a dream and she is told what she has to do to keep her children. So she goes to the village of her ancestors. She finds a well at least nine-men deep and it is near her mother's house. Once a month she goes to the well at midnight, unties her two tightly woven braids of hair that start just above the nape of her neck. With her fingers she pries open the strands until her hair, crimped by weeklong braiding, falls loosely about her shoulders. Then she takes a bath.

(*TL* 2002: 5)

By including a biography of her grandmother in her memoir, Koul tells the story of a community of women spanning generations. She also elevates Dhanna to the status of

heroine. Not only is Dhanna a heroine, she is also Koul's mentor. From her Koul derives her cultural heritage. Dhanna tells her stories and teaches her how to cook. In turn, Koul tells her story which becomes her contribution to the preservation of this culture. She also creates a matrilineage (here food is the linking device which positions these women in a seemingly indestructible chain) which allays some of her diasporic anxieties about the cultural fate of her American daughters:

My daughter, the student president and varsity athlete, settles down at the kitchen table to a hot fish-cold rice lunch. By the side of her plate is the inevitable stack of comic books she reads at the dining table. As I watch her eat I can see my mother and grandmother on either side of me and we smile at each other with contentment. My daughter is one of us.

(*TL* 2002: 179)

Food, the hot fish-cold rice dish which Dhanna prepared for Koul when she was a child in Kashmir, binds the three generations of women despite the diasporic location of the younger generations and their assimilation into another culture.

Koul's memoir creates and salutes a community of women who tell stories, cook food and share their woes in an increasingly violent and ruptured Kashmir. Life-writing such as *Tiger Ladies: A Memoir of Kashmir* (its subtitle, like Mayat's title, emphasises that it records a collective as well as an individual identity), are just as much repositories of cultural or social history as they are personal life-stories. This form of life-writing could be categorised as "cultural autobiography" which, according to Caren Kaplan, renegotiates "the relationship between personal identity and the world, between personal and social history" (1992: 130). Also, Kaplan sees the "narrative inventions" of cultural autobiographies, in this instance, the construction of a matrilineage, the use of the food

trope, and the interweaving of other life-stories with one's own, as "tied to a struggle for cultural survival rather than a purely aesthetic experimentation or individual expression" (1992: 130).

Similarly, Mira Kamdar's narrative, *Motiba's Tattoos: A Granddaughter's Journey Into Her Indian Family's Past* (2000), which, as the title suggests, is both a tribute to the author's grandmother (*motiba* in Gujarati) and a narrativised genealogy. Kamdar, an academic from New York, begins her narrative with an exoticised description of *motiba*, and then moves on to trace the fortunes and the migrations of various family members who originated in the small village of Gokhlana in Kathiawar, India, and who are now spread across the USA. Kamdar's text is a hotch-potch of cultural and personal information. It includes a poem, photographs, two of *motiba*'s recipes, maps, emails, letters, extracts from the *Puranas* and a lengthy glossary. Lacking the critical and self-reflexive edge of a memoir like *Fault Lines*, this text nonetheless expands the genre of life-writing by focusing strongly on ethnographic detail and attempting a form of cultural translation for the non-Gujarati reader.

A somewhat different form of life-writing is displayed by Jayapraga Reddy's *The Unbending Reed* (unpublished; henceforth *UR*). Reddy, a disabled South African writer, was the descendent of indentured labourers from India who migrated to the British colony of Port Natal in the late nineteenth century to work on the sugar-cane plantations. In this narrative Reddy concentrates almost exclusively on her disability (she was wheel-chair bound as a result of muscular dystrophy), and her struggle to become a writer. The style

is dry, prosaic, and at times tedious as Reddy records details of her physical condition. But on the whole, this autobiography is celebratory. As its preface indicates, Reddy's main aim in writing it is to show how she, as a woman, has triumphed over her physical disability and over the hardships she has been forced to endure: "A woman is like the reed, though she bends with the wind, she does not break. – eastern proverb" (*UR* unpublished: n.p.). It is an ironic choice for Reddy's epigraph because, in the literal sense, she was almost totally unable to move her upper body due to a steel rod which was inserted into her spinal column and held in place with clamps.

But this proverb could also refer to Reddy's mother, to whom the autobiography is dedicated: "To the memory of my Mother, Esperri (Bommie) whose dedication, discipline, far-sightedness, courage and endurance made life a lesson in grit" (*UR* unpublished: n.p.). The narrative is filled with praise for her mother's unbending resolve and, curiously, because Reddy herself did not bear children, Chapter One begins with the narrator's identification with Bommie as a mother of a disabled child: "Unless a woman has personally experienced the heartache and pain of bearing a disabled child, she cannot identify with the complexities involved in the upbringing of that child" and "Every expectant mother wants her child to be normal and healthy" (*UR* unpublished: 1). Reddy opens her autobiography with the spotlight on her mother, *her* pain and suffering due to Reddy and her brothers' condition: Reddy's own subjectivity as the "disabled child" is relegated to the shadows. Elsewhere, her praise for her mother is more directly stated. After her death Reddy writes: "Only mothers are indispensable. ... She who had been

there for us, sparing nothing and the tower of strength was no longer there” (*UR* unpublished: 128). Similar praise also extends to her paternal grandmother:

My grandmother, Mungama Reddy, was a remarkable woman. An early widow-hood did not cow her into spiritual weakness or reduce her to self-pity. Instead she picked up the pieces and did what she could to keep the home fires burning. After my grandfather’s death, she gave up the banana farm in Roosfontein and moved to town. Roosfontein was a beautiful scenic area in Westville which became a White area.

(*UR* unpublished: 21)

In terms of content and intention, Reddy’s narrative is similar to the other life-writing discussed. She does praise female relatives and highlights their strengths as women in their specific contexts of hardship, but she does not attempt to mythologise them, and except for the uncanny empathy at the opening of the narrative, her relationship with her mother is represented in a straightforward manner. The language of Reddy’s life-writing is colourless, almost life-less at times, resembling reportage rather than creative writing. But although devoid of figurative imagery, the candid force of Reddy’s writing succeeds in claiming for its author the authority and autonomy lost through her sex, race and disabled body. A similar goal is achieved for her female relatives by including their stories in the autobiography.

Reddy also describes a lively community of women who are confined to the “yard”, a communal space in the midst of a tenement house used by these women to perform daily chores and for social interaction. As a disabled child this space signified freedom from confinement and valuable social interaction for Reddy:

Living in that year brought me close to nature. The old woman reared fowls, plump,

squawking free-rangers of a myriad kind. She sold the fowls and eggs to the neighbours. Her best customer was a tired dispirited housewife who lived in self-imposed isolation. No one ever saw her but she became the chief topic of conversation for the women in the yard who took fiendish pleasure in dissecting her failed marriage as they sat together cleaning vegetables or sheep's heads. ... I would sit in their midst, listening.

(UR unpublished: 28a)

Reddy obviously admires these women who are so enterprising and industrious but in between the raw details such as the "sheep's heads", she slips in a critical comment about these gossiping women and their *schadenfreude*. Nevertheless, Reddy utilises the aesthetic element of describing domestic spaces and the minutiae of life for women like her mother in order to highlight their social and cultural positioning. Paradoxically, this "yard-space" (Mehta 1997: 10) evoked by Reddy, symbolises both restriction and marginalisation due to *apartheid* laws and traditional Indian gender roles, and a lively, interactive, recuperative area where women could share their experiences.

Reddy differs markedly from the other authors by not engaging with the subject of 'homeland'. As the quotation about her grandmother reveals, Reddy was acutely aware of the trauma and injustices of *apartheid* (in this case, forced removals due to the Group Areas Act), and this is what she engaged with, her family's struggle to survive in South Africa. This shows that her affiliations and interest lay with her diasporic 'home', not a remote 'homeland' (two generations removed, and a land she never visited).

Betty Govinden has noted that in South Africa, South Asian women autobiographers often intertwine the story of South Africa's liberation struggle with their personal life

stories. Govinden cites Fatima Meer's many autobiographical pieces and Dr Goonam's *Coolie Doctor* (1991), both women being high profile political activists, as examples of what she calls "struggle autobiography" (Govinden 2000: 278). In this form of life-writing, "political agency and activism" (Govinden 2000: 275), become strongly linked to the identity of the author. Although neither Reddy, nor Mayat, write "struggle autobiographies" of this kind, their life-writing does draw a strong association between their political milieu and their respective subjectivities.

In her autobiography, Reddy is not at all concerned with preserving Indian culture or imagining India as her 'homeland'. Instead, she is eager to capture the textures and complexities of South Africa. In an interview with Annemarie van Niekerk she said "I am a South African with Indo-African links. I derive my creative spirit from the land of my birth, not from the land of my origin" (1994: 173). In contrast to Alexander, Reddy does not problematise her ethnicity, although she does offer a critique of *apartheid* in the *Unbending Reed*. Interestingly, however, the life-writing of Alexander and Reddy are similar in that they both stress the significance of writing in the formation of their respective subjectivities.

The achievement of women writers of the South Asian diaspora who, in their respective cultural contexts, seek to articulate empowered female subjectivities (though not always stable or cohesive, as we see with Alexander), through their life-writing, is indubitable. Whether for themselves, through the act of writing and grappling with the exigencies of diaspora, or for their female relatives, through inclusion of their biographies

and the construction of matrilineages, they succeed in representing autonomous and authoritative female subjectivities. Through the use of a number of aesthetic elements which cohere into a pattern despite a multiplicity of perspectives and styles, these writers inscribe a form of life-writing which is distinctive and innovative.

As women's writing, this life-writing draws attention to the oppression of women and to writers as agents. Gudmundsdóttir reminds us that "autobiography can be a potent tool for women's voices, as feminists have long insisted on the politics of the private" (2003: 100). As we see with Koul, Mayat and Kamdar, some life-writing by women of the South Asian diaspora contains a particular and striking combination of the private and the political. Not only in theme, but also in descriptive or emotive elements, these narratives poetically capture scenes of family life and domestic intimacy which resound with political or social significance. Moreover, in the cultural context of the South Asian diaspora, the very act of writing one's own life-story is "itself a gesture enunciating the empowerment of the female when she speaks in protest, in rejection, in an infinitely recessive 'desire' within a powerfully restrictive psychosocial matrix" (Geok-lin Lim 1992: 353).

Finally, in almost direct response to Cixous's controversial appeal to women to "write the body" (Cixous 1975: 245), Alexander declares her restoration of the visceral to the act of writing: "Sometimes I think I have to write myself into being. Write in order not to be erased. What should I write with? Milk, blood, feces, spittle, stumps of bone, torn flesh?" (*FL* 1992: 73). This return to the body and assertion of agency with relation

to the constitution of subjectivity in language is the basis of *écriture féminine*. In varying degrees and with less self-consciousness the other life-writers discussed here also enact a form of *écriture féminine* which traverses national and cultural boundaries, and explicitly celebrates female creativity.

End Notes

ⁱ I use the term life-writing as an umbrella term to cover the various strands of the genre, whereas other scholars, for example, Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield (2000) use only the term autobiography to refer to different forms.

ⁱⁱ For a comprehensive and up-to-date list of life-writing by women of the South Asian diaspora see the website SAUNET: Bookshelf: Nonfiction & (Auto)Biographies.

<http://www.sawnet.org/books/nonfiction.php>

ⁱⁱⁱ It seems that as feminist literary scholars have attempted to map out women's life-writing, many have tended to make sweeping generalisations about the distinctiveness of their subject, often ignoring the overlaps between male or 'mainstream' life-writing and women's life-writing.

^{iv} As the subtitle indicates, this is a memoir, not an autobiography. Although the boundary between the two sub-genres is blurry, with the two terms often being used interchangeably, some scholars have made a distinction between the two. For example, Elleke Boehmer maintains that a memoir is a series of memories arranged into a narrative rather than a life-story (Seminar presented at the University of London, Inter-University Postcolonial Seminar Series, 1 March 2005).

^v As argued in Chapter One, this writing has a distinctly feminist aim of resisting patriarchal oppression and of asserting female autonomy.

^{vi} Linda Anderson has suggested that memory is a space in which the self can be remade by women autobiographers (1997: 8-12).

^{vii} According to Gloria Anzaldua, these contradictions and ambiguities can be usefully deployed in a process of synchresis:

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a

pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else.

(Anzaldúa 1987: 79)

^{viii} According to Graham Dawson, who draws on the double meaning of the word ‘compose’, in telling life-stories we engage both in the cultural activity of constructing narratives about ourselves, and in the psychological one of striving for an “orientation of the self within the social relations of its world” (1994: 22-3). Alexander’s psychological striving for composure at the outset of this text is excruciating.

^{ix} See Section 8 where she details the shame and agony of being forced to learn English. An interesting parallel is evident in Agnes Sam’s short story, “Jesus is Indian” (1989). See Chapter Four.

^x For example, Sara Suleri weaves the violent history of Pakistan’s independence with her own intimate memories of her childhood and her family in *Meatless Days* (1987), and Zuleikha Mayat tells the infamous story of South Africa’s apartheid regime in her memoir *A Treasure Trove of Memories - A reflection on the experiences of the people of Potchefstroom* (1996).

^{xi} Alexander’s tortured account of her re-negotiation of the relationship between the past and the present through writing is echoed by Homi K Bhabha:

Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.

(Bhabha 1994: 7)

^{xii} See Kamdar’s dedication to her grandmother in *Motiba’s Tattoos* (2000), Koul’s moving description of her grandmother in *Tiger Ladies* (2002) and Reddy’s admiration for her mother and grandmother in *The Unbending Reed* (unpublished).

^{xiii} See also Alexander's description of her paternal grandmother, Mariamma, who is responsible for instilling in the young Alexander a sense of her deficiencies as a female with a dark complexion: "'Look child, you are dark enough as it is. How will you ever find a husband if you race around in the sun?' ... Her words never left me." (*FL* 1992: 50).

^{xiv} Cosslett sees this rise in the number of texts which deal with the mother/daughter relationship as part of the "feminist movement's recovery of the mother/daughter bond, after an earlier feminist phase of what Adrienne Rich calls 'matrophobia'" (2000: 142).

^{xv} The made-up name Susikali, has the suffix, kali or Kali – the most feared deity in the Indian pantheon, the goddess to whom powers of death and destruction are attributed. During festivals dedicated to Kali, the oracle who takes on the role of deity is male and young women join a processional ritual and enter trance-like states. According to Shirley Geok-lin Lim the "Kali figure therefore represents the usually repressed energies of the female psyche whose release transgresses and crosses social hierarchy and gender." (1992: 356).

^{xvi} On page 4 I argued that life-writing by women of the South Asian diaspora contributes to the three areas of feminist intervention, one of them being "the feminist insistence that 'the personal is political'" (Cosslett, Lury & Summerfield 2000: 2-3).

^{xvii} This notion of being divided in two, or being a fracture recalls one of Vertovec's theories of diaspora . According to Vertovec, what may result are "fractured memories" or "a multiplicity of histories, 'communities' and selves". This "multiplicity" used to be viewed as schizophrenic or pathological but it is being "redefined by diasporic individuals as a source of adaptive strength" (2000: xviii).

^{xviii} See also more recent feminist theory which situates gender in the body. For example, Judith Butler argues that "gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements,

and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (2003: 392).

^{xix} See Kaplan’s argument that transnational women autobiographers are devising what she calls an “out-law genre” of life-writing. One such “out-law genre” is cultural autobiography which renegotiates “the relationship between personal identity and the world, between personal and social history” (1992: 130).

^{xx} The Group Areas Act was one of the main *apartheid* laws. Introduced in 1950, it separated residential areas according to race, forcibly removing black people from their homes and re-locating them in designated areas, usually far away from the centre of cities.

Chapter Three

A Novel Aesthetic: The Poetics of Displacement and Home

Section I: Women's Writing and the Novel Tradition

In the introduction to *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain*, Susheila Nasta describes “the construction of an aesthetic framework for the genesis of the South Asian literary diaspora” (2002: 6). Nasta is referring to British Asian authors whose literary endeavours “figure and frame a new architecture for the im/migrant imagination, an architecture built around the poetics of displacement and the poetics of home” (2002: 7). My concern is with just such “an aesthetic framework”, but it extends to South Asian diasporic locations around the globe, and it includes in “the poetics of displacement and the poetics of home” the category of gender. The architecture which women writers of the South Asian diaspora utilise, in novels, to express their preoccupation with the experience of migration and dislocation is the focus of this chapter. Novels by Monica Ali, Farida Karodia, Meera Syal, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Bharati Mukherjee are selected for discussion.¹

Novels by these writers, which exhibit a common aesthetic, need to be described, historicised and theorised. First, in this chapter, the literary lineage of this particular form of novel writing is considered. The global increase in volume and popularity of novels by South Asian diasporic women writers necessitates placing these works within a narrative of women's literary history. Second, a close reading of Monica Ali's *Brick*

Lane (2003) is offered to demonstrate how the aesthetic pattern functions in a realist novel. Third, a discussion of a cross-section of novels by South Asian diasporic women writers concludes the chapter. This final section will examine the different literary strategies and thematic emphases of writers from different diasporic contexts who, despite these differences, participate in an overarching, transnational, feminist mode of cultural production.

One scholar concerned with historyⁱⁱ in relation to women's writing is Firdous Azim. In her text *The Colonial Rise of the Novel* (1993) Azim weaves together feminist and postcolonial concerns about the novel genre:

Women's writing, its connections with social realities, the novel as a form where women emerged to create a woman-to-woman discourse, or even the status of the novel as a form which questions and disrupts the narrative terrain within a fact/fantasy oscillation – are questions and issues that have been thoroughly examined within novel criticism. However, if a historical dimension is added to this examination (and by history I mean the history of the form itself, as well as the historical moment of the creation of texts, along with a history of its reception), the complexities of the genre will be highlighted, and the need for constant re-examination and perusal felt.

(Azim 1993: 212-3)

Azim's suggestion is very similar to the project begun by Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977). Showalter's aim was to place women's writing within a historical and cultural framework and to examine the relationship between dominant and muted cultures within literary practice. As we have seen, Showalter's early focus on only white British middle-class women writers of mainly the nineteenth century earned her much criticism from postcolonial feminist scholars. She was, as a result, deemed part of the 'high'

feminist norm which marginalised and universalised 'Third World' women. Azim's suggestion is an attempt to counter this hegemony by introducing a "historical dimension" to feminist literary criticism. By creating a history of women's novel writing, specific moments in specific cultural contexts can be highlighted. At the same time points of contiguity and patterns can be discerned from such a history. As far as novel writing by women of the South Asian diaspora is concerned, "connections with social realities, the novel as a form where women emerged to create a woman-to-woman discourse, or even the status of the novel as a form", have not been thoroughly examined yet. The development of a significant body of literature by women writers with a similar geographical origin and cultural heritage, who are now dispersed across the globe but who share a literary aesthetic, must be recorded as part of the lineage of novel writing.

The novels by South Asian diasporic women writers are, as are the examples of life-writing discussed in Chapter Two, most concerned with self-discovery, or self-recovery. But these forms of self-representation also involve degrees of both imitation and protest. These novels are rooted in the tradition of the canonical English novel and they bear a resemblance to novels by British women novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth century.ⁱⁱⁱ Arguably, they also share a similar 'grounded aesthetic'^{iv} with Indian, African-American and Caribbean women's writing.^v The multiple influences of these antecedents and contemporaries combine with specific and new aesthetic elements to generate a distinctive diasporic, feminist novel.

The novels by women of the South Asian diaspora share many characteristics with some of the acclaimed realist novels by English women writers of the nineteenth century. Celebrated examples of women's writing from this phase would be Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1846), referred to as a "cult text of feminism" by Gayatri Spivak (1995: 244), or George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874), novels which Showalter has categorised as "feminine", by which she means concerned with imitation rather than protest or self-discovery (1977: 100). Despite significant points of departure from this novel tradition, some of the shared characteristics of the realist mode used in both historical phases are worth noting. For example, in both, a central narrating subject, or an omniscient narrator, narrates the life-story of a single, central character, thereby constructing an authentic representation of that character's social reality. However, whereas *Jane Eyre* or *Middlemarch* have a definite, single heroine, Jane and Dorothea respectively, novels by South Asian diasporic women writers often include a secondary or 'sister' heroine, widening the scope of the central consciousness.

For example, in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and its sequel *The Vine of Desire* (2002) the lives of central characters Anju and Sudha are narrated. They are cousins whose sisterly bond surpasses all other loyalties and desires. Similarly, in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) the divergent lives of sisters Nazneen and Hasina are narrated, mainly through their epistolary relationship, although Nazneen's is the central consciousness developed in the novel. A similar dual formation is found in Farida Karodia's *Daughters of the Twilight* (1986) and *Other Secrets* (2000). The eponymous daughters are Meena and Yasmin, sisters growing up during South Africa's twilight years

of *apartheid*. It is the character Meena whose interior life is explored in the narrative, but the external actions of Yasmin drive the plot of this novel. The exploration of female relationships, matrilineal formations and supportive sisterhoods is an important element in these contemporary novels.

A similar trend is evident in Indian, African-American and Caribbean women's writing of the twentieth century. In the introduction to *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia* (1992), Susheila Nasta comments on the shared strategies of resistance in this women's writing working alongside its roots in older literary forms:

The question of new languages and literary forms springing from old roots is central to the energy emanating from the development of women's writing in the regions under consideration here.

(1992: xvi)

The new literary forms of the twentieth century created by these women writers acknowledge western novelistic conventions but move beyond an individual focus to encompass other female consciousnesses, intersubjective relationships between women, and female solidarity. Examples are Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980), Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), and Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* (1982). In *Clear Light of Day*, which was shortlisted for a Booker Prize in 1981, Desai describes the relationship between two sisters, Bim and Tara, whose reminiscences about their childhood at the time of India's independence form a substantial part of the narrative. In *Our Sister Killjoy* Aidoo explores the possibility of a global sisterhood through the relationship between Sissie and Marija who represents the Madonna, a western-derived

icon. Walker situates Celie, her central character, in a community of supportive women, and it is Celie's relationship with Shug, the beautiful and charismatic blues singer, that offers her redemption and love.

In addition to portraying communities of women or intersubjective female relationships, novels by African-American women, in particular, have explicitly explored female sexuality, the female body as a site of oppression (be it through slavery, racism or patriarchy), the value of the everyday and the sensuous, oral literature and folklore. These common themes and aesthetic elements, which collectively may be referred to as an African-American feminist aesthetic, are evident in prize-winning works such as *The Colour Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker and *Song of Solomon* (1977) by Toni Morrison. This women's writing, what Susheila Nasta calls "black women's writing" (1992: xv) which was ascendant a generation or two before the emergence of South Asian diasporic women's writing, is evidently extremely influential and inspiring to contemporary women writers.

Common to both the nineteenth century novels and the contemporary ones under scrutiny in this thesis, is the desire to inscribe a unified female subjectivity. The significant difference in the formulation of this unified female subjectivity is that the nineteenth century novel was strongly aligned with Western Enlightenment discourse. Azim argues that in the nineteenth century novel, "the portrayal of the development of a rational and unified female subject" (1993: 189) was done at the expense of 'others'.^{vi} In the case of *Jane Eyre*, the 'other' is the madwoman in the attic, Bertha Mason, who has to

be destroyed before Jane can step into her new role as an integrated and liberated woman, this transition being symbolised by her marriage to Rochester. Showalter summarises this utility of the character Bertha Mason:

Madness is explicitly associated with female sexual passion, with the body, with the fiery emotions Jane admits to feeling for Rochester. ... Thus it becomes inevitable that Bertha's death, the purging of the lusts of the flesh, must precede any successful union between Rochester and Jane.

(1977: 122)

Despite her rebelliousness and fiery emotions, Jane's narrative is one of linear progress and just rewards for a reasonable and moral temperament. In novels by South Asian diasporic women writers a similar desire for a coherent female subjectivity is discernible, but this formulation is based on a positive re-articulation of the notion of difference, what Gloria Anzaldua has described as "a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" (1987: 79). The 'other' is incorporated rather than destroyed.^{vii}

The notion of difference, theorised and valorised by postcolonial feminist scholars, is crucial to certain twentieth century women's novels. Azim points out how, in the late twentieth century, radical revisions in feminist literary criticism re-formulated the notion of an allegedly unified female subject: "The recognition of the impossibility of a coherent subject-position has led to an examination of the split subject, and the class and race significance of such a subject-position for feminism" (Azim 1993: 103). The split-subject is examined in *Clear Light of Day* (1980) where Bim, the daughter of a traditional Hindu household is both immersed in *dharma* to her family, and in actively pursuing her career as a history lecturer. Another Indian novelist, Shashi Deshpande, also explores

difference and the notion of a multiplicity of selves in her novels *Roots and Shadows* (1983) and *That Long Silence* (1988). In these novels the female characters are racked with contradictory desires for freedom from family duties and cultural restraints, and for a sense of identity and belonging within their respective milieus. The result of such different desires and affiliations is the splitting of the self into what could be termed the ‘traditional self’ and the ‘modern self’ on the part of these Indian women characters.

Novels by women of the South Asian diaspora have at their base the notion of difference. The central characters tackle oppression of women by patriarchal cultural structures and the exigencies of diasporic life by picking their way through differences of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and geography, amongst many others. Plots are propelled by crises caused by difference, and *denouements* are usually in the form of a resolution or management of difference. Roger Bromley describes the narratives of diasporic writers as:

... not simply narratives about contestation and difference, but [they] achieve their very textualisation through constructions of difference and contestation: it is an aesthetic and a political issue. ... [They are] sites of cultural resistance and refusal, empowering critical difference.

(Bromley 2000: 3-4)

These novels utilise critical difference in two ways: by recording the often traumatic and harsh encounters with difference; and then by celebrating the creative synthesis of difference. These narratives protest against discrimination or oppression based on difference but acknowledge the integral role played by difference in the formation of empowered, female, diasporic subjects. For example, in *Brick Lane* the fateful

Nazneen's 'Other' is the wilful and seemingly self-destructive Hasina. Instead of destroying or obliterating the 'Other' in order for the heroine to triumph, Ali constructs a narrative which subtly delineates Nazneen's integration of the 'Other' until she is able to assert her will, defy her fate and take control of her life. Nazneen is also shown to synthesise cultural differences, dancing to western popular music and ice-skating in a sari. So instead of creating a unified female subject, Ali creates a hybrid subject who has incorporated aspects of the 'Other' rather than destroyed it, who has resisted her oppression as a traditional Bangladeshi wife, and who celebrates her myriad cultural influences without glossing over any of them. Unlike *Jane Eyre's* culmination in marriage,^{viii} symbolically a permanent state of balance and unity, *Brick Lane* ends with Nazneen repudiating both husband and an unsuitable lover, and then enjoying a momentary transcendence on the ice. This glimpse of utopian freedom and integration of selves is what gives the novel its transformative power in terms of female subjectivity.

A further and related similarity between nineteenth century women's novels, the novels of the twentieth century, and novels by women of the South Asian diaspora, is the desire to inscribe a woman's voice in literature. Recognising and highlighting the presence of this voice had enormous political ramifications, as we see with Showalter's record of women's writing in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977, 1999). In *Jane Eyre*, for example, the heroine develops from silenced, disempowered child to fulfilled, expressive married woman. In fact, she becomes the extremely articulate narrator of this novel. In a fascinating retelling of *Jane Eyre*, Caribbean writer Jean Rhys gives the first Mrs Rochester a voice (*Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) is a prequel to *Jane Eyre* and so we

encounter Bertha Mason before her migration to England and subsequent madness). In *Brick Lane* a turning point in the narrative occurs when Nazneen speaks out against the usurer Mrs Islam and her henchmen sons. This voice or ability to enunciate one's position or subjectivity is integral to the development of an empowered female subject. For both Jane Eyre and Nazneen their autonomy is predicated on their ability to speak authentically. It is only when their speech is in correspondence with their feelings that they begin to be liberated. Both heroines defy the rules of social behaviour, the decorum and the hierarchies of power which are part of their respective social contexts.

African woman novelist, Ama Ata Aidoo also questions this notion of a voice for her character Sissie in *Our Sister Killjoy*:

What positive is there to be, when I cannot give voice to my soul and still have her heard? Since, so far, I have only been able to use a language that enslaved me, and therefore, the messengers of my mind always come shackled?

(Aidoo 1977: 112)

Sissie cannot “give voice” to her soul because she is a woman and because of the imposition of a colonial language, but Aidoo finds a voice through the writing of this highly experimental novel which parodies colonialist discourses and re-writes Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. C L Innes applauds Aidoo for inscribing an innovative literary voice:

Her experimental technique revises the form and conventions of the novel as they have been handed down from British writers and, more specifically, rewrites and reverses Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, as the archetypal European novel ‘about’ Africa.

(Innes 1992: 139-140)

Aidoo's literary voice is a double achievement because of its successful interrogation of both feminist and postcolonial issues. Shirley Chew has recognised a similar achievement by Indian women writers such as Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal. Chew commends them for their

... serious and passionate commitment to the task of reconstructing the past, and with the view to retrieving for women, both ancestral and present-day, a voice and a presence within their motherland.

(Chew 1992: 46)

Novels by women of the South Asian diaspora echo these voices of their literary mothers, showing how "the text becomes the site of struggle, of voices in conflict, and a 'self' continually pitted against its multiple and shifting realities" (Chew 1992: 46).

In all three historical phases discussed here the use of the realist mode of novel writing recreates the social realities of women, highlights their plights as victims of patriarchal systems of oppression, inscribes a unified or empowered female subjectivity, and articulates a female voice in literature. Although there are other literary influences, the realist novels by contemporary women writers can be seen as the literary progeny of the nineteenth century women's *bildungsroman* in English. The combination of the legacy of colonial education regimes, the globalisation of western cultural forms, and the experience of common cultural constraints by these women writers separated by more than a century,^{ix} has led to twentieth century women writers and contemporary South Asian diasporic women writers adopting the realist mode of novel writing made so popular in nineteenth century England. The results of this transnational feminist practice of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are in many respects markedly different

from their nineteenth century exemplars, but further historicising of the practice and commentary on the dialectical relationship between the different phases of women's writing is crucial for feminist literary criticism in general.

Although the realist mode does dominate, not all novels by women of the South Asian diaspora employ a consistently realist mode to address feminist or diasporic concerns. A notable exception is Suniti Namjoshi's use of fantasy and utopian modes of writing. Her novels incorporate fables, fantasy and oral traditions to portray feminist utopias and lesbian relationships. More generally and not as an exception, writing by women of the African diaspora employs "superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things" (Morrison 1985: 342) in an attempt to retrieve the "discredited knowledge" (*ibid.*) of black people and to forge a new form of epistemology. Carolyn Cooper has studied this aesthetic element, particularly descriptions of spirit possession, in writing by women of the African diaspora, and has concluded that it "signifies both the dislocation and rearticulation of Afro-centric culture in the Americas" (1992: 64). In these novels, for example Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981), the use of this narrative technique, the mingling of the quotidian and the fantastic within a realist setting, is thus linked to the themes of migration and cultural displacement.

Even in the generally realist *Brick Lane*, the narrative sometimes drifts into the realm of magic and fantasy. The accounts of Nazneen's dreams, memories and ghostly visions, for example, explore her unconscious and repressed desires, offering an alternative 'reality' to the 'reality' of the main narrative. Roger Bromley has noted that

diasporic fiction often uses “both the dominantly constructed orders of discourse and the unsettling, undercutting and subversive orders of dream, the unconscious and the ‘mad’” (Bromley 2000: 5).^x In *Brick Lane* it is at these moments of mental flight and altered states of consciousness that the realist mode is challenged and extended. As the author attempts to represent gaps or rifts in the subject, it becomes almost impossible to maintain a homogeneous narration of linear progress. The contemporary woman novelist, it seems, is not driven to construct a seamless narrative with characters who exercise complete rationality and control over their emotions. Further, the diasporic woman writer extends and stretches the realist mode to focus on the fissures and ruptures of her subjects who “live ‘border lives’, in between nation/s, past and present, inclusion and exclusion, negotiating ‘liminal’, hybridised cultural identities that subvert the idea of an essentialised subject” (Bhabha 1994: 1).

The literary lineage of novels by South Asian diasporic women shows its debt to its antecedents but also reveals their aesthetic innovations and political interventions, especially with respect to subverting the notion of an essentialised subject, and inscribing a poetics of home and a poetics of displacement.

Section 2: Literary Daughters: Brick Lane’s Nazneen and Hasina

Monica Ali’s first novel, *Brick Lane* (2003), met with critical acclaim and worldwide interest. The novel was longlisted for the Orange Prize, shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the Guardian First Book Award; it won the best debut novel prize at the WH Smith People’s Choice Book awards and Newcomer of the Year at the British Book

Awards. The novel traces the life of Nazneen from her ignominious birth in a Bangladeshi village to her maturity as an independent and assertive woman on a council estate in London. It contains a shadow protagonist in the form of Hasina, the wayward sister in Dhaka. The social detail is expansive, covering immigrant life in London and rural and urban life in Bangladesh, for various classes. The characters span three generations, and the political scope of the novel includes racism in England and the repercussions of 9/11. At the heart of the narrative is the construction of an empowered female subjectivity and the articulation of a diasporic female voice, but the novel also contains sensitive portrayals of male characters such as Chanu and Dr Azad.

Ali herself was born in Bangladesh and immigrated to the UK with her parents in 1971 when she was three years old. But unlike novels such as Farida Karodia's *Other Secrets* (2000), or Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* (1997) which uses her memoir *Fault Lines* (1992) as its blueprint, down to passages replicated verbatim, Ali does not employ an autobiographical mode of narration. Instead, an omniscient narrator tells the story of Nazneen, a village girl who becomes a flat-bound, council estate wife, incorporating vivid descriptions of her memories, reminiscences and dreams. A tone of nostalgia permeates the earlier descriptions of Nazneen's memories of childhood in the village, Gouripur. However, the fact that Ali is herself a Bangladeshi immigrant to the UK suggests that this poignant fictional account of a Bangladeshi immigrant community in London is a form of "cultural autobiography", what Caren Kaplan has categorised as being more "social history" (1992: 130) than personal life-story. Also, Kaplan sees the "narrative inventions" of cultural autobiographies as "tied to a struggle for cultural

survival rather than a purely aesthetic experimentation or individual expression” (1992: 130). The narrative inventions of *Brick Lane* (henceforth *BL*) are tied to both cultural survival and cultural assimilation, and the novel does operate as a social record of a specific community at a specific point in its history.

Nazneen’s relationship with her past is sketched early in the narrative. She dreams and thinks of Gouripur frequently and with an intensity that is lacking in her external life in the flat at Tower Hamlets, East London. Almost every reminiscence features her sister Hasina or her unfortunate mother. As the narrator guides us through Nazneen’s interior life and develops her consciousness, we see that she constantly makes comparisons between her old and new lives as she fervently tries to position herself in the present. She also displays a self-awareness about this process, sensing that her husband Chanu is unable to accept the present: “while she wanted to look neither to the past nor to the future, he lived exclusively in both. They took different paths but they had journeyed, so she realized, together” (*BL* 2003: 121).

Nazneen’s relationship with the past and the home she has left behind is represented through alternative forms of consciousness – dreams, phantasmagoria and ‘madness’. Carolyn Cooper calls these alternative forms of consciousness “zombification”, and claims that it is a common technique used by African-American women writers to “define new spaces and realities for women” (1992: 64). In the initial stages of the narrative of *BL* memories, dreams, fantasies, myths and the supernatural are used to render Nazneen’s bifurcated consciousness. Vertovec has posited that diaspora may result in “fractured memories” or “a multiplicity of histories, ‘communities’ and

selves". This "multiplicity", according to Vertovec, used to be viewed as schizophrenic or pathological but it is now being "redefined by diasporic individuals as a source of adaptive strength" (2001: xviii). The combination of this mode of narration - which affords the reader a peek into Nazneen's alternative forms of consciousness - with the realist framework results in a deeper understanding of Nazneen's fractured memories, multiplicity of selves and adaptive strength. Initially, her memories and daydreams reveal her loneliness and isolation in the alien, hostile environment she has travelled to as the result of a transaction between her father and her husband. The immigrant's tendency to idealise or romanticise the homeland is portrayed through Nazneen's imaginative reconstructions of an idyllic childhood spent in the company of her vivacious sister, Hasina. But that construct of home is gradually dismantled as Nazneen comes to apprehend the truth about her mother's misery and death. Thus we also see, in these episodes, Nazneen's struggle to repudiate traditional prescriptive gender roles which have been transplanted from her homeland to her diasporic home.

In the latter stages of the novel Nazneen has another dream of her childhood in Gouripur, in which her mother is combing and braiding her hair. But during this homely, domestic scene, she becomes trapped and imprisoned by the mat she is sitting on, and the dream turns into a nightmare about being bound and suffocated, her mother being the symbol (victim and purveyor) of this oppression. A ghost scene follows the dream. Amma walks into Nazneen's kitchen wearing her Dhaka sari (her best sari which she put on to commit suicide) and tells Nazneen that she killed her baby son, Raqib, by believing that she had the power to keep him alive. Now Amma is the symbol of Nazneen's own

repressed guilt and her misguided conscience, which hold her back and prevent her from asserting her will. This past has to be exorcised in order for Nazneen to transform herself from a fatalistic, obedient wife and mother into an autonomous, assertive woman.

The tone of memory and nostalgia which is common to most novels by women of the South Asian diaspora, is extended in *Brick Lane*, by Ali's use of dreams and phantasmagoria to explore the contradictions and paradoxes of the immigrant's relationship with the past. Nazneen's memories of her past sustain her but they also paralyse her in a state of subservience and fatalism. These journeys into her past and her unconscious mind offer a stark contrast to the realist mode of the rest of the narrative. These episodes, which afford the reader a glimpse of an inner life, threaten to disrupt the realist mode of the novel, and they split the subjectivity of Nazneen. These ruptures in the narrative and the split-subjectivity of the central character are the domain of the diasporic writer whose task it is to represent 'border lives' which occupy an interstitial space.

For women writers of the South Asian diaspora, one way of constructing empowered female subjectivities is by anchoring their central characters in secure female bonds of empathy and solidarity, or by inscribing matrilineages. In transnational feminist theory, the notion of solidarity is highlighted. Constance S. Richards, in her book *On the Winds and Waves of Imagination: Transnational Feminism and Literature* (2000) is most concerned with how women writers deploy "empathy and solidarity" in their strategies of "female self-construction of identity" (2000: xi). Jasbir Jain has commented on the

positive use of this aesthetic element in diasporic women's writing: "Matrilineage is a strong trope in the work of several diasporic women writers, for in this condition of uprootedness, one is free to imagine the absent and allow suppressed relationships and histories to surface" (2002: 143). These constructions recuperate the strength and power of women within family structures. At the same time, many of these novels examine the complicity of women in their own oppression and the oppression of other women. For instance, in *Brick Lane*, Amma's victimhood is transferred to Nazneen in the form of an indoctrinated fatalism which proves to be a serious handicap to Nazneen for many years. In this women's writing in general, the paradox of female camaraderie alongside female complicity in the face of patriarchal oppression, is often emotively evoked.^{xi}

For Nazneen, as discussed above, her suppressed relationship with her mother surfaces as she confronts a new life in the present. Her inner life is dominated by images of her mother and her sister, yet it was her father, the shadowy figure of the patriarch, who dictated the path her life would take, and it is now her husband Chanu who controls her. In addition to these imaginings of Amma, she engages in a highly formative epistolary relationship with her much-loved sister, Hasina. Senegalese writer, Mariamma Bâ, employs a strikingly similar narrative technique in *So Long a Letter* (1982). In this novel Ramatoulaye writes a letter expressing empathy and solidarity to her friend Aissatou. Ramatoulaye's letter is in the form of an interior monologue or diary of memories and reflections which celebrates the depth of the two women's friendship and camaraderie in the face of the harsh demands of marriage. At the close of *Brick Lane*, we see Nazneen participating in a women-only business venture, surrounded by her best

friend, Razia, and her daughters. The significance of these female relationships to the inscription of Nazneen's subjectivity is far-reaching, impacting on both the social and personal dimensions of identity formation.

At the outset, Hasina's primary role in Nazneen's emotional life is made clear. The only indication of will in the newly-married, brand new immigrant, Nazneen, is to be seen in her desire for a letter from Hasina (*BL* 2003: 51). Before the birth of her children Nazneen seems to have loved only one person, Hasina. Nazneen's act of writing carefully constructed and censored narratives of her happy new life in London is a survival strategy for her (*BL* 2003: 142). In these letters she maintains the role of dutiful, pious wife and fortunate immigrant which she has assumed in her external life at Tower Hamlets. But the gap between this external role and the inner, authentic Nazneen widens as the narrative proceeds. In contrast Hasina's letters are candid, crude and compassionate, brimming over with realistic detail of her often tragic life in Dhaka:

Nazneen composed and recomposed her replies until the grammar was satisfactory, all errors expunged along with any vital signs. But Hasina kicked aside all such constraints: her letters were full of mistakes and bursting with life.

(*BL* 2003: 94)

Some critics have been sceptical about this stylistic device, noting that the idiom Ali has used for Hasina's letters is distracting and unconvincing, perhaps even deprecating.^{xiii} But I would argue that the overall effect of the use of pidgin English in the novel is to highlight that the characters are in fact Bengali-speaking, and this serves to highlight Nazneen's struggle to assimilate an alien culture. Ali has also been accused of cramming too much social detail into these letters, thus creating in Hasina a crudely-wrought

political mouthpiece.^{xiii} There is something jarring about the simplicity of her translated-from-Bengali idiom and the chilling perspicacity with which she reports on subjects ranging from wife mutilation and prostitution to standards of beauty in Bangladesh and the hypocrisy of the middle classes. In addition, the letters at first serve to highlight the glaring contrast between the characters of the sisters, and then the gap between them begins to narrow as Nazneen becomes more assertive and less fatalistic.

Significant to her process of transformation and adaptation is Nazneen's realisation that Hasina is not just a victim of fate, "a life which has been tossed and twisted like a baby rat, naked and blind, in the jaws of a dog ..." (*BL* 2003: 340). By the end of the narrative Nazneen apprehends Hasina's agency and she understands what drives Hasina to make defiant and seemingly rash choices. So when Chanu asks: "Why did she do it? Why does she do these things?" Nazneen answers "Because, ... she isn't going to give up" (*BL* 2003: 490). Quietly celebrating Hasina's self which has been 'other' to her fatalistic, obedient self since childhood, Nazneen acknowledges her own will to live her life on her own terms. This remarkable relationship between Nazneen and Hasina places them in a long line of literary daughters, such as Elinor and Marianne in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), and Ramatoulaye and Aissatou in Mariamma Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1982), who, through their love and support of one another, celebrate the notion of a sisterhood.

Hasina is also the one who exposes Nazneen to the bald truth about their mother's suffering and suicide:

Amma always say we are women what can we do? If she here now I know what she say I know it too well. But I am not like her. Waiting around. Suffering around. She wrong. So many ways. At the end only she act. She who think all path is closed for her. She take only onè forbidden.

(*BL* 2003: 434)

Whereas Hasina expresses understanding of but also resistance to her mother's life, Nazneen's relationship with her mother is characterised by meek obedience and repression, a replication of her mother's stance in the face of an entrenched system of patriarchal oppression. The novel opens with the tale of Nazneen's birth, "How You Were Left to Your Fate", in which we see Nazneen inheriting her mother's fatalism.^{xiv} But Nazneen represses the truth about the destructiveness of her mother's self-denial in life "I don't want anything from this life ... I ask for nothing. I expect nothing" (*BL* 2003: 102), and ultimately in death, perceiving it rather as "her mother's quiet courage, her tearful stoicism" (*BL* 2003: 15). It is only when Nazneen acknowledges the full extent of her mother's capitulation and the anger she feels towards her that she can begin to break free from the cycle of oppression. Whilst in hospital watching over her sick son Raqib, Nazneen is tempted to relinquish all agency to God and fate, but then she remembers her mother's fatalism and is angered into the realisation that her mother, the saint, was wrong to abandon her child and then spend the rest of her life playing the role of a martyr: "At once she was enraged. A mother who did nothing to save her own child!" (*BL* 2003: 135).

The full horror of her mother's suffering and the sentence of victimhood, which had been transferred from mother to daughter, is realised in the "zombification" (Cooper

1992: 64) scene which culminates in Nazneen's nervous breakdown. Nazneen allows her years of repressed resentment and unhappiness to surface. She is also overcome with guilt about her affair with Karim. All the disgust and discontent she has felt towards Chanu and her imprisoned state since her marriage are projected onto this grotesque image of Amma which appears to her in this moment of mental anguish. The image of the apparition is archetypal, resembling a harpy or succubus (or *jinni*), preying on its victim:

'No, baby, come to me.' She pulled harder, so hard that Nazneen gave way and slid down to the floor. 'It's easy.' Amma began to cackle, and she did not cover her teeth and her mouth became wider and wider and the teeth became longer and sharper and Nazneen put up her hands to cover her face. 'It's easy. You just have to endure.'

(BL 2003: 323)

Amma's adherence to this belief "You just have to endure" led to her own mental breakdown when Nazneen was eight or nine years old. The story of Amma's breakdown is recounted in Ali's story-within-a-story of "the year that Amma became possessed by an evil jinni" (BL 2003: 398) and a *fakir* was employed to exorcise the *jinni*. Both Amma's stoicism and the *fakir's* sham are unmasked in this reminiscence. Amma's constant chanting of her mantra of suffering and endurance is not authentic. It masks her repressed anger which is unleashed by the *jinni*. The violence which is released is in direct contrast to the passive, stoical pose of the martyr – the role usually adopted by Amma. This violence, ultimately self-directed, is echoed in Nazneen's ghostly imagining of her mother, a symbolic image which has to be exorcised before Nazneen can assert her will and adopt a self-realising strategy of defiance and liberation. Both Amma's and Nazneen's breakdowns could be interpreted as a form of hysteria,^{xv} as both women

repress powerful emotions; these eventually manifest in bodily symptoms which are read as signs of psychic disturbance. In Nazneen's case, the hysteria also takes the form of these visions of her mother who has come to symbolise her repressed anger and sense of injustice. According to Gudmundsdóttir in narratives of mother-daughter relationships this is a common pattern: "Admitting to the violence of this strong relationship, often depicted in bodily images and metaphors, usually leads to an attempt at getting rid of the mother" (Gudmundsdóttir 2003: 122).

The trope of the mother-daughter relationship is central to the depiction of Nazneen's development of autonomy. After reading the letter in which Hasina describes their mother's suicide, Nazneen is filled with a quiet determination. The knowledge of Amma's self-destruction contained in the letter "displaces the world" (*BL* 2003: 437), and in her new world Nazneen repudiates the role of obedient, God-fearing wife and long-suffering mother. A crucial decision is made: "The plane left tomorrow and she would not be on it" (*ibid.*). In this depiction of a mother-daughter relationship we see a power struggle between a self-defeatist mother who continues to wield power from beyond the grave, and a daughter who struggles not only against the patriarchs who controlled her life, but also against the mother who tutored her to give in to them.

In her quest for autonomy, Nazneen is aided by the solidarity and camaraderie of women like herself. At Tower Hamlets, Nazneen encounters, for the first time as an adult, the company of other women in the communal space of the council estate. It is through a crucial relationship with the spirited, gossiping, observant Razia that Nazneen

becomes less isolated. Razia communicates to Nazneen her knowledge about the suffering of other women on the estate (*BL* 2003: 71). Razia, who is unconventional and irreverent, helps Nazneen test the boundaries of her role as traditional wife and mother. The two women discuss their ridiculous husbands and their respective marriages and through the curative power of laughter sustain each other during domestic crises and tragedies. Razia defies the norm for a Bengali wife or widow and is unconcerned when her appearance makes her a figure of ridicule in her community. She cuts her hair, smokes, wears trousers, goes to work in a factory and learns English. Nazneen's transformation in the diasporic setting is never as extreme or overt as Razia's, but the two women share a desire to adapt and be independent. At the close of the narrative, it is Razia who shows entrepreneurial zeal by starting a fashion business which employs women on the estate (*BL* 2003: 480). In the final scene of the novel Nazneen is surrounded by Razia and her two daughters, and it is Razia's words which close the novel and proclaim the achievement of women like themselves who have negotiated empowered and liberated lives for themselves in the diasporic location: " 'This is England,' she said. 'You can do whatever you like'" (*BL* 2003: 492).

The prevalence of the theme of marriage in literature by women of the South Asian diaspora is indicative of the feminist commitment of the literature. In this literature the traditional South Asian marriage is most often portrayed as an institution which oppresses women: an arranged marriage is a transaction between the bride's parents and her in-laws; it is based on a code of conduct which keeps the woman imprisoned within the confines of the home; it reduces the woman to the functions of her body; it erases her

sexuality and enslaves her body; unmarried women and widows are burdens to their families and are often treated as outcasts. In South Asia the Hindu concept of *dharma* is pervasive, irrespective of religion, class, or caste. *Dharma* is not aligned with a specific belief or act of worship but is better described as a code of conduct acceptable to a community (Jain 2002: 79). Within this framework, marriage is a sacred state which controls the body of the woman, delineates her roles as wife and mother, and confers status upon her only if she is fertile and produces male children. Embedded in this code of conduct is the “concept of *pativrata*, of the *dharma* towards the husband, the law of unquestioning obedience and fidelity in a marital relationship” (Jain 2002: 80).^{xvi} For many immigrants this code of conduct, or variations of it, is transplanted to the diasporic location, as we see in *Brick Lane*.

Very early in her marriage Nazneen overhears a telephone conversation in which Chanu describes her as:

‘Not tall. Not short. Around five foot two. Hips are a bit narrow but wide enough, I think, to carry children. All things considered, I am satisfied. ... What’s more she is a good worker. Cleaning and cooking and all that. The only complaint I could make is she can’t put my files in order, because she has no English. I don’t complain though. As I say, a girl from the village: totally unspoilt.’

(*BL* 2003: 23)

This description which designates for her the role of child-bearer and domestic servant, also establishes the power dynamic in the relationship between husband and wife. Chanu has bestowed on her her functional value to him; he has plucked her from an obscure village in Bangladesh and brought her, in her state of both moral and cultural purity, to London to serve his needs. He controls her destiny, shapes her subjectivity and

determines her worth, it seems. The description also strips away any romantic notions the naïve Nazneen might have had about love or sexual desire as part of the marital relationship. But although Nazneen chastises herself for expecting more from her marriage - “She realized in a stinging rush she had imagined all these things. Such a foolish girl. Such high notions. What self-regard.” (*BL* 2003: 23) - she is deeply disturbed by the prison-like situation she is in. This disturbance in her psyche is represented through her fear of the wardrobe - “Sometimes she dreamed the wardrobe had fallen on her, crushing her on the mattress. Sometimes she dreamed she was locked inside it and hammered and hammered but nobody heard” (*BL* 2003: 24). The trope of spatial confinement in women’s writing is ubiquitous, for example Bertha Mason’s attic in *Jane Eyre* (1848), the garret in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and the tomb-like ancestral house in Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* (1980). This trope serves to spotlight both the physical and mental restraints imposed upon women by the various structures of patriarchy.

In the early days of her marriage Nazneen survives this confinement through a combination of sustaining memories of home; Hasina’s letters; the routine of domestic life; and the adoption of the role designated for her by Chanu. In an act of mimicry,^{xvii} she performs the role of innocent, ignorant girl from the village in order to get her own way. For example, her desire for a new bed is skilfully handled in an exchange with Chanu (*BL* 2003: 51) which reveals her superior intelligence and ability to manipulate him.

The narrative of Nazneen and Chanu's marriage can be broken down into phases which indicate the development of Nazneen as an empowered female character. At first, she is mindful of the code of conduct, which prescribes her role as wife, but she is not without insurrection against its injustices or the capacity to wield a certain degree of power within its parameters. Then, after years of Chanu's tyranny as patriarch in the home and growing incompetence outside of the home, Nazneen's resistance to the network of taboos which bind her becomes more overt. She becomes self-employed and embarks on an affair with Karim. But the disjuncture between her inner thoughts and outward behaviour leads ultimately to a mental breakdown. After the breakdown, she is openly defiant to Chanu and more forceful as a mother. Finally, as Chanu's unilateral decision to return to Bangladesh becomes more and more of a reality, and Karim's presumptions about her desires begin to oppress her, she repudiates both her marriage to Chanu and Karim's offer of marriage. Marriage then is the yoke she must throw off in order to be autonomous and authentic.

Ali's critical treatment of the theme of marriage extends to secondary characters. Nazneen's parents' marriage is described in stereotypical terms. The father is silent and stern, enjoying his freedom of movement, and exhibiting biting sarcasm towards his wife's unhappiness. The mother, as discussed above, plays the role of down-trodden wife to the hilt (sic). The story of Hasina's love marriage is at one level tragic. It is the first of her ill-fated decisions, and the repercussions of defying the social code of her community by eloping with a husband of her own choosing, are huge. First, she is ostracised by her family, then she is physically abused by her husband, and thereafter she suffers a series of

privations as a 'fallen woman' in Dhaka. In Gouripur, Hasina's extraordinary beauty is interpreted as the root cause of her troubles. According to the mores of the village, her body is her downfall, her reason for shame:

And how the older women began to say, even before she turned eleven, that such beauty could have no earthly purpose but trouble. Amma would cry, and say it was no fault of hers. Abba looked grim, and said that was certainly true, which made her cry harder. And, all in all, it was a fact that being beautiful brought hardship ...

(BL 2003: 50)

But Hasina's spirit is indomitable. Despite this crippling association between a woman's body and shame, despite the many taboos which seek to restrain her as a woman, she asserts her will and her desires time and time again. She also retains her optimism and her compassion and learns to function outside the severely demarcated bounds of marriage. Surprisingly, Razia, who was moved to tears by Hasina's story, declares "But Shefali will make a love marriage over my dead body" (2003: 51). In spite of perceiving her own marriage as a drawn-out battle of wills, peppered with violent threats from her husband and verbal attacks from herself, Razia still adheres to the institution of arranged marriage and expresses an abhorrence for the 'western' practice of love marriages.

Razia's biggest fear, which is later realised by her son Tariq's drug addiction, is the corruption of her children by the moral laxity of their diasporic location. Ali's treatment of this theme of marriage is expansive, detailed and complex. Although the author's sympathies for the plight of South Asian women who are trapped by the oppressive institution of traditional marriages is apparent, her focus is more squarely on how women can negotiate the parameters of marriage, either shifting them or repudiating them.

One of the gravest transgressions against traditional marriage is adultery, and so it comes as something of a shock to the reader when the pious Nazneen embarks on an affair with Karim. Her insurrections up until this point in the narrative have been minor ones which went unnoticed. Through this affair Nazneen explores her sexuality and experiences autonomy over her body after years of submission to and revulsion for Chanu. This transgressive sexual desire is just as potentially dangerous to Nazneen as it is liberating. It could trap her in guilt and lead her to replicate her role as submissive wife with Karim, who sees marriage as the only logical outcome of their affair. Like Jane in *Jane Eyre*, Nazneen has to curb this sexual desire. In the Victorian novel, the dangerous sexual desire, symbolised by Bertha Mason and figured as madness and passion, is destroyed. In novels such as Walker's *The Colour Purple* (1982), or Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), transgressive sexual acts signify a transcendence of and freedom from societal norms. For Nazneen, her sexual desire is at first suppressed, then kindled and realised in the affair with Karim, and finally it is translated into self-knowledge and autonomy which is articulated when she turns down Karim's marriage offer.

But it is not only sexual desire which is gratified in the affair. Through Karim Nazneen is further drawn out of her isolation in her confined domestic space. She attends religious fundamentalist meetings and becomes acquainted with diaspora politics. Karim also, in stark contrast to Chanu, listens to her and acknowledges her when she speaks: "This was something he did: made her feel as if she had said a weighty piece, as if she had stated a new truth" (*BL* 2003: 262). Most significantly, the affair gives Nazneen the

opportunity to defy the patriarchs who controlled her life and explore the potential of her own agency:

Out of the bedroom, she was – in starts – afraid and defiant. If ever her life was out of her hands, it was now. She had submitted to her father and married her husband; she had submitted to her husband. And now she gave herself up to a power greater than these two, and she felt herself helpless before it. When the thought crept into her mind that the power was inside her, that she was its creator, she dismissed it as conceited. How could such a weak woman unleash a force so strong? She gave into fate and not to herself.

(*BL* 2003: 299-300)

At this point Nazneen is experiencing the first taste of power and agency but her consciousness still works in the old way and she still believes that fate is stronger than the individual will. As she becomes more sexually confident, she also becomes more defiant and more desirous of abandoning the role of the dutiful wife: “He held a hand across her throat and she wanted everything: to vanish inside the heat like a drop of dew, to feel his hand press down and extinguish her, to hear Chanu come in and see what she was, his wife” (*BL* 2003: 343). Ali shows how this sexual pleasure and expression of the body, what the French feminists would call *jouissance*,^{xviii} is a conduit for a new subjectivity for Nazneen, who does eventually come to realise the power of her will.

Crucially, Nazneen is able to deconstruct her relationship with Karim. She recognises his fundamentalism, chauvinism and idealism and most significantly, she perceives how these qualities influence his construction of her: “How did Karim see her? The real thing, he said. She was his real thing. A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her. ...” (*BL* 2003: 454). Ironically,

like Chanu, Karim wants this essentialised, exoticised package of womanhood but without the hassle of having to arrange her transplantation and adjustment. Karim has found, he believes, an authentic Bengali girl from the village in the midst of a council estate in East London. But Nazneen succeeds in resisting this imposed subjectivity by rejecting both husband and lover. Nazneen will not be fixed as a symbol of home or the purveyor of traditional culture in the diasporic location. She uses first her body and then her new-found voice to break free of this objectification. Jasbir Jain has argued that in India, because the primary site of patriarchal control is the woman's body, women's liberation should begin in the body: "Thus any attempt to seek selfhood or project a subjectivity, or to work towards self-expression and freedom, has to work through the body, and deconstruct received notions regarding a 'good' woman'" (2002: 120). What follows Nazneen's sexual affair and reclamation of her body, which effectively shatters the stereotypical image of her as a 'good' woman, is a series of defiant, liberating, self-affirming acts: she courageously stands up to the Islams; she then concocts a plan to get rid of Chanu; and she ends her relationship with Karim with quiet determination.

An aesthetic element which is seen in many novels by women of the South Asian diaspora, is the description of domestic spaces, everyday mundane life, and sensuous details. This element is integral to the realism of these texts. The lives of the female characters are often shown to be spatially confined to the home where they are occupied with the endless routine of chores and lonely servitude, living out their roles as wives and mothers, alienated in an already alien environment. In *Brick Lane*, many of the Bangladeshi female immigrants are restricted to their homes by their husbands. They are

not allowed to seek employment, speak to non-Bangladeshis, or even associate with a woman who is deemed not “a respectable type” (*BL* 2003: 83) by their husbands. We learn early on in the narrative of Nazneen’s confinement:

She did not often go out. ‘Why should you go out?’ said Chanu. ‘If you go out, ten people will say, “I saw her walking on the street.” And I will look like a fool, ... She never said anything to this. ‘Besides, I get everything for you that you need from the shops. Anything you want, you only have to ask.’ She never said anything to this. ‘I don’t stop you from doing anything. I am westernised now. It is lucky that you married an educated man. That was a stroke of luck.’ She carried on with her chores.

(*BL* 2003: 45)

In this extract Chanu’s typically illogical monologue is met with silence from Nazneen who is engaged at that moment in razoring “away the dead flesh around his corns” (*ibid.*). The narrator tells us that “She did not let the razor slip” (*ibid.*), which is not so much a statement of Nazneen’s conscientiousness, as an oblique reference to her desire to let the razor slip; it is also indicative of the omniscient narrator’s empathy for the protagonist.

This representation of Chanu’s curtailment of Nazneen’s movements and his relegation of her to the status of personal slave, coupled with the tedious descriptions of Nazneen’s domestic routine, reveals her isolation, loneliness, and growing resentment. Her sense of imprisonment, as mentioned before, is symbolised by the black wardrobe which dominates their bedroom. But this state of subjugation does not result in increased servility or the acceptance of her victimhood. Instead it results in a struggle for liberation which is fought in the terrain of the small, cramped flat. As discussed earlier, she mimics the role of obedient wife whilst manipulating Chanu to give in to her desires. She then begins “domestic guerilla actions” (*BL* 2003: 100) which include sabotaging Chanu’s

sandwiches with fiery red chillies and indeed letting the razor slip when she cuts his corns. But the more significant triumphs are her self-employment and her sexual affair with Karim. The decisive battle is won by Nazneen when she succeeds in eliminating Chanu, the patriarch, from the home.

However, the domestic sphere is not only a site of subjugation and struggle. It is also a recuperative space where women can seek out the company of other women and form networks of solidarity. For Nazneen, the communal space of the estate becomes more and more significant in her process of liberation. At first it relieves her boredom and loneliness and forms part of “domestic guerrilla actions”: “Razia introduced her to other Bengali wives on the estate. Sometimes they would call and drink tea with her. She enjoyed the company although most times she did not mention it to Chanu” (*BL* 2003: 47). But by the end of the narrative it becomes her means of livelihood and emotional support.

Ali’s additional yet dubious achievement, with regard to this aesthetic element, is the interpenetrations she draws between the domestic and the private, and wider social and political issues. Ali manages to weave together the social and domestic themes, albeit sometimes giving in to melodrama. For example, the Hollywood-movie style climax of the narrative is boldly and dramatically but implausibly painted to heighten the impact of the disintegration of Nazneen’s domestic and social worlds (*BL* 2003: 466-476). Tensions are high on both the domestic and social fronts. Chanu’s “Going Home Syndrome” has become more urgent, the date for the departure of the family is imminent.

The “Bengali Tigers” have imploded and broken down into smaller factions intent on revenge. Faced with a domestic crisis (Shahana, their daughter, has run away), the heroine plunges into the chaos of the march in Brick Lane which turns into a violent riot with Muslim fundamentalist youths turning against each other. Risking personal safety, not to mention moral reputation, Nazneen leaves behind the mind-numbing drudgery of home and propels herself into the midst of this exhilarating morass of action to rescue her daughter and restore order, in the domestic sphere at least.

In addition to strategic descriptions of domestic spaces, the novel also abounds with sensuous, evocative details, of food in particular. Food is used symbolically in three main ways in the novel. First, food is a symbol of home and Bangladeshi culture. Part of Nazneen’s longing for home is relayed through her memories of food. She remembers how “Amma used to make yoghurt: thick and sweet and warm” (*BL* 2003: 77) and she recalls the villagers’ reliance on rice during the monsoons. Nazneen carefully reproduces Bangladeshi cuisine in her flat in London, indicating her cultural affiliation with her homeland. On the other hand, the tasteless, western food served by the Azads is a sign of their cultural estrangement from their homeland.

Food is also used to refer to Nazneen’s bodily privations and pleasure. Nazneen, as part of her role as self-effacing, dutiful wife, has been denying herself food in Chanu’s presence. But when Raqib is critically ill in hospital and she is for the first time served a meal cooked by her husband, she luxuriates in the experience:

This rice was superb. Just the rice would be enough for her. But fresh coriander made her swoon for the chicken. The deeply oiled aubergine beckoned lasciviously. She wanted to stick her tongue in the velvety dal.

(*ibid.*)

This sensual response is not Nazneen's usual relationship to food, and the sexually suggestive language ("swoon", "lasciviously", "stick her tongue") used to describe this response indicates her repressed sexuality and sensuality.

Finally, food is a symbol of the bond Nazneen shares with her daughters. At the end of the novel, the night Chanu leaves for Bangladesh, Nazneen enters the kitchen and cooks *dal*. Every step in the preparation of this simple dish is narrated in meticulous detail (*BL* 2003: 478). Through this seemingly effortless action, Nazneen is shown to triumph and thrive on her own territory. She is joined by her daughters who assist her and then partake of this midnight feast. The scene is one of familial bliss and domestic harmony, quite a contrast to previous scenes when Chanu's repulsive eating habits and tyrannical behaviour turned the scene into a domestic nightmare. This aesthetic element of describing domestic spaces, everyday mundane life, and sensuous details is used in *Brick Lane* to both realistically portray Nazneen's adversities and to celebrate her victory over them.

In novels by South Asian diasporic women writers, the use of mythology, ancient literature, traditional religious practices or descriptions of ritual and ceremony, all serve to highlight the fissures and ruptures of their female subjects who live "border lives" and who are negotiating "hybridised cultural identities" (Bhabha 1994: 1). These references

reveal the cultural matrix in which the characters are embedded, and hence the struggle they encounter to adapt and assimilate in the diasporic location is explored.

Ali's use of mythology, classical South Asian literature or traditional rituals and ceremonies is limited compared to other novels by South Asian diasporic women writers. Chanu makes throwaway references to the high Bengali tradition but none of these are expanded or integrated into the narrative. Instead, attention is given to banal rituals which constitute Nazneen's everyday routine. Even Nazneen's daily prayers and recitations from the Holy Qur'an are described more as Nazneen's attempts at consolation and endurance, than a rich cultural practice. With the years, these daily prayers fade away from the narrative. There are, however, references to folklore or colourful traditional practices which work primarily to highlight the theme of female affliction within the narrative. For example, Mrs Islam relates the tale of "how the women in my village got themselves a new well" (*BL* 2003: 65). In this tale of female victory and subversion of patriarchal power, the heroine is a prostitute, Shenaz, who had been abandoned by her husband and left to fend for herself. Even though this tale has the quality of folklore, with its cursed well, poisoned pond, unlikely heroine and triumphant conclusion, it includes stark social realism within its ambit. The suffering of the women who had to walk four miles to fetch water, and the tragic story of Shenaz's life, are harsh details which undercut the quaint appeal of the tale.

Also, interwoven with the main narrative is Nazneen's memory of her aunt Mumtaz's good *jinni* and her mother's bad *jinni*. Nazneen is in the habit of telling her

daughters this tale about a good *jinni* which used Mumtaz as a medium to dispense advice, of a peculiarly feminist ilk, to the community (*BL* 2003: 395-397). What follows the tale of the good *jinni* is the narration of the hitherto undisclosed memory of Amma's possession by a bad *jinni*. In addition to revealing the extent of Amma's affliction, the tale is highly evocative of village life. Nazneen's father engages the services of a *fakir* to exorcise the *jinni* from his wife; this exorcism ritual is the source of great entertainment for the villagers:

Exorcisms were a spectator sport in the village. A crowd gathered and it was a bigger and more excitable crowd than formed even for Manzur Boyati, the most highly esteemed of storytellers. The *fakir* was an impressive sight. He was tall and straight as sugar cane and his beard was at least twenty inches long, twisted into two halves like a woman's braids.

(*BL* 2003: 399)

What follows is a farcical tale involving the unmasking of this bogus *fakir* by a mischievous servant boy. The *fakir's* elaborate performance of transferring the *jinni* from Amma's body to the body of the servant boy, is mocked by the boy who begins his own exaggerated performance of *jinni* possession. This tale has a two-fold carnivalesque effect: within the village where authority is upturned; and for the reader because of the subversion of exoticising assumptions about the authenticity of certain traditional cultural practices. This satirical evocation of village life, conveyed through the colourful and amusing tussle between the *fakir* and the servant boy, obscures the underlying subject of the tale – Amma's affliction. But Nazneen recalls that her mother did recover after the incident and it is only now, many years later, as she performs her domestic chores in the flat in Tower Hamlets, that she begins "to wonder what had really happened that day, and why it was that Amma believed only in bad jinn and not in the good" (*BL* 2003: 403). In

her new location and with a dramatically altered perspective, Nazneen is jolted into re-interpreting this seminal childhood experience.

Ali's aesthetic use of traditional culture is self-aware and complex. These tales and vignettes are not facilely written into the narrative to accentuate its cultural authenticity or didactic value. Rather they highlight the tensions which impinge on the diasporic split-subject: the tensions between homeland and diasporic location, between the past and the present, between the modern and the traditional. References to South Asian literature too, are tinged by these tensions. For example, Chanu's obsession with teaching his daughters Bengali poetry - "Chanu was taking his family back home and Tagore was the first step on the journey" (*BL* 2003: 179) - is met with Shahana's resistance, expressed in her refrain, "I didn't ask to be born here" (*BL* 2003: 181). In addition, this aesthetic element, more subtly than the lineaments of the plot, as we see in the tale of the *jinni*, serves the feminist aims of the novel.

One of the most prevalent aesthetic elements in novels by women of the South Asian diaspora is the paradox of cultural continuity versus change and adaptation in the diasporic location. The central characters are often migrants, or descendants of migrants, who face the task of negotiating the constraints of their traditional cultures and the exigencies of their adopted cultures in order to forge autonomous lives. Roger Bromley has described the unique positioning of such characters within their fictional diasporic settings:

The fictions are, for the most part, constructed around figures who look in from the outside while looking out from the inside, to the extent that both inside and outside lose

their defining contours. They are figures with hyphenated identities, living hybrid realities which pose problems for classification and control, as well as raising questions about notions of essential difference.

(Bromley 2000: 5).

Nazneen is one such figure who is able to “look in from the outside while looking out from the inside”. When she first arrives at Tower Hamlets and is immediately immersed in the constrained Bangladeshi immigrant community there, her perceptions of her new environs are based on a comparison with her home in Gouripur. She retains, to some extent, her identity as “a girl from the village”, an outsider looking in passively on this new site which she would have to make home. As the narrator describes her view of this new home, we see it is a mixture of awe, bewilderment, criticism and dissatisfaction. For example, she is awed by the material objects in the flat:

There was a lot of furniture, more than Nazneen had seen in one room before. Even if you took all the furniture in the compound, from every auntie and uncle’s *ghar*, it would not match up to this one room.

(BL 2003: 20)

But her awe is mingled with criticism of this materialism and the anomie of urban life:

Everyone in their box, counting their possessions. In all her eighteen years, she could scarcely remember a moment that she had spent alone. Until she married. And came to London to sit day after day in this large box with the furniture to dust, and the muffled sound of private lives sealed away above, below and around her.

(BL 2003: 24)

Nazneen initially experiences life in the diasporic home as imprisonment, sitting day after day in a “large box”. One recourse is to dream of Gouripur, recreate it in her imagination and idealise her childhood spent in the company of Hasina. But as Nazneen realises the truth about her mother, the circumstances of her death, and the psychological strangle-

hold she has had over herself, the dreams of Gouripur fade out of the narrative.

Thereafter, Nazneen takes up her position as agent in her new location and with this new stance, her longing for the homeland is assuaged. She breaks out of the prison imposed by traditions transplanted from the homeland to the diasporic location; she transforms herself from village girl to assertive bread-winner and protector of the home. But she does not abandon her cultural heritage altogether. She still cooks Bangladeshi food, wears a sari and greets fellow immigrants with a respectful “Salaam Ale-Koum” (*BL* 2003: 485).

As a member of the immigrant community, Nazneen also manages to look out from within its confines, to the world outside. She is a newcomer to London, to the ‘west’ and so her perspective is novel. She is puzzled and fascinated by this alien world and its apparent contradictions. She cannot, for example, understand why the tattoo lady was both poor and fat: “To Nazneen it was unfathomable. In Bangladesh it was no more possible to be both poor and fat than to be rich and starving” (*BL* 2003: 53). Nazneen’s view of the metropolis is refreshing in that it focuses on the unfamiliarity and hostility of London. From Nazneen’s point of view, it is the imposing cityscape and its stressed, white inhabitants that are exotic. In Chapter Three of the novel Nazneen bravely and recklessly plunges into the midst of the city, and is startled by her observations, as well as her ability to negotiate this alien world.

They could not see her any more than she could see God. ... She began to scrutinize. She stared at the long, thin faces, the pointy chins. The women had strange hair. It puffed up around their heads, pumped up like a snake’s hood. They pressed their lips

together and narrowed their eyes as though they were angry at something they had heard, or at the wind for messing their hair.

(BL 2003: 56-57)

This perspective of the metropole and its inhabitants must come as a shock to the white, western reader. Nazneen's view of London women is far from appreciative. To her they are hard, artificial and unfriendly, and to them she is invisible. But rather than experience her "invisibility" as a negation of subjectivity, Nazneen uses it to scrutinise these exotic creatures. Their *haute couture* and expensive *coiffures* are lost on Nazneen whose standards of beauty are based on her appreciation of Hasina, the antithesis of these reptilian London women.

The full extent of Nazneen's resilience is revealed a little later in the narrative when a fit of anger against Chanu's ineffectuality causes her to celebrate internally her achievement as a non-English speaking Bangladeshi woman lost, alone and pregnant in London:

Anything is possible. She wanted to shout it. Do you know what I did today? I went inside a pub. To use the toilet. Did you think I could do that? I walked mile upon mile around the whole of London, although I did not see the edge of it. And to get home I went to a restaurant. I found a Bangladeshi restaurant and asked directions. See what I can do!

(BL 2003: 62-63)

This ability to observe, adapt, assimilate, blend cultural influences, defy stereotypes and find fulfilment is what confers upon Nazneen the status of heroine in this novel. What is also significant is that Nazneen, like Hasina, arguably the other heroine of the novel, learns to exercise her will and take risks in order to fulfil her desires. The closing,

incongruous image of the novel is of Nazneen, in a sari about to physically step onto an ice-rink (*BL* 2003: 492). Her fantasies about ice-skating were about to become a reality, but the underlying significance of the fantasy had already been realised. Nazneen had achieved freedom, mobility, stability, form and grace in her new home.

Brick Lane may be categorised as a postcolonial or diasporic *bildungsroman* because of its clear delineation of the development of Nazneen's character from silent, fatalistic village girl to empowered, autonomous hybrid woman. An omniscient narrator narrates Nazneen's life-story, thereby constructing an authentic representation of her social reality. However, the narrative also includes the story of Hasina's life, her social reality in Bangladesh, and a portrayal of her indomitable spirit. Nazneen's subjectivity at the end of the narrative achieves a momentary coherence, but this subjectivity is the result of the synthesis of difference, not its annihilation. Nazneen has learnt to juggle gender, race, class, ethnic, and geographical differences, but she has also assimilated some of Hasina's wilfulness and passion. Further, the accounts of Nazneen's dreams, memories and ghostly visions disrupt the linearity of the narrative and the unity of Nazneen's subjectivity. The result is a hybrid novel form which echoes the cultural hybridity of its central consciousness. Moreover, it is a novel that combines elements from a complex tradition of women's novel writing, with a new "poetics of displacement and the poetics of home" (Nasta 2002: 7).

Section 3: The South Asian diasporic women's novel: a multiplicity of perspectives

Nasta has described black women's writing as doing more than "redressing the balance; the reclamation is more than simply shifting the ground of a series of oppositions and areas of struggle" (1992: xvi). It is not enough for women writers to deconstruct binarisms such as male/female, First World/Third World, traditional/modern or coloniser/native. The great achievement for women as producers of textual meaning, according to Nasta, is through 'the expression of a multiplicity of perspectives and literary poetics' (*ibid.*). What follows is a comparative analysis of the multiplicity of perspectives to be found in novels by South Asian diasporic women from diverse locations across the globe.

Farida Karodia is a South African author of South Asian and 'Coloured'^{xix} descent who has written two 'autobiographical' novels: *Daughters of the Twilight* (1986) and *Other Secrets* (2000). Both novels use a first person narrator, Meena, to tell the story of the lives of two very different sisters, Yasmin and Meena Mohammed, who grow up in the rural Eastern Cape in *apartheid* South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. As children of mixed race, Meena and Yasmin are not only subject to discriminatory *apartheid* laws, they are also victims of the cultural clash in their domestic sphere: their father is Muslim, an Indian immigrant, and their mother and grandmother are 'Coloured' Christians. *Other Secrets*, the novel I will focus on here, is divided into three sections: "Daughters", "Mothers" and "Other Secrets". This novel incorporates the earlier novel which features here as the first section, "Daughters", with some minor alterations.

Other Secrets has been described as “fictional autobiography and autobiographical fiction” (Fainman-Frenkel 2004: 56). In other words, the text contains Karodia’s life-story in combination with the conventions and practices one associates with fictional novel writing. Leah D Hewitt describes such texts as “mixtures of literature in life and life in literature, making it difficult to keep the ‘purely’ literary and the ‘purely’ referential in their ‘proper’ (opposed) place” (1995: 1). Unlike *Brick Lane*, this narrative clearly contains many elements of the author’s own life-story. Like Meena, Karodia’s father was an immigrant from Gujarat and her mother was ‘Coloured’, Karodia spent her childhood in a small Eastern Cape town where her father ran a general store, she became a teacher and then went into exile, and significantly, both Meena and Karodia become writers. But why has Karodia chosen to narrate her personal history using this starkly realist novel form? Fainman-Frenkel’s theory as to why Karodia chose this narrative mode is convincing:

Karodia utilises the truth-value implied in an autobiographical form within fictionalised framework in order to authenticate the narrative, thereby destabilizing received notions of history and fiction, public and private, as the narrative occupies both positions.

(2004: 55)

This liminal generic positioning of the text can also be seen in Meera Syal’s *Anita and Me* (1996).

Like other women writers of the South Asian diaspora, Karodia is keen to inscribe an empowered female subjectivity, and to tell the story of her own development from an oppressed, silenced girl into a liberated, articulate woman. But Karodia cannot create her personal *bildungsroman* without telling the extraordinary story of *apartheid* which had

such a profound impact on her subjectivity. This meta-narrative of the nation extends beyond Karodia's own personal experience, and therefore, to address social and political issues of wider, public interest, Karodia introduces fictional elements to her narrative. The core narrative remains Meena's/Karodia's and Yasmin's life-stories. With this in mind, I would argue that it is more accurate to describe *Other Secrets* as an 'autobiographical novel' than as a novel. The same can be said for Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996), which also features a first person narrator called Meena, and is a coming-of-age *bildungsroman* which, in addition, tells the story of racism and conservatism in 1960s England. In these novels the private and the public are fused, but ultimately individual consciousnesses are extolled.

In *Other Secrets* (henceforth *OS*), just as in *Brick Lane*, we find two protagonists. Although it is Meena's voice which narrates the story, it is Yasmin who dominates it. Yasmin, who is beautiful, charming, selfish, and ambitious, is counterpoint to Meena's self-sacrificing, self-effacing, malleable self. It is through Yasmin's tragic life that we learn the most about the horrors of *apartheid*, just as it is through Hasina's unfortunate history that we learn of the harsh social conditions in Bangladesh. Florence Stratton, referring to the earlier novel, *Daughters of the Twilight*, describes Karodia as juxtaposing "two characters, the one representing the socially acceptable or conventional personality, the other externalising the free uninhibited, often criminal self" (1988: 157). But the two sisters are not just juxtaposed or antithetical; they are intricately bound by their common experience of oppression, their love of their families and home, and their deep love and support of each other. Meena, who is often deeply hurt and appalled by Yasmin's

behaviour, grows to understand her sister's temperament, and by end of the novel, she even begins to emulate some of Yasmin's drive and optimism.

The novel emphasises female relationships and strongly inscribes a matrilineage. Nana, Ma, Yasmin, Meena, Yasmin's daughter, Soraya and then Soraya's baby, Ashleigh, form a line of closely bonded females. This is an intense bond, strengthened through adversity and tragedy. Papa, as well as other male characters, is always on the periphery of the action, a man emasculated by *apartheid* and bemused by the women of the household. Karodia is also at pains to celebrate female friendship. Meena, exiled in London, lonely and depressed, attempts suicide. Her succour is a Nicaraguan woman called Rosita:

Rosita taught me, through example, how to survive. She knew more than most people about struggle and hardship. She had lost everything. Exiled from her country, she'd lost her husband, her family and one of her children. All she owned when she arrived in London were the clothes on her back. Her friendship helped to pull me through those dark days and her faith illuminated the way for me.

(OS 2000: 348)

Meena and Rosita are united in their alienation and their 'homelessness', but both survive and flourish. Meena, like Nazneen in *Brick Lane*, is deeply influenced and shaped by her female relatives. But as adults and immigrants Meena and Nazneen are aided and supported by resilient and enterprising female friends who, like these 'heroines', create homes and lives on their own terms.

The novel abounds with everyday scenes, descriptions of domestic chores and sensory details. In particular, this use of realism delineates female spaces and spheres of

power. In the Mohammed household, the women, including the ‘black’ domestic worker, Gladys, congregate in the kitchen to prepare meals and thrash out their affairs:

There was a sense of camaraderie amongst us and even though Yasmin hated cooking, she would find an excuse to be with us. Amidst the clatter of pots and dishes, there would always be gossip and laughter ... Gladys had built a huge fire in the stove. Each time the oven door opened we were assaulted by a blast of air hot enough to singe the hair off our legs. Nana’s cake was done and she left the kitchen as Yasmin joined us. I guessed that Yasmin was still waiting for the right moment to broach the subject of her schooling.

(OS 2000: 22)

This description of female camaraderie, gossiping and shared domestic duties is echoed in many other South Asian diasporic novels. For example, in *Anita and Me* (henceforth *AM*), Syal describes a kitchen “bustling with activity” (1996: 116) when her parents host a party to celebrate *Diwali*. In this scene the overall comic tone of the novel is used to convey Meena’s childhood pain at overhearing her mother discuss her misdemeanours with a gaggle of sympathetic “Aunties”. The good humour of these women does not detract from the narrator’s criticism of the division of labour she observes. The women worked hard at preparing food which they passed “straight into the waiting hands of the men ... It irritated me that the men would hardly look up whilst I stood there waiting for them to finish” (*AM* 1996: 116-7). This scene then has a three-fold purpose in the narrative: it describes a group of gregarious, companionable women adept at their domestic tasks; it reveals young Meena’s difficulties with socially integrating into the white community of Tollington (all the misdemeanours listed by her mother are a result of racism or her feeling culturally alienated); and it outlines traditional gender roles transplanted from South Asia to England.

In *Other Secrets* the Mohammed women, who are the only Indian or ‘Coloured’ women in the town where they live, and who are then extremely isolated at the trading post to where they are forcibly removed by the Group Areas Board,^{xx} find companionship and solace in each other. These descriptions reveal the hardship and mundane routine of their lives which is a result of the *apartheid* regime. But it also testifies to the strength and endurance of millions of ordinary South Africans who, in varying degrees, suffered similar privations. Njabulo Ndebele has described the use of the “ordinary” in South African literature:

By rediscovering the ordinary, ... stories remind us necessarily that the problems facing the South African social formation are complex and all-embracing; that they cannot be reduced to a simple, single formulation.

(Ndebele 1994: 57)

Karodia’s evocation of the “ordinary” in *Other Secrets* achieves this effect. Even though the novel tells the story of unexceptional lives, the descriptions of the commonplace expose the profound and complex effects of *apartheid* on women like Yasmin and Meena. Karodia’s perspective also highlights their heroic responses to those effects.

The theme of marriage is addressed both directly and indirectly in *Other Secrets*. First, the threat of an arranged marriage for both Yasmin and Meena is raised by Papa but never followed through because of their resistance to the practice. Papa, a Gujarati immigrant and a Muslim, has tried to do his paternal duty by attempting to arrange marriages for his daughters. But his daughters, South Africans of mixed race and cultural heritage, are defiant. They want to be educated, employed, and they want to choose their own partners. In the case of Meena, she comes to repudiate the notion of marriage

altogether. When Papa tries to arrange a marriage between his cousin Rashid's son, Hamid, and the usually docile Meena, a heated confrontation ensues:

Hurt and bewildered, my father looked at me through his thick glasses ... 'I will not have you speaking to me so disrespectfully! I will not have you disgracing me the way your sister did. What is wrong with you girls? Is it so hard to be honourable? Do you have to be cheap? Muslim girls don't run around the country – they stay home with their families. They know what's right and wrong!'

'So what are we? It's not our fault that we're not what you wanted us to be!'

(OS 2000: 210)

This emotionally charged scene filled with mutual recriminations is reminiscent of the many scenes of conflict between Chanu and his daughters in *Brick Lane*. Like Chanu, Papa is also trying to hold onto his role as patriarch, though he too fails miserably. Both men suffer the bewilderment of being father to culturally hybrid daughters who reject their authority, and both suffer the same fate, marginalised in their homes. Similarly, in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Sister of My Heart* (1999), the household is run by women and the male characters are absent or shadowy, lurking on the perimeters of the narrative. The responsibility of supporting the household and arranging marriages for Anju and Sudha, the two heroines of the novel, fall upon their mothers who toil to uphold the social code.^{xxi}

In *Other Secrets*, the failure of Papa to arrange marriages for Yasmin and Meena is Karodia's comment on the break-down of a social code of conduct which the Indian immigrants to South Africa had tried to preserve. In Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), a similar comment is made on intra-cultural marriages when the 'perfect match' between Gogol and Moushumi fails miserably. Lahiri's perspective, however, is quite

different as Gogol and Moushumi are second-generation immigrants to the USA, and they are both modern city slickers who choose to marry each other. In these two contrasting contexts, the respective writers show the break-down of the social codes governing traditional marriages.

Marriage is also dealt with obliquely in *Other Secrets* through the many instances of extra-marital affairs in the novel. The sanctity of traditional marriage as enshrined in the *dharmic* code, is openly disregarded by almost all of the female characters: Ma was involved with at least three men other than her husband, all of them white; Yasmin has an affair with her married employer Neville and later marries him; Meena enjoys a three year relationship with Sayeed who is married; and Yasmin's daughter, Soraya, falls in love with Douglas, the middle-aged husband of her mother's friend. This open and often deliberate transgression of marital boundaries is seen also in Nazneen's affair with Karim in *Brick Lane*.

Often, female characters opt out of marriage, choosing to be outcasts rather than suffer the stifling limitations of their roles as wives and daughters-in-law. In Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), Devi first transgresses by entering into an extra-marital relationship with Gopal. She then rejects both husband and lover, as Nazneen does, to return to her mother's home. Divakaruni's sequel to *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002) also records the intertwined tales of Anju and Sudha's disastrous marriages and their subsequent recoveries. Sudha, forced into an arranged marriage, flees her abusive mother-in-law and seeks refuge with Anju who has emigrated

to the USA. Here Sudha has a brief, explosive affair with Anju's husband. Even though Anju's marriage is destroyed, the cousins remain 'sisters of the heart'. In these novels, female relationships endure and flourish while the patriarchal institution of marriage is undermined or rejected.

The attention given, in these novels, to the female body as both the site of oppression, and the vehicle of self-knowledge and self-determination, is fervent and detailed. Many of the characters are shown to be reduced to the functions of their bodies, repressing their desires and needs in order to fulfil circumscribed roles as wives and mothers. However, another contrasting perspective is given: others, like Hasina, Yasmin, Sudha, and Jasmine in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989a), are cursed with physical beauty. The novels show how feminine beauty offers the illusion of power but in actual fact leads to tragic consequences for these women, who become objects of unwanted male desire. In the extreme cases of Yasmin and Jasmine, they are raped. Yasmin's rape in *Other Secrets* results in the birth of Soraya, the shattering of her dreams, her desertion of her child and family, and terrible heartache and hardship for the Mohammeds. The violation of Yasmin's body by Cobus Steyn, the son of a local Afrikaner farmer and local Member of Parliament, is a metaphor for the brutalisation of the nation at the hands of the *apartheid* regime. Because her attacker is white and Yasmin is classified black, she has no recourse to the law. Meena describes the situation, filling in the facts:

Counselling for situations like hers was unheard of then. Abortion, unless obtained through a backstreet practitioner, was illegal. We lived in a patriarchal, Calvinistic and racist society. And Yasmin, in the bloom of her life, had been brutalised. ... Our parents, fearing that Yasmin would be prosecuted in a system that almost invariably

punished non-white victims, did not report the rape. Believing that they would never be able to convince the authorities of Yasmin's innocence, they closed ranks. Our family became united in shame.

(OS 2000: 277-8)

Not only is Yasmin a victim of her female body: she also suffers further because of her racialised body. To escape this personal tragedy and the horrific, unjust system which punishes the victim, Yasmin has to escape the nation. She leaves South Africa and begins a new life in England but returns to the family home and, one by one, she extricates her female relatives from the land, which like her body, has been brutalised.

Violence against the female body can sometimes have surprising consequences. When the beautiful and vulnerable Jasmine in Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is raped shortly after arriving in the United States, her response is unexpected. She slashes her tongue, and bleeding from the mouth like the goddess Kali, she kills her attacker. But her exotic beauty is also her "passport to assimilation" (Koshy 1994: 78). In the USA, Jasmine's beauty opens doors for her - she gains employment, a lover, a husband and even middle class respectability, the latter two being ultimately rejected for romantic love. But *Jasmine* is not simply the success story of a beautiful heroine. Rather, it is a tale of loss, adaptability and survival. Just as her beauty affords her some possibilities, she also faces the exigencies of the female body, and crucial to the narrative is that she survives and perseveres, but not unscathed.

In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen does not suffer violence against the body but her physical desires are repressed in favour of her functional roles as wife and mother. But a sexual

awakening and new-found awareness of the body opens doors for her, doors towards self-knowledge and self-determination. Ali's use of this aesthetic element reclaims for Nazneen her sovereignty over her body. This textual strategy, of recreating in language women's "own original relationship with the excluded and negated subjectivity located in their bodies" (Ashcroft 1989: 28), or *écriture féminine*, is used also by Syal in *Anita and Me*, albeit with a very different effect. Syal uses her unique brand of self-directed humour to describe Meena's coming-of-age which is about integrating her cultural identity. But this cultural identity is also interwoven with her experience of her racialised body, the body which is 'other' to Anita's skinny, blonde, green-eyed white body. At the end of the novel, Meena experiences a moment of coherence which is described as an integration of subjectivity and body:

I was outside my body, watching a fat brown girl chew her lip and talk in faltering sentences ... And then I flew right through the roof of my house and I saw everything: ... It was time to let go and I floated back down into my body which, for the first time ever, fitted me to perfection and was all mine.

(AM 1996: 325-6)

Writing about the relationship between women's subjectivities and their bodies is an important component of these novels, which makes visible how that relationship has been controlled by patriarchal systems, and how it is now being reclaimed.

The use of mythology, ancient literature, traditional religious practices, and descriptions of ritual and ceremony are variedly deployed in these novels. Karodia does not make significant references to South Asian literature or mythology in *Other Secrets*, but she does describe religious and cultural practices which have been transplanted from

South Asia. For example, the rituals of a Muslim funeral are described in detail (*OS* 2000: 218) and the Muslim month of fasting, *Ramadaan*, is described by Meena using a didactic tone and the dry rhetoric of ethnography:

During this month of fasting, like millions of other Muslims throughout the world, we were up before sunrise to prepare and eat the last meal of the day. After this meal nothing could be consumed until sunset – not a crumb of food nor a drop of water could pass our lips.

(*OS* 2000: 64)

There are also references to traditional foods and Papa's idiom is scattered with Gujarati and Arabic words. Perhaps these instances of cultural translation serve to highlight Meena's disparate cultural heritage, her own hybrid subjectivity, and the tenacity of these practices in the diasporic location. On the whole, these elements of cultural description appear as obstacles in the flow of the narrative, forced and self-exoticising.

A more successful utilisation of this aesthetic element is evident in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), (henceforth *TN*). Here Lahiri uses food as a trope to explore the vicissitudes of the diasporic consciousness. The novel opens and closes with a scene in a kitchen. In the first scene, Ashima Ganguli, a new immigrant to the USA., is pregnant and homesick, her feelings refracted through a lengthy description of her attempts to reproduce "the snack sold for pennies on Calcutta sidewalks and on railway platforms throughout India" (*TN* 2003: 1). The final section of the novel opens with another detailed description of Ashima, widowed and now aged fifty-three, preparing food for a Christmas party (*TN* 2003: 274). Again the reader is given a detailed, step-by-

step account of the preparation of the dish, and again the food operates as a catalyst for Ashima's memories and as a symbol of her desire for the homeland.

From the outset, food is used to indicate Ashima's feelings of alienation in the diasporic location. She is repulsed by the bland 'American' food, and her enthusiastic culinary endeavours are her attempts to recreate home. A similar phenomenon is recorded by Meena in *Anita and Me*:

My mother grew up in a small Punjabi village not far from Chandigarh. As she chopped onions for the evening meal or scrubbed the shine back onto a steel pan or watched the clouds of curds form in a bowl of slowly setting homemade yoghurt, any action with a rhythm, she would begin a mantra about her ancestral home.

(AM 1996: 34)

This power of food to evoke the homeland in the exilic imagination is one of the most effectively rendered of the common aesthetic elements. Food and its accompanying rituals feature prominently in these novels, stirring the senses and the emotions of the characters (and, no doubt, tantalising the taste buds of the reader).

In these novels many characters face the paradox of cultural continuity and change, in varying forms and settings. Ali and Karodia share a similar perspective regarding male characters who cannot reconcile this paradox. Papa, in *Other Secrets*, is wracked by his failure to preserve the old ways, especially with respect to the upbringing of his daughters. He is also defeated by the *apartheid* system and he dies a broken man still "yearning for that long-ago life" (OS 2000: 258). Similarly, Chanu cannot reconcile himself to his new home and suffers from what Dr Azad calls "Going Home Syndrome"

(*BL* 2003: 32). Chanu is trapped in the paradox: he reveres the academic system of the metropole and is proud to be ‘westernised’ but he is fearful of the moral laxity of England and the dissolution of the ‘traditional’ values of the homeland. He is also critical of immigrants like himself and fails to see himself in the following description:

‘Our community is not educated about this, and much else besides. But for my part I don’t plan to risk these things happening to my children. We will go back before they get spoiled. ... These people are basically peasants and they miss the land. The pull of the land is stronger even than the pull of blood. ... They don’t ever really leave home. Their bodies are here but their hearts are back there. And anyway, look how they live: just recreating the villages here.’ ...

‘But they will never save enough to go back.’ ... Dr Azad continued, ‘Every year they think, just one more year. But whatever they save, it’s never enough.’

(*BL* 2003: 32)

This conversation with Dr Azad early in the narrative is charged with irony. Chanu ignores Dr Azad’s perceptive remarks and does not see that the diasporic condition he is describing so scathingly is his own. Dr Azad’s observation about migrants not being able to afford to return home foreshadows Chanu’s own predicament. This lack of self-awareness, combined with his ineffectuality, grotesque appearance and pomposity, render Chanu a caricature of a Bangladeshi immigrant. He is the source of most of the novel’s humour. However, Ali also imbues this figure with pathos. This is seen most clearly in Nazneen’s concern for Chanu despite his absurdity and her silent criticism of him. She empathises with his ‘homelessness’ and when the moment arrives to evict Chanu from the home he has failed to embrace, Nazneen is very gentle with him (*BL* 2003: 477).

Syal uses different poetics in *Anita and Me* to represent the painful clash between cultures and between generations, the poetics of comedy. Her mode of self-representation is designed to undercut the pain and isolation she herself felt as a result of social discrimination and racial hostility (evident in her career as a comedienne). Jasbir Jain offers a useful definition of the literary brand of comedy utilised by Syal in this novel:

Comedy with its subcategories of satire, self-ridicule and force becomes another way both of self-assertion and rehabilitation. It allows for a distancing from oppression and from images of victimhood and permits a lighthearted mixing of linguistic and social codes. Even as it adopts a dominantly realistic mode, it has space for playful fantasising where the two cultures jostle with each other.

(2002: 144)

In particular, Jain's definition is useful in pointing out how the realist mode of narration is modified by Syal to introduce an element of subversion and liminality. Syal's narrator Meena uses comedy and lying as a creative means of self-formation. Instead of using a tone of longing or nostalgia for a cultural heritage, such as the one her mother adopts, Meena is irreverent and jocular, poking fun at all the cultural influences in her life. The overall effect of this use of comedy by Syal is to point to the constructedness of the diasporic subjectivity. Meena asserts, "I'm really not a liar, I just learned very early on that those of us deprived of history sometimes need to turn to mythology to feel complete, to belong" (*AM* 1996: 10). The comic success of *Anita and Me* lies in its ability to render the hybrid subjectivity of Meena both absurd and necessary.

The Namesake also tackles the struggle to forge coherent diasporic identities, and like Karodia and Ali, Lahiri's perspective includes a male consciousness. The novel ends

with Ashima reconciling herself to having two homes. For her son Gogol, it has been the other way around. The USA is his home and he has a long and painful battle to accept his Indian roots and heritage, and to integrate it with his 'Americanness'. Here again Lahiri uses food to convey the tussle between generations and between cultures. As a child, Gogol preferred pizza or Chinese food to Indian food. This preference serves as a forewarning of the problems Gogol will experience later in relation to his parents. As a young adult Gogol is seduced by the sophistication and relaxed life-style of his girlfriend's family. They, the Ratliffs, epitomise bourgeois gentility, and he is repulsed by his parents' gaudy (and immigrant) way of life. The contrast between the Gangulis and Ratliffs is vividly set up. Food is used as the main object of comparison. At the end of the novel, the narrator indicates that for Gogol to mark the synthesis of his diverse cultural influences, he has to both remain alone in his room reading, and join his mother's Christmas party where he will eat with his hands, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

South Asian diasporic women's novels share a common aesthetic pattern but they by no means simplify or homogenise the themes of gender oppression or diaspora. As primarily realist narratives they all offer conclusions or some form of *denouement*, albeit from a multiplicity of perspectives. Meena Mohammed returns to London alone to resume her life as a writer of romance novels. Nazneen is independent and free to explore and experiment with her subjectivity. Meena Kumar outgrows Anita and Tollington and moves away to a new phase of her peculiar 'English' life. Jasmine (who has metamorphosed from Jyoti to Jasmine, to Jazzy, to Jase and finally to Jane) is about to embark on another perilous venture (and incarnation) which sees her abandoning

marriage for love and proceeding further west in a parody of the archetypal settler journey. For not one of these characters is liberation or integration simple, painless, or complete. In addition, the common focus on emergent female subjectivity in these novels does not erase the intersecting narratives of race, class, religion, nation or ethnicity. An important component of the literary heritage of these writers is “an autonomous, self-making, self-determining subject” (Alarcón 1990: 357). But this subject is a split-subject, and difference is valorised above seamless assimilation. The heroines of these novels, literary daughters of a complex tradition of women’s novel writing, continue to occupy an interstitial space from where they can speak out against hegemonic systems.

End Notes

ⁱ For a comprehensive and updated list of novels by South Asian diasporic women writers see the SAUNET website. <http://www.sawnet.org/books/fiction.php>

ⁱⁱ The relationship between history and the novel has been most notably theorised by Georg Lukács who saw the central subject of the realist novel as the carrier of its ideological content, representing changing social and economic conditions (1977: 5).

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Incidentally, Susan Koshy refers to Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* as a "confident appropriation of the Jane Eyre story" (1994: 72).

^{iv} See Chapter One for a discussion of "grounded aesthetics".

^v For example, Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* or Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.

^{vi} Azim's broader theory is that "the birth of the novel coincided with the European colonial project; it partook of and was part of a discursive field concerned with the construction of a universal and homogenous subject. This subject was held together by the annihilation of other subject positions" (Azim 1993: 30).

^{vii} Gloria Anzaldúa's formulation of the *mestiza* consciousness is once more useful here: The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else.

(1987: 79)

^{viii} *Jane Eyre* ends with the following words: “Reader, I married him” (1977: 474).

Marriage in this context has been read as a triumph for Jane albeit a conservative, bourgeois triumph.

^{ix} A major difference, for example, is that in this modern, specific cultural context the institution of marriage is portrayed as oppression not triumph. Marriage is a state to be repudiated not coveted.

^x Perhaps the most famous examples of this mode of writing in a South Asian diasporic text is Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1995) which features his fantastical, telepathic, one thousand and one midnight’s children.

^{xi} See for example, Jyoti’s grandmother, *dida*, in *Jasmine*, who is set against her further education and arranges a marriage for her when she turns thirteen.

^{xii} See Mahmud Rahman’s review of *Brick Lane* on the SAWNET website <http://www.sawnet.org/books/reviews.php?Brick+Lane> (accessed 21 March 2006); and Nicola Walker’s review “The State of Bengali England” on <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/08/20/1061368348340.html> (accessed 21 March 2006).

^{xiii} See Sukhdev Sandhu’s review of *Brick Lane* in *London Review of Books*, Vol 25 No. 19, 9 October 2003.

^{xiv} The impact of the mother-daughter relationship on subjectivity has been the subject of much feminist debate and scholarship. Nancy Chodorow’s conclusions about the primacy of the mother in the formation of female identity are relevant here: “Because mothers are the primary love object and object of identification for children of both genders, and because fathers come into the relational picture later and differently, the oedipus complex in girls is characterized by the continuation of preoedipal attachments

and preoccupations” (1978: 133). We see these continued attachments in the novels under analysis.

^{xv} The idea of hysteria is that a body produces a symptom, such as the paralysis of a limb, which represents a repressed idea; the body thus ‘speaks’ what the conscious mind cannot say, and the unconscious thoughts are written out by the body itself. Hysteria is “by definition a female disease ... of maladjustment to the physical and social environment” (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 53).

^{xvi} See also Ranjana Ash’s discussion of the Code of Manu which delineates the role of the woman as daughter, wife and mother in “The Search for Freedom in Indian Women’s Writing” (1992). Helen Kanitkar’s examination of the role played by Hindu mythology in reinforcing the traditional nurturing and functional role of women, is also very informative - see “ ‘Heaven Lies Beneath Her Feet’: Mother Figures in Selected Indo-Anglian Novels” (1992).

^{xvii} See Homi Bhabha’s definition of mimicry in “Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse” (1994: 85-92).

^{xviii} See the introduction to Elaine Marks’s *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (1980) for a lengthy definition of *jouissance* and the feminist significance of the term.

^{xix} A racial classificatory term in South Africa used to describe the descendents of indigenous Africans and Dutch settlers.

^{xx} Karodia provides her own definition of the Group Areas Board in the novel:
 a government body that had been formed to deal with the classification of racial groups and their removal to particular areas set aside for the different groups. New townships sprouted along the outskirts of towns and cities to accommodate the dispossessed.

(OS 2000: 69)

^{xxi} For a detailed discussion of Divakaruni's novels see Chapter Five.

Chapter Four: South African Women's Short Stories Within a Transnational Feminist Aesthetic

Section 1: The Short Story Genre - Serving the Needs of a Transnational Feminist Project

The short story genre is notably popular with women writers of the South Asian diaspora. Many collections from different diasporic locations have been published in the last decade. Perhaps most successful has been Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) which won the Pen/Hemingway Award and the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Lahiri was also selected for *The Best American Short Stories* and the O. Henry Award. Although these collections contain stories with a wide range of themes and subjects, many of the stories deal with feminist and diasporic issues. The question is: why do these writers use the short story form of narrative, and is there anything distinctive about their use of it?

The classification and categorisation of the short story is contentious and complicated. The general understanding that the short story is a short, fictional, prose narrative, has over the years, been challenged by many arguments about the porousness of its generic boundaries. J.A. Cudden stresses the formal diversity of the short story, deriving as it does from other forms such as myths, legends, fables parables, fairy tales, anecdotes and even the essay. He concludes that in "the end the form has shown itself to be flexible and susceptible of so much variety that its possibilities seem almost endless" (Cudden 1970: 623). Following a similar argument, Nirmal Verma has placed the short story in the liminal space between the

novel and the poem and identifies its distinguishing feature as the “imaginative potency of language” (Verma 1984: 48-50). Other critics too have commented on this “potency” of the form, linking it to its intensity, brevity and striving for a single effect.¹ Various experimentations with form have not obliterated these constitutive features. As Verma concedes, the “structures have surely loosened but they have not disintegrated” (Verma 1984: 43). Ian Reid expands on this notion of a basic framework for the form. He argues that a well-written short story evinces three essential qualities: “it makes a single impression on the reader, it does so by concentrating on a crisis, and it makes that crisis pivotal in a controlled plot” (Reid 1977: 54). Reid does admit that these qualities are essential to novels, too, but contends that they have to make a more striking impact in a short story in order to be moving and aesthetically satisfying (1977: 54).

Not all writers and critics will subscribe to these three essential qualities of a short story, but on the whole, they seem to agree on the potency, intensity, and concentrated *effect* of the form. Notwithstanding the ongoing debate, this effect, it seems, derives mainly from the structural imperatives (such as a single focal point in the plot) which result from, and contribute to, the concise form of the short story. For prose writers seeking this kind of maximum impact with minimum dimensions, the short story then is the ideal form. For these writers, a highly intense creative strategy is used when producing a short story, as Anita Desai confides in an interview: “a short story demands something quite different, you have to have the whole of it quite clear in your mind and just put it down at one throw” (in Jain 1987: 13).

The women writers of the South Asian diaspora are grappling with two main thematic areas: the oppression of women within patriarchy; and the dislocated diasporic identity. As we have seen, both these themes have intensely personal significance for the writers who often incorporate lived experience into their fictional accounts of gender discrimination and diasporic tensions. Their writing, as argued through the description of the overarching aesthetic, is therefore self-representing, politicised and aimed at liberation and self-empowerment. For the transformation of these deeply personal issues and concerns into public discourse, the writers often choose a hard-hitting, emotively charged form. Hence, the short story form is favoured by these writers because it is “at once concise and evocative in its linguistic/grammatical usage and imagistic pattern respectively, [and] allows its writer to combine compression with an effulgence” (Celly 2002: 45).

But in the search for intensity, conciseness, and the impact of a honed focus, do these narratives lose something of the range or complexity of their themes, or even perhaps of the cultural or historical specificities of their subjects as social details are sacrificed for the sake of brevity? The corollary probably also applies: is there room for more generalised or universal observations in a narrative with such a concentrated focus? One scholar who firmly believes in the ability of the short story to fulfil both these requirements is Alka Kumar:

The short story genre is a powerful medium, with possibilities of innovation and experiment located in the present, in contemporary social, political and cultural realities. Through this form though, immediate contexts are also transcended, and larger more universal nuances are made accessible. ... Both the plurality of lived moments and the dynamism of everyday reality are often mirrored with efficacy, through the short narrative, which is generically rich in the potential to be multilayered and complex. (Kumar 2002: 56)

Indeed, the short stories by women of the South Asian diaspora are often located in the present and they deal with immediate social realities, but they also contain personal accounts of the past, or they traverse the space between the homeland and the diasporic location. In the evocative and poignant instances of female oppression narrated in these stories, “universal nuances” are evident. Not only are there similarities between women from different South Asian diasporic locations, but also many patterns of subjugation and gender discrimination common to other cultures and nations. I would add to Kumar’s exposition by pointing out that the plurality *and specificity* of lived moments and everyday reality are captured in these stories. These writers use the short story form to drive home themes of deep personal and political concern, but the form does not limit the scope of the content. Rather, the concentrated form enhances the transnational relevance and appeal of the content. In short, the short story form ideally suits the feminist and diasporic themes which women writers of the South Asian diaspora are invested in.

Writing by South African South Asian women has a similar investment in feminist and diasporic themes. However, writing by South African South Asian women has generally been omitted from studies of South Asian diasporic women’s writing. Jasbir Jain, for example, who has published extensively on the subject [*Stairs to the Attic: The Novels of Anita Desai (1987)*, *Writers of the Indian Diaspora (1998)*, *Writing Women Across Cultures (2002)*, and *Gender and Narrative (2002)*], has not examined writing by South African women. Even the usually scrupulous SAUNET (South Asian Women’s Network) website has neglected to include South African South Asian women writers in its copious ‘Bookshelf’ lists. One of the aims of this thesis is to rectify that exclusion, and thus short stories by South African South

Asian women form the focus of this chapter. A brief historical account of the South Asian diaspora in South Africa, and an overview of South African South Asian women's writing, are offered in order both to contextualise the close reading of Jayapraga Reddy's short stories which follows, and to facilitate an examination of how women's short fiction from this location fits in with the aesthetic. Within the transnational feminist framework, short stories by South African South Asian women offer a unique perspective on the diasporic experience, due to the particular troubled history of South Africa.

Between 1860 and 1911, 384 ships carried 152,184 indentured immigrants from India to the British colony of Natal. These immigrants were contracted to their employers, white farmers, who were experimenting with sugar production, for a minimum of five years. Not quite slaves, these labourers were not quite free either. They worked under harsh conditions, were subjected to floggings and pass laws, and were undeniably exploited. After the period of indenture they had the option of a free passage back to India or they could remain in the colony as "free Indians". About half the immigrants decided to stay (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000: 10-11). But in 1895 a three-pound tax on every ex-indentured Indian was imposed, with the desired effect that many Indians returned to India and many were re-indentured (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000: 16). Writers such as Jayapraga Reddy, Agnes Sam and Farida Karodia are descended from these indentured immigrants. For the women writers of the South Asian diasporic community, the "story of Indian indentured labour" formed the "inevitable historical backdrop" (Govinden 2000: 23) for much of their work.

The 1895 three-pound tax was just the beginning of many restrictive laws which controlled Indian trade, Indian movement, education, and marriage, for over a century until 1994 and the establishment of a democracy in South Africa. These restrictive laws formed part of the national *apartheid* regime which, based on segregation of the races, was designed by the white minority government in the 1940s and 1950s to subjugate and exploit the black races. For most of the twentieth century these immigrants, together with the indigenous black population and the 'Coloured' population of the country, lived under an increasingly intransigent and repressive white regime. Writing by women (and for that matter, by men)ⁱⁱ of the South Asian diasporic community strongly reflects the exigencies of living under the regime's segregationist policies, which resulted in widespread dislocation and relocation for the already transplanted South Asian immigrants. For example, Ansuyah Singh's novel *Behold the Earth Mourns*, published in 1960, and labelled as the "first Indian novel" in South Africa, is set against the backdrop of Passive Resistance and protest politics in the 1950s.

Betty Govinden describes the writing by women who were also political activists as "important historical documentation of the narratives of resistance against apartheid" (Govinden 2000: 26). She singles out Dr Goonam, Phyllis Naidoo and Fatima Meer as authors whose "personal itinerary is assimilated into a larger historical narrative of resistance and struggle" (Harlow 1994: 117). These three women writers and political activists have received some, but still limited, recognition from the South African literary academy.ⁱⁱⁱ

At the end of the twentieth century, Govinden's chief concern is with the marginalisation of Indian women writers in South African literary historiography and criticism:

Indian women's writings in South Africa have obviously been smothered in the larger politics of marginality that has attended the production and reception of literary texts historically, to the extent that the marginalisation has gone unnoticed even in corrective archaeological work. ... This may have been caused by several factors. Given the separation of racial groups historically, and the dominance of male writers, the literary achievements of Indian women have not been widely known by local Western audiences. Since these efforts have been relegated to the margins of South African society, anthologists, publishers and researchers have been inclined to gloss over them.

(Govinden 2000: 3-4)

It is certainly the case that literary practices have reflected wider social dynamics, and therefore works by South Asian women have not been widely published, read, studied or critically examined in South Africa. Until the 1980s very few works by 'black' writers, male or female, were published in the mainstream literary market, but in that decade, which saw two States of Emergency in South Africa and an increased fervour in the liberation struggle on the part of the African National Congress in particular, local 'black' writers began to be more pointedly represented. At this point in South Africa's history 'black' was an umbrella term used to refer to all people who were not designated 'white' by the Population Registration Act, although the term is also used to refer to indigenous Africans only. Further, strict divisions between different types of 'black's were maintained by policies of separate development. Rehana Ebrahim-Vally's comprehensive sociological study of the 'Indian' community in South Africa points to the artificiality of ethnic markers and racial divisions imposed by *apartheid*:

...Apartheid, mainly through legislation such as the Population Registration and the Group Areas Act but also through the imposition of racially-based education

systems was responsible for the crystallization of peoples' perceptions of the others. ... Separate development has closed off communities and the official Apartheid discourse, very often the only link between communities, conditioned all perceptions of others.

(Ebrahim-Vally 2001: 85)

In the 1980s the "closed off" 'Indian' community (perceived to be homogeneous by the *apartheid* government but which was in fact divided along religious, linguistic and caste lines), the 'Coloureds', and the indigenous African people, were maintained as separate and distinct racial groups, but were collectively referred to as 'blacks'. For South African South Asian women, their double-marginalisation as women within a patriarchal culture, and as members of an oppressed, minority racial and ethnic group, would have rendered their diasporic experience particularly fraught and agonising.

Govinden describes the interest in the 1980s in 'black' literature by a handful of publishers and critics as "a self-conscious attempt at this time to see the literary establishment become less elitist, to recover forgotten indigenous texts, and to encourage the enterprises of new local literary publishers in anthologies" (Govinden 2000: 8). But, according to Govinden, the decade of the 1980s nevertheless ended with scant critical attention being accorded to Indian women's writings. The late 1980s saw some attempt to include the writings of Indian women, but this occurred selectively and unevenly. Govinden points out that the

only female writer who seemed to have enjoyed any critical attention in these years was Jayapraga Reddy. In the retrospective edition of *Staffrider, Ten Years of Staffrider* (1988), Reddy's short story, "The Spirit of Two Worlds" was included. Later anthologies were to continue with this trend. Percy Mosieleng and Temba Mhambi have included Reddy's short story, *Friends*, in their collection, *Contending Voices in South African Fiction* (1993).

(Govinden 2000: 11)

Staffrider Magazine, a South African periodical established in 1978, was a radical art magazine which promoted 'black' literature and gave a whole generation of writers such as Njabulo Ndebele, Mbulelo Mzamane, and Essop Patel, a platform to voice 'politically sensitive' material at a time of national upheaval and strife. However, South Asian women were not usually published in *Staffrider* and Reddy's inclusion in the periodical (she had other short stories published in *Staffrider* over the years) in a climate of exclusion and marginalisation for South Asian women writers, is unusual. At about the same time Skotaville Publishers (another publishing venture dedicated to promoting 'black' literature) published Reddy's collection of short stories, *On the Fringe of Dreamtime and Other Stories* (1987). Two other writers succeeded in getting their stories published, and it is noteworthy that both were in exile at the time, and that it was the UK-based company, Heinemann, that published them. In 1988 Heinemann Education published Farida Karodia's *Coming Home and Other Stories* and a year later they published Agnes Sam's *Jesus is Indian and Other Stories* (1989).

At the beginning of the following decade, Annemarié van Niekerk published *Raising the Blinds: A Century of South African Women's Stories* (1990). In her introduction to this anthology Van Niekerk attempts to challenge not only the socio-political restrictions which had crippled literary practice in South Africa, but also the generic boundaries which limit short story writing. Her marrying of literary critical discourse with anti-*apartheid* rhetoric is indicative of the broader processes of resistance and transformation which began in South Africa in the 1990s:

This anthology sets out to break these restrictive aesthetic categories, within the sphere of women's writing. It is done by including, for example, oral narratives and stories of a social and historical nature. ... These narratives can easily be accommodated within the genre of the short story. ... Stylistically and thematically

the short story displays great diversity as a literary form and it is difficult to define according to any single inherent criterion. ... Against this background it should be clear that the privileging of any single definition of the short story at the expense of others is likely to result in a subtle process of exclusion and marginalization. Within a multi-linguistic and diverse cultural context the dangers of a monolithic definition should be avoided.

(Van Niekerk 1990: 16)

Van Niekerk's engagement with the short story genre includes a gynocritical^{iv} element. In foregrounding women as producers of textual meaning, Van Niekerk attempts to end "the confinement and culturally induced blindness concerning women as storytellers and writers in South Africa" (Van Niekerk 1990: 11). In this respect, Van Niekerk is anxious to include women writers from every cultural and racial category in South Africa, although she does recognise the disparity between the opportunities which were available to white middle and upper class women, as opposed to black working class and peasant women (Van Niekerk 1990: 16). The anthology contains Jayapraga Reddy's ubiquitous story "Friends" and Farida Karodia's "Something in the Air". These two prose narratives, which adhere in many ways to the basic forms of the genre, are placed alongside indigenous oral narratives and works by internationally acclaimed authors such as Doris Lessing and Nadine Gordimer.

In addressing the imbalances of the past at a crossroads moment, South African literary critics like Van Niekerk have had a tricky path to negotiate. How could they be inclusive and fully representative of a multi-cultural society which is acutely sensitive to its historical divisions? How could they conduct comprehensive and affirmative scholarship without generalising and eliding differences which implicated them with a nationalist discourse of facile unity and solidarity? Indeed,

these are still the challenges facing scholars, myself included, in South Africa today.

In an unwitting contradiction, Van Niekerk stresses her ambition to be all-inclusive:

This anthology, however, intends to bring together a representative selection of all the South African women short fiction writers, *disregarding* their race and class or the dominant aesthetic tradition.

(Van Niekerk 1990: 17; my emphasis)

In order for Van Niekerk to edit, introduce and publish “a representative selection of all the South African women short fiction writers”, she would have to pay particular *regard* to the race, class and aesthetic tradition of the writers. Five pages before the above statement is made, Van Niekerk clearly asserts her desire to recognize difference by compiling

a representative selection of work by women narrators from the country’s wide spectrum of social and cultural positions and endeavours to compare divergent and interrelated themes, and the various narrative forms and styles.

(Van Niekerk 1990: 12)

And elsewhere, for example in her article “Feminist Aesthetics: Aspects of Race, Class and Gender in the Constitution of South African Short Fiction by Women” (1993), Van Niekerk emphasises *difference* as a crucial analytical tool which, if re-articulated positively, would help South Africans to live “with incommensurability through new ethical and democratic frameworks, within a culture that both recognizes difference and is committed to resolving its antagonisms” (1993: 26).^v Here Van Niekerk echoes postcolonial feminist scholar Trinh Minh-ha who defines difference as

not opposed to sameness, nor synonymous with separateness ... [D]ifference is not what makes conflicts. It is beyond and alongside conflict ... Difference can be a tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance.

(Minh-ha 1995: 372-373)

In the “new ethical and democratic” framework in which literary scholars in South Africa practice, recuperative and gynocritical work is possible. In recent years, work by scholars such as Betty Govinden, Miki Flockemann, Cecily Lockett and Annemarié van Niekerk have carved out a place for South African South Asian women writers in South Africa’s literary history. Hopefully, this thesis will take that remedial process a step further and claim a position for South African South Asian women’s writing in a transnational feminist framework.

In short stories by women of the South Asian diaspora, and in particular by South African South Asian women, difference is recognised, appreciated and optimised as a creative tool. The following analysis of short story writing by South African South Asian women engages with difference on two levels. Not only do these authors use the intense, concise, high-impact style of the short story form to spotlight differences arising from the context of South African history and socio-politics, but also their difference from other writers of the South Asian diaspora is noteworthy. Despite many commonalities with other writers from different diasporic locations, as outlined in the aesthetic pattern, the short stories from South Africa offer a unique and stimulating perspective on women’s issues and diaspora.

Section 2: Home versus homeland in Jayapraga Reddy’s South African South Asian Short Stories

Jayapraga Reddy is remarkable for a number of reasons. She is one of the first Indian woman short fiction writers to have published a collection of short stories in South Africa. Added to the disadvantage of being both a woman and ‘black’ in *apartheid*

South Africa, she suffered from muscular dystrophy and grew up in a poor, working class home. But by the time of her death in 1997 Reddy's writing had become largely representative of Indian women's writing in South Africa (Govinden 2000: 16,) due to her relative success in South Africa's publishing arena. The publication of her collection of short stories by Skotaville, the first 'black' publishing company in South Africa, is heralded as a highly significant moment in the country's literary history because it "exposes the silenced world of the South African Indian woman as a world riven with ideological ruptures" (Van Niekerk 1993: 77). In addition to this gynocritical achievement, Reddy also entered the wider forum of race and class politics in South Africa. For this heterogeneous political commitment Reddy receives unreserved praise:

Her narratives reflect a far greater awareness of the dynamics operating within gender, race and class intersections than the early white women short fiction writers. She positions her characters in confrontational relations, but analytically examines the nature of this interaction, instead of blindly reproducing dominant ideology.

(Van Niekerk 1990: 24)

Thus far critical studies of Reddy's work have focused almost entirely on the political and social significance of her writing, but very little analysis of the literary aesthetics employed by Reddy has been conducted. The following discussion is an assessment of her "grounded aesthetics", that is, the textual strategies she uses in her short story writing which serves as a form of personal and cultural survival (Flockemann 1998: 12-13).

In Jayapraga Reddy's work, as will be shown later, the primary tensions are within the diasporic home where the horrors of *apartheid* supercede any discomfort or difficulty characters might experience as a result of cultural dislocation or patriarchal

oppression. On the whole the most distinctive feature of the literature produced by women of the South Asian diaspora in South Africa is the precedence the issue of racial discrimination takes over affiliations to homeland or a traditional cultural heritage. At the same time, Reddy, like her counterparts in other diasporic locations, does address the topic of “Indian-ness”, and the plight of women labouring to be free from diverse forms of oppression. But in Reddy, similar to other fiction produced during the *apartheid* era, grappling with imposed categories of race is imperative. Short fictions by Farida Karodia and Agnes Sam also reveal this tendency.

The South African literary landscape is enriched by these works, which offer a unique and multi-layered perspective on a society with a troubled and divided history. As Van Niekerk argues in “Feminist Aesthetics” (1993), the theorisation of such work has a role to play in the democratic processes of transformation, and the ethos of tolerance and celebration of difference, which are so carefully nurtured in post-*apartheid* South Africa. However, moving beyond the national boundaries, the comparison between South African South Asian women’s writing with other writing of the South Asian diaspora forges new solidarities, and opens up new, global, vistas for the understanding of difference.

As a descendent of indentured labourers, Reddy’s history is a complex one fraught with oppression, discrimination, displacement and marginalisation. She was born in Durban in 1947, three years before the promulgation of the infamous Group Areas Act (which separated residential areas according to race). She fought a life-long battle against muscular dystrophy and was wheelchair-bound. She cites her family, in particular her mother and her grandmother, as the main support and

influence in her life, and indeed, much of her writing is dedicated to the diverse strengths and plights of her gender. This is an obvious commonality with other women writers who originate in the South Asian subcontinent. To add to Reddy's heterogeneity, she and her family were staunch Jehovah's Witnesses in a predominantly Hindu community, a faith which she embraced. The subject of disparate cultures and religions co-existing in one household is not dealt with explicitly by Reddy, but other writers explore this theme compellingly, for example Agnes Sam in the title story of her short story collection, *Jesus is Indian* (1989).

Uncommonly, for the time, Reddy received an education, but not without enormous struggle. It was not common practice for Indian females to be educated, and due to separate education policies for the different races in *apartheid* South Africa, black schools were ill-equipped for everyone, let alone for a handicapped child. But Reddy persevered with her colonial education and discovered that she had a strong attraction for English culture. In her unpublished autobiography, *The Unbending Reed*, discussed in Chapter Two, this affiliation is celebrated as a form of imaginative liberation from her own constrained life:

I discovered the great English writers, [...] I loved the English language and for this reason I could never get enough of the great English writers [...] Reading Dickens brought London alive to me [...] For years I had a recurring dream in which I would find myself roaming the streets of London.

(Reddy unpublished: 41)

Reddy began writing when she was twelve, but only received recognition as a writer in 1975, when the BBC broadcast three of her short stories. Significantly, this exposure in Britain heralded her launch as an acclaimed creative writer in South Africa. It is ironic that this break, denied to her in postcolonial South Africa, was

given to her by the former imperial authority. As with many other women writers of South Asian descent, for example, Sam and Karodia, it was in the metropole, with its economic and intellectual resources, that Reddy was able to truly begin her career as a writer.

This cursory biography of Reddy raises some pertinent questions. How is it that Reddy felt deeply patriotic as a South African, despite being treated as a second-class citizen for most of her life, and why did she feel a strong cultural affiliation to Britain, the former coloniser of both India and South Africa? Even more puzzling is the lack of identification with India. The answer possibly lies in Vertovec's theory about a necessary strategy of synthesis and adaptation which enables survival (and evolution) in the diasporic location. Vertovec refers to the negative or positive identifications which a diasporic subject experiences. These identifications result in "fractured memories" or "a multiplicity of histories, 'communities' and selves" (2001: xviii). Reddy, being acutely sensitive about her ancestors' struggle to lay down roots in South Africa, and about the continuing struggle facing South Asians in South Africa, would have come to possessively regard South Africa as her home. That is, her patriotism is in spite of and because of her experience of *apartheid*. Moreover, being "deterritorialised" (Appadurai 2001: 199), that is, cut off from India^{vi} and cut off within South Africa, Reddy was obliged to seek positive cultural identification elsewhere. Her colonial education and active imagination would have provided the necessary ingredients for an identification with English culture. Sarah Nuttall, in her analysis of selected South African 'black' women's autobiographies, describes this process as "recognition" (Nuttall 1996: 6), whereby subjectivities are constructed outside the framework of *apartheid* through exposure to the English literary canon.

Appadurai reminds us that the imagination is essential to survival in a “deterritorialised” world (Appadurai 2000: 199). For Reddy the exigencies of her diasporic location, coupled with her writer’s imagination, gave rise to the multiplicity of histories and communities which comprised her subjectivity. Indeed, Reddy’s inventive capacity gave her the opportunity to express her patriotism to her diasporic location precisely by criticising its neo-colonial evils and celebrating its diverse beauty in her writing. As for the “recognition” of English literary culture, Reddy’s colonial education, an acquired, socially constituted disposition, contrary to politically correct views, offered her liberating, imaginative forays into unconfined and enabling spaces.

Reddy’s short stories, generally speaking, engage with two types of oppression: the neo-colonial, in the shape of *apartheid*; and what I call the ‘traditional’ in the shape of rigid and unequal gender roles within the South African Indian community. This is not to say that these are Reddy’s sole focuses. Reddy’s collection, published in 1987 at the height of the liberation struggle in South Africa, reflects Reddy’s keen engagement with the diversity of South African society. She attests to this in the Foreword to the collection, pointing out that she takes her cue from her milieu: “One derives one’s creative spirit from this land of a myriad contrasts” (np). Annemarié van Niekerk has also noted the range and variety of the protagonists of the stories:

In the fourteen stories included in *On the Fringe of Dreamtime and Other Stories*, nine are told from Indian perspectives, one from a ‘Coloured’ perspective, and four from black perspectives. Seven of the stories are told from a woman’s perspective, three from a man’s perspective, and four from a child’s perspective.

(Van Niekerk 1992: 36)

But despite the diversity of subject matter, characters and plots, the complex

dynamics of oppression, be it racial, class or gender oppression, feature prominently as a theme in these stories. The plots often contain “cross-confrontational relationships” (Van Niekerk 1992: 36), forming an axis on which the plot pivots, and also a means to explore the notion of difference. Further, this theme is conveyed through the literary strategy of using a single focus and concentrated effect in the social realist mode.

Many of these stories poignantly evoke life in Durban, especially the Durban of the 1950s which was the site of the original Group Areas legislation. The Group Areas Act was devised by the *apartheid* government to control the movement of Indians in urban areas (it was, in fact, an extension of the restrictive Asiatic Land Tenure Act of 1946), and to separate Africans, Whites, ‘Coloureds’ and Indians. This was a national policy based loosely on the principle of “divide and rule”. The effects of this social engineering on identity are consequently of great concern to Reddy whose family was uprooted from a semi-rural area outside Durban in the 1960s.

Reddy uses an autobiographical style of writing, relying heavily on memory (her own and those of her characters) and a nostalgic tone. Many of these short stories are very personal narratives, which sometimes give the impression that they have purgative value, as well as operating as a record or a tribute. This element affects the tone of the writing, imbuing it sometimes with a mournful or wistful mood, and at other times with a celebratory, commemorative mood.

Reddy uses the former mood in the title story of *On the Fringe of Dreamtime and Other Stories* (1987) (henceforth *OFD*). In this story the unnamed central

character experiences the pain and loss of forced removals in Durban in a dream-like state. He returns to his childhood home to reminisce but is met with suspicion and fear by the new white owners. The past, the joy of ownership, the sense of home and security, the connectedness to place, all become a dream and he is cast into the periphery of his world. Here Reddy captures the tragedy of a past injustice which will haunt generations to come. Reddy's family had in fact been settled in an area which was also claimed by the government for re-population by whites: "Roosfontein was a beautiful scenic area in Westville which became a White area" (*The Unbending Reed* unpublished: 21). Here her family had farmed bananas just as the protagonist of the story had done on his farm:

'This is my land!' He insisted. 'We lived here for thirty years! The farm, the bananas, such bananas! Then they took it all from us!'

(*OFD* 1987: 63)

The story has as its central focus the visit of the old man to his former place of dwelling. This visit is traumatic for him as powerful memories transport him back to happier times. The past, so strongly contrasted to the present, appears like a dream. Roughly, the story is divided into three parts: it begins with a description of a tree, a tangible symbol of all that has been lost; this description is followed by a confrontation between the old man and the new white female owner of the house and her companion; it ends with the man narrating his anecdotes about the past in the local general store, and finally his departure. This simple structure is bolstered by the interspersed idyllic childhood memories. The highly charged confrontation between the protagonist and the two white women reveals the horrors of the racist ideology which divided people and positioned them as adversaries. The encounter emphasises the differences between the two parties and the processes of 'othering'

which both employ. The women are stereotypically racist: they regard the old man with contempt and suspicion, oblivious to his grief and profound sense of loss. He, on the other hand, is horrified that they eat beef, smoke, wear trousers and totally and callously misunderstand him. The result is that they appear to one another as an “alien intrusion” (*OFD* 1987: 62). Throughout the duration of this encounter, the old man is filled with memories which sharply contrast with the harshness of his current situation. This short story is an economical and powerful rendering of the theme of loss and displacement in the *apartheid* era, using memory and elements of autobiography to achieve its effect. This three-fold deployment of memory in her writing: the motif of memory as a plot device, the use of memory and nostalgia to set the tone and mood of the story, and the incorporation of memories of her own life, is one of Reddy’s most successful literary strategies. In general, use of memory in South African literature has sparked many interesting debates about the therapeutic value of remembering a traumatic past for a post-*apartheid* society.^{vii} In Reddy’s short stories memories are used to recreate a history for and tell the untold story of marginalised and oppressed peoples such as the protagonist of “On the Fringe of Dreamtime”. Reddy’s act of reclamation of the past is a necessary step in the nation’s rehabilitation process. As Homi K Bhabha points out:

Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.

(Bhabha 1994: 7)

The impact of Reddy’s stories on the present should not be hindered or underestimated, as they have been in the past, but encouraged to innovate and interrupt the performance of present diasporic lives the world over.

In addition to the use of memory and the past, “On the Fringe of Dreamtime” also contains the image of the revered and mythologised female figure.

Her careworn face, bereft of make-up except for the traditional dot on her forehead, bending over a bed of herbs. Mother had known the earth and its powers intimately. She had known every healing plant and herb. Like a true daughter of the earth.

(OFD 1987: 2)

This clichéd description of the protagonist’s mother, which highlights her simplicity, gentleness and fecundity, is in direct contrast to the hardness and masculinity of the white women. In another description the mother is described as “slapping the washing on the stones and singing the folk songs of her youth” (OFD 1987: 65). She is revered as the nurturer and the custodian of traditional values and practices. This reverence of the protagonist is indicative of his own position within the patriarchal structures of a traditional Indian community.

Another aesthetic element employed in this story is the description of ritual and ceremony. The old man pauses dramatically in front of the ruins of a Hindu temple as he shuffles away from his former home:

Nothing remained of it now except the ruins of the inner sanctum. He stood there and heard once more the prayers and songs of a thousand devotees. The blackened ruin conjured up the fragrant smoke of incense and fruit offerings. Here he had accompanied his family during festivals and special occasions. At such times, the spirit of sharing and oneness was strengthened.

(OFD 1987: 66)

This description too serves to further emphasise his present status as intruder and alien. In the past he belonged and was secure in the bosom of his family and community. The “spirit of oneness and sharing” experienced at the temple in the past is an oblique indictment of the divisions and strife of *apartheid*. Also, the details of

this description serve as cultural information, reinforcing the cultural identity of the protagonist.

Finally, the aesthetic element of depicting the paradoxes of diasporic life is also evident in this story. The narrator offers us a glimpse of continuity and change residing side by side in the diasporic family. The old man's sons have severed ties with the past and adapted, and are unable to empathise with their father's sense of loss and displacement: "But he had never really adjusted. His sons understood his pain but didn't share it" (*OFD* 1987: 66). In another manifestation, his "son's impatient blaring on the horn broke into his memories and thoughts" (*OFD* 1987: 67). Reddy shows how the younger generation is emphatically in the here-and-now while the older generation immigrant is immersed in the past, estranged and lonely. The closing lines of the story are curt and brutal, echoing the brutality of the protagonist's reality: "He must shed his pain and crush the desire to return to a land where he was now an intruder" (*OFD* 1987: 67). For the older-generation immigrant, the past is a burden and a source of frustrated longing. For the younger generation the challenges of the present and adaptation in the diasporic location are paramount. Reddy does not offer a solution to this generational conflict and rift.

As argued previously, much of the literature by women of the South Asian diaspora is drawn from personal experiences and deeply intimate concerns. Thus it often relies on personal memory, and sometimes on the synthesising of facts, events, people, settings from the author's own life, with imagined/fictional characters and events. This overt blending of fiction with autobiography results in a hybrid literary form, which although not unique to these writers, has particular implications and

resonances for them as women writers. In South Africa, such “autobiographical acts” (Nuttall & Michael 2000: 298) are particularly significant because of the perspectives of the past which are thus excavated, and because of the potential for healing which they create.

As is evident from the reading of “On the Fringe of Dreamtime” above, some of Reddy’s short stories definitely employ this autobiographical form, especially the stories which paint Durban as their vivid and real setting, and the stories which deal with spatial confinement. In another story, “A Gift for Rajendra”, a young man confined to the wheelchair is sparingly but poignantly described as

[...] sitting in a wheelchair, reading. He was young, probably in his early twenties. He was very much like his mother. But the eyes that he turned upon the barber were sombre and painlined.

(*OFD* 1987: 7)

This description could well be of Reddy’s brother, Mags, who was also stricken with muscular dystrophy, and the reference to reading is a definite link to Reddy herself who, in her autobiography, valorises the act of reading as a form of liberation. This story too is simple and stark, and it is set in the Indian community of Durban. It brings together two characters who are restricted: the itinerant barber by the dissipation of his trade; and the isolated, disabled Rajendra. But the emotive impact of the story is concentrated in the quiet grace and compassion of the character of Rajendra’s mother, a female figure of outstanding dignity and strength who brings the two needy men together.

In interviews and in her autobiography, Reddy discusses at length the inspiration and support she received from her mother and grandmother. Her short

story collection is dedicated to her mother, who she has praised in the autobiography for her “dedication, discipline, far-sightedness, courage and endurance” (unpublished: n.p.). The short stories are scattered with older female characters who display similar noble qualities. In the short story discussed below, this aesthetic element is accompanied by another: the critique of arranged marriages and the circumscription of women’s bodies and sexuality. Often in literature by women of the South Asian diaspora, these two aesthetic elements overlap and act in tandem to articulate a feminist standpoint.

In “A Time to Yield”, Zainab, a headstrong, ambitious and intelligent young woman is forced into an arranged marriage. She remains defiant but is disempowered and her attempts to assert her desires are futile. The action of the story occurs on the day of the dreaded wedding, or more specifically, in the few hours leading up to the nuptials. Zainab is imprisoned in her room, seething with anger and frustration; we are privy to her private thoughts and passionate emotions. The narrator leads us through Zainab’s painful memories of the struggle she put up against the marriage. Then a series of female relatives visit her in her captivity. First is her beloved younger sister Zubeida who is sympathetic but naïve and even more powerless than Zainab. Zainab’s defiance does not abate. Then follows the crisis of the plot, a violent confrontation with her mother, who is fearful that Zainab’s unconventional behaviour will bring disgrace on their family. She strikes Zainab and forcefully drags her out of bed, undresses her and propels her into a bath. The mother’s anger matches the daughter’s. The mother is explicit in her denunciation of Zainab’s attempt to deviate from the prescribed role of a traditional Muslim female of their class and social standing:

‘Let that be a lesson to you! I blame your father for this. He spoilt you. He gave you everything. And what good has it done? All that education, wasted! I never believed education was good for women. But your father never listened to me. And now, what does he get? A proud and headstrong daughter!’

(*OFD* 1987: 99)

Moreover, the mother strongly condemns the father for indulging the daughter in this deviation. The wrathful mother appears to wield power in this instance, a power to demand that her daughter conform. But as Irene Gedalof argues in her study on the complicity of women in Indian patriarchies, this “is power in its capillary mode, at its most insidious” (1991: 184). According to Gedalof, women in strict patriarchal structures are

produced in visible ways. It is this production of women as (impure) subjects – managed, contained, but also valorized, enabled and empowered – that helps to make their subordination so persistent.

(Gedalof 1991: 184)

Zainab’s mother has been “produced” within a system which deems her a secondary citizen, a vassal of her male relatives. She has a semblance of power but it is allowed to be directed only at other women. Thus Zainab too is “produced” in this mould of the impure, subservient, demure woman who will obey the commands of her elders. But Zainab rebels against this system. Her father, the patriarch, humoured her as a child, but as soon as she reached marriageable age he “concluded an important business deal with the Khans, and now Khan and Joosab were partners” (*OFD* 1987: 95), thus sealing her fate. It becomes clear then that the mother is a mere instrument of this patriarchal power, her complicity rendering her both victim and oppressor.

In this story Reddy highlights the physical objectification of the young woman who is bartered in the marriage transaction. After the mother’s brutal visit, a “string

of old aunts followed in her wake” (*OFD* 1987: 100). Their invasion of Zainab’s private space and abhorrent appraisal of her body is described as molestation. The scene is sinister and threatening, heightening Zainab’s sense of aggravation and disempowerment.

They surrounded her. They ran their eyes greedily over her fresh young body and touched her with creepy hands. They cackled lewdly. She shuddered and shut her eyes. She felt their stale breath on her, reeking of betel leaves and soiling her. Their raucous voices filled the room. She felt someone’s hand on her, feeling the smooth lines of her body. With an exclamation of disgust, she sprang up, and thrust the person violently from her.

(*OFD* 1987: 101)

Zainab’s response to this violation, ironic and perverse because it is carried out by a group of old women, is met with further disapproval because this “was no way for a shy, young bride to behave” (*OFD* 1987: 101). The odious aunts function as a vivid symbol of the oppression Zainab faces in the complex patriarchal matrix which surrounds her. Reddy does not in this instance simplify the machinations of patriarchal oppression, nor does she shy away from the often shameful and complicit roles women play in it.

After these scenes of conflict, the story reaches a pivotal point with the grand entrance of the grandmother. Zainab’s grandmother is a strong commanding figure but she is also described as gentle and compassionate. This is the ubiquitous figure of the revered, older female relative who is the fount of wisdom. She immediately takes charge of the situation and calms Zainab with her firmness and empathy. She recounts her own arranged marriage and how it turned out to be a success: “I submitted to everything they required of me. And in time, I did learn to love your grandfather. We were really a very happy family” (*OFD* 1987: 102). She advocates

that Zainab also submit to the demands of her family, and socio-cultural milieu. The grandmother, it seems, subscribes to a feminism born of necessity and which involves compromise rather than outright rebellion. Her argument centres on the notion of power. She regards women as powerful, not disempowered, as agents not victims, and she urges Zainab to “work at making [her marriage] a success” (*OFD* 1987: 103). This power is seen as universal and timeless, something intrinsic to women and not culturally determined:

Women are the same today as they have been over the centuries. All the education and modern thought hasn't changed them much. Women have the same needs, the same desires, the same hopes and dreams, the same roles and abilities ... and the same power, as women throughout the ages.

(*OFD* 1987: 102)

On the one hand, the grandmother may be praised for her sagacity and her recognition of women's agency. Her encouragement of Zainab in the face of unassailable forces is admirable. But on the other hand there is something dangerous and insidiously deceptive about her argument. She is advocating that Zainab succumb to the pressures of her community, and in so doing, repress her own individual aspirations and desires. Within the circumscribed parameters of Zainab's life, she will wield a semblance of power, but ultimately she will be subject to the will of her husband. Further, when she remarks that “there is power in beauty too” (*OFD* 1987: 103), she is asking Zainab to fight with a double-edged sword. Zainab will be subject to the standards of beauty within this traditional social system and as long as she adheres to the codes which regulate her behaviour, that is, she will be able to use her feminine attributes of beauty and passivity to wield power. The grandmother's position does beg the question: what form will Zainab's power take, and for someone who she

describes as having “a strong will and a strong mind”; (OFD 19987: 103), how tenable will it be always to walk within the carefully delineated parameters of patriarchy?

The theme of marriage and the conflicts which arise from the enforcement of traditional gender roles is also explored in “The Spirit of Two Worlds”, and in Reddy’s television screenplay, *Web of Persuasion* (1984), which is about the intricate net of cultural and familial obligations which operates to secure an arranged marriage. Reddy deviates from the stereotypical depiction of the mother-in-law as cruel domestic tyrant by portraying the mother-in-law in “The Spirit of Two Worlds” in a highly sympathetic light. It is the older woman who experiences loss and sadness at the hands of her daughter-in-law who breaks from ‘tradition’, not the other way around, as is usually the case in this literature. Although the mother-in-law, in contrast to the revered grandmother or aunt, has become a stock character (likewise in popular, formulaic Bollywood movies), a symbol of the internalisation of patriarchal law and complicity, there are notable exceptions. Sometimes the mother-in-law too is a figure of pathos, a down-trodden household drudge who does not have the heart to continue the cycle of oppression. In “The Spirit of Two Worlds” Reddy creates a mother-in-law who forsakes her own beliefs and needs in order to facilitate her daughter-in-law’s freedom and independence.

A rich and vital aesthetic element in South Asian diasporic women’s literature is the description of everyday, sensuous scenes and domestic spaces. Small objects or trivial events are described in minute detail. The richness of home living and the domestic spaces of women are evoked. In these spaces women are shown to have knowledge, expertise, and traditional skills, and here they are free from oppression,

albeit temporarily. These spaces are often offered in contrast to other male-dominated, often public, spheres where women are either silenced and abused, or complicit in the structures which oppress their gender. In her autobiography Reddy addresses the theme of spatial confinement due both to physical disability and the restrictions of the *apartheid* regime. In almost obsessive detail she describes her struggle to overcome the spatial and kinetic restrictions of her physical condition, linking this with her struggle to become a writer. Accompanying this narrative are descriptions of restriction and confinement imposed by *apartheid*. In particular, she tells the story of a community of women who are confined to the “yard”, a communal space in the midst of tenement houses used by Indian women to perform daily chores and for social interaction. This “yard-space” (Mehta 1997: 10), paradoxically, symbolises both restriction and marginalisation due to *apartheid* laws combining with traditional Indian gender roles, and a lively, interactive, recuperative area where women can share their experiences. In the short stories this form of “grounded aesthetics” contributes to the realism of the texts which are aimed at capturing the hardships of life under *apartheid* in a traditional Indian community.

“The Spirit of Two Worlds” opens with an evocative description of the old mother-in-law performing her domestic duties in her own private space:

The old woman pounded the spices in a wooden mortar. She sat on the grass mat in the sartorial position adopted by generations of women before her. ... Out there it was quiet and she could think her thoughts in peace as she prepared the mangoes for pickling.

(OFD 1987: 9)

This description establishes the setting, the central character of the old woman, and the overall meditative tone of the story. The description is also significant because it

shows the woman in her designated gender role of nurturer, one “adopted by generations of women before her”, and it indicates that the woman has a private space, a place of respite from the “cramped living conditions of the council house” (*OFD* 1987: 10) she shared with her extended family. The crisis or conflict in the story takes the form of dissension in the home when the youngest daughter-in-law, Sharda, announces her decision to escape from this domestic space. Sharda first seeks employment in the city and then insists on moving into her own home. This fleeing from the confines of the family home is Sharda’s declaration of her repudiation of the traditional roles imposed on wives and daughters-in-law. She will not join the long line of women who, wearing a sari, sat on a mat pounding spices with a pestle and mortar. But the rift between Sharda and her mother-in-law is healed when Sharda has a son. The old woman, realising Sharda’s desire to continue working, offers to care for the baby who becomes the symbolic bond between the traditional and the modern lifestyles. She takes the baby into her nurturing, domestic space where the spirit of two worlds can merge. This might appear as a somewhat glib resolution to the generational conflict evident here and Reddy’s rendering of it is unambiguous. But through the development of the character of the old woman, we see that the resolution is spurred by a more self-serving motivation. At an earlier point in the narrative, the old woman makes the discovery that “her matriarchal authority had its limits” (*OFD* 1987: 13). Perhaps the old woman now makes the offer to care for her grandson because she realises that she cannot stem the tides of change, and because her powerful role as matriarch and nurturer is thus partially reinstated.

Elsewhere too Reddy describes the mundane duties of women and their humble dignity and devotion to their families. For example, in “On the Fringe of

Dreamtime” the mother, idealised in a memory, is described as tending a bed of herbs, washing clothes in a stream and cleaning sheep’s tripe (*OFD* 1987: 62-65). The class status of the women in these stories is indicated by the descriptions of them preparing offal. In “Market Days” the hardworking, tireless mother purchases a sheep’s head in the market, much to the chagrin of her young son:

When he glimpsed the sheep’s head in her basket, his heart sank. Now he will have to spend the afternoon gathering firewood. She would insert long, flat irons into the fire and use the heated irons to singe the sheep’s head. It was a lengthy process and would take the whole afternoon.

(*OFD* 1987: 43)

Reddy’s intention is not to provoke disgust, but to realistically portray a community living under adverse conditions, and to show the effort of its women who were determined to produce culinary delights, even from dubious sources. Significantly, Reddy does not pander to a western readership by censoring what might be perceived as unpalatable sensory details. Nor does she attempt cultural translation for the benefit of a foreign reader. Further, unlike Sara Suleri in *Meatless Days*, she does not treat these everyday, gastronomical activities as loaded with cultural significance. For the reader, though, these details are of cultural significance, and they are powerfully evocative because they are well integrated into the narrative and not specifically flagged. Significantly, this is also one of the few stories in which Reddy deviates from Standard English to incorporate bits of Durban Indian English idiom into the dialogue. In “Market Days” a conversation between the mother and the café owner in the market is rendered through this idiom. Her achievement, with this aesthetic element, is to authentically capture the textures and flavours of life for an Indian woman in Durban during the 1950s and 1960s.

One of the most widely used aesthetic elements in literature by women of the South Asian diaspora is the use of mythology or ancient literature, traditional religious practices, and descriptions of ritual and ceremony. This is an effective way to capture the richness of a culture, and to enact its preservation through writing, to allude to esoteric concerns, to set up contrasts, or to zoom in on sensory details. The themes of cultural continuation and perpetuation are thus highlighted. Reddy, being a second-generation Indian settler in the diasporic community in Durban, differs somewhat from other writers with regards to the use of this aesthetic element. For Reddy the preservation of traditional South Asian culture is not a foremost concern. Instead she is more concerned with representing cultural differences in the South African context. In interviews, and indeed in her literature, Reddy emphasises that it is the diversity of South Africa she wishes to represent, not one specific group. In an interview with Annemarié van Niekerk, Reddy claims that she does “not see the necessity of bringing in eastern influences in an African setting” (1994: 73). Rather, Reddy describes the Durban Indian community as *part of* a distinctive South African multi-culturalism.

Hence, when the short stories contain cultural references specific to the Indian community, such as Hindu rituals at the temple, arranged marriages or the preparation of spices for pickling, Reddy’s primary aim is to describe life in the diasporic location, and her secondary aim is to provide the cultural information required to sketch characters and settings. Furthermore, life in this specific diasporic location is about life under *apartheid*. Rather than weave the ancient cultural laws imported from India into her narratives or make intertextual references to ancient South Asian literature and mythology, Reddy addresses the laws of the *apartheid* government in

South Africa. This is not to say that Reddy is not aware of either the continuing stranglehold or positive value of some of those ancient laws and traditional practices. But her stories are not a means of perpetuating the homeland culture, so much as a means of questioning how this culture fits into the complex cultural matrix of South Africa.

For example in “Market Days”, which is told from the point of view of ten-year-old Anil, the Durban Indian market is colourfully evoked. During the course of the narrative of Anil’s weekly visit to the market with his energetic mother, we learn of the historic significance of the market which is threatened with shut-down by the *apartheid* authorities. The market was (and still is to some extent) the hub of Indian commerce and a symbol of the immigrants’ mercantile spirit and resourcefulness. In a vignette typical of Reddy’s socio-politically attentive style, the “stream of humanity” (*OFD* 1987: 40) which flowed through the market is described:

A White woman sailed out followed by her African maid bearing heavily laden baskets. African women with baskets balanced on their heads moved with an enviable ease. There were trussed fowls in many of their baskets. A few beggars straggled along and further down, a group of Hindu swamis stood in their saffron robes, holding out brass trays containing ash and flowers which they handed out at random.

(*OFD* 1987: 40)

In this scene Reddy is successful in suggesting, quite economically, the race relations and power dynamics of *apartheid* South Africa. The supremacy of the white woman is conveyed through the verb “sailed”, and the servility and exploitation of the maid is captured in the image of her “heavily laden baskets”. Reddy also manages to imply the dignity and the endurance of the African women who “moved with an enviable ease” even though they are burdened, in the immediate sense, and more pervasively in

their life situation. Pertinent to the current argument is the description of the Hindu swamis. They are described in sartorial detail, their act of religious devotion and piety sparingly but vividly illustrated. But these swamis, members of the South Asian diasporic community, adhering to the culture and religion of the homeland, are not of singular interest. Reddy differs from other South Asian women writers by not reifying Indian cultural practices. Rather she paints a scene which includes Indian cultural practices but which is also quintessentially South African, thus accenting the heterogeneity of South African culture, not the sacredness of homeland customs.

This emphasis is clear also in Reddy's treatment of the paradox of cultural continuity or the preservation of a cultural heritage versus change. In "The Slumbering Spirit" she highlights the injustices and loss of forced removals in Durban and she recreates and restores a sense of community, the richness of an organic, multi-cultural, pre-1950 Durban, which has been disrupted by *apartheid*. Unlike other writers of the South Asian diaspora, Reddy uses memory and imagination to recreate, not the homeland, but this quasi-mythical multi-cultural pre-*apartheid* community. She achieves this through narrating the unlikely friendship between a 'Coloured' child, Terry, and an old 'White' woman, Mrs Anderson.

Through the unusual relationship between Terry and Mrs Anderson, she examines uneasy race relations between 'Coloureds' and 'Whites', and ends the story with an epiphany for Terry. The use of the generic short story conclusion of an epiphany is effective here because it follows a development of the characters' relationship and Mrs Anderson's symbolic bequeathing of her beloved dog to Terry. The story ends with Terry's experience of an "awakening of the slumbering spirit to

mutual sharing and communication and sympathetic understanding” (OFD 1987: 120). Being the last story, this utopian vision of the author also concludes the collection of stories.

Reddy is frank and emphatic about her focus and commitment in her writing. In an interview with Van Niekerk she says, “I am a South African with Indo-African links. I derive my creative spirit from the land of my birth, not from the land of my origin” (1994: 73). Hence Reddy is “haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back”, and her short stories do create “imaginary homelands” (Rushdie 1992: 12). But hers is not an imaginary *homeland*, India, the land of her origin, but an imaginary *home*, South Africa, the land of her birth. Perhaps because she is a second-generation South African and because of her experiences under *apartheid*, she is deeply embroiled in her immediate and present home, even if that home is to some extent an ‘imaginary home’. With regard to the transnational framework, the textual strategies used by Reddy to reclaim and create her imaginary home are similar to the textual strategies used by other South Asian diasporic women writers to recreate imaginary homelands.

Where Reddy does concentrate on Indian characters, she links their struggle in this immediate and present home to characters with different backgrounds, and thus explores the complex dynamics of oppression. For example, the story “Friends” deals with the intricate and often hostile racial and class relations between Indians and black Africans. As mentioned earlier, Reddy’s stories often contain “cross-confrontational relationships” (Van Niekerk 1992: 36), forming an axis on which the plot pivots. In this story the confrontation occurs on two levels. Reddy creates two

pairs of characters, each comprising a mother and daughter: Sadhana, the indulged and disillusioned Indian 'madam' and her neglected daughter Asha; and Bessie, the hardworking, downtrodden domestic worker and her deprived daughter Phumza. Sadhana, unhappy in her traditional Indian marriage, is a neglectful and abusive mother. The five-year-old Asha, like her mother, is materially indulged but emotionally neglected. Sadhana is overtly racist and oppressive towards Bessie who is a devoted and gentle mother. The two mothers have a highly charged but muted confrontation when Bessie expresses her desire to buy Phumza a dress like one that Asha owns. Sadhana is angered by this challenge to a hierarchy which affords her some supremacy in her otherwise disempowered life. She is disdainful and uncomprehending of Bessie's aspirations to provide "good things" (*OFD* 1987: 107) for her child, displaying none of the stereotypical female empathy or solidarity one would expect from a mother. But Bessie is quietly defiant: "Bessie had given her a strange, unfathomable look before replying loftily. 'The shops are for everybody'" (*OFD* 1987: 107).

A much more dramatic and violent confrontation occurs between the younger generation characters. Asha and Phumza are ostensibly the "friends" of the story but their relationship is also tainted by the racism and segregation endemic in their society. Phumza silently and passionately desires a doll which Asha is playing with and when Asha recognises this desire in Phumza she brutally attacks and breaks the doll, finally discarding it. When Phumza attempts to rescue and care for the battered doll, Asha savagely reclaims her property. Reddy's hyperbolised representation of Asha's sadism and Phumza's defeat is a powerful indictment on the dynamics on power within *apartheid* society. In the microcosm of the domestic setting Reddy

shows how the Indian mother and daughter (who are themselves victims of *apartheid*), act out their respective anger and frustration on those more vulnerable and less privileged than themselves. Using her signature technique of “cross-confrontational relationships”, Reddy creates a tightly focused yet emotionally rich short story which explores the notion of difference amongst South African women. “Friends” reveals that Reddy is aware that the South Asian immigrant is sometimes so deeply immersed in the diasporic location as to sometimes become complicit in its injustices.

Within a transnational feminist aesthetic, Reddy’s short stories, conventional in form, sharing many of that aesthetic’s elements but atypical in their primary focus, show that she is less concerned with the continuity of South Asian culture and much more invested in the project of creating an egalitarian and multi-cultural South African society. The following section expands to discuss other short stories by women writers of the South Asian diaspora in relation to Reddy’s distinctive South African contribution to the genre.

Section 3: Short Stories and the Heroic Potential of Migrancy

The transnational feminist aesthetic is evident in a vast number of short stories and short story collections by diverse women writers of the South Asian diaspora.

Predominantly, these stories deal with the migrant experience – the processes of assimilation and cultural translation. These stories also, to a large extent, foreground the experiences of women. However, some writers combine, in their collections, stories which exhibit this aesthetic with stories which explore divergent themes and

stylistic modes. For example, Jhumpa Lahiri's collection *Interpreter of Maladies* has a wide range of subject matter and is not restricted to representing the Indian immigrant experience in the USA. Nor are all the stories in this collection concerned with women or the oppression of women.^{viii} On the other hand, Agnes Sam's collection *Jesus is Indian and Other Stories* is a short story cycle with an "overall structural and thematic unity in that the stories all deal with estrangement and displacement in colonial and apartheid society" (Govinden 2000: 223). Pertinent questions which thus arise are: do different migrant experiences give rise to these differences in the treatment of subject matter and theme; and do cosmopolitan transnational writers offer a different feminist and diasporic perspective to those writers from diasporic locations in developing countries? In this section, for the purposes of drawing a comparison between how different authors employ a transnational feminist aesthetic, individual short stories which deal with the concomitant themes of migration and women's lives are selected for analysis.

It is noteworthy that short stories by South Asian women writers now settled in the USA are often set in India or exhibit a preoccupation with the social constraints facing women in India. For example, Padma Perera's "Mauna", Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar", and Bharati Mukherjee's "A Wife's Story", all exhibit salient elements of the aesthetic. A similar migratory experience and class background links these three authors. All three are themselves migrants to the USA, Perera and Mukherjee from India, and Lahiri from the UK. They are also educated and enjoy the privileges of belonging to certain elite intellectual circles in the USA.^{ix} In contrast, South African South Asian women writers, the majority of them descendents of indentured labourers, were until recently subject to a radical form of

racism which included literary exclusionary practices. It can be argued that within the South Asian diaspora, different patterns of migration^x produce different forms of women's writing, which nonetheless adhere to an overarching transnational feminist aesthetic. On the whole, as seen with Reddy's stories, short stories produced by South African South Asian women are firmly rooted in the diasporic location and the primary thematic engagement is with the adopted home. Exemplary stories by Farida Karodia and Agnes Sam are examined later in this section.

The three short stories mentioned above epitomise what Susheila Nasta calls "the heroic potential of migrancy as a metaphor for a 'new' form of aesthetic freedom" (Nasta 2002: 4). The migrant position of the authors allows them to hark back to the homeland, their retrospective perspective honed by their experiences of displacement. In this sense displacement is not always the focus of the narrative but it is the author's displacement which generates the narrative and its themes. A new form of aesthetic freedom born of displacement affords these authors the opportunity to work through ties with the homeland and to struggle with "the rootedness of old, hollowed-out belongings" (Bromley 2000: 4). Even Bharati Mukherjee, who in recent years has controversially advocated a whole-hearted embrace of the adopted homeland,^{xi} began her career by writing about the former homeland and the treacherous path which links the two homes. In "A Wife's Story" (1989b), a young wife, Panna, travels to New York and as a migrant and a student she experiences a degree of self-determination which causes her to question her role as a traditional, Indian wife. But Mukherjee reveals the tenacity of deeply ingrained social codes and taboos by exploring the protagonist's ambivalence. In New York Panna enjoys an exhilarating liberation but when her husband visits her, she is wracked by "guilt,

shame, loyalty” (Mukherjee 1989b: 34). Her only recourse is to inauthentically perform the role of dutiful wife whilst inwardly she is “free, afloat, watching somebody else” (Mukherjee 1989b: 40). In this story Mukherjee maps out the complex web of social, cultural and ideological constraints which traps a traditional Indian wife, but through Panna’s ambivalence and performance, she also expresses the heroic potential of migrancy.

Like Panna, these authors have also occupied a liminal space between the two homes, and they have had to negotiate that path from one life to another, somehow achieving a synthesised and empowered subjectivity. Edward Said has described such subjectivities as

... decentred and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the artist and intellectual figure in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes and between languages.

(Said 1994: 403)

Padma Perera, whose memoir *Room To Fly: A Transcultural Memoir* (1999) portrays herself as just such an artist and intellectual figure in exile, also began her writing career by creating short stories set in India. Her first collection, *Dr Salaam and other stories of India* (henceforth *DS*) was published in 1978. “Mauna”, from this collection, is a short story about the author’s grandmother. It is in the form of a memoir, including childhood memories and anecdotes about family life. The author exhibits a strong sense of nostalgia for her former home but her migrant consciousness enables a keen critical eye and a subtle feminist faculty. The story also contains the following aesthetic elements: a reverential attitude towards female family members, in particular the formidable matriarchal grandmother; an exposition of

traditional Hindu marriages; the underlying theme of the oppression of women; rich and sensual descriptions; and vivid evocations of rituals and ceremonies. Through her use of this aesthetic, the author articulates her fervent ties to India and the type of family life which was sacred there.

“Mauna” means “the vow of silence – abstaining from speech for spiritual discipline” (DS 1978: 119). This is the focalising device of the narrative, concentrating it into a sharp and penetrating social comment and saving the story from appearing as a series of sentimental and rambling anecdotes. Perera recounts her grandmother’s plight as a child bride who is isolated and lost in her undefined role, neither wife nor child: “Every day, after she finished the morning’s household duties to her mother-in-law’s satisfaction, she went to the village pond near their house and played ‘ducks-and-drakes’ by herself for hours together” (DS 1978: 120). But despite this vague and lonely childhood, the grandmother matures to enjoy a strong network of female solidarity or sisterhood, particularly with her sister-in-law and then with other female relatives, even those of future generations: “Here I saw our grandmother’s other pattern, this one linking itself to the women of the family, and still unrolling a little further with each new generation” (DS 1978: 121). The grandmother is also described as being the “implacable serenity” (*ibid.*) at the centre of the family. But she is not totally romanticised and hero-worshipped, as is often the case with the stock character of the revered, older female relative. Recall Zainab’s grandmother in Reddy’s “A Time to Yield”, who is ideally figured as strong and commanding but also as gentle and compassionate, the perfect arbiter of discordant worlds. Rather, Perera subtly and humorously delineates her grandmother’s fallibility and quirks, which not only expresses the author’s affection and reverence, but also her

keen perception of her grandmother's social positioning and complex personal aspirations.

The crux of the story is the grandmother's *mauna*, her vow of silence on Saturdays. This act of religious piety and discipline causes huge practical problems for the family, and also greatly incenses the grandfather who sees this brand of devoutness as ridiculous and futile. It is possible that he sensed that it was a form of ironically masked defiance on the part of his wife who in "the tradition of the good wife accepting her husband's dictates, [she] kept her mouth shut and her Saturday's silent" (*DS* 1978: 126). Perera succeeds in conveying the full significance of this action by constructing a humorous narrative which alludes to the paradoxical situation - the grandmother's subversion of orthodox gender roles from within the domains of patriarchy. She asserts her independence and will in a way which is accepted, even admired and respected, in her society. Perera goes a step further by representing how her grandmother used her vow of silence to impose her traditional values upon her family. In this way she is not unlike Zainab's grandmother who was also complicit in a form of patriarchy which produced "women as (impure) subjects – managed, contained, but also valorized, enabled and empowered" (Gedalof 1991: 184). Perera's grandmother, manipulating her son into accepting an arranged marriage by strategically using her vow of silence, wields "power in its capillary mode, at its most insidious" (Gedalof 1991: 184). But Perera's awareness of the complexity of her grandmother's subjectivity is clouded by her own, exilic-derived ambivalence. On the one hand she is awed that her grandmother's "every gesture is weighted down with four thousand years of tradition" (*DS* 1978: 137), and on the other hand she cannot refrain from a muted criticism of her grandmother's inferior status in relation

to her husband, as dictated by this tradition. This criticism is evident when Perera notes that her grandmother's death is perceived by her Brahmin family as a blessing and "good fortune: survived by her husband, she had died a *sumangali*, still in the cherished state of wifehood" (DS 1978: 136).

Perera's own decentred and exilic energies allow her the aesthetic freedom to comprehensively represent her grandmother's remarkable subjectivity. Using the central motif of *mauna* to shape and drive the plot, Perera is able critically and reverentially to discharge the complexity of her grandmother's subjectivity: she is a matriarchal figure, yet the shape of her life has been largely dictated by her male relatives; she is an orthodox Brahmin and the upholder of a four-thousand year old tradition, but she defies her husband's wishes for years; she is the centre of family dynamics, yet she manages this placidly and silently. For the diasporic women writer this imagining of female subjectivities in the former homeland is a crucial stepping stone on the path to enacting and representing empowered female subjectivities in the diasporic home.

Jhumpa Lahiri's award-winning short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) (henceforth *IM*) also contains a story which gazes back from the diasporic location to the homeland, in particular to the plight of women there. "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" has an overtly feminist theme, and it explores an unusual form of resistance and a unique female subjectivity. It contains a few key elements of the overarching aesthetic. The story is narrated in the first person plural, creating the sense of a distinct community, which consequently highlights the marginalised position of Bibi. This communal point of view is portrayed as female (although this is

not explicitly stated), and the domestic space and activities of this community are strongly evoked. But the aesthetic element at the centre of this narrative is the theme of marriage, the woman's body and female sexuality.

It is not clear whether Bibi is a hysteric^{xii} or not, but she does suffer from a mysterious, seemingly incurable illness which renders her an outcast in her community. At first Bibi expresses a strong desire to be married and to give vent to her repressed sexual and emotional needs. She also desires to belong socially, to conform and take her place in the community of other wives and mothers. But her disability and her impoverished state thwart these desires. As a result she lives in an abject state of dependency and vulnerability. She is at the bottom of the social ladder: a disabled, poor, unmarried woman. But Lahiri has created a character with unusual will and resolve. Bibi has been denied even the commonplace role of a woman in her society, that of a wife and mother within the parameters of patriarchal law.

Nevertheless she achieves her aims through unconventional means and seeks empowerment and fulfilment outside those parameters. She engages in an illicit relationship, the details of which remain a mystery, and bears an illegitimate child. Her sexual and emotional needs met for the first time, Bibi is cured. Furthermore, in the limited space made available by the short story form, Bibi is shown to be an entrepreneur, capable of earning her own living and providing for her child. Surprisingly, she is not shunned by the community but succoured by them in her hour of need, thus achieving social acceptance as well. Although this conclusion to a tragic tale might seem too glib and triumphantly feminist, it is recouped by an otherwise harsh and penetrating feminist critique of the ill treatment of women such as Bibi

Haldar in India. A similar critique is to be found in another story in the collection, “A Real Durwan”, which is also set in India.

Lahiri’s decentred and exilic energies extend beyond the feminist accounts of the position of women in India contained in these two stories, but it is in these narratives that the harshest feminist criticism finds expression. The rest of the collection’s seven stories are about diaspora or migration, and six of these seven stories are set in the USA. They all exhibit elements of a transnational, feminist aesthetic. Of the total nine stories, eight deal with the theme of marriage. In particular, the focus is on the changes wrought by South Asian migration to the USA on gender dynamics and traditional roles within marriage. The predicament of the migrant who is faced with multiple positionalities and affiliations is poignantly rendered through rich cultural descriptions in which sensuous details about food stand out.^{xiii} Lahiri’s distinctive talent for short story writing is most evident in her use of perspective. Marriage is viewed from the perspective of male characters, and through the eyes of white characters, for example, Miranda in “Sexy”, Mrs Croft in “The Third and Final Continent”, and Eliot in “Mrs Sen’s”. Lahiri thus projects an image of the migrant as slightly bewildered by cultural dislocation but indefatigable in the struggle to adapt and synthesise cultures. This swivelling around of the gaze also serves to raise, in a manner both economical and potent, the complex racial dynamics of these cross-cultural encounters. Not as explicitly political as Reddy, Lahiri still manages to interrogate issues such as the occasional incommensurability of cultural difference, stereotypes, and exoticisation. Further, Lahiri succeeds in expanding the scope of her social commentary by including the effects of migration on existing cultures of the USA and on American national identity.

Lahiri's fluid and privileged background as a South Asian born in London, raised in Rhode Island and now resident in New York City, is perhaps responsible for the aesthetic freedom which allows her to imaginatively travel from the homeland to the diasporic home, from the male focalising consciousness to the female one, from the white ethnic perspective to the South Asian migrant's outlook. This aesthetic freedom manifests in a short story style which combines intensity and conciseness with an impressive complexity of themes and lush sensory details.

For South African South Asian women writers this aesthetic freedom has been hindered by socio-political conditions in *apartheid* South Africa. However, writers like Reddy, Karodia and Sam have made forays into short story writing, which have begun, in recent years, to receive critical attention. Karodia's "Crossmatch", from her collection *Against an African Sky* (1995) (henceforth *AAS*), is about arranged marriages and is set in a previously designated Indian suburb of Johannesburg. This story exhibits all the elements of the transnational feminist aesthetic I have mapped out previously. First, the story contains details of Karodia's own life – her Indian family background, her migration to London, and her return from exile after the first democratic elections in 1994. As in her long fiction, discussed in Chapter Three, Karodia keenly engages with both the oppressive *apartheid* system which forced her into exile, and the form of patriarchy which she was subject to while growing up in an Indian household. Using elements of autobiography in her fiction allows Karodia to not only tell her own story, but to insert this personal narrative into the broader narrative of a nation which has emerged from the ravages of *apartheid* into a hard-won and uneasy democracy.

Second, the story has a domestic setting, the homes of two middle-class Hindu families in Lenasia, a suburb to which Indians were forcibly removed by the Group Areas Board. This domestic setting is the realm of women, in particular the two matriarchs, Mrs Makanji and Mrs Vasant, who are the instigators of would-be arranged marriage. These women are shown to be at their most powerful and manipulative in their respective spheres of influence.

Third, Karodia highlights the relationship between the two Makanji sisters: Sushila and Indira. A deep and empathetic bond exists between them despite their very different temperaments and life situations. The more problematic mother-daughter relationship is also explored through the characters of Mrs Makanji and Sushila. As in many other examples of South Asian diasporic women's writing, the mother here is cast as a formidable representative of cultural traditions, and it is her oppressive yoke that Sushila has to throw off in order to assert her self-determined subjectivity. Just like Zainab's mother and grandmother in Reddy's "A Time to Yield" and Perera's grandmother in "Mauna", Mrs Makanji uses varying degrees of force and manipulation to assert her desire for an arranged marriage for Sushila. Unlike Reddy and Perera's stories, "Crossmatch" does not end with the triumph of the mother, but with her being thwarted. The arranged bridegroom is in fact gay and Sushila is already in a committed relationship with a white Englishman in London. Added to this farcical outcome of Mrs Makanji's machinations is Sushila's determination to live her life on her own terms far away from the binding tentacles of her mother.

Fourth, the story abounds with cultural information, often appearing to be gratuitously thrown in for didactic purposes. There are descriptions of clothes, music (*ghazals* by a popular Indian singer) and pictures of mythological scenes, such as “prints of Krishna playing the flute with the gopis dancing around in their colourful skirts, pictures of Lakshmi and Ganesh” (AAS 1995: 95). Karodia in this way reconstructs the milieu for the particular generational and cultural conflict which is her main focus, but she also seems to be attempting a crude form of cultural translation for her reader. Fifth, the themes of marriage, women’s bodies and female sexuality are strongly delineated in this story. The practice of arranged marriages receives severe criticism as it is shown to be markedly out of touch with the reality of the lives of younger generation South Asians. Further, Karodia shares Reddy’s view, seen in “A Time to Yield”, that many arranged marriages are business transactions conducted by parents of the same class and caste for the purposes of securing material standing. To Mrs Vasant, the fact that the Makanjis were rich created the “possibilities of a good match” (AAS 1995: 106-7). Through the character of Sushila, Karodia shows the attempts which are made to control female bodies and sexuality within this particular patriarchal formation, and the sort of resistance that these attempts receive. Mrs Makanji is horrified by her daughter’s lack of modesty: ““It would be much better for her to be wearing decent clothes, good dresses, so she can look decent like a nice Hindu girl should”” (AAS 1995: 90). Sushila is unperturbed, even when her mother puts on a “tearful performance” (AAS 1995: 108) and she continues to wear “black leggings and a brief top” (AAS 1995: 90) or “white tight pants” (AAS 1995: 108). It is perhaps not as dramatic as Bibi Haldar’s act of resistance, but Sushila too breaks the taboo on pre-marital sex by living with her English lover before marriage. Her uninhibited sexuality is vividly represented in a

photograph of her and her lover in a passionate embrace, a photograph which is the undoing of Mrs Makanji. Like Lahiri, Karodia also provides the male perspective, showing how male children are also subject to similar pressures, through the character of Dilip Vasant who is a gay engineer in Stanford, USA, living an independent and fulfilled life away from his family.

The role of traditional Hindu wife is ably played by both Mrs Makanji and Mrs Vasant. Both are taken care of by their husbands to whom they appear subservient, both uphold the tenets of traditional Hindu practice, and both are complicit in the patriarchal systems which attempt to dictate their children's lives. Sushila's elder sister, Indira, has unquestioningly assumed this role, and as a result she suffers the sexism of her husband Ravi, who demands that she abort the child she is carrying if it is female. The vigour of Karodia's treatment of these themes and her formulation of Sushila's defiant subjectivity are indicative of her feminist commitment.

But Karodia also has a fervent commitment to the politics of the diasporic home. In the sixth and final aesthetic element we see this commitment manifest in her many references to *apartheid* and the complex racial hierarchy it gave rise to. The struggle for South Asian immigrants in South Africa is shown to be more than a negotiation between homeland and home, but a bitter battle against an oppressive political regime which further uprooted and displaced them. Karodia's stance against this regime in her short stories is similar to Reddy's. From the opening line of "Crossmatch", the reader is aware of the troubled history and racial tensions which continue to plague post-*apartheid* South Africans. The Makanjis' middle-class status

is shown to be largely due to the older generation's resilience and determination to survive. In the present day Mr Makanji complains of the high crime rate and the competition to business posed by "African vendors" (AAS 1995: 108). Just as Reddy did in "Friends", Karodia shows that for South Asians, the process of creating a home in South Africa is obstructed by white racism as much as it is by their own racism against black Africans. This final element greatly affects the style of the story because the insertions of socio-political reportage interrupt the narrative flow and cause it to lose some of the momentum and focus expected of the genre. Almost an entire page of polemic prose or forced dialogue on the subject of transformation appears heavy-handed and unnecessarily didactic. Despite significant similarities, Karodia's story lacks the subtle dexterity of Lahiri's treatment of racial themes. But then again, Karodia, a 'black' South African who was forced into exile, demands a more overt and fervent engagement with racial and political themes than Lahiri. Karodia and Reddy share similar preoccupations and levels of involvement with them, but Reddy's brevity and steadiness of focus render her stories somewhat more compelling.

Another South African writer still attached, in a literary sense, to the diasporic home despite multiple migrations and exile, is Agnes Sam. Sam, like Reddy, insists on calling herself an African and asserts that she is "cut off from India" (1988: 4). Ultimately Sam claims to be "not rooted anywhere" (*ibid.*) although her short stories testify otherwise. Sam, similar to characters in her short stories, left South Africa, travelled around Africa and finally settled in England, where she currently lives. Her short story collection *Jesus is Indian and Other Stories* (1989) (henceforth *JJ*) has been identified as a short story cycle^{xiv} with the history of Indian indentured labour as

its framing device. According to Betty Govinden the collection aims to address the absence of Indians from South African history and it deals “with issues of prejudice in various forms, and with cultural translation, syncretism and assimilation” (Govinden 2000: 222). The collection also conspicuously foregrounds the lives of women. Most of the stories have female protagonists and in the introduction Sam identifies the figure of Ruth (from the Book of Ruth 1.16) as a motif in the collection. She describes her in the following way: “Expressing her commitment whilst voicing uncertainty about a new place, people, religion, Ruth, the epitome of the migrant wife is still willing to adapt” (*Jl* 1989: 12-13). This description of Ruth as a hardy and outspoken yet displaced migrant woman fits many of the characters mentioned in this study.

Certainly, Hama, the mother of the child protagonist, Angelina, in the title story, “Jesus is Indian”, can be described using exactly the same words. Hama is a Hindu who has converted to Christianity, not because of religious faith but to expedite her transition into the diasporic home. She is willing to adapt but she does not passively assimilate the doctrines of the Catholic Church, embodied in the story by Sister Bonaventura. Hama has not repudiated her Hindu name or her language despite the stringent colonising efforts of the Church. The relationship between mother and daughter is figured in a manner typical of the aesthetic. Hama represents a traditional wife who is confined to the domestic sphere. Her greatest concern is to find good husbands for her daughters. Angelina is cheeky, defiant, subversive, and questions authority at every turn, and when faced with a choice between two oppressive systems decides, “I rather go to school than stay at home and do cooking and housework with Hama” (*Jl* 1989: 30). But Sam creates an uncommon dynamic in this story by

describing a triad in which mother and daughter are united in their struggle against the forces of colonialism and *apartheid*. In the classroom Angelina has been waging a war against Sister Bonaventura, the figure of authority who is intent upon sanitising and anglicising Angelina's creative writing, and by extension, Angelina's subjectivity. But Angelina is indomitable and insists on writing in her own dialect and on her own moral terms. Hama's influence on Angelina is evident in the scene of the show-down between Sister Bonaventura and Angelina:

(So I stand up in front of the whole class and I tell Sister I never going to call Hama 'mother'. Even when I'm writing English in my book. Sister can say mother for Sister's mother. I say Hama for my Hama. Because Hama say Jesus is Indian because Jesus wear dhoti and Jesus can understand our language.)

(JI 1989: 33)

Hama and Angelina display a cultural syncretism born of tortuous negotiations between the traditions of the homeland and the exigencies of the diasporic home. For Angelina and Hama, the response to colonialism and *apartheid* is to construct a hybrid culture by appropriating and synthesising what they choose from the diverse cultural resources at their disposal. They refuse to kowtow to one religion, race or language, but optimise the heroic potential of migrancy by amalgamating cultural difference. The story ends on a definite note of triumph for both mother and daughter.

In addition, the story captures that, for Angelina, coming of age in *apartheid* South Africa is a bewildering process of juggling contradictory and conflicting cultural influences in an oppressive and hostile environment. This use of a child's perspective is a common trope in South African literature where "the child's gendered rite of passage into a given South African class/race hierarchy" (Flockemann 1998: 75) is effective in exploring South African subjectivities and inter-subjective

relationships. Reddy employs this fictional strategy too in “Market Days” and “The Slumbering Spirit” - two stories discussed above.

Sam’s use of the short story form is experimental and innovative. Not only has she attempted a short story cycle linked by a meta-narrative rather than the conventional linking devices of distinctive region and community (Marais 1995: 32), but she has also used a variety of narrative voices and fictional styles, ranging from realism to parable and oral story-telling traditions. The overall effect is not one of maximum impact with minimum dimensions, but rather the Chinese Box effect of narratives within narratives, all dialectically connected by a framing device. In addition, the obvious self-reflexive element of “Jesus is Indian”, seen in Angelina’s unwavering commitment to her unorthodox and hybrid writing style, is indicative of Sam’s attitude to her personal literary aesthetic. In an interview a year before the collection was published she emphasised the importance of speaking and writing in her own accent and voice, and in a style that is “not dictated by publishers’ perceptions of what and how black women should write” (Sam 1988: 74).

In “Jesus is Indian” Angelina, too, insists on speaking and writing in her own voice. The story is Angelina’s first person narration and the language used is a creole composed of Tamil and the idiomatic English used by Angelina and her family. Angelina’s creative cultural expression is an open defiance of the strict Catholic, English education system which seeks to erase her ‘Indian’ culture. This stylistic element, the linguistic hybridity of the narrating central character, sets the humorous tone of the story, imbues it with its ebullient energy, develops the main themes, and is Sam’s declaration of her personal and political stance to migration and colonialism. Interestingly, Sam is the only short story writer studied here who utilises this stylistic

device. The other writers hardly deviate from Standard English, except for Reddy who uses Durban Indian English sparingly and only in direct speech, and Perera who scatters Sanskrit words amongst her precise English prose. The reason for this linguistic uniformity is probably, as Sam herself suggests, the result of publishers' dictums and the perceived market appeal of women's short stories.

Sam shares with her compatriots in South Africa, Reddy and Karodia, a profound involvement with the country's troubled history, and, with her compatriots in the South Asian diaspora, an ardent interest and concern for the condition of migrant women in colonial and postcolonial society. Her view is that migration need no longer emphasise the migrant woman's "chattel nature" as it did in the nineteenth century; instead "it can signal our independence and status as individuals" (*Jl* 1989: 12). Migration becomes a self-determined positionality, not a historical necessity. For Sam, as it does for Nasta, migration signals a new form of aesthetic freedom.

The South Asian diasporic women short story writers included in this analysis all exhibit this new form of aesthetic freedom. They explore feminist and diasporic issues with passion and commitment, giving voice to their grievances against state patriarchal structures and hegemonic practices in general. They achieve this through the deployment of the set of common aesthetic elements initially outlined. The discussion of South African South Asian writing is telling. It shows that, in South Africa, a female writer of South Asian descent shares many concerns as well as tropes and stylistic elements with other women writers of the South Asian diaspora. It also confirms that these writers, in their informal guild of sisterhood and common cultural heritage, can be markedly different. The South African writers, for instance, display a

much stronger engagement with the history and politics of their diasporic home than their American counterparts, bringing to the guild a unique perspective of a particularly gruelling diasporic experience. These differences testify to the very different migratory patterns which comprise the South Asian diaspora, and they serve as a warning against treating South Asian women's writing as a homogeneous literary category. Nevertheless, a common aesthetic achievement of these transnational writers is the optimisation of the robust short story form, with its facility to combine compression with effulgence, to resist oppression in its various guises and inscribe empowered female subjectivities.

End Notes

ⁱ See John Metcalf (1981: 110).

ⁱⁱ For South African Indian men's short stories see Ahmed Essop's *The Hajji and other stories* (1978) and Ronnie Govender's *'At the Edge' and other Cato Manor Stories* (1996).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Phyllis Naidoo's *Waiting to Die in Pretoria* (1990); Dr Goonam's *Coolie Doctor - An Autobiography by Dr Goonam* (1991); Fatima Meer's *Portrait of Indian South Africans* (1969).

^{iv} Elaine Showalter defines gynocritics as "scholarship concerned with woman as producer of textual meaning, with history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women" (1986: 128).

^v Van Niekerk echoes Minh-ha who defines difference as "not opposed to sameness, nor synonymous with separateness ... [D]ifference is not what makes conflicts. It is beyond and alongside conflict ... Difference can be a "tool of creativity to question multiple forms of repression and dominance" (1995: 372-373). Van Niekerk and Minh-ha both seems to be arguing that difference is not opposition and not predicated on a fixed binarism.

^{vi} This breach could be the result of Reddy being a second generation South African South Asian, or because the Indian government, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, had begun to withdraw support of Indian immigrants to South Africa in the late 1940s.

^{vii} See for example Carli Coetzee & Sarah Nuttall (eds.). 1998. *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

^{viii} I am reminded here of Tharu and Lalitha's caveat: "Not all literature written by women is feminist, or even about women. Neither is the scope of women's writing restricted to allegories of gender oppression" (1991: 34).

^{ix} Perera (who also publishes under the name of Padma Hejmadi) has an M.A. from the University of Michigan, won the major Fiction Award in the Hopwood contest, and is a celebrated photographer and visual artist. Jhumpa Lahiri enjoys a similarly illustrious career.

^x See Chapter One for a detailed discussion of the patterns of migration in the South Asian diaspora. Shukla's argument has to be born in mind: "Whether the presumed South Asian subject is a 'worker,' a 'migrant,' a 'refugee,' or an 'exile,' ... depends on the routes and temporality of diasporic movement and determines the production of class, racial, and ethnic positionality" (2001: 565-566).

^{xi} See Mukherjee's "Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!" *New York Times Book Review*. 28 August 1988: 29.

^{xii} Bibi's 'illness' is cured by a change in her circumstances, not by medical intervention, which suggests a psycho-social disorder akin to hysteria.

^{xiii} Food as a metaphor, token of cultural difference or symbol of cultural continuity is an feature of this aesthetic. See Mita Banerjee's "Pork Chops and *alu gobi*: The (Un)Translatability of Culture in Mukherjee's *Jasmine*" in *The Chutneyfication of History* (2002).

^{xiv} See Flockemann (1997: 8) and Marais (1995: 32).

Chapter Five: South Asian Diasporic Romance Writers: Translators or Brokers of Culture?

Section 1: Evolving Romance: Why South Asian diasporic women write romance novels

Recent years have seen an increased popularisation of South Asian culture and the 'Asian experience' in the form of global cultural commodities such as movies, television sitcoms, and popular literature. BBC sitcoms such as "Goodness Gracious Me" and the "Kumars at No. 42" have become household media phenomena, whilst movies like "East is East" and "Bend it Like Beckham" have enjoyed international success. The Bollywood cinema industry has played a key role in this popularisation process, extending its market to the USA, UK and South Africa. In the literary arena novels which conform to the genres of popular literature, but with South Asian, usually diasporic content, have been produced, and can be seen as part of this trend. Or, alarmingly, novels which are adapted for the screen, mutate into cheesy soap operas or flimsy 'chick-flicks', for example, Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999) which was made into a television mini-series and *Anita and Me* (1996) which was made into a feature length movie.

Authors who have found success in the popular literature arena are Bharti Kirchner (*Shiva Dancing, Sharmila's Book*), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (*The Mistress of Spices, Sister of My Heart, and The Vine of Desire*), and Shauna Baldwin Singh (*What the Body Remembers*). Also, appealing to a younger audience and a new generation of diasporic subjects are Tanuja Desai Hidier's *Born Confused* and

Ameena Meer's *Bombay Talkie*. South African author Praba Moodley has produced an historical romance, *The Heart Knows No Colour*, while Malaysian writer, Rani Manicka's family saga, *The Rice Mother*, records the history of the Ceylonese migrants to Malaya.

Some of these novels are clearly modeled on the western romance paperbacks of the Mills & Boon or Harlequin variety. Others contain certain elements of the genre but deviate to introduce other aesthetic forms or to address varying historical and social issues, such as diaspora and female identity. In short, the South Asian diasporic romance novel extends and revises the already evolving romance genre. Ann Rosalind Jones has described how romance has been a persistently popular mode in western literature for centuries, but how in the mid-twentieth century it has evolved into "a concerted programme of market research, mass publication and multi-media advertising" (Jones 1985: 198) directed at a female audience. Jones also notes how the genre has modified towards the end of the twentieth century:

I have confronted the most recent trends in the genre. I was astonished to find that every novel I read ... either explicitly refers to feminism or deals implicitly with issues feminism has raised.

(Jones 1985: 197)

Jones goes on to describe the paradox of how a genre which promotes the belief that a woman's greatest happiness lies in love and marriage also contains feminist themes. In particular she describes how in recent years, heroines have evolved from traditional, passive or even subservient characters into self-made, autonomous, sexually confident agents (Jones 1985: 212). These heroines, of course, are still operating within the ethos which designates heterosexual romantic love and marriage as the pinnacle of human existence. The novels selected for analysis in this chapter

reveal that this ethos certainly prevails. Interestingly, it is an ethos which transcends cultural difference and historical periods. Jones concludes her study of the intersection between romance and feminism by stating that the basic premise and driving force of the modern romance novel will remain unchanged for a while to come. Authors will “continue to make the ideally matched couple look to many readers like the still centre of a spinning universe” (Jones 1985: 215). Nevertheless, feminist inroads are being made into the genre, and South Asian diasporic women writers are making a considerable contribution to this foray.

Even with these recent developments in the romance genre, and the wider trend of South Asian cultural commodification and consumption proving to be lucrative and persistent, the question of why South Asian diasporic women writers should choose such an arguably disreputableⁱ literary antecedent to emulate and propagate does arise. Danielle Fuller, a scholar at the Department of American and Canadian Studies, University of Birmingham, has put forward the argument that the creation of cultural capital within a literary economy revolves around the concept of “genre hierarchy”. Influenced by Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic and symbolic capital,ⁱⁱ Fuller defines “genre hierarchy” as the ranking and categorisation of texts according to their aesthetic elements which determine whether the text will travel globally. For example, texts which are multi-generic, have a strong central narrator, and ostensibly conform to a popular literary form increase their accessibility to a wider audience (Fuller 2006: forthcoming). “Here the potential profitability of the novel as a genre that can attract a broad readership is rendered visible, but, simultaneously, its economic worth and its association with women’s leisure time clearly position it further down the literary hierarchy” (Fuller 2006: forthcoming).

For diasporic writers, using the notion of “genre hierarchy” to tap into an already established global market spells popular success, or at least high sales figures. The expediency of the adoption of the romance novel formula is therefore apparent. In particular, because the romance genre typically utilises an exotic and luxurious locale for a portion of its narrative, there is a prerequisite for exoticisation which South Asian writers can easily fulfil. To reach a larger audience, to make ‘foreign’ or ‘exotic’ content more accessible to an existing readership, to translate one’s minority culture to a host culture, to integrate and assimilate with the host culture – all these are plausible reasons for the appropriation of the romance genre.

Despite what appears to be a leap onto the ‘Indo-chic’ bandwagon, the positive value of these novels, in terms of their discursive and ideological impact, should not be disregarded. Popular texts by South Asian diasporic women writers result in an increased awareness of South Asian cultures (the target audience is western), the inscription of a voice for South Asian women, and the forging of solidarities with other women in diasporic locations (these novels obviously also have a strong appeal for South Asian diasporic women readers). Further, the main elements of the overarching transnational feminist aesthetic are present, confirming an engagement with both feminist and diasporic issues.

A catch arises when the diasporic writer finds herself unreflectively translating her culture for wholesale consumption. This literary strategy amounts to a cultural commodification which mars her critical engagement with themes, and cheapens the overall aesthetic of the text. The translator becomes a broker. Jasbir Jain has noted that, ironically, “the more the immigrants wish to distance themselves from cultural

ghettoisation, the more they realize that this is where their marketability lies” (Jain 2002: 295). This may be the case for opportunistic writers; however, there are writers who are not motivated solely by marketability but who genuinely want to be cultural translators and literary artists. Still, they too run the risks of cluttering their narratives with cultural information, or at worst, complicity with hegemonic structures and self-exoticisation. In addition, representing one’s culture need not necessarily lead to cultural ghettoisation. A demand in the market for exotic goods may be met with a product which represents the tensions of diaspora, that is, the tensions between the foreign and the local, the ‘traditional’ and the modern, continuity and change. Texts which deal with the “multiplicity of histories, ‘communities’ and selves” that constitute a diasporic consciousness (Vertovec 2001: xviii) may very well contain material which is *exotic* and informative to readers who are unfamiliar with South Asian cultures without *exoticising* South Asian immigrants and their cultures.

Within the popular literature industry the risk of exoticisation by the publisher and self-exoticisation by the author is great. By emphasising the exotic content of novels by South Asian women writers, publishers boost their cultural capital.

Publishers gain legitimacy by marketing texts produced by someone with ‘authentic roots’ in a specific culture. In this way the exotic is used to consolidate the position of the transnational presses as global brokers of culture and consecrators of literary value. The distinctness or ‘authenticity’ of the text helps to obscure the traces of mass production, global marketing, and transnational commodification which underpin the production of a block-buster literary phenomenon. Even a serious or ‘high-browed’ author such as Bharati Mukherjee, notorious in academic circles for her controversial views on migration and assimilation, falls prey to the devices of the global brokers of

culture. The publisher's blurb on the back cover of *Jasmine* (1989a) ends with the following sentence: "In *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee has created a heroine as exotic and unexpected as the many worlds in which she lives". The *San Francisco Chronical* review, also on the back cover, reads "A beautiful novel, poetic, exotic, perfectly controlled". To complement this rhetoric the front cover features a smouldering, sensual photograph of a very beautiful South Asian woman dressed in 'ethnic' garb. But the novel itself is about *becoming* American, not about *being* South Asian, and most of it is set in New York or rural Iowa. So, the emphasis on the exotic in the paratext of *Jasmine* is misplaced and misleading, surely a serious oversight on the part of the publisher and a source of embarrassment for Mukherjee.

As mentioned above, publishers want to emphasise the exotic, but why do writers do it, especially if it leads to the adoption of a literary strategy which is risky? If we use Huggan's definition of exoticism as a starting point, we can see how writers who wish to function as cultural translators might end up as cultural brokers:

"exoticism may be understood conventionally as an aestheticising process through which the cultural other is translated, relayed back through the familiar" (Huggan 2001: ix). In choosing a popular genre such as romance, the South Asian women writer may be engaging in an ethnographic project whilst appealing to a mass readership by the deployment of genre hierarchy. Also, the adoption of the familiar romance genre involves an exploration into the forbidden territory of self-determined romance and sexual desire. Huggan describes the romance genre as

a privileged genre for the retailing of exotic myths and stereotypes, particularly with respect to ethnicity and gender and the relations between them. Not least, romance provides a reminder of the connection between the *exotic* and the *erotic*.

(Huggan 2001: 275)

Even if an ethnographic function is served and the hitherto taboo subject of autonomous female sexuality is broached, the exotic compromises the text by participating in what Huggan describes as an industry “invested on a large scale in the commodification of cultural difference” (2001: 12). To become complicit in the global commodification of cultural difference, to retail exotic myths and stereotypes about one’s culture, might result in sales but it also constitutes a sell-out. Exoticising South Asian culture would be a perpetuation of older forms of imperialist exoticist representations of South Asia. By fetishising cultural difference and recycling clichés that have historically dominated ‘orientalist’ representations, these writers participate in a global imperialist enterprise. On the persistence of imperialism, Edward Said has noted that although direct colonialism has largely ended in our time, “imperialism ... lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere” (1994: 8).

This imperialist enterprise is evidenced in “the continuing hunt for ‘Indian masterpieces’, especially in Britain, [which] is tied in both with an exoticist perception of India filtered through the familiar topoi of Raj nostalgia and with a metropolitan desire, through this reified ‘India’, to rejuvenate a humdrum domestic culture” (Huggan 2001: 74). Through this enterprise an ‘othered’ India is made available as: spectacle; alternating object of horror and fascination; world of magic, mysteries and wonders; site of colonial nostalgia; forbidden space of cross-cultural desire; and romantic tourist goal. Kirchner’s *Shiva Dancing* (1998), although not an “‘Indian masterpiece’” but a popular romance novel, presents India in all of the above ways, and it also metonymically proffers its Indian heroine, Meena, in many related ways. For example, Kirchner uses Indian food extensively as a token of cultural difference in the novel’s cosmopolitan San Francisco setting. But as Mita Banerjee

has noted of Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, food can function as a sign of both the acceptance of cultural difference, and of exoticisation of the Indian migrant (2002: 233). In Section Two of this chapter Kirchner's tendency to exoticise South Asian culture in *Shiva Dancing* will be discussed. Nonetheless, the novel will also be assessed in terms of its deployment of the romance genre for its feminist interventions.

This self-detrimental trend has not been picked up by some leading scholars in the field, who fail to see that the 'opening up of the publishing scene' also has ominous implications. Jasbir Jain writes that

[W]omen writers of the Indian diaspora, the majority of them, are out of the phase of celebrating ethnicity or refurbishing the image of an exotic India. Instead they are out to demolish all cultural stereotypes nurtured by the cultures about each other. ... The publishing scene has also opened out for them even if only marginally, specially with presses like Virago and Women's Press and awards, like the Booker and the Pulitzer now within their reach.

(Jain 2002: 144)

Perhaps Jain is guilty of overstating her point and of premature celebration, rather than of myopia. There are numerous novels published in recent years which reify ethnicity and perpetuate stereotypes of an esoteric, mystical India, in particular of the exotic Indian woman. On the other hand, there are novels which explicitly debunk the notion of the exotic, and demolish cultural stereotypes, the most obvious example being Gita Mehta's *Karma Cola* (1979).ⁱⁱⁱ A case might also be made for the use of ironic self-consciousness in Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) especially in the fake *fakir* episode which certainly debunks 'orientalist' perceptions about the mysticism of the 'east'. Perhaps, also, the use of local idiom and pidgin English in Hasina's letters, which serve as a political and social mouthpiece on modern-day Bangladesh, might be read as evidence of a "strategically deployed exoticism" (Huggan 2001: 80).^{iv} This

would constitute a very sophisticated and oppositional aestheticisation of political issues, in which case Jain's gushing response would be justified.

For diasporic writers, inevitably members of minority groups in the metropolises, the exotic is brought to the centre. These writers inhabit a cultural position which is in-between East and West, metropole and margins, local and global. Homi K Bhabha's theory of a rhetorical 'Third Space' is useful in understanding the position of these writers in terms of cultural production. For Bhabha the 'Third Space' or in-between space opens the way

to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the *exoticism* of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity.

(Bhabha 1994: 38; my emphasis)

Bhabha is optimistic that this positioning will lead to a healthy exchange between the migrant and the host cultures. In other words, diasporic writers with an awareness of culture's hybridity would not commodify cultural difference, but would rather focus on the complex processes of syncretism. But Bhabha does not reckon with economic incentives and the power of market forces. A crucial question which Bhabha neglects to ask in this instance is, as these writers dispense with their historically 'marginal' positions and are catapulted to the forefront of the global literary economy, that is, as they come to occupy a 'Third Space', are they persuaded to exoticise their cultures for the markets of the metropole? My task in the rest of this chapter is to comment on the extent to which these writers *are* so persuaded; on the constructedness of the cultures they represent; and on the pitfalls of such an onerous task as cultural translation when the romance genre is adopted.

As mentioned earlier the romance genre has enjoyed a long and varied history. In the twentieth century, since its popularisation in the form of paperback novels aimed at a female audience, accusations of complicity with the structures of patriarchy have been leveled at the popular romance genre. Mainly, the attacks by feminist scholars have focused on the genre's reinforcement of stereotypical gender roles which position women within the parameters of marriage and the confines of domestic spaces, and position men in the arena of business, adventure and public life.^v It has been generally argued that plots of romance novels reproduce a patriarchal social system in which the practices of heterosexual courtship and marriage dominate. Within this system women are defined by their relationships to men, and formulaic happy conclusions of marriage between the hero and heroine are seen to consolidate stereotypical gender roles. The plots are suffused with hyperbolised passion and sexual desire, and improbably successful unions, thus fulfilling the fantasies of its avid readers. A commonly held view is that romance novels offer a form of escapism for the reader, resulting in a complacency which is counter-productive to feminist projects. Janice Radway summarises this perspective:

... when viewed from the vantage point of a feminism that would like to see the women's oppositional impulse lead to real social change, romance reading can also be seen as an activity that could potentially disarm that impulse. It might be so because it supplies vicariously those very needs and requirements that might otherwise be formulated as demands in the real world and lead to the potential restructuring of sexual relations.

(Radway 1984: 213)

Here Radway outlines one feminist perspective of popular romance novels. This perspective regards popular romance novels as counter-productive for the modern feminist project. These feminist critics are responding to the earlier forms of the popular romance novel made famous in the 1960s and 1970s by publishing companies

such as Mills and Boon. These ‘proto-type’ romance novels, which were later churned out in the thousands, employed a formulaic plot and a strict narrative logic. (For a table outlining the narrative logic of the romance novel and a summary of a typical romance plot see the Appendix).

However, Radway’s seminal study of the reading practices associated with popular romances, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984), also explores the possibility of the reading of romance novels as being a “combative and compensatory” practice for certain women (1984: 211). Moving analysis away from the text to the social event of reading, Radway challenges widely accepted critiques of romance reading by recasting it as “an oppositional or contestative act because the women use it to thwart common cultural expectations and to supply gratification ordinarily ruled out by the way the culture structures their lives” (1984: 211). More recently, feminist scholars have revisited romance by focusing on the “fictionality” or “pervasive textuality” of romance (Pearce & Stacey 1995: 14). Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey have edited a collection of essays, *Romance Revisited* (1995), which deals with the re-scripting or transformation of the romance genre. Ann Rosalind Jones’s view is that the evolving romance genre reflects a changing world, including changing gender politics, even if its central motif of a perfectly matched heterosexual couple remains fixed. She drolly notes that as the genre has expanded, heroines have become more feisty, even to the point where they “can be feminist *and* sexy” (Jones 1985: 202).

Radway recognises in romance reading a valid but limited protest by the readers who are victims of patriarchal oppression. These readers form the target

market of publishers. In an article entitled "Readers, and their Romances", Radway describes this readership as predominantly female, middle-class, married mothers (2001: 216). For these readers, the very act of claiming time to read, and by thus vicariously fulfilling their fantasies, is in some way defying the confines of their lives. The act of reading, that is, the choice of material, the right to pleasure, the apportioning of leisure time for oneself, goes a certain distance towards empowering this reader. In this context, popular romance novels may be seen as a form of women's writing, and I would suggest that the act of reading then be described as 'women's reading'. For readers whose primary role is a nurturing, domestic one, and who are to some extent confined by patriarchy, women's reading is a partial alleviation of that confinement. But Radway warns against homogenising the readership of romance novels. Her study was conducted amongst a small group of middle-class housewives in the mid-western community of Smithton in the USA. The reading of romances by other groups of readers has yet to be rigorously studied. Radway makes this useful suggestion about her sample group:

While their preferences may be representative of those held by women similar to them in demographic characteristics and daily routine, it is not fair to assume that they use romance fiction in the same way as do women of different background, education, and social circumstance.

(Radway 2001: 216)

The readers of South Asian diasporic women writers' romance novels would fit the demographic profile Radway has outlined, as the American and UK publishers of South Asian romances target just such a market. There is also the very high probability that many of these readers are themselves of South Asian descent. The South Asian diasporic women reader who fits Radway's profile would of course be

attracted to literature which addresses issues pertinent to her own life. Furthermore, the isolation of diaspora would very likely result in the seeking out of affirming and familiar images and narratives. For these readers too, a few stolen hours with a romance novel could be construed as a mild form of defiance, as women's reading.

Arguably, the writing of contemporary romance novels constitutes an even more vociferous protest than the reading of them, especially on the part of South Asian women. Writers such as Bharti Kirchner and Praba Moodley have recognised the economic viability of the genre, as well as its potential for political, especially feminist, protest. Their writing needs to be classified as women's writing, that is, writing which draws attention to women writers as agents who, in a process of self-definition, inscribe empowered female subjectivities. By using the romance genre, these writers celebrate not only the autonomy or agency of their heroines, but also their sexiness and passion. Roger Bromley argues that most diasporic literature is produced by women intent on challenging patriarchy:

That the narratives are mainly produced by women is not surprising at this juncture, as the 'worlds' they are challenging are almost exclusively male dominated and designed primarily for fulfilment in terms of the human as envisaged by men occupying positions of power; the women are doubly exiled.

(Bromley 2000: 4)]

The doubly exiled women of the South Asian diaspora inscribe a feminist aesthetic through a literary strategy of appropriation, self-representation, and articulation of new narrative forms. The popular romance genre has indeed been appropriated and extended by these writers. Some of the original generic characteristics have been tweaked and the genre's potential for feminist intervention has been tapped, but in many instances the core motifs have been retained. For example, Kirchner's heroine

Meena is intelligent, talented, and dynamic, but she still needs a man to define her and make her happy. However, the novel does not end in marriage, and the hero and heroine do not make a home in which they live happily ever after. Instead the relationship is consummated only after the hero, Antoine, undergoes a transformation of character and has proven himself, and after Meena accepts her hybrid cultural identity. The main emphasis in Kirchner's romance is the heroine's search for her cultural identity, and the fulfilment she finds in her relationship with the hero is secondary.

Kirchner's *Shiva Dancing* (1998) (henceforth *SD*) closely resembles the standard forms of the genre, which Radway sums up in the following way:

The contemporary romance's prose is dominated by cliché, simple vocabulary, standard syntax, and the most common techniques associated with the nineteenth century realist novel.

(Radway 1984: 189)

Kirchner does employ simple syntax and vocabulary, elementary realism, clichés, and authorial interpretation characteristic of romantic fiction together with a narrative structure that can be 'decoded' easily and quickly on the basis of previously mastered generic codes and conventions. Into this standard form, Kirchner has inserted 'exotic' material about Indian culture and political polemic. The cultural information which is packed into the narrative is mediated through detailed authorial interpretation or literal translation. For example, Kirchner intersperses Hindi words and phrases through her English text.

Ahmed pushed the button for the sixth floor for both of them. 'Want to watch a video with us this evening, *behenji*?' As usual, he called her "respected sister" in Hindi.

(*SD* 1998: 96)

At other times the narrator offers a detailed ethnographic description and interpretation of events. At the beginning of the narrative, the event of Meena's child marriage to Vishnu is presented with pedagogic commentary on every stage of the ceremony.

Auntie Teelu along with three other women came forth with trays heaped with pure white jasmine garlands. She draped one about the neck of each child. Meena savored the sweet scent of hers as she listened to the haunting notes of a *shahnai*, a tubular flutelike instrument favored by the gods. ...

Meena looked up to see the priest – Pundit, or wise man, he was called – make his entrance swathed in a floor-length saffron wrap of cotton. ... His head was shaven, his chest was bare except for a sacred thread looped diagonally from his neck down across his upper body to mark his status. On his forehead was a slash of white sandalwood paste that indicated his priestly calling. ... Solemnly he began the ceremony by speaking of the creation of the world. How Lord Brahma created man, then fashioned a woman ...

(SD 1998: 8-9)

The intention of this lengthy description, aimed at either the uninformed western reader or the nostalgic South Asian reader, is to create a magical, sensual, mythical setting for Meena's origins. There is something otherworldly about this marriage ceremony where the brides and grooms are seven years old, the music played is favoured by the gods, and the priest who officiates is body-painted and half-naked. Kirchner optimises the exotic appeal of this scene through sensory appeal – there are references to colours, textures, sounds, smells and flavours. But Kirchner also employs familiar stereotypes. The priest, although unfamiliar in appearance, is solemn and cuts an awe-inspiring figure. He fits the stock image of an ascetic, Hindu holy man in every detail, and at no point do idiosyncratic or ironic features disrupt this rigid portrayal. Furthermore, his recitation about the creation of world is surprisingly familiar. Although the priest is reciting from a five thousand year-old

Sanskrit text, he could very well be re-telling the Judaeo-Christian myth of Creation. Kirchner's readers are transported to a fascinating exotic setting but they are not allowed to be alienated by its strangeness.

The narrative structure of *Shiva Dancing* can be 'decoded' easily and quickly on the basis of previously mastered generic codes and conventions. Usually a romance novel sets up an initial unstable situation which raises multiple possibilities for future resolution. The reader is invited to project possible endings for the narrative. Pearce and Stacey summarise the trajectory of the classic romance narrative as follows:

Typically the story offers the potential of a heterosexual love union whose fulfilment is threatened by a series of barriers or problems. At the most general level, then, romance might be described as a quest for love; a quest for another about whom the subject has very definite fantasies, investments and beliefs.

(Pearce & Stacey 1995: 16)

In *Shiva Dancing* the reader is invited to predict the outcome of Meena's quest. Will she end up with Antoine or Vishnu; will she choose the USA or India as her home? There are also many instances of foreshadowing in the novel. For example, the Cosmo software package debacle and the climactic Moxan bombing in Calcutta both occur after tense build-ups and ominous machinations. In addition, the novel contains a mythic story in realistic form. In the romance genre the narrative structure suggests that what is being represented is another version of the mythic story, the quest for love, whose ending the reader already knows. Here the mythic story is in the guise of a modern, gritty realistic novel. Meena, who is told by her grandfather that she is a Rajput princess, descended from "warrior kings" (*SD* 1998: 14), is destined to triumph in her quest for love and self-fulfilment.

Shiva Dancing is also populated with a whole range of stock characters:

- Exotic, beautiful heroine with tragic past and secret of child marriage still haunting her [Meena]
- Fallible hero who behaves abominably then redeems himself by heroic gesture [Antoine]
- Foil hero who is brave and honourable [Vishnu]
- Rival who is deceitful and undeserving [Liv - Antoine's fiancé]
- Rival who is beautiful and good and later becomes an ally [Asha]
- Mother figures [biological mother, Bimla, adoptive mother, Auntie Teelu]
- Suitors [Carlos]
- Friends and Confidantes [Kazuko]
- Villains [Rajasthani bandits, Moxan terrorists]

These characters are easily recognised by a reader of romance fiction because they behave predictably even if they are from an unfamiliar culture. Some of the characters are thinly sketched and appear as nothing more than stereotypes. The Rajasthani bandits who kidnap Meena are cruel and enjoy gratuitous violence. They are also described as hardened criminals, filthy, prone to crude language and avarice.

The short bandit put his grimy hand over her mouth. 'Quiet, bad child, or I'll ...' He pointed to the dagger on his belt, chuckling at the terrified expression on her face. ...

The short bandit took off his vest and pulled his shirt over his head. This lifted his bangs and exposed the word 'thief' tattooed in Hindi letters on his forehead. ...

Drops of perspiration fell from his back. A smell like week-old rice floated from his body. It was obvious he had not bathed in days.

The tall bandit, whose eyes had the yellowish cast of a rotten fish, congratulated his side-kick. 'Nice piece of luggage you got there, soldier.'

(SD 1998: 14-15)

The bandits are so run-of-the mill that even their idiom (“Nice piece of luggage you got there, soldier”) is recognisable as the ‘lingo’ of lowlife. These characters are ‘baddies’ through and through in any culture and are instantly recognisable as belonging to a type, even on camel-back.

In *Shiva Dancing* Kirchner has clearly set out to explore the diasporic consciousness through her heroine Meena, and to translate her Indian culture for an American audience. For this dual task she has chosen a literary form which has a wide and established appeal, ensuring economic success. Further, she has attempted to address feminist issues and certain elements of modern Indian politics. Although she has manipulated the genre in order to realise her literary ambitions, she has also conformed to it in many respects, in the process exoticising Indian culture. The following section examines how *Shiva Dancing* employs the transnational feminist aesthetic outlined in previous chapters.

Section 2: Bharti Kirchner’s Shiva Dancing: Consolidating, Embellishing and Subverting the Romance Genre

The back cover of *Shiva Dancing* describes (and markets) the novel in the following way:

Unfolding against a vivid canvas of intersecting cultures and passions, spiced with the richness and grace of Indian tradition, this wry and romantic novel follows a woman on a journey of self-discovery as she attempts to reconnect with her far-off past.

(1998: back cover)

As this short paragraph so suggestively indicates, Kirchner's aims are to explore the cultural matrix of the South Asian diaspora in the USA, to translate Indian culture for a predominantly western readership, and to represent the subjectivity of a South Asian woman who needs to reconcile her Indian past with her transnational, cosmopolitan present. Meena Kumari is a thirty-five year old systems analyst living in San Francisco. At the age of seven she was kidnapped from her home in a remote village in the Rajasthani desert and brought to the USA by her adoptive parents, the Gossetts. Meena is haunted by her past life, especially her child marriage to Vishnu, and when her fast-track life in San Francisco hits a bump she decides to return to India to re-discover her 'roots' and possibly reunite with Vishnu. This possibility of transformation and personal fulfilment is one of the enduring and seductive elements of the romance genre. Pearce and Stacey have noted how the narratives of romance represent the quest for new subjectivities:

Such possibilities are often figured through a literal and metaphorical journey (to a new self); hence travel, relocation and movement have become central to such romantic trajectories.

(Pearce & Stacey 1995: 18)

In *Shiva Dancing*, Meena Kumari, a new transnational romantic heroine, travels to India to confront her past, there she resolves the tensions of her present, and she ends up choosing to continue on her travels and exploration of possibilities in the future. For diasporic readers of this novel, the vicarious 'journeying' towards integration of selves and personal fulfilment must surely ameliorate their condition of diasporic dislocation.

Bengali-born Kirchner has herself worked in the computer industry in the USA and has family in India. She worked as a software systems engineer at the Bank

of America in San Francisco and now lives in Seattle. She emigrated to the USA in the 1960s in order to further her education, but she denies that this first novel is autobiographical.^{vi} However the similarities between Kirchner's own life and that of her heroine, Meena's, are too glaring to be overlooked. When the author/narrator's 'intimacy' with both Meena's dilemma and the cultural information which is presented, is considered, it becomes impossible to deny the autobiographical elements of the text. Fuller argues that the

deliberate slippage between author biography and fictional protagonist here also speaks to the persistent desire within contemporary popular culture to establish a parasocial relationship of intimacy between producer, text, and reader.

(Fuller 2006: forthcoming).

This intimacy or 'personal touch' arguably imbues the text with an authenticity which adds to its market value. This is no ordinary romance novel. Kirchner, the author, is thus posited as an authority or expert on her subject, having lived through many of the experiences of her heroine, bringing to the genre a new notion of authenticity and genuine cultural information. Add to this also the tone of nostalgia which permeates the novel, and we find that *Shiva Dancing* adheres to the first aesthetic element in the overarching pattern, the autobiographical or memoir style of writing.

Kirchner's heroine is deeply involved in her past. The adult Meena is haunted by memories of her childhood in Rajasthan which becomes romanticised and mythologised. All the ugliness and harshness of poverty and rural life are glossed over as Meena recalls her beautiful and devoted mother, her story-telling grandfather and the simple rituals of communal life. But the past represents a burden to Meena. She is still troubled by the trauma of being violently removed from her home and family at an early age.^{vii} She is also plagued by unanswered questions about the fate

of her family, and by the marriage vows made to Vishnu. Moreover, she is confused about her cultural identity and the duality she has had to live with:

But she had long ago learned to split herself in two. A school essay she started began with the sentence 'In my house, there are two homes.'

History, Meena concluded years later, was a problem subject because she didn't like switching back in time. The past was painful.

(SD 1998: 62)

Meena describes the Gossett household as divided into two cultural camps. Meena's adoptive parents are middle-class whites but they hire an Indian nanny, Auntie Bimla, to care for their foreign child. Auntie Bimla becomes the umbilical cord connecting Meena to India and to her past, and through her Meena's 'Indian' self is nurtured.

Bimla spoke to Meena in Hindi, sang devotional *bhajans* to her, recited Hindu parables, taught her the *Vedas*, the Hindu mythical stories of the *Ramayana*, and introduced her to the translated works of Kalidasa. The Gossetts saw to Meena's assimilation into 'American' culture and like "many parents, they tried to make her a replica of themselves: reserved, cerebral, cultured" (SD 1998: 64). To reconcile this duality, Meena has to return to the small village of Karamgar and confront her past.

When Meena returns to Karamgar twenty-eight years after being snatched away, she finds that a lot has changed: she is devastated to find that her memory and reality do

not correlate. Auntie Teelu, the only older-generation relative still alive, comforts

her: "All gone, my child. Time has taken everything. We cannot fight time. We can only remember" (SD 1998: 258). Meena is taught to accept change whilst cherishing

memories of the past. She also realises that her idealised image of Vishnu and their relationship is not real. She sheds her hypostatic, essentialised views of the past. This

return visit teaches her that the "'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living" (Bhabha 1994: 7). Meena, the romantic heroine on her quest

towards self-fulfilment, is no longer haunted by the past, but strengthened and enlightened by it.

Kirchner has crammed her novel with sensuous imagery. In particular, Meena and various aspects of Indian culture are infused with the characteristics of sensuousness and sensuality. Meena, as romantic heroine, is idealised and exoticised:

She pondered what to wear and found herself drawn to a sari. The flowing apparel had always felt kind to her skin. In Western clothes she acted assertive, just right for the daytime. A sensuous sari was meant for the night.

Tonight's selection of a luminous yellow silk complemented her dark complexion and instilled in her an attitude of expectation. She wrapped the six yards of fabric around her waist, leaving just enough to drape over one shoulder. Standing in front of the full-length mirror, she struck various poses. What had happened to manager Meena? The same dark eyes, the same burnished skin, the same dimpled cheeks, yet she had become subtly different. She was a woman, an Indian woman to whom much could happen.

(*SD* 1998: 99)

The details of this descriptive passage reveal an emphasis on Meena's desirability as 'other': the sensuousness of the soft fabric (silk being associated with the 'East'; the vivid colour of the sari; the graceful drapery of the sari, itself a traditional garment and symbol of Indian femininity; Meena's dark complexion and attractive physical attributes. Kirchner suggests that by donning a sensual Indian garment, Meena taps into her femininity and her Indian identity. She is transformed from a hardened, American corporate manager into a frivolous, exotic and sexy woman, a plausible heroine for a romance novel. As mentioned earlier, in the evolving romance genre heroines are now often self-made, independent career women, but the genre still demands that the heroine be unusually sexy and desirable, thereby setting up the erotic dynamic between hero and heroine which is at the heart of the romance

narrative. In this portrait we see how the narrative of “romance provides a reminder of the connection between the *exotic* and the *erotic*” (Huggan 2001: 275).

Further, the cultural stereotype of the elegant, sensual, dusky, sari-clad beauty is an example of what Huggan describes as “the commodification of cultural difference” (2001: 12). One does wonder whether wearing a sari in the daytime would preclude Meena’s occupation as a systems analyst, considering that millions of women in India, from peasants to prime minister, wear a sari every day. As argued before, to exoticise South Asian culture would be a perpetuation of older forms of imperialist representations of South Asia. Meena, and by extension India, as object of fascination and desire in a neo-colonialist discourse, functions as the dangerous and sensual, heathen ‘other’ to the cold restraint of western, Christian culture. Fortunately, Kirchner instills in her heroine an uneasiness with this stereotypical role. Meena is after all a diasporic subject, neither essentially Indian nor completely American. Ultimately she discards the exotic persona in favour of the ubiquitous t-shirt and jeans.

Kirchner, being originally a writer of cookbooks, makes constant references to food throughout the novel. The detailed explanations and translations of Indian dishes seem to be an attempt to make Indian culture palatable to a western readership. Intriguingly, this commodification of cultural difference is aimed at the literary and literal consumption of South Asian!^{viii} The juicy, tantalising food references enhance reading pleasure, and promote South Asian cuisine. But could the prevalence of food in this literature have a more sinister than sensory appeal? If Kirchner’s aim is to entice readers with her tidbits of cultural information, she is not altogether successful,

as the narrative flow is constantly interrupted by her clumsy descriptions and her characters are rendered into ethnographic mouthpieces:

After they had been served, she decided to show off a bit herself. 'You can always judge a cook by his samosas.' She cut into the triangular pastry. It split open, revealing a stuffing of peas, potatoes, and whole cumin seeds and exuding a spicy aroma. She spread a little mint chutney of bright green color on it, took a small bite then resumed talking. ...

A hint of cardamom scent rose from her cup and summoned a feeling of animation.

(SD 1998: 108)

Meena's knowledge of *samosas* is a marker of her cultural identity. It is significant that she responds so passionately to the food, to the point of being animated by the aroma of her *chai* (tea), as a sign of her authentic appreciation. Kirchner's description of the actual dish is didactic. One often gets the impression that Kirchner would like to offer the recipe for the dish mentioned. If Kirchner's aim to promote an appreciation of Indian cuisine overrides her desire to produce a gripping romance novel, then she may well have succeeded, as *Shiva Dancing* leaves one more gastronomically hungry than libidinally satiated (part of the appeal of the romance genre is the vicarious sexual pleasure readers derive from the passionate encounters of its heroines).

In other examples of literature by South Asian women, I have shown how the richness of home living and the domestic spaces of women are evoked. In these spaces women are shown to have knowledge, expertise, traditional skills, and here they are free from oppression albeit temporarily. These spaces are offered in contrast to male-dominated, often public spheres where women are either silenced and abused, or complicit in the structures which oppress their gender. When Meena, the western

career woman, visits Karamgar as an adult woman she is initiated into a female domestic fold from which she has been excluded as the result of her migration.

Meena and Janu beamed at each other and clasped hands. Janu proudly introduced her two teenage daughters. One of them brought a basin of water, washed Meena's palms, and for the next half hour painted intricate designs on them with brownish green henna paste.

Next, the teenager varnished Meena's toenails a red ochre with a natural dye. Just what Mataji did for her on her wedding day. ... The other daughter squeezed Meena's hands and slid a cluster of beaded bracelets past them onto her wrists. Neighbours came and went. The room swirled with sari colours so bright as to chase away any trace of gloom from the corners.

(SD 1998: 260)

Meena, as a long-lost relative, is feted and cosseted in the bosom of this female coterie. But the women of Karamgar are traditional in that they are responsible for the household and domestic chores whilst the men of the village go out to work. This element of the aesthetic is a contentious one as it also indicates that women are relegated to the domestic sphere, and to celebrate this confinement is to perpetuate the subjugation of women. But in this literature 'traditional' women also have a role to play in the public domain. Recall Meena Alexander's philanthropic grandmother, Kunji, Nazneen and Razia establishing their own fashion design business at the end of *Brick Lane*, the middle-aged Ashima Ganguli working in a library, or Bibi Haldar, against all odds, starting her own little trading store. Of course, in *Shiva Dancing*, Meena is a high-flying computer analyst who comes to appreciate the camaraderie and nurturing power of women in the domestic sphere when she visits Karamgar. Meena, the independent woman with power in the public domain learns the value of female companionship and the reciprocity of female domestic rituals. What this literature represents, then, is that women can triumph in both realms, and even if confined to the domestic one, they establish their own far-reaching power and

influence from that domain, often transcending it if they choose to. This sentiment would provide a strong validation for the typical reader of romance fiction who, according to Radway's profile (2001: 216), is often confined to the domestic sphere.

Meena has four mother figures in her life: her biological mother, Mataji; Bimla her nanny; Mrs Gossett her adoptive mother; and Auntie Teelu. Mataji is cast in the role of the revered older female figure who comes to be mythologised. She is a simple peasant woman, traditionally submissive but strong and devoted to her daughter:

Mataji who had persevered in the face of so much adversity only to be hit by the bandits – Meena's eyes would burn with rage and grief as she recalled the scene. Mataji, poor and not schooled but happy and loving, her lean silhouette outlined in a long flowing skirt, a play of colours, and a veil coming down to her nose. She would squat in their yard every afternoon to make an open cow-dung fire. ... She'd puff the breads over the fire, fetch a pot of spiced vegetables from the kitchen, and arrange the food on a reed mat. They'd have a picnic, watching the sunset and the camels passing by.

(SD 1998: 59)

This pastoral vignette masks the hardships of rural life. Mataji, perhaps lean from the privations of living as a widow in a small desert village, is presented as a romantic figure, half concealed by a colourful veil. Even the arduous task of making a cow-dung fire is rendered elegant and noble. For the displaced Meena, this idyllic memory of her mother and of their trouble-free relationship is sustaining. The myth of a strong, loving woman who endured all manner of hardships helped her endure her own trials. Mataji is a superlative female role model.

When Meena is relocated to the USA, Bimla comes to play the role of surrogate mother to the disoriented, dislocated child. Bimla is given the important role of being the purveyor of Indian culture for Meena. As mentioned before she is a talented storyteller and acquaints Meena with Indian mythology, literature and music. She is also an emotional nurturer, notwithstanding her own tragic past, which casts her as a heroine in her own right. In her role as Meena's "sari-clad guru" (SD 1998: 65), she becomes another idealised female figure in Meena's life. Later when Meena returns to Karamgar she is reunited with Auntie Teelu, who plays the role of matriarch and repository of local history. She welcomes Meena back to her homeland and helps her make peace with her past.

These three women are Meena's role models and they are unambiguously celebrated in the novel. On the other hand, Meena's white American mother, Mrs Gossett, is middle-class and austere. She is set up as a contrast to the Indian women who are warm, expansive in their gestures of affection, and empathetic to Meena. Similar to Lahiri's contrasting families in *The Namesake*,^{ix} Kirchner seems to be pointing to a cultural difference in methods of motherhood and parenting. The danger, of course, is that Kirchner sets up the 'Indian woman' as a natural nurturer, and the 'western woman' as somehow deficient in this regard. This generalising can be read as part of the larger process of stereotyping of Indian culture which underpins this novel. Nevertheless, in what is a typical feature of women's writing, Kirchner celebrates female characters with strength, wisdom, capacity for suffering and a talent for storytelling. Stereotyping aside, the foregrounding of this feature is no doubt a feminist contribution to the romance genre.

As already mentioned, Kirchner has not spared the use of mythology, ancient literature, traditional religious practices, or descriptions of ritual and ceremony in her narrative. When asked in an interview why the novel is called *Shiva Dancing*, Kirchner gave the following answer:

What I mean to say is this: at first I had in mind to use the dancing image of Nataraj only as the logo for tribal political party (the Moxans). However, as I kept writing, I found the destructive/recreation theme lay under the surface of the story. Meena's life goes in turmoil only to be transformed at the end. The same goes for Vishnu and Antoine. It's God Shiva dancing!

(Kirchner: interview)^x

Kirchner's use of the myth of Shiva to comment on the vicissitudes of life is not subtle. It is not merely implied by the title or alluded to by oblique reference. When an opportunity arises Kirchner manipulates her characters to make encyclopaedic speeches about Shiva:

'Our new party logo is Lord Shiva in his Nataraj dancing pose,' Pradip said. 'Shiva has many hands and legs, many powers. When he dances, the world moves, shakes and changes.' Vishnu pictured the pose: Shiva with four extended arms carrying weapons, his enemy under one foot, his other leg raised and crossed over, forming the circle of the universe. Shiva, who destroyed before recreating. There were many interpretations of that pose. 'We were inspired by Tagore,' Pradip said. Vishnu had read much of Tagore, the Nobel Prize-winning Bengali poet, who had died half a century ago.

(SD 1998: 53-54)

Much of the above extract reads like the fruits of a Google search – type in Shiva or Tagore and Vishnu and Pradip's words might very well appear on the screen. This gauche attempt at cultural translation does, however, serve a purpose. While on the one hand it interrupts the narrative flow, on the other hand it eliminates the need to consult an encyclopaedia or reference book. The western reader of romance fiction might find this information edifying, and readers of South Asian descent might

appreciate the familiarity of the material. But on the whole, Kirchner's overkill and the resultant stiltedness of the narrative mars the usual fast-paced, racy tempo of the romance genre.

To create a magical past for the heroine, Kirchner refers to the myth of the Rajputs, descendants of warrior kings, and of course, there are countless references to rituals, both religious and social. As other South Asian women writers have done before, Kirchner also invokes the myth of Sita from the *Ramayana* to further a feminist theme. In the myth, the beautiful Sita was abducted by the evil Ravana. Sita's husband, Rama, rescues Sita but is wracked by doubt about his wife's fidelity. He subjects her to a purity test by fire. But Sita, a prototype feminist, is defiant. She appeals to another authority: "If in truth unto my husband I have proved a faithful wife,/Mother Earth! Relieve thy Sita from the burden of this life!" (Dutt 1955: 152).

Meena identifies with Sita who was swallowed by the earth (Mother Earth) and never seen again, having suffered the humiliation of being suspected of adultery when she was in fact the victim of a violation. This story finds many modern-day parallels in a society which condemns women for crimes committed against them. After Meena is deceived by Antoine she explains her pain to her friend, Carlos, using the myth of Sita as illustration (*SD* 1998: 170). Further allusion to the mythical Sita is the incident of Meena's condemnation for 'abandoning' her child-husband, Vishnu, when she was in fact kidnapped by bandits (*SD* 1998: 262). Here Kirchner's use of an ancient but popular myth has a clear feminist objective^{xi} – highlighting the injustices meted out to Indian women unfortunate enough to be the victims of sexual crimes. The romance genre is evolving to incorporate feminist themes. Kirchner's

blending of contemporary social concerns with ancient myth extends the genre in this direction, indicating that the romance novel need no longer be simply a form of escapism.

In romance fiction in general and in literature by women of the South Asian diaspora in particular, the theme of marriage, the woman's body and female sexuality, is highly prominent. There are countless narratives of varying lengths and merits which detail the hardship, and often the horrors, of arranged marriages. In these narratives, the woman's body as a site of patriarchal control and violence is vividly and emotively portrayed. Typical romance fiction, on the other hand, is characterised by a formula which upholds some of the main tenets of patriarchy: heterosexual courtship culminating in marriage between the hero and heroine, with clearly designated gender roles for each. That is not to say that some romance novels do not question the institution of marriage or the position of women within a patriarchal society. But, if Radway's argument about the "compensatory" (1984: 211) value of romance fiction is to be accepted, then what we find ultimately in classic romance novels is an idealised, perfect union within a patriarchal system which serves as a fantasy fulfilment for readers who are dissatisfied or disempowered by that very system. Kirchner has created in *Shiva Dancing* narrative strands which deal with this theme from quite different angles. The primary narrative strand is about Meena's search for identity and love which she finds with the hero, Antoine. Here the central motif of the typical romance novel is upheld but modified. A second strand is the story of Vishnu and Asha's romance in a traditional, Indian context. Here the central motif of the ideal couple is presented in an exotic cultural context. Finally, in a tangential strand, Kirchner recounts the tragic story of Auntie Bimla's abuse at the

hands of her family and husband. This strand constitutes an overtly feminist perspective. By manipulating the genre in this way, that is, by offering three perspectives on marriage, Kirchner, consolidates, embellishes and subverts the genre.

In the primary narrative strand Meena is an independent, headstrong woman who exercises her will and satisfies her desires. But her diasporic dislocation results in a nostalgic longing for 'home' and the 'husband' she left behind in India. She also naïvely believes that she can slot into the role of traditional Indian wife. On meeting Vishnu again, Meena realises the cultural rift which exists between her and Vishnu:

Vishnu was a man of great quality and appeal. But living in India had molded him, and it would shape her too. He'd expect her to take on the role of an Indian wife: preparing the meals, cleaning the floors, hanging up the wash, visiting relatives. She'd think of herself only secondarily. After all those years in the U.S. she needed more from life.

(SD 1998: 291-292)

A traditional Indian marriage, sketched here as life-long drudgery for the wife, is not for Meena. Meena's return to India is an eye-opener for her. She had not considered the social position of women in India or the cultural framework which designated them secondary citizens. On arrival in India she complied with the social mores, even concealing her face with a veil to ward off unwanted male attention. However, when Meena returned to Karamgar she was, to her surprise, denounced by one of the villagers for 'abandoning' her husband. In this cultural context, Meena's abduction resulted in *her* shame and the dishonour of her husband's family. Meena's retaliation to this diatribe reveals her alienation from a culture which she had grown to idealise:

Meena could see that the village had progressed much, but old attitudes, meaningless traditions still gripped its residents. Now furious, she stood up. 'Be quiet, you spiteful old crone,' she said to the brown sari. 'What do you know? Was

it you who was kidnapped, you whose wedding day became a nightmare, you who were alone in a vast city with no chance of finding your way home? I did nothing shameful. You're the one with nerve.'

(*SD* 1998: 263)

This defiant response to an elder and to "old attitudes" is a sign of Meena's cultural ambivalence. Whilst in San Francisco, Meena lived with painful knowledge that she was not entirely American and she felt unfulfilled as a woman. Now in India she has to accept that she is not wholly Indian and that the role of Indian wife will not fulfil her. Nothing awakens her to the reality of India more than the subjugation of women which she witnesses there. For a woman used to expressing her views, and exercising her will, or exploring her sexuality and feeling autonomous in her body (represented by her success as a marathon runner), the role of traditional Indian wife would be anathema. In the latter part of the novel, Kirchner chooses to emphasise Meena's subjectivity as a diasporic South Asian woman, that is a woman with the best of both worlds at her disposal. However, the imperatives of a popular genre call for a happy and passionate union between the hero and heroine. Meena and Antoine consummate their relationship (outside of wedlock) after Antoine has proven his devotion to Meena and Meena has come to terms with her cultural hybridity. The formulaic elements of a resolution, a separation and reunion and requited desire are employed for the conclusion of the novel, but it is also modified by the lack of the 'happily-ever-after' ingredients of a marriage and a home. The two lovers are happy to be transnational travelers together. Pearce and Stacey remind us that in the evolving romance genre

[T]hings do not necessarily happen in the expected order any more, and the roles/actions of the protagonists are being challenged by specifications of gender, class, race, and sexuality.

(Pearce & Stacey 1995: 37)

Kirchner contributes to this transgressive subversion of the genre through a visible reworking of the classic romance, even as the typical trajectory is maintained.

In the second narrative strand which deals with marriage, a contrast is set up between Meena, and Asha, the serene, elegant, dutiful Indian woman who Vishnu has fallen in love with. Kirchner is at pains to highlight the differences between the Indian woman and the diasporic Indian woman:

She [Asha] was polished in a pure, unspoiled way. In her minimalist jeans and tee shirt outfit Meena felt vulgar and slovenly by comparison. Her hat and sunglasses that sat on the coffee table seemed like garish trappings ...

Asha was tranquil, Meena noticed. No doubt she had been raised to accept people and situations, even a rival, with equanimity.

(SD 1998: 310-311)

Kirchner's representation of Asha is stereotypical. She is the exotic woman in the sari and a long braid of jet-black hair, a sort of latter day version of the 'inscrutable Indian', possessing rare qualities of purity and poise. She is well-schooled in the lessons of *dharma*^{xii} as shown in her attitude to her parents and Vishnu, but she is spirited and determined to have a tertiary education. Further, Asha is the idealised Indian woman Meena thought she would be if she reconnected with India and Vishnu.

It is also the persona she assumes momentarily when she dons a sari and is transformed into "an Indian woman to whom much could happen" (SD 1998: 99).

Although Meena does reject the role which Asha embraces, she is still in awe of her, even envious:

Asha arranged lemonade and a plate of *laddoos* on the coffee table. Taking care of guests seemed to come easily to her. She was what Meena would have been if that long-ago kidnapping hadn't taken place. The side of Meena that had always remained Indian appreciated Asha for the woman she was.

(SD 1998: 314)

The 'Indian' Meena appreciates Asha, but what about the 'American' Meena and the readers of *Shiva Dancing*? What will they make of this image of womanhood?

Kirchner's exoticised package glosses over the realities of a life of subservience which awaits Asha. Instead we are presented with the construction of a composed and competent woman, both intelligent and beautiful, and content with her position in society. She also 'gets her man' in the end. The 'American' and enlightened Meena is critical of this image, but there is strong ambivalence at the heart of her (and Kirchner's) response. The novel shows that in some ways Indian women are superior to western women (more enduring of hardship, more nurturing as seen in the three mother-figures in Meena's life), but in other ways American women are more fortunate (freedom, mobility, opportunities to break out of prescribed roles). Meena, as a diasporic Indo-American, Kirchner suggests, can negotiate a subjectivity which encompasses both configurations of womanhood. Asha's patience and dignity are rewarded with marriage to her sweetheart. Asha and Vishnu's cross-class and cross-ethnic relationship has a happy and predictable culmination in marriage. Although in its context their marriage is not a completely conventional one, it upholds the patriarchal framework on which the typical romance novel is built. The reader who is accustomed to neat resolutions and typical conclusions will be satisfied with this narrative strand.

In telling Bimla's story, Kirchner addresses the plight of thousands of women in India. Forced into an arranged marriage to a much older man as a teenager, Bimla is beaten and mistreated by her drunken husband. Eventually, her dowry is stolen and she is cast out of her home. This abuse is seen as Bimla's fault and the shame and dishonour fall on her and her family. As a result of this further injustice Bimla

becomes an outcast. Yet, in keeping with the romance genre's avoidance of distressing, actual social ills, Kirchner shies away from the more pernicious details of sexual discrimination in India, and instead she focuses on Bimla's 'escape' to the USA:

... she migrated to New Delhi and joined the Women's Auxiliary, a support organization that took in displaced women and gave them vocational training. Fluent in Hindi and several other Indian languages, Bimla soon acquired a working knowledge of English as well and, in her spare time, functioned as an interpreter for an American family.

(SD 1998: 59)

In the USA, as Meena's nanny, Bimla lives a chaste, ascetic, selfless life. She totally immerses herself in her role of surrogate mother to Meena. She dies having attained Meena's love and respect. Kirchner is perhaps a little too glibly celebratory of Bimla's escape, endurance and adaptability. She is a two-dimensional character and we are not given any indication of the depths of her suffering. Like so many of the feminist issues raised in the novel, Kirchner puts a gloss on this story of the abused teenage wife who became a pariah, then a nanny in a foreign country, and finally, a guru. Although not brilliantly executed, the inclusion of this narrative strand in the novel is plucky and its intention is resolutely feminist.

What makes *Shiva Dancing* even more of an 'innovation' in romance publishing is its focus on cultural dislocation, which is given just as much weight in the narrative as the romantic theme. The paradox of cultural continuity and change in a diasporic community is explored not only through the character of Meena, but also through minor characters such as the Rasuls. Kirchner, relishing her role of cultural translator, produces a portrait of a South Asian immigrant family, the Rasuls. This portrait is comprised of stereotypes, exoticisation, and intrusive interjections of

cultural translation on the part of the narrator. Moreover, the Rasuls seem to be suffering from “Going Home Syndrome”, Chanu’s affliction in *Brick Lane* (2003).

Over the past two years, she had become a friend of the Muslim immigrant from India and his family. They were her only contact with the local Indian community. Like most expatriates, they retained their traditions in food and manners and the way they approached life, and that was fascinating to Meena. ...

Ahmed pushed the button for the sixth floor for both of them. “Want to watch a video with us this evening, *behenji*?” As usual, he called her “respected sister” in Hindi. ... The Rasul family watched Indian videos as part of their attempt to stay in touch with the culture they had left behind, to feel as though they were in India if only for a few hours.

(SD 1998: 96-97)

This portrait of “expatriates” is more a caricature than a realistic portrait, depicting the stereotypical members of an immigrant family: the hardworking man who dreams of India, the dutiful domestic wife, the match-making white-haired grandmother, the energetic but respectful child. This is the caricature which forms the basis of popular BBC television series ‘Goodness Gracious Me’ and ‘The Kumars at No. 42’. In these series, the ‘otherness’ of the immigrant families is a source of humour. The reluctance of the older generations to adapt and change, their clashes with the younger generations, and their views on the strangeness of ‘traditional’ British culture, combine to form a complex socio-political platform for the comedy series. Kirchner, however, does not attain such complexity; neither is her portrait funny. Instead we have the Rasuls painted as an insular family, unwilling to be assimilated into multicultural America and weighted down by nostalgic longing:

To them India was the mother with an enormous hold on them. They were connected to her by a bond stronger than anything she had ever known. To them life in the U.S. was pleasant, yet their homeland was something greater and more magical.

(SD 1998: 102)

In this quite lengthy portrayal, Kirchner does not meaningfully interrogate the dual or paradoxical nature of the diaspora consciousness. The liminal positioning of the Rasuls between home and homeland is unproblematically presented as loyalty to India, a loyalty which Meena envies. In short, the Rasuls are simplified and flattened into a *dalmut*-eating, curry-munching, Bollywood movie-watching expatriate family who will always be expatriates.

Contrary to the Rasul portrait is the exploration of diaspora consciousness to be found in the character of the heroine, Meena, who is caught in the duality or paradox of multiple histories, cultures and selves. Meena is American but wishes to preserve her Indian heritage, even if it means repudiating her American identity for an Indian one. She thus embarks on a romantic quest. Due to her early uprooting and traumatic separation from her homeland, she clings to a romanticised notion of her Indian past, only to discover as an adult that it is a fantasy. But this realisation is not crippling. Vertovec's description of the duality and paradox of a diasporic consciousness "as a source of adaptive strength" (2001: xviii) is evidenced at the end of the novel when Meena integrates her American and Indian selves by taking "the good from many cultures" (*SD* 1998: 322). She decides against an absolute affiliation to one home or location, and, with her lover Antoine, she has for the moment chosen an unconventional life-style:

'You think you might go back to the Bay Area?'

'Eventually. I'm not ready to make a choice between East and West. I'd rather take the good from many cultures. It's like I feel I don't belong anywhere. If I went back to San Francisco, I'd just fall right back into the same fast-track lifestyle and always feel a little dissatisfied. I feel like a stranger any place I stay.'

(*SD* 1998: 322-3)

Antoine, to whom these words are spoken, echoes her sentiments: “We’re both wandering in search of a home, or maybe ourselves” (*SD* 1998: 323). But Meena’s feeling of rootlessness is still a worrying point. Is she doomed to a life of estrangement from the notion of home because of her diasporic consciousness? Kirchner resolves the paradox of diasporic multiplicity by asserting the rubric of the romance genre: a happy ending in which the hero and heroine resolve their joint and respective problems through their shared love. For Meena, happiness and fulfilment are not to be found in a home but in accepting her heterogeneity and embracing a nomadic life-style with a hunky lover:

All that I’ve struggled to be – a Rajput warrior, a software techie, a runner – are just parts of me and I won’t ignore them. They helped make me what I am. But now I know my happiness and fulfilment come from being a whole person, a woman, with no baggage from the past, nothing to prove. And from being with you.

(*SD* 1998: 327)

Kirchner’s achievement in the novel is double-edged. On the one hand Kirchner has extended the scope of the genre to include a consideration of diasporic dislocation, and on the other hand she has reinforced the genre’s central motif with this resolution. But ultimately, Meena is an empowered female subjectivity. She integrates her multiple selves, embraces romantic love, and embarks on an unorthodox lifestyle with her lover – a worthy heroine of the romance genre, and for South Asian diasporic women’s writing. However, Kirchner’s achievement is undercut by the exoticisation of South Asian culture which pervades the novel. In the process of marrying the romance genre with politically motivated textual strategies, Kirchner has exoticised South Asian culture. Whether her incentive for this brokering of cultural difference was economic or ethnographic, the retailing of exotic myths and

stereotypes about her culture, constitutes a certain complicity with imperialist cultural forces.

Section 3: An Exotic Affair: feminist aesthetics and the romance genre

There are a number of other texts by South Asian women writers that adopt the romance genre whilst re-casting and transforming it. The reason for the engagement with the romance genre, I argue, is the desire to ensure that their texts will travel and sell globally. Their texts are written, designed and packaged to: reach the widest possible audience; to make 'foreign' or 'exotic' content more accessible to an existing readership; and to 'translate' a minority culture to a mainstream audience. Aside from economic incentives, these writers are also driven by cultural or political agendas which thus find expression in re-scripted romance novels. Many of the novels deal with the theme of diaspora and display a desire to resolve the tensions of diasporic dislocation. In this way the novels also appeal to South Asian diasporic readers. In the case of historical romance, the writers record the otherwise suppressed history of a marginalised social group, as we see in Praba Moodley's *The Heart Knows No Colour* (2003), Rani Manicka's *The Rice Mother* (2002) and Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999). Most conspicuously, the writers adopt a feminist stance which is articulated through one or more of the elements of the overarching aesthetic pattern.

Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999) (henceforth *WBR*) is a family epic set in Punjab during the Partition era. Baldwin was born in Canada, raised in India and now lives in Milwaukee. Her novel is set in a farming district in

the Punjab, near the city of Rawalpindi, and it spans the decade from 1937 to 1947.

The novel is described on the dust jacket as

[D]eeply imbued with the languages, customs and layered history of colonial India, ... Never before has a novel of the Partition of India been told from the point of view of the Sikh community, never before through Sikh women's eyes.

(WBR dustjacket)

Baldwin is thus presented as a spokesperson for Sikhs, and in particular, as an authoritative voice for Sikh women. The novel, a combination of a historical saga and romance, is indeed suffused with local language, customs and history. In telling the story of sixteen-year-old Roop's arranged marriage to a Sikh landowner twenty-five years her senior, Baldwin employs a concoction of the local argot untranslated from the vernacular, and the clichéd prose of romance novels, resulting in a painful pidgin English. For example, dialogue in the novel is only partially intelligible to the reader who has no knowledge of Punjabi:

'You and Gujri keep making more parshaad for the gurdwara because you think if you make more, the granthi will leave you more. But he's much-much cleverer than you. He always puts the same size little-little bit in your hands.'

(WBR 1999: 77)

Baldwin is obviously attempting to capture the inflections of the local language, but the profusion of vernacular vocabulary and the echolalic argot have the effect of a contrived and overstated 'authenticity' which does not ring true.^{xiii}

The dilemma of capturing in English the language and customs of a South Asian community is not evident in Praba Moodley's *The Heart Knows No Colour* (2003) (henceforth *HKC*). Moodley, a descendent of Indian indentured labourers to South Africa in the nineteenth century, has opted for a starkly realist prose style with

minimal cultural translation, but her descriptions are, not devoid of cultural significance:

Chumpa had prepared traditional vegetarian dishes of beans, herbs and lentils with flat round roti, made from mielie-meal rations which Chumpa had saved.

(HKC 2003: 49)

The words “roti” (Hindi for flat, unleavened bread) and “mielie-meal” (South African term for maize meal) are not translated although they are both strong cultural and historical indicators. Rotis are usually made from wheat flour, and so in this context, rotis made from maize flour indicate a culinary adaptation in the diasporic location where indentured labourers did not have access to wheat flour but lived on meagre rations.

Where Moodley has opted for clichéd prose is in the romance elements of the novel. Central to the plot of *The Heart Knows No Colour* is the inter-racial love affair between an Indian servant girl, Sita, and a white landowner, Albert. The back cover blurb describes the novel as:

[S]umptuous, sexy, packed with period detail, *The Heart Knows No Colour* weaves a rich tapestry of love, family loyalty and betrayal, and the early struggles of the South African Indian community. Compelling and accessible, it is sure to appeal to all lovers of romantic fiction.

(HKC back cover)

This text is published and marketed as a romance novel, and more specifically as a historical romance with a particular racial and ethnic focus. In an interview with Kwela publisher, Nelleke de Jager, I learnt that Kwela does not generally publish romances, but that an exception was made for *The Heart Knows No Colour* because of its racial and ethnic focus:

The reason why we published *Praba* is because of its off-beatness in the first place. That is romance, but with a twist, as it is written by an Indian writer.

(de Jager 2006: interview)

As a result of this “twist” the novel combines the “accessible” hackneyed forms of the romance genre with cultural information about the South African Indian community:

Even with red, swollen eyes she looked so appealing. Shaking his head to keep himself focused, he heard her continue.

‘If my father discovers us like this he will surely kill me’ she explained, appealing for him to understand. ‘My older sister is married to a nice Indian boy and they are going to have a baby soon. She has made my parents ... very proud ...’

She started crying again.

‘And so you have to marry someone of their choice,’ Albert stated, his voice bitter, for he could not understand why this had to happen.

(*HKC* 2003: 39)

In what is meant to be a heartrending scene depicting the second meeting of the hero and heroine, sexual passion, the frustration and pain of imminent separation, the obstacles of a mythic love story, and stereotypical masculine and feminine roles are all conveyed through the simple vocabulary and syntax of the romance genre.

Interwoven with the romance themes are references to arranged marriages, a daughter’s duty to her parents, and cultural difference. Moodley’s language, although deceptively simple, is charged with the dynamic between the exaggeratedly masculine hero, Albert, who comes across as angry and hard (pun intended), and the exaggeratedly feminine heroine, Sita, who is soft and emotional. However, while conforming stylistically, Moodley extends the romance genre to translate specific historical and cultural information about South African Indians to her reader.

Rani Manicka, the front cover blurb claims, conjures up a “captivating, exotic world of myth and magic” in *The Rice Mother* (2002) (henceforth *RM*), a family saga, historical romance, and sustained tribute to Lakshmi, the matriarchal central character set in Malaysia. It depicts the little-known history of Ceylonese immigrants to Malaya and the invasion of Malaya by Japan in 1941. In *The Rice Mother*, Manicka takes on the daunting roles of cultural translator, historian and genealogist. But even with such noble aims she cannot avoid the corny prose of popular novels. Lakshmi, a demure, protected sixteen-year-old experiencing her first labour, describes her waters breaking with the following words: “Finally the real pains began. Water gushed out of me like cheap rice brandy in a busy brothel” (*RM* 2002: 50). Despite these lapses into incongruous and tacky similes, Manicka is experimental with the overall structure of the novel. She uses the different voices of Lakshmi, her children and her husband to effectively narrate different segments of the novel. Lakshmi’s great-granddaughter, Nisha, born in 1977 and roughly the same age as the author, is the *bricoleur* who pieces the narrative together in the present, and is no doubt an autobiographical character.

Manicka makes constant references to Hindu mythology and rituals, and also to Chinese social and cultural practices. The imagery of these references is often sensuous and the descriptions of domestic spaces are evocative and celebratory. Lakshmi is seen to triumph in this context as she struggles to hold her family together during the most horrific trials. She is described as cooking, sewing, milking cows, shopping at the market, worshipping at her make-shift Hindu altar, and tending to her children’s needs. But these descriptions are not exoticising as the emphasis is more on Lakshmi’s constant battle to provide for her family, than on the ‘otherness’ of the

cultural practices described. In addition, the description of Lakshmi's statue of Kuan Yin, the Chinese Goddess of Mercy, the family's enjoyment of *satay* dishes, Lakshmi's use of *Tiger Balm*, or her son's addiction to *mah-jong*, are examples of how the Ceylonese or Indian immigrants integrated Chinese culture into their new lives in Malaya. This is a romance novel aimed at rich cultural translation and historical detail.

Less subtly, local customs pervade every narrative strand of *What the Body Remembers*. From rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, superstitions, religious doctrine, social practices, descriptions of food and clothes, the novel is crammed with ethnographic information that bombards the reader with its overwhelming detail. For example, below is an account of one of Satya's outfits:

The lehnga's voluminous crimson skirt is topped with a formfitting silk choli that leaves Satya's midriff bare. Covering her choli completely, a crimson brocade kameez falls to her wrists and below her knees, restraining her lehnga's gathered fullness. A gold pin fastens a chunni of crimson georgette at the centre parting of her henna-dark hair.

(WBR 1999: 159)

This sort of meticulous recounting of cultural detail transforms Baldwin's novel into a museum display with Sikh culture as the main exhibit. The caste system, the differences between Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam, the designated roles of men and women, funeral rites, and many other cultural features, are 'packaged' within this narrative of love, jealousy and war. The resulting literary commodity has the twin attractions for the romance reader, being both highly satisfying because it conforms to the basic tenets of the romance genre, and culturally edifying. However, for the literary scholar, this exoticisation is distracting and faintly embarrassing. Baldwin comes across as an over-zealous saleswoman flogging her goods at a literary bazaar.

For the history lesson embedded in her narrative, Baldwin employs Hindu mythology. A potted history of India is told through the trope of “the wind-god, Vayu, bearer of perfume, god of all the Northwest of India”(WBR 1999: 29):

In the ages since he first inhaled, before India was ever called India, Vayu has guided army after army through the mountain passes to Punjab. The English circulate a story that a race of tall, blond, blue-eyed Aryans invaded first, from the Caucasus, Vayu ushering them forward, to lord it over darker people, drive them south, but Vayu, oblivious to bloodline, remembers only that he caught music from migrants over the passes, melded it into language. Then Vayu guided invaders whose traces still remain – Persians; Alexander the Great astride his Bucephalus; Hun raiders and traders from Afghanistan, Mahmud of Ghazni; the idol-breaking raiders from Turkestan; fugitives and refugees from the Mongols.

(WBR 1999: 29-30)

Baldwin kills two birds with one stone here. She manages to incorporate local mythology and history into one *tour de force* of a lesson. The reluctant learner will certainly be seduced by the lyricism of Baldwin’s prose, and perhaps even be lulled into ignoring that fact that Vayu, more like a tornado than a perfumed breeze, blasted terrible violence and destruction into the Punjab. However, Baldwin is less gentle on the reader later in the novel when she recounts the horrors of Partition.^{xiv} Her description of the scenes of gore and depravity on the trains bringing Hindus and Sikhs across the brand-new border to Delhi, and taking Muslims in the other direction to Lahore, is unflinching. Furthermore, her perspective is honed to address a feminist theme. She highlights the brutality against women which characterised this period in history:

The tales fly – naked Sikh women were forced by Muslims to dance before mosques. Naked Muslim women were forced by Sikhs to dance in the compound of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. Perhaps Huma was among them, who knows? Everywhere on this platform, women pull the remnants of rags about their breasts –

Satya would say they have learned shame, shame of their own bodies, from men of all faiths who cannot trust each other.

(WBR 1999: 438)

Baldwin does indeed fulfil her role as spokesperson for not just Sikh women, but all the women victims of the Partition era, by drawing attention to how the shaming of women through the defilement of their bodies was a potent male weapon wielded by men otherwise rendered impotent by the colonial forces that carved up their homeland. In this way, her utilisation of the romance genre is unconventional and subversive. These overt representations of ethnic violence and violations against women are unusual in a typical romance novel. Baldwin thus manages to imbue her romance with a degree of political and social weight.

Manicka's historical focus in *The Rice Mother* is the Japanese occupation of Malaya. Manicka also adopts a feminist stance in her historical narrative by relating the tragic story of Mohini, Lakshmi's beautiful teenage daughter, who is raped, tortured and murdered by Japanese soldiers. Again and again, the Japanese invaders are described as barbarians from whom all females, adult and child, have to be protected. Both Baldwin and Manicka interrogate the use of rape as a method of systematic violence against women and as a war crime.^{xv} Moodley, too, represents an act of sexual violence in *The Heart Knows No Colour*. Radway has examined the function of rape and physical violence in the romance genre and she concludes that although distasteful

the romance, which is never simply a love story, is also an exploration of the meaning of patriarchy for women. As a result, it is concerned with the fact that men possess and regularly exercise power over them in all sorts of circumstances.

(Radway 1984: 75)

In the romances by South Asian diasporic women writers, this “exploration of the meaning of patriarchy for women” is not subtle or secondary to the romance plot. Often these concerns form the primary focus and the structures and stylistics of romance form the supplementary narrative strands of the novel.

In *The Heart Knows No Colour* the incident of rape has a dual function in the narrative. Joseph Sheldon, son of the hero, Albert, is an arrogant, white, racist sugar-cane farmer. In a parody of his father’s love for Sita, he rapes Rani, Sita’s daughter. Joseph Sheldon is a study in male brutality and the abuse of power. In addition, in this context, Moodley’s account of rape is a metonymical depiction of the exploitative relationship between the white colonialists and the indentured labourers of Natal’s sugar-cane plantations. Jarring as it is, this ugly incident is acceptable in the romance format because there is a happy ending for the victim: Rani’s sweetheart comforts her after the rape and eventually they marry. Extrapolating on the theme of abuse, Moodley is at pains to convey the conditions of the Indian indentured labourers and their monumental struggle to better their lot in life:

To many, it mattered not whether they worked for themselves or for the white man, as long as they were not treated like animals, living on rations and in fear of their sirdar’s whip.

(HKC 2003: 72)

Whether it is a serious feminist commitment about the violation of women or a concern about the abject conditions of immigrants’ lives, these writers optimise the romance genre by addressing the objectionable historical realities of colonialism and war. As Pearce and Stacey are at pains to point out, in “different texts/contexts, the structural properties of classic romance – action, sequence, contexts, closures – have

become radically dislocated” (Pearce and Stacey 1995: 37). The women writers of the South Asian diaspora have contributed to the radical dislocation of the structural elements of the typical romance. For them, the contexts of colonialism, war and diaspora confer on romance novels a radicalised historical and feminist dimension.

To return to the aesthetic pattern, Baldwin employs one of the main elements of the overarching transnational feminist aesthetic, the relationship between women. However, it is also in this aspect of the narrative that one of the key elements of the romance genre manifests. The enmity between Satya and Roop, senior and junior wives, respectively, of Sardar, a wealthy, influential and noble landowner, is pivotal to the romance plot of the novel. It initially casts Roop in the role of virtuous heroine and Satya in the role of evil and dangerous rival. This rivalry provides much of the intrigue, suspense and melodrama of the novel. However, the narrator is not unsympathetic to Satya, who is shown to be a victim of patriarchal oppression. Satya is barren and she seeks the advice and help of holy men when she discovers that her husband is to take another wife.

They told her they were men devoted to God and that she must be self-effacing, humble, grateful for her undiminished status, the magnanimity of her husband, her continued unharmed existence.

(WBR 1999: 19)

But Satya, a willful and strong woman, will not be cowed by the advice of the holy men. Therefore, when Sardar marries Roop, she plots and schemes to exact her revenge. Her anger and her humiliation endure until the moment of her death. Her dying words are to Roop: “Forgive me, Roop, I wish you had come to our house as my daughter instead of as my sister” (WBR 1999: 330). It is at this moment that Roop fully understands what a source of torment she has been for the ageing, barren ‘First

Wife'. She realises how the same patriarchal, hierarchical system which allowed Satya's denigration also gave Satya, as senior wife, the power to revile Roop. This moment of empathy between the two women is transformative, and henceforth "Satya's desires flame within Roop, ... Roop will be Satya's vessel, bearing Satya's anger, pride and ambition forward" (*WBR* 1999: 331). Baldwin's feminist message here is conveyed in a somewhat whimsical fashion: after the death of Satya, the spirits of the two women are united against the common enemy, the system that would subjugate them and drive a wedge between them.

Chita Banerjee Divakaruni's twin novels *Sister of My Heart* (1999) and *The Vine of Desire* (2002) are also about an indestructible female bond which is put to the ultimate test of betrayal. Anju and Sudha are cousins who grow up in Calcutta. In the sequel, *The Vine of Desire*, which is set in San Francisco, their close relationship is strained to the limit when Anju's husband acts on his secret passion for Sudha. Although the novel also deals with the theme of diaspora, the romance element is strong. The forbidden desire between Sudha and Anju's husband, the betrayal, the corny depiction of illicit love-making, these are all in the novel. But the most 'romantic' moment in the novel occurs when the cousins are reconciled:

The hang glider bumps down on the landing strip, comes to a skittery, triumphant halt. The woman on the ground opens her arms for the woman who was in the sky.

(2002: 372-3)

With two failed marriages behind them, and Sudha's betrayal and Anju's grief between them, the cousins find themselves exiled from their childhood home, but free, reunited and hopeful about the possibilities of transformation. Meera Syal has also explored the durability of female relationships in her comic romance novel *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999), in which three childhood friends survive various trials

including sexual betrayal and jealousy. These writers portray female solidarity as an ideal defence against the batterings of patriarchal oppression in novels which celebrate romance as well as female solidarity.

These novels also display another commonality. They each contain a form of tribute to older female relatives just as *Shiva Dancing* does with its triad of exemplary maternal figures: Mataji, Bimla and Teelu. Manicka's matriarch Lakshmi is the eponymous Rice Mother. Sevenese, Lakshmi's son, explains this phenomenon to his niece Dimple:

'The Giver of Life, that's who. In Bali her spirit lives in effigies made out of sheaves of rice. From her wooden throne in the family granary she protects the crops she made bountiful in the paddy fields. So sacred is she that sinners are forbidden to enter her presence or consume a single grain from her figurine.'

'In this house, our Rice Mother is your grandmother. She is the keeper of dreams. Look carefully and you will see, she sits on her wooden throne holding all hopes and dreams in her strong hands, big and small, yours and mine. The years will not diminish her.'

(*RM* 2002: 309)

Lakshmi's husband Ayah is irresponsible with money and cannot provide for his family. Lakshmi, with knowledge learned from her mother, and her own resourcefulness and determination, ensures the survival of her family. Her suffering and sacrifice are recounted in harrowing detail by the different narrative voices in the novel.

Moodley creates a similar, but less imposing matriarchal character in *The Heart Knows No Colour*. Chumpa, the heroine's mother, has an abusive and reckless husband,^{xvi} but she is a dutiful wife and a devoted mother. The novel begins and ends

with Chumpa as its focal point. We first encounter her in 1879 on board a ship which is destined for Natal, South Africa:

Over the years, Chumpa had learnt to become a typical, subservient Indian wife, dressed in the traditional cotton sari with a red dot on her forehead. She had learnt to tolerate her husband for the sake of peace and stability in her home. Now, much against her will, they were all on their way to Natal, in South Africa.

(HKC 2003: 12)

Forty years later, the novel ends with a grand celebration for Chumpa's seventy-fifth birthday. Her family, friends and business acquaintances have turned out in full force to pay tribute to the woman who had left her homeland to become a labourer on a sugarcane field in a strange land, who nurtured and succoured her family as they struggled to adapt to their new life, and who served her community with generosity as a midwife. She also survived many personal tragedies and the indignities of a colonialist regime. Now, in 1919, she is affluent, respected and surrounded by her family and extended family in her diasporic home. Both 'traditional' wives, Lakshmi and Chumpa's triumph is measured in terms of the love and respect of their families, and the battles they won in the domestic spaces where they exercised power. Here the romance genre is utilised for sentimental and elaborate tributes to an older generation of South Asian diasporic women.

Extraordinarily beautiful and irresistibly attractive heroines are a necessary feature of the classic romance genre if the typical reader is to enjoy her fantasy of a passionate and exciting love affair in which the heroine is the object of intense desire. In romance novels by women of the South Asian diaspora, the heroines are not just beautiful, they are *exotically* beautiful. In *What the Body Remembers*, Roop the

heroine is sixteen years old when she enters into an arranged marriage with a man twenty-five years older. Her youth, beauty and innocence are referred to repeatedly:

A man could tell those eyes anything and they would believe him, a man could kiss those red lips for hours and they would look fuller and more luscious for the bruising.

(WBR 1999: 15)

She is described through the use of a repeated simile: “her Pothwari skin, smooth as a new apricot beckoning from the limb of a tall tree, her wide, heavily lashed brown eyes” (WBR 1999:15, 31, 159). By associating Roop with the Pothwar Plateau in Punjab, Baldwin highlights the specific, remote setting of the novel. Also, the reference to apricots, the region’s chief fruit crop, is another means of linking Roop to her locale. The effect of the simile is to present Roop as an exotic fruit, ripe and delectable. This presentation is consolidated by the description of Roop’s deflowering. The scene is stereotypical of the romance genre – the heroine is an inexperienced virgin who offers her pure, unblemished body as a gift to her lover/husband:

He thrusts within her to a place her body does not remember owning. Hidden place, locked-away place, sealed place, imprisoned place, place that waited so long for one man given the key.

Fragile place, so tender and giving.

Hai!

All the giving pent up within her, pierced at last.

(WBR 1999: 158)

Baldwin emphasises Roop’s “giving” in this scene and in other scenes of lovemaking between Roop and her husband, Sardar. The ‘romance’ between hero and heroine is based on this selfless giving of the heroine’s body in varying forms. At the close of the novel, when Sardar has lost everything in the upheaval of Partition and is living as an expatriate in Delhi, it is Roop who restores his “haumi, his self-ness” (WBR 1999:

470) by revealing her deafness. In contrast to her youthful giving of a perfectly formed body, Roop now offers her 'blemish', her weakness, to Sardar so that he may experience empowering anger and renewed vigour. The strategy works: Roop sees that her "gift is working within him, giving him the strength he needs" (WBR 1999: 472). Baldwin suggests, with Roop's dubious triumph as the conclusion of the novel, that the union is a successful one. Roop, the heroine of the romance, realises her feminine power and uses it to cement the romantic relationship which is at the heart of the narrative.

In *The Heart Knows No Colour*, Moodley presents Sita as an exotic object of desire for the amorous Albert Sheldon:

Slowly, lazily, Sita lathered her long, black hair and her slim body. All the while she sang to herself in her warm, husky voice. ... He had never seen a more beautiful sight than the one before him. The girl stooped to cup water in her hands. Mesmerised, he watched as she brought it up to wash away the rich lather to reveal full, firm breasts. He drank in her warm, honey-toned skin and wondered at its golden hue: most Indians, even the women, were darker. She was mysterious and lovely; ...

(HKC 2003: 25-26)

Sita is imbued with every stereotypical characteristic of the classic Indian beauty: she has long, black hair, a slim and graceful body, golden skin, large, unusual eyes, shapely legs, firm breasts, curvaceous hips and "dainty ankles he knew many an English lass would die for" (HKC 2003: 26). Furthermore, she is demure but passionate, virginal but sexually responsive. Huggan's observation of romance as "a privileged genre for the retailing of exotic myths and stereotypes, particularly with respect to ethnicity and gender and the relations between them. ... romance provides a reminder of the connection between the *exotic* and the *erotic*" (Huggan 2001: 275) is

useful here in understanding why Moodley has created such a crudely exoticised (nude) portrait of her heroine. Moodley has taken her cue from the classic romance texts where the heroines are all distinguished by spectacular beauty, and unusual intelligence or an extraordinarily fiery temper (Radway 1984: 123).

But Moodley's description of Sita contains another layer of exoticism and eroticism. She is narrating the events of an inter-racial, taboo love affair occurring in the sugar-cane fields of colonial Natal. For this unlikely phenomenon to appear plausible, the heroine has to be more than beautiful, she has to be 'other' to the hero. For this novel to sell, the hero and the reader have to be seduced by a heroine who is both exotic and erotic. Sita's body is therefore the site of exotic and erotic fantasy for Albert, and when the opportunity to transform the fantasy into reality offers itself, Albert leaps at it. The reader, it is assumed, enjoys the vicarious pleasure of Sita and Albert's illicit lovemaking. The fascinating element of this construction of Albert's fantasy is Moodley's ability to replicate Albert's 'white' psychic needs. Katherine Perry, a feminist scholar who has examined questions of power, fantasy and desire across constructions of 'racial' and 'ethnic' difference in romance narratives, concludes that the "white sexual imagination has constituted racial others in accordance with its own psychic and social needs" (Perry 1995: 40). Perry examines how "this 'racist' heritage is negotiated in interracial relationships" (*ibid.*). In the detailed description of Sita summarised above, we see her through Albert's eyes. She is the racialised 'other', a brown-skinned, brown-eyed, black haired, mysterious beauty, ethnically and culturally different yet sexually and aesthetically appealing. Crucially, she is also in a position of subservience. Her difference and 'otherness' increase her desirability. For Moodley, intent on creating a best-selling romance, the

increased desirability of her heroine translates into increased sexual passion between hero and heroine, and thus into increased sales. The downside is that the brokering of Sita as an exotic object of desire perpetuates racial stereotypes of South Asian women which date back to colonial times. In the anthology *Breaking the Silence: A Century of South African Women's Poetry* (1990), Cecily Lockett includes a poem "Waiting" by Caroline Goodenough, who, writing in the 1890s in colonial Natal, depicts African and Indian women in a similar objectified, exoticised and stereotypical way.

A Zulu woman on the highway,
 with burden hard to bear;
 a slender Hindoo following
 with black dishevelled hair,
 and gaudy garments fluttering,
 and jewel at her nose;
 her silver anklets tinkle back,
 and glitter as she goes.

and at the door, soft wistful eyes
 of one of Ishmael's race,
 look mournfully upon the world,
 in which she hath a place.
 O Arab woman, prisoner!
 O Hindoo toy! redemption waits
 for woman and her world.

(in Lockett 1990: 273)

In some of the romance novels by women of the South Asian diaspora, the possibility of romance (albeit a re-scripted and culturally specific form of romance) in an arranged marriage is explored. We saw with Roop and Sardar that Roop's "giving" resulted in mutual strength and a harmonious partnership in their marriage. In Moodley's text we also see the happiness and security possible in an arranged

marriage. Sita and Hemith have a strong bond which even weathers the revelation of Sita's affair with Albert. As Pearce and Stacey have stated, it is the romance genre's "capacity for mutation which has enabled romance to survive" (1995: 12). In these texts, the notion of romance itself has mutated as writers have shifted the cultural contexts of their romances.

The deployment of the romance genre by women writers of the South Asian diaspora is varied. Some adopt the deep structure of the romance narrative and modify superficial elements such as context for their own ends, as we see in Moodley's South African historical romance. Others merely borrow certain stylistic elements in order to popularise their works. This strategy is evident in Manicka's *The Rice Mother* which employs the prose and characterisation of romance, but which is ultimately a disturbing account of migration, war and broken dreams. Others consciously challenge the classic forms of the romance narrative. An example of this is found in the conclusion of *Shiva Dancing* where the hero and heroine do not marry and 'settle down', but opt for a nomadic lifestyle as lovers. Similarly, Divakaruni's *The Vine of Desire*, although pivoting around a forbidden romance, emphasises female relationships and concludes with the sisters' reunion. Some writers go further in their challenge of the classic romance trajectory. Shamim Sarif's *The World Unseen* (2001) is a love story set in 1950s apartheid South Africa. It tells the story of two Asian women, Amina and Miriam, who fall in love and thus break every possible taboo of their Muslim community in the small town of Delhof, outside Pretoria. The novel is courageous in its handling of themes such as transgressive sexuality, the abuse of women, arranged marriages, and apartheid, but it often slips into the prose of

the romance genre to describe the lovers or their illicit physical relationship. It is an inspired and politically sensitive attempt to re-write the romance narrative.

As more and more women writers of the South Asian diaspora produce popular texts, some of them memoirs and autobiographies or novels for adolescents,^{xvii} the question of self-exoticisation becomes more pertinent. As publishers search for texts produced by someone with 'authentic roots' in a specific culture, authors respond by writing novels which create unfamiliar worlds in a familiar form. In this way authors are persuaded to exoticise their cultures, and in so doing they occupy the position of cultural brokers within the global publishing industry. The publishers meanwhile are fortified as consecrators of literary value. The writers in this study are caught between a desire to reach the widest possible audience and the desire to address feminist, racial or political issues. They therefore oscillate between inscribing a transnational feminist aesthetic and perpetuating neo-imperialist forms of exoticisation and cultural othering. At the same time they either perpetuate or radically alter the romance genre with their contributions. The way forward, it seems, lies in generating a popular narrative form which allows for the expression of feminist and political commitment and cultural translation without resorting to complicity in patriarchal and imperialist structures.

End Notes

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- ⁱ See feminist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949), Kate Millet (1969), Shulamith Firestone (1970) and Germaine Greer (1971) who perceived the romance genre to be a monolithically pernicious and disabling ideology.
- ⁱⁱ According to Pierre Bourdieu, “symbolic capital” is labour that cultural workers perform and the financial and symbolic benefits that they achieve (Bourdieu 1993: 75).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Gita Mehta’s *Karma Cola: Marketing the Mystic East* (1979), is a wickedly funny debunking of the western propensity for spiritual tourism, and an equally astute analysis of the various ways in which Indian writers/thinkers have capitalised on western exotic myths.
- ^{iv} Huggan’s definition of “strategic exoticism” (2001: 72) can be summarised as follows: Scholars and writers work from within exoticist codes in order to subvert and redeploy them i.e. the self-conscious use of exoticist techniques and modalities of cultural representation.
- ^v The opprobrium of earlier feminist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir (1949), Kate Millet (1969), Shulamith Firestone (1970) and Germaine Greer (1971) has sparked many feminist debates about romance as a cultural institution over the years.
- ^{vi} See interview with Julie Rajan (http://www.monsoonmag.com/interviews/i3inter_kirchner.html).
- ^{vii} This melodramatic and far-fetched episode in the narrative serves as a hyperbolised dramatisation of the migrant’s displacement from the homeland.
- ^{viii} Critic Noy Thrupkaew has written a hilarious piece for internet magazine *AlterNet* entitled “The God of Literary Trends”. In it Thrupkaew writes:
- The language of cultural consumption is particularly apt here. At worst, South Asian and South Asian-American writing is just like tasty Indian food -- to be chewed, digested, and excreted without a lot of thought. But hope springs

eternal. Perhaps Americans, having tasted something delicious, will seek out books that outrage and challenge, narratives written from the diaspora ... translations that don't rely on bindi or kulfi to make their points.

(<http://www.alternet.org/story/13448>)

^{ix} The protagonist's Indian immigrant family, the Gangulis are set up in a sustained contrast with his girlfriend's bourgeois, Manhattan-based family, the Ratliffs.

^x Interview with Julie Rajan

(http://www.monsoonmag.com/interviews/i3inter_kirchner.html)

^{xi} Kirchner is not the only author to use the Sita myth for feminist projects. "Sita's story has been a fertile source for writers with the feminist agenda as a metaphor/example for female resistance to patriarchal predications of dharma. They have deiconised the submissive and all suffering Sita into a courageous person whose withdrawal from the male value world is pictured as a counter construct to Rama's self-righteous artifact of Prajadharmā" (James 1998: 207).

^{xii} In South Asia the Hindu concept of *dharma* is pervasive, irrespective of religion, class, or caste. *Dharma* is not aligned with a specific belief or act of worship but is better described as a code of conduct acceptable to a community (Jain 2002: 79). Within this framework, marriage is a sacred state which controls the body of the woman, delineates her roles as wife and mother, and confers upon her status if she is fertile and produces male children. Embedded in this code of conduct is the "concept of *pativrata*, of the *dharma* towards the husband, the law of unquestioning obedience and fidelity in a marital relationship" (Jain 2002: 80).

^{xiii} Similar criticism has been heaped on Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). The prose of the award-winning controversial novel has been described as "gimmicky", "overdone", and "flowery". Roy has also been accused of exoticising herself and India to sell her book. See reviews by Varma Abha.

(www.newindpres.com/sunday/collItems.asp) and Kai Friese

(www.villagevoice.com/vls/172/friese.shtml).

^{xiv} In 1947 the British government decided to grant independence to India. To appease various religious groups it was decided that India would be split into Pakistan, a Muslim state, and India, a secular state. Sir Cyril Radcliff was appointed to set the new borders. Hindus and Sikhs had to move to India and Muslims had to move to Pakistan. Violent sectarian riots ensued as land was appropriated and redistributed and people had to abandon their homes.

^{xv} Alexandra Atiglmayer concludes after her study of mass rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina that it “is a tool, a tactic, a policy, a plan, a strategy, as well as a practice” (1994: 187).

^{xvi} There is in fact a long list of ineffectual, absent or abusive husbands and fathers in this literature: Meena Mohamed’s father in *Other Secrets* (2000); Chanu in *Brick Lane* (2003); the absent father in Agnes Sam’s “Jesus is Indian” (1989); and Nazneen’s father in *Brick Lane* (2003); Anju and Sudha’s fathers in *Sister of My Heart* (1999); and Meena’s biological father in *Shiva Dancing* (1998).

^{xvii} Note the rising popularity of memoirs and autobiographies such as Sudha Koul’s *Tiger Ladies* (2002), and Mira Kamdar’s *Motiba’s Tattoos* (2000). Younger generation authors have been producing trendy, adolescent novels which deal with the dilemmas of diaspora. For example, Tanuja Desai Hidier’s *Born Confused* (2002), and Ameena Meer’s *Bombay Talkie* (1994).

Conclusion .

The world has changed since Conrad and Dickens in ways that have surprised, and often alarmed, metropolitan Europeans and Americans, who now confront large non-white immigrant populations in their midst, and face an impressive roster of newly empowered voices asking for their narratives to be heard.

(Said 1994: xxii)

Globalisation has changed the modern world. Now people can, and routinely do, claim multiple nationalities and a range of cultural affiliations as world travel and communication become more accessible. Existing and developing diasporic communities are flourishing in countries on every continent. Due to the fecundity of the diasporic location, which, according to Bhabha is a 'Third Space' or in-between space of enunciation for those who live "border lives" (1994: 1), individual and collective voices of these communities are being heard. The symbolic creativity of immigrant cultures is finding expression in innovative aesthetic forms.

The voices of South Asian diasporic women are newly empowered by the spate of writing which has taken the literary world by storm in recent decades. This women's writing has achieved literary success and recognition, and its social and political value increases as more voices clamour to be heard. New alignments across national borders are apparent in this writing, challenging old notions of identity and of literary practice. But the heterogeneity and diversity of the various populations of South Asians resident in different nations across the globe are maintained by this literature. This literature, reflecting these transnational links and the multiplicity of the diasporic experience, is therefore a site for dynamic social and cultural change.

I have demonstrated in this thesis that an informal guild exists, comprising of women writers from the South Asian diaspora. This guild, however tenuous in formal organisational or overtly articulated terms, exhibits, in literary terms, a transnational feminist practice. In describing this women's writing, overarching similarities and significant differences, as well as its literary lineage, were elucidated. This description revealed an alternative feminism at work, one in which previously silenced subjects have found eloquent voices to enunciate themes and concerns specific to their gender and culture. I have also shown how this literature explicates the dilemma of the diasporic subject who lives a border life between cultures.

Further, I have shown not only the geographic multi-locationality of this transnational feminist aesthetic, but also its politically subversive nature. These writers resist and challenge patriarchal oppression through the act of writing. In their attempts to constitute subjectivity in language, these writers further the feminist aim of reclaiming women's autonomy. As women's writing, it draws attention to women as producers of textual meaning. In addition, this women's writing highlights the *differences* and solidarity between women. Living in diverse locations across the globe, these writers nevertheless engage with a shared historical 'home', South Asia, and with distinct feminist concerns. In particular, their achievement is evident in the range of empowered female subjectivities inscribed through a common literary aesthetic which has been forged across national, cultural and historical boundaries.

But such an onerous task has its risks, and certainly there are shortcomings in some of the literary strategies employed by these writers. The self-exoticisation evident in romance and popular novels is of particular concern. How can South Asian

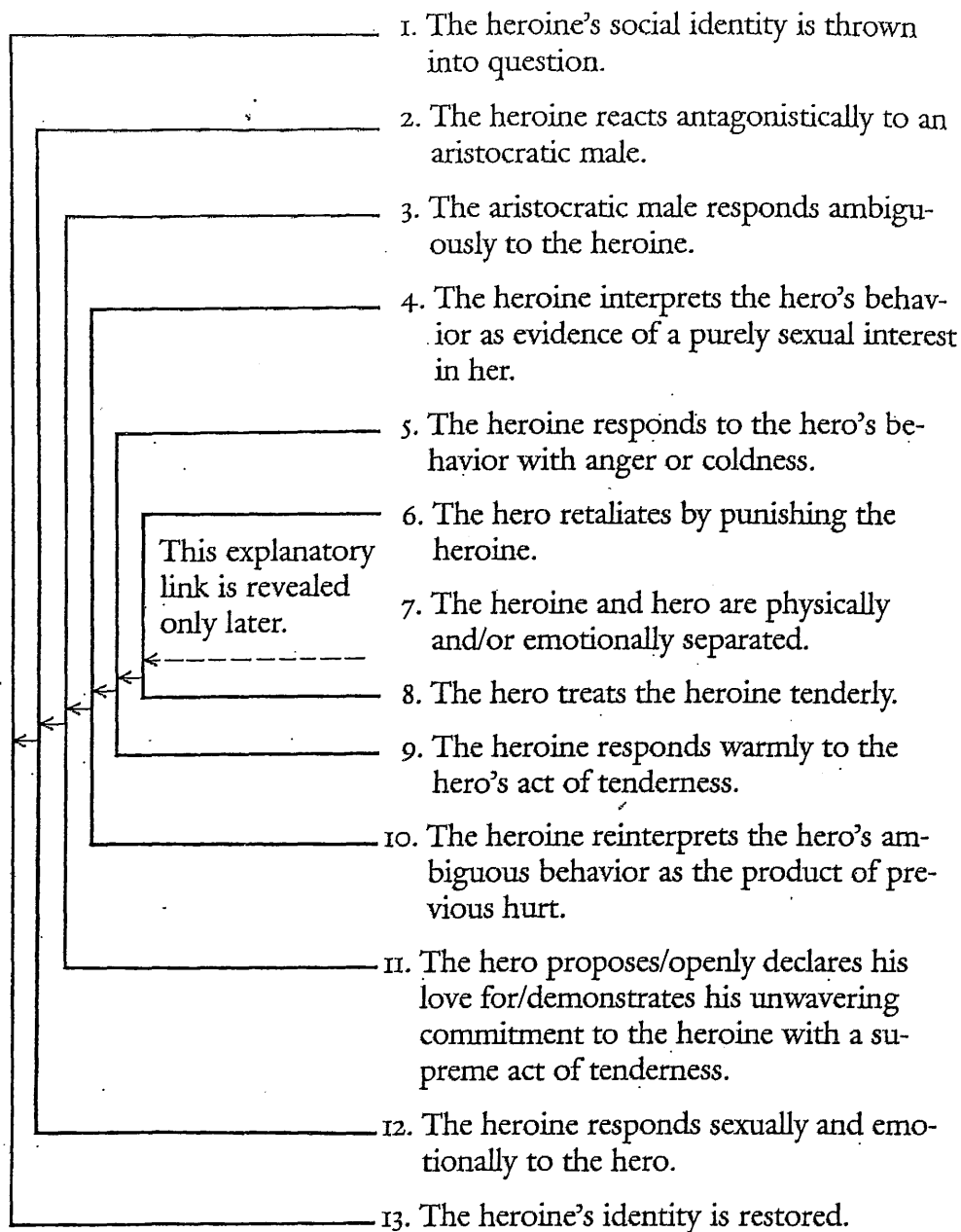
diasporic women writers avoid the traps of exoticisation and ghettoisation? Some writers, for example, Jhumpa Lahiri, have side-stepped both these pitfalls by delicately balancing South Asian or feminist themes and concerns with more universal ones. Stylistically also Lahiri employs a subtler, lighter touch when it comes to cultural translation. South Asian characters and South Asian culture are not presented as 'other'. For some other writers, the careful balance between cultural translation and cultural commodification has yet to be struck.

It is hoped that this study will provoke similar research in the area of feminist and diaspora studies. Other genres of writing require attention, and each migratory route and diasporic location requires historicisation and a thorough-going literary examination. A comparison between writing by men and women of the South Asian diaspora would also yield intriguing fruit. I firmly believe in the symbolic value of this literature, that its translation of historical experience into cultural forms has a significant role to play in our understanding of the processes of globalisation. Further enquiry into similar subject matter will be of enormous benefit, not only to literary scholarship but also to the entire area of diaspora studies, and the various disciplines it incorporates.

In addition to demonstrating a transnational feminist aesthetic at work, I have also hoped to place South African South Asian women's writing onto a global literary map. Needless to say, a great deal remains to be done for literature by other minority groups in South Africa. As the battle for acceptance of this corpus of literature into the South African literary academy continues, the battle for recognition in a global literary arena begins.

Appendix

The Narrative Logic of the Romance (based on a typical romance novel)



(Radway 1984: 150)

Summary of a typical romance plot

The heroine, a virgin in her early twenties, is set in a social limbo: her family is dead or invisible, her friends are few or none, her occupational milieu is only vaguely filled in. As a result, her meeting with the hero occurs in a private realm which excludes all concerns but their mutual attraction; the rest of the world drops away except as a backdrop (often exotic and luxurious, defined through the hero's wealth and taste). The hero, seven to ten years older than the heroine, is dazzlingly successful in the public world; in private life, he is a rake or a mystery, saturnine in appearance, sexually expert, and relentlessly domineering. He takes the reins erotically, naming the heroine's desires to her; all she can do is submit or flee. She tries constantly to interpret his behaviour, which alternates abruptly between tenderness and rejection. Finally, after a separation, the hero tracks the heroine down, explains his earlier motives and offers her love and marriage. They fall into a final embrace.

(adapted from Jones 1986: 198)

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