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Book Review: Emerging Voices – South Asian American Women Redefine Self, Family and Community

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Emerging Voices – South Asian American Womenⁱ Redefine Self, Family and Community. Edited by Sangeeta R. Gupta, Sage 1999, pp 259. Reviewed by G. Asha.

The nineties saw a consolidation of South Asian activity all across the United States. The second generation (for our purpose defined as the children of immigrants) have now entered college campuses and are largely responsible for this flurry of activity. From the mid-1980s to the present, South Asian women too have been organising separately in women's groups, mainly around the issue of domestic violence. As this activity continues, it is not surprising that it finds its expression as anthologies of writing – both fiction and nonfiction. *Our Feet Walk the Sky*, Aunt Lute Press, (1993), was one of the first in this series.

The book under consideration is more academic in nature with articles ranging from the adolescent development of South Asian girls to marriage, divorce and sexuality. The eleven articles were selected from a large number submitted after a conference on South Asian women. The multiperspective, multigenerational and multi-disciplinary perspective was a deliberate choice to represent the emerging voices of South Asian women. The editor, Sangeeta Gupta, writes in her introduction that, “ this volume explores how *some* women from India and Pakistan have experienced immigration in various aspects of their lives.” The book also looks at how women's experience of immigration is different from that of men. She believes, as do many of the contributors to the volume, that the clash between gender role expectations from South Asia and mainstream Western culture form the basis of the struggles of the South Asian immigrant woman. To this reviewer, this seems a slightly oversimplified perspective. It does not include the class differences, immigration, educational and professional status of the women concerned. Nor does it take into account the xenophobia and racism faced by most immigrants. For example, a nurse from Kerala who migrated to the U.S during the boom in the market for nurses is both comfortable materially and also has a certain amount of leverage due to her possession of a “ green card”. In fact, many a Malayali nurse has sponsored her husband to come to the United States. However, it seems an interesting point that many of these women have been victimised by these men whom they help bring and settle in the U. S. Is this just “culture” or the power and class dynamics between men and women? After all, many an American woman has put her boyfriend / husband through graduate school only to be dumped later.

Ananya Bhattacharjee in a thoughtful article discusses the changing contours of the immigrant population in the United States. The pre World War 1 immigrant revealed “ a consciousness of economic power, racial politics, and imperialism that is more radical “ than what predominates today. The post 1965 immigrant was drawn largely from the professional class and worked very hard to fit into the stereotype of the “model minority”. However, this category often proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the Indian immigrant community worked hard at achieving a standard of wealth set by the dominant white majority. On the other hand it continues to remain a minority and not quite white. The changing contours of the immigrant community, which includes illegal immigrants, unpaid and underpaid workers is something the leadership of the

“model minority” would prefer to ignore. Women form a large proportion of the precariously placed / illegal immigrant population in the South Asian community. They also exercise very little economic power, though exceptional cases of very successful businesswomen do exist. Women’s groups run on shoestring budgets and are staffed by harried and overworked women.

In Lalitha Subrahmanyam’s discussion on the gender ideology of graduate students at an American university, many of the perceptions and attitudes that shape young South Asian professionals come to the fore. Most of the men and women believe that men and women are equal. However there is a need to maintain the family and this might result in the woman making more compromises. They are highly critical of mainstream American society which includes divorce, break up of families, impersonal relationships and a host of stereotypes based on television and not on actual knowledge of real Americans and their lives. “Yet, I found their criticism of the so-called individualism in American society very interesting. None of the students, except three, had said anything spontaneously about their own social or political duties and responsibilities and those of other men and women. Only one of them talked about service to others and another mentioned that all human beings have a duty toward the environment. Among the women, only one said that women should support each other. Others were quite blasé and said that they did not feel any responsibility toward the society.... To me therefore, their perceptions of individualism in American society seemed almost facetious. It seems that they are just as individualistic as the Americans they criticise are, only their unit of individualism is the family: spouse, children, and sometimes, parents.”

Asian Indian parents have continued to exercise great control on their children’s lives especially that of the girls. Dating, love marriages, premarital sex are all frowned upon and actively discouraged. It is the woman who bears the brunt of the negative associations attached to divorce. Many a South Asian woman has had to move away from the South Asian community to heal herself, after a painful divorce or while coming out. Mantosh Singh Deoji states that “some Indian women are now finding themselves in the same position as many of their mainstream American contemporaries: divorced, but the standards of many of their peers within the Indian community remain unchanged. Divorce still creates a stigma and ostracism in the Indian community, leaving the divorcee isolated and vulnerable. At this point the sexual life of these women is supposed to be over, but an increasing number of women are rejecting these old standards.”

I wondered why I did not hear the voices of the articulate lesbians of *Anamika* or *Shamakami*. In the eighties, women of color threw a challenge to white women’s groups, which continued to practise a policy of exclusion by claiming “innocence” of the other. Many a conference was held without a person of color as the organizers could not find any. Similarly, in the late nineties, there is no excuse for a volume like this to exclude certain important voices in the South Asian community- lesbian, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, working class and other “minorities within a minority”. In fact, they would have provided the much-needed balance to this work, which seems overly tilted in favor of the conservative sections of the community.

Though Gupta's desire to have a multidimensional perspective is in essence good, it would help if in further volumes, more serious research based on actual empirical data could be published. It is only then that South Asian women can even begin the hard task of lobbying for justice. For example, Sudha Sethu Balagopal concludes that, "many of the women interviewed for Arlie Hochschild's study bear similarities to the South Asian women interviewed for my study." This is important. In what ways do South Asian women as part of the workforce face added discrimination due to their "new" immigrant status? How is this group of immigrant women different from that of earlier immigrant groups – perhaps Jewish women coming in droves after the Holocaust? And most importantly cultural differences notwithstanding, how are South Asian women's struggles **similar** to that of all American women?

In Sabah Aafreen's very incisive essay on growing up illegal in Chicago we get a taste for the perilous nature of her adolescence. "Generally speaking, girls from our community who are born in America do not like being Indian when they are in grade school. The American media teaches them that white is beautiful and Indian is ugly." She continues, "even if we had green cards, it would have been difficult for my parents to take us to India every summer. They could not afford such trips. They could not afford a house." More of such voices would have helped quell the misconception in many quarters that all South Asians are very well off materially.

Describing her mother's search for the moon in suburban Los Angeles, Sangeeta Gupta gives us a narrative of Karvachoth, a tradition among certain groups of married Hindu women to fast and pray for their husbands' well being. Once again, Gupta does not clarify that this pertains to a certain group of North Indian women and not all married Hindu women observe this. It would have been interesting to know whether married Hindu women from all parts of India have started observing this ritual in the U.S of late, under pressure to have a homogenous community and practice its mainstream values. In this context a discussion on the role played by the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) and other right wing religious groups in resurrecting such activity would have been helpful.

One had hoped to get a wider range of experiences and responses from a volume published in 1999. Many of my friends and I went to the United States as graduate students in the early eighties. Most of my friends married fellow students in the U. S. If immigration laws permitted, these weddings held in the basement of some church or synagogue in rural Idaho, or suburban Cincinnati were attended by close relatives from India, as were child-births. Grandmothers often stayed on with newly born infants to allow the women to continue with their work without disruption. Is that not a process of acceptance by Indian families to the changed circumstances, in which their daughters now live and work? I am surprised that Gupta's collection does not even include one such strong voice which could reassure all of us that " South Asian culture" is not all that backward and that there are many who move with the changing times.

In conclusion, though a step in the right direction, this reviewer hopes for more volumes exploring the notion of South Asian ' culture' versus immigration/race/class/gender

dynamics which shape the lives of South Asian women in the United States. This becomes all the more pertinent now with the down turn in the hi-tech industry which is leaving many an H 1- B wife in a perilous situation. One also hopes that homophobia will not in future form the basis for exclusion of South Asian lesbians from any study.

ⁱ G. Asha is a neurobiologist currently based in India. She was a former Pembroke Scholar at Brown University and hopes that in the not too distant future she will once again be able to contribute her might to the cause of South Asian and other women in the United States.