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## The "Good-Girl" Value Construct: Asian Indian Immigrant Women in the U.S. and Contested Spaces

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# The “Good-Girl” Value Construct: Asian Indian Immigrant Women in the U.S. and Contested Spaces

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## Abstract

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The multiple constructions of identity that define an Indian woman – as a wife, a mother, a Goddess - and the thread that holds these identities together, the “good-girl” are explored in this paper. Fox’s (1977) argument of the use of “nice-girl” or “good-girl” as value constructs for the social control of women is used to examine the narratives of three Asian Indian immigrant women. The discourses presented in the case studies, reflect strongly on the socialized nature of the “good-girl” construct and indicate how its influences, sources, and definitions lead women to communicatively produce and reproduce the meanings of this construct whilst undergoing the dual tensions of embodying and resisting becoming *the* “good-girl”.

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**Keywords:** multiasian indian women, discourse, identity, good-girl

On Becoming a Wife

My child, when you have entered your husband's home,  
Obey your elders; and be very kind  
To rivals; never be perversely blind  
And angry with your husband, even though he  
Should prove less faithful than a man might be;  
Be as courteous to servants as you may,  
Not puffed with pride in this your happy day:  
Thus does a maiden grow into a wife;  
But self-willed women are the curse of life.  
-Kalidasa (A.D. 400-500)<sup>1</sup>

**T**he Asian Indian immigrant population in the United States is over 1.5 million (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000) of which a considerable number are married women. The immigrant Indian woman's experience in the United States is unique (Rayaprol, 1997) and although as an immigrant Indian woman her experiences might be distinct from her husband's, scholars who have focused on these women have focused on "male" issues such as wage labor or economic contributions (Rayaprol, 1997). In South Asian cultures, women are often defined according to their relationship to men, and not persons in their own rights. They are primarily their father's daughter, a wife or a mother (Gupta, 1999). Thus, the lives and experiences of women have been largely ignored or muted. Rayaprol (1997) laments the dearth of research in the cultural contribution these women have made to the Asian Indian community as well as the larger American society. The following observation by Sydney Stahl Weinberg's 1992 review on immigrant women in history as cited in Rayaprol (1997) points out the consequences of this lack of research:

...what women thought of their authority, their attitudes toward acculturation, changes in women's status between the old country and new, and perhaps even significant differences between the attitudes of first generation men and women... (*have not been considered*). Thus we do not learn about the texture of women's lives: how did they see themselves, socialize their children, participate in neighbourhood life, maintain kinship relationships, establish sex-linked ties and create their own sense of values and neighbourhood? (Weinberg, 1992, pp. 33-34, italics added)

This appears to be changing, however. Several South Asian and specifically Asian Indian scholars interested in researching and preserving the history of their ethnic roots in the United States and several feminist scholars (Gupta, 1999; Hegde, 1998; Ram, 2002) have been paying attention to the immigrant woman's voice, contribution, and experiences. This paper adds to the limited but growing research on married Indian women in the United States by examining how the "good-girl" image they have been socialized into, growing up in India, pervades their marital identities and relationships. This paper argues that the idea of an ideal wife emerges out of socialized discourses of a "good-girl". The paper investigates how women co-construct their narratives to "understand themselves in relationship to others within specific contexts, settings and themes" (Buzzanell, 1994, p. 353). The relationships being examined in this paper are related to those members of the family that the women feel most connected to; parents, husbands, and in-laws. To do so, this paper presents the cases of three Asian-Indian immigrant women and the (re)negotiations of their identities in their lives while still trying to navigate the images of a good-girl and subsequently an ideal wife and daughter-in-law.

### **Literature Review**

To narrate a single story as belonging to all Asian Indian immigrant women is a challenge few would take on and even the assumption that there might exist one such story is naïve. Likewise, within the Indian diaspora, the cultural socialization experiences retold by immigrant women who came to this country as newlyweds may be different from

stories narrated by second generation Indian-American women who were either born here or those who immigrated to the United States with their parents at a young age. Similarly, experiences will be different for those immigrant women who lived in the United States for several years before getting married and those immigrant women who had been married for several years before coming to the United States with their husbands. I acknowledge that each story might present a unique perspective and make no claim to include every viewpoint.

This paper is more interested in those women who immigrated to the United States with their husbands after having already gotten married in India. This paper claims that as a result of early childhood upbringing and formative years spent in India, embedded within the larger collective, cultural influences will hold stronger significance for the women. Arguably then, when the immigrant woman first comes to the United States as a newlywed, having lived a majority of her life in India with her parents, as is the norm in traditional Hindu families, once in the U.S., she is now the woman of the house who not only has to adjust to her new life as a wife, but also to a new country and a new way of living. Consequently, a number of previously taken-for-granted knowledges will need to be reexamined and in many cases, re-learned in a foreign culture. Puri (1999) writes in her book *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-colonial India* how marriage brings about sweeping changes in an Indian woman's life. She writes that the changes brought about by marriage include "changes in her residence, her kin affiliation, the rights and responsibilities of being a wife – including participating in sexual activity, bearing some or all household responsibilities, and maintaining kin relations within the conjugal family..." (p. 137). As is customary upon getting married, an Indian woman usually moves in with her husband's family. As a result, new behaviors will have to be learned in order to fit in with the new family's lifestyle and way of doing things. When the new place of residence after marriage is a foreign country, the context becomes even more complex as a result of unexpected novelties.

### **Mythological perspectives of the ideal**

The construct of the “ideal Indian woman” and the “ideal Indian wife” are heavily loaded value constructs that when critically evaluated might be seen as strategically intended to impose a hegemonically patriarchal form of social control over women. The image of the ideal Indian woman is often modeled after goddesses in Indian culture. For most Hindus, writes [Nayaprol \(1997\)](#), the “ideal woman is personified by Sita, the quintessence of wifely devotion and the heroine of the great epic, *Ramayana*...” (p. 124). While the entire story of Lord Rama and Goddess Sita is beyond the scope of this paper, it suffices to say that the ideal of womanhood represented by Goddess Sita is that of “purity, chastity, and the careful control of sexuality, continuously circumscribed within the domain of heterosexual marriage, family and the nation” ([Ram, 2002, p. 33](#)).

Another popular Hindu story told down from generations is that of Savitri who insisted on marrying a man she knew was destined to die within a year. When he did die, she followed Yama, the god of death and proving her chastity and devotion to her husband, tricked Yama into granting her a wish to beget a hundred sons. Having gotten that wish, she pleaded with him for the return of her husband’s life for as a chaste woman, she could not have children without her husband ([Nayaprol, 1997](#)).

While these ideal and mythological images of the Indian wife are highly dramatized, their significance still holds true in the Indian mind for both men and women. As [Nayaprol \(1997\)](#) writes, “identification with Sita contributes to the Hindu woman’s adaptation to married life in her husband’s extended family and prepares her for her obligatory participation in the family’s patriarchal rituals” (p.125) with the traditional ideology being “the woman is expected to follow the wishes of her husband” (pp. 125-126). Along with these mythical stories, usage of words such as *patidev*, *patiparmeshwar* (*pati*, meaning husband and both *dev* and *parmeshwar* meaning God) in movies and the depiction of picture perfect daughters-in-law in extremely popular Indian television dramas reinforce the qualification that a wife should be unconditionally devoted and faithful to her husband in a docile subservient way and regardless of how the husband is or behaves toward her. This thought is

also evident in the poem cited at the beginning of the paper by the famous poet Kalidasa (whose name ironically means one who is the servant of Goddess Kali, Kali, the Goddess and dasa, servant).

Allusions to women as Goddesses or the “mother” are also common. In Hindu religious and mythological texts, the woman is characterized as being all-powerful with the ability to destroy (like Goddess Parvati or Durga who represents *shakti* or power and Goddess Kali who destroys evil), the giver of knowledge (like Goddess Saraswati), and the giver of wealth and prosperity (like Goddess Lakshmi) (see [Nayaprol, 1997](#)). In many mythological stories, angered Goddesses had the power to bring about the destruction of the universe and only the power of the male God could soften that destruction ([Nayaprol, 1997](#)). In the process of creation, writes [Nayaprol \(1997\)](#), “the woman represents the fertile soil, while the man represents the seed of the future” (p. 124).

Women of India also have to deal with the construct of “woman” as a sign for “nation” embodying the “spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity...” ([Chatterjee, 1989, p. 630](#)). [Chatterjee \(1989\)](#) expresses skepticism when he questions the construct of the Indian woman or the ideal Indian woman. For [Chatterjee \(1989\)](#), these constructs are hegemonic forms of exercising dominance. He writes that regardless of what the source of the above constructs are, the classical religions of India or the medieval religious practices, “it is undeniable that the specific ideological form in which we know the “Indian woman” construct in the modern literature and arts of India today is wholly a product of the development of a dominant middle-class cultural coeval with the era of nationalism” (p. 630). The media also play into the extension of these constructs to the masses. In particular, the Indian cinema contributes to the dissemination of these messages through its portrayal of the ideal woman as the “sacred mother figure and the pure, chaste, virginal heroine” ([Ram, 2002, p. 42](#)).

### “Nice-girl” or “good-girl”

[Fox \(1977\)](#) proposes three strategies that are used to “regulate the freedom of women and to exert control over their behavior in the world” (p. 805). The first is *confinement* that restricts a woman to the boundaries of her house. The second is *protection*, where women have

access to the world by one or more designated protectors guarding them. The third is *normative restriction* that controls social behavior of women through the embodiment of their behavior in value constructs such as “nice-girl”, “lady” or “good-girl”. In India these constructs might translate into the “ideal” woman. Fox (1977) explains,

...the normative restriction pattern appears to allow individual women a high degree of direct and independent participation in the world: women are neither confined to their homes nor accompanied by escorts whenever they wish to go out. However, this appearance of relatively unrestricted intercourse with the world may be more illusory than real. (p. 806)

Therefore, although it might appear that Indian women have freedom, the truth in fact might be that they feel obliged or even required to act in morally, ethically, and religiously appropriate ways to fit into the “ideal” image.

Motherhood is another essential of the married woman’s identity. Puri’s (1990) research establishes that motherhood is the essence of womanhood and marriage, within the context of which an Indian woman should bear children. Marriage and motherhood thus confer the “good-girl” status on the Indian woman and any deviation from that role is considered inappropriate.

### **Asian Indian immigrant women, value constructs and identity**

Given the account of what constitutes the “ideal” woman images, it can be safely assumed that immigrant women born and raised in India who were socialized into these gendered value constructs of normative restriction bring some variation of these ideas with them when they immigrate to the United States. Because the role of being the ideal Indian wife also includes that of being the ideal daughter-in-law who serves, respects and takes care of her in-laws, this role may be reified as a result of moving away from the marital home and living in the United States. Despite being pulled away from her roots and replanted into the foreign soil, the immigrant woman is still expected by her family in India to uphold “Indian” values, fulfill rituals, preserve family traditions



and impart those values and the richness of Indian culture to her first generation American born children. The home, which is now in the United States, is considered the place where the spiritual quality of the national culture is expressed and women would have to take on the responsibility to protect and nurture this quality (Chatterjee, 1989). In doing so, regardless of external contradictions of life for women, Chatterjee (1989) brings out the irony that these women, “must not lose their essentially spiritual (that is, feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, become essentially Westernized” (p. 627). While the external world and the home were two separate domains for men and women respectively, in the external world, it was appropriate and in fact necessary for men to adapt to Western norms while a woman doing so within the domain of her home, was “tantamount to annihilation of one’s very identity” (p. 625). Thus, as Hegde (1998) observes, the model of Indian womanhood becomes the signifier of Indianness in the United States that translates into forms of control and domination.

The immigrant woman thus is whirling in a pool of contradictions and ideal dos and don’ts that threaten to overwhelm her “Indianness” while at the same time almost compelling her to live out the Indianness in her Western/American living. In addition to these internal discursive and contradictory pulls, the immigrant woman, is not only constantly negotiating her identity as Indian, Asian Indian, immigrant, foreigner, (Hegde, 1998) but is also finding out that she is an immigrant woman of color in the United States. Hegde (1998) notes, “the experience of seeing oneself represented as ‘the other’ makes immigrants highly speculative and anxious to develop oppositional narratives that explain and connect their relationship to otherness” (p. 42). This in turn may make the Indian immigrant woman willingly reproduce her Indianness as explained earlier in the form of Indian rituals and traditions. As is evidenced, the immigrant woman faces multiple identities and challenges.

Several Asian Indian scholars have explored the area of negotiating immigrant identities. Hegde (1989) tried to locate the negotiating of immigrant Indian women’s identities by understanding the emergence of meanings in everyday practices of immigrant women, Ram (2002) looked at how immigrant Indian women frame the “feminine” from its representation in popular Indian cinema and Rayaprol (1997) examined

the negotiating of immigrant Indian women's identity through the significant role these women play in the activities of the South Indian temple in Pittsburgh. Other research has looked at the construction of selfhood in the Bengali community in New Jersey (Ganguly, 1992) and the construction of the woman as representative of the pure "nation" in the Asian Indian immigrant community (Bhattacharjee, 1992). The above research has made great contributions to the understanding of the Asian Indian immigrant women diaspora by extending the unique experience based narratives that these women have to share.

Arguably, an Indian woman's identity is often formed and developed through the value constructs she has been socialized into since childhood which as has been alluded to earlier may contradict the lifestyle in the United States. For example, Asian Indian women in the United States may face concerns regarding clothing (the traditional Indian *sari* or *salwar kameez* versus jeans and dress pants) or even shouldering the responsibility of child care (which in India would in all likelihood have been a collective effort by the parents and grandparents as well as neighbors and extended family members). Some scholars (Bhattacharjee, 1992; Ganguly, 1992; Hegde, 1998; Nayaprol, 1997) have looked at the negotiation of the immigrant Asian Indian woman's identity after she has been in the United States. Although the scope of those studies and this study are not diametrically opposed, this study further acknowledges that the immigrant Asian Indian woman already has an "Indian" identity when she arrives in the United States. The understanding is that, that identity has been formed because of the socialization as part of living in India but which will now undergo negotiations, reifications, or changes in the United States. If it was the "good-girl" value construct that guided women's behavior in India, it may now translate as the "good wife" or ideal wife value construct.

Issues of contention regarding an Indian woman's identity (or an Asian Indian immigrant woman's identity in this case) are rendered problematic by the multiple definitions one has to live up to; as the "good-girl"/ideal wife, mother figure, the goddess and so on. In this paper, I started out wanting to examine the place and pervasiveness of the "good-girl" value construct. As it turns out, the connotations associated with the construct are reflected in other aspects of these

women's lives as well. The research questions posed in this paper are:  
RQ1: How do women make sense of the "good-girl" construct?  
RQ2: What influence does the value construct of "good-girl" have on Asian Indian women in their marital lives journeying as they are between the two worlds represented by the socialization of their Indian upbringing (good-girl) and desire to (not) maintain an "ideal" wife image?

## **Method**

### **A researcher's "insider" view**

A good qualitative study demands self-reflection on the part of the researcher. Qualitative researchers are also known to and in fact, expected to engage the self in their research projects, motivated as they often are by their own histories, contexts, situations, and experiences to pursue a particular area of inquiry. The current study was influenced by my own conflicts and the struggles that I had in negotiating my identities - growing up being socialized into societally expected behaviors of what a woman should and should not do and the will to be my own woman and often do as I please. Growing up in India, I also realized that even though I had the privileged freedom to do as I pleased, I imposed restrictions on my own behaviors through self-monitoring. In a sense, in talking to these women, I was trying to reassure myself that I was not alone in this contested "ideal" space. I was trying to find my "self" in these women. [Krieger \(1991\)](#) contends that the self cannot be separated from one's research because:

...when we discuss others, we are always talking about ourselves. Our images of "them" are images of "us". Our theories of how "they" act and what "they" are like, are, first of all, theories about ourselves: who we are, how we act, and what we are like. This self-reflective nature of our statements is something we can never avoid. In social science, although we try to comprehend others, and although we may aim to depict the ways their realities are different from our own, understanding others actually requires us to project a great deal of ourselves onto others, and onto the world at large (p. 5).

## **Participants**

The three women whose cases are presented in this paper are Indian women who came to the United States after having married their husbands in India. At the time of interviewing, two were currently pursuing advanced degrees while one, a doctor from India, just completed her qualifying examination to pursue medicine in the U.S. I conducted a semi-structured interviews with the women which made up 45 typed, single-spaced pages. The interviews ran from 58 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes. Although they were not explicitly asked, insider cultural knowledge and understanding informed me of the middle class status of the women. Two of the women were in their early thirties while one woman was in her late twenties. Two of the interviews were conducted at the women's houses while one participant visited my apartment for the interview. The following are the stories of these women who shared their experiences with me. The findings are structured uniquely in two sections. In the first, I discuss only the definitions these women proposed. In the second, I take a closer look at these definitions and discuss areas of influences and resistance among others.

### **Definitions of "good-girl"**

*Naina's definition* At the time of the interview, Naina has been in the United States for two and a half years. It was marriage that brought her to the U.S. Naina had a clear definition of who a good-girl is when I asked her but I noticed that her definition was based on how others defined it for her. In other words, when asked if she was familiar with the term "good-girl", she immediately cited movies, media, and her parents. In shaping her definition of a good-girl she was channeling the interpretations that she has been presented to her during socialization. At no point did Naina present her own views on what the term meant. So taken together, a good-girl for her was determined primarily by her parents' messages growing up. A good-girl therefore was one who did not talk to boys on the middle of the road (avoided unsupervised interactions with the opposite sex), oiled her hair while going to school

(so as to be modest and not show off), visited temples regularly, did not interact with boys on her way to the bus stop or while going for a walk and did not work (for pay) because after all, it was the man's job to provide for the family. A good-girl is also one who listens (obeys) her parents and follows all the restrictions placed on her. A definition of the good-girl that emerged out of media for her was that of someone who in the image of a Hindi film heroine would be clad in one of the traditional Indian dresses called the *salwar kameez*. A definition of the good-girl coming from her community's perspective would be someone with long hair that was well oiled and combed, adorned with lots of Jasmine flowers clad again, in a *salwar kameez* and a *bindi* (a little sticker or red color applied to or stuck to the forehead often between or slightly above where the eyebrows meet), prayed regularly, and did not talk or mingle with the opposite sex. The only point of departure from the above definition that Naina said she would allow herself because of her urban upbringing was perhaps leave the shampooed (no oil and no tying the hair, pulled back into a pony tail) hair open.

*Meghana's definition* Meghana came to the United States seven years ago to pursue her Master's degree. She got married to her boyfriend who was from a different Indian community (community differences in India, particularly in marriage are based on differences region, and linguistic backgrounds, among others) a marriage that initially met with opposition from his parents. She had definite ideas of the characteristics of a "good-girl". Although her definitions were influenced by other sources, she seemed to have developed her own views on what this construct meant. For Meghana, the characteristics of a good-girl depended on the age of the girl. For instance, a little school going girl, in order to be a "good-girl" would have to study and do well in school, not be disruptive, and would be neat and talented. An older woman to be called "good" should be "responsible, not belligerent or a contentious kind of a person, be friendly, respectful, should not challenge someone's ego and should not be a controversial person". When probed about what she meant by a "controversial person", Meghana said a women controversial if she did not respect or follow traditions, if she opposed people vociferously and fought with people she had disagreements with. For a married woman, the "good" emerged in terms of whether the woman was a nurturing mother. If the woman did not have children, the

focus would then be on whether she was hospitable and got along with people.

*Pria's definition* Like Naina, Pria also came to the U.S. after having married her husband in India. Her husband at the time of their marriage was a student at a university in the United States. Pria had a nine month old baby and at the time of the interview had her in-laws visiting her from India to help take care of the young child while Pria studied for her medical school exams. Pria's definition of a good-girl, while self-opined, was strongly influenced by external sources. She defined a good-girl in spatial terms, as before and after marriage. A good-girl before marriage in her teenage years "should be studying hard, be demure, not have boyfriends, abstain from pre-marital sex and remain a virgin until marriage". After marriage, the good-girl is the "one who respects her parents-in-law and tries to be a superwoman while trying to manage her family and career".

The definitions of these women clearly indicate how strongly they are influenced by the socializing sources of their society. Parents (who are themselves influenced by the larger society) and the media seemed to strongly influence how these women defined a good-girl. Moreover the three women have come to internalize these definitions to the extent that these are part of their own opinions of who and what a good-girl should be. To hear a woman define a post-marital "good" girl as one who attempted to be a superwoman appeared to be a shocking reinforcing of patriarchy. Thus, it can be argued then that "good-girl" is a socially constructed term that is then communicatively produced and reproduced by the very people who are supposedly being victimized by these value constructs.

### **Contesting spaces**

The definitional narratives presented by the women were further analyzed to develop a better understanding of their narratives. This analysis led to the emergence of four themes.

### **Internal sensemaking of external influences**

All three women cite external influences as having shaped their definition of the good-girl. Even though Meghana and Pria have

developed a personal definition of the term, all three definitions seem to be located in the larger discourses of Indian culture, the community, and ones parents. For Naina, Hindi movies and other media played a role in shaping her views along with the constant messages conveyed either directly or indirectly by her parents. Naina explains how she developed her definition of a good-girl as an antithesis to her sister. Because her sister did not follow the characteristic behaviors of a good-girl and got reprimanded for it, Naina saw herself as the good-girl who had to then make up for her sister's behavior and work harder to ensure that at least she would always be the good-girl for her parents. For Meghana, the influences were largely external as well.

While Pria does not immediately internalize her definition like Naina who sees herself as an antithesis to her sister's bad girl behavior, it is important to note that Pria's definition of a good-girl after marriage includes respect of parents-in-law and attempts to becoming a superwoman who seamlessly balances her family and career. At the time of our interview as mentioned earlier, Pria's parents-in-law were visiting the United States from India and were staying with Pria and her husband. Besides, Pria had just had a baby nine months ago. These two immediate contexts might have played a role in influencing her definition of a good-girl, thereby having internalized the definition as well. Besides parents and the media, the larger community of people around a woman and society in general also seem to have played an influencing role. While none of them define the "society" they are talking about, it would make contextual sense to infer that societal norms fuelled by ideas of living according to the standards of the Hindu Indian culture and promoted by media play an overwhelming role in the development of the construct of who a good-girl is and what she represents.

### **Exemplifying the good**

Another theme that emerged out of the narratives was that of the good-girl construct having age specific or life course specific characteristics. For Meghana a little school going girl is a good-girl if she studies hard, is neat or talented and not disruptive. For an older woman, her choice of words shifts to responsible, non-belligerent, non-contentious and non-

controversial which she defined as someone who did not oppose people vociferously, did not fight with anyone over differences of opinion, and followed traditions. As for a married woman, being a good-girl was all about how much of a nurturing mother she was. This concurs with Puri's (1990) research that motherhood is the essence of womanhood and marriage. Marriage and motherhood thus confer the "good-girl" status on the Indian woman. Pria divides her definition in terms of a pre- and a post-marital good-girl. She says,

Acchi (good) in terms of before you get married or in your teenage years you should be studying hard and not having you know boyfriends, pre-marital sex and you know basically very demure and probably in a stronger term, a virgin...

These women represented through their definition of the term good-girl, the idea that women, no matter how old, have to continually adopt a lifestyle of living the ideal life. Even though the content and contexts embedded within individual definitions may vary, the fact that women, across age and marital status have to pursue a life that exemplifies the good is beyond negotiation.

### **Going along to get along**

All three women have consciously played the role of the good-girl. Naina was always the good-girl. She did what her parents wanted her to do and behaved as she was expected of her. She did not talk to men, oiled her hair, visited temples regularly, and only made female friends as befriending the opposite sex or going for walks with them was contradictory to the good-girl image. Even as a wife, Naina says, she keeps home and cooks for her husband besides doing other things around the house. Despite being a trained classical singer, she admits she has considerably cut down on her involvement in musical activities and travels because her husband does not support those pursuits. Careful socializing and reminders of how and what the image of a good-girl should be, growing up, have now translated into fulfilling her duties as a



good wife, almost unconditionally. As I was interviewing her I could easily sense resentment toward those “duties” and yet she does them because like she says matter-of-factly, “I’ve always been the *acchi ladki* (good-girl) type”.

Meghana’s understanding and definition of the construct from the beginning was other- centered. When asked if she had ever tried to be a good-girl, her narrative jumped right into the phase of life after marriage. While she admits to not getting along with her in-laws and not attempting to pretend she loves them when she does not, she admits to playing along to keep domestic peace. She says:

...when my husband’s brother got married, I attended the wedding and I wore the things she (mother-in-law) got for me...I just played along

Meghana’s construction of her act as “playing along”, can be construed as her attempt to be a good-girl. After all, by her own definition, good-girls follow traditions and do not oppose people vociferously or fight with people just because they do not agree with them.

Pria assigns her attempts at being the good-girl to her personality:

Even though maybe because it’s my personality that I don’t want to see anybody unhappy and I want to keep all pieces of the extended family around to be in happy situation so if it means that if I do this there will not be any contradiction then I would rather do it than unless there was a very strong reason for me to put my foot down.

By Pria’s explanation, good-girls do not like to see others angry or make them unhappy. Good-girls also do not mind compromising if it means everybody gets along, stays together, and continues to remain happy even if such a compromise comes at personal discomfort.

## **Resistance**

Although each one of these women admitted to being a good-girl at

some time or another, their behaviors were not completely devoid of resistance. In Naina's case, two years before she was to get married she started rebelling against her parents.

Because I realized I wanted to move on. Because they had economic control, financial control so then they seemed to have some kind of emotional control as well. Control on my entire behavior, my entire there were a lot of things I wanted to do. I wanted to be at these musical events and then they had this whole thing of okay you have to get back on time and things like that. Maybe I took it to the other extreme come to think of it... It was totally unnecessary but I would just do it because I got a kick out of it.

Naina wanted to break away from the strict discipline and control her parents imposed on her even though as she admits, it was totally unnecessary. Naina had even started working at this time which was against her parents' or at least her father's idea of a good-girl since he believed good-girls need not work (but instead, get married to a man who would then support her). Perhaps in fear that after marriage expectations of being the good-girl will only get stronger in the form of multiple "goods" as wife and daughter-in-law, Naina wanted to enjoy her singlehood. This may have been why she later defied her parents and ignored her hitherto good-girl image.

For Meghana, her acts of resistance are performed when she creates a separation between her multiple selves with her in-laws.

...what they see is not the complete me. They are just seeing a version of me that is not coming out with all my statements and all my thoughts.

While she goes along with what they say when she is with them (like telling her wants to wear), she acts as if that was her alter ego. By not being herself with them she is holding on to the real self. In silencing the "real" her, she is in other words, not only resisting but also playing the good-girl by not voicing her discontent or unhappiness with the situation.

Pria tries to be the good-girl by holding the family together and making sure everybody is happy. She admits to having imbibed the qualities of being calm and friendly as is expected of a good-girl. While an explicit act of resistance was not evident in Pria's narratives, she admitted that had she really wanted to do something that her parents were opposed to, she would do have done it (such as the time when her mother forbade her from going to a party). That is, although she tries to be the good-girl and live like one, she would not hesitate to go against her self-imposed definition of being a good-girl, if provoked.

### **Conclusion**

The three narratives examined in this paper shed light on how three Asian Indian immigrant women navigate their way through multi-directional relational pulls. Clearly, the socialization of these women into behaving like "good-girls" is reflected in their marital relationships as well. The review of the literature presented earlier in the paper focused on the "ideal" Asian Indian women while the subsequent narratives and analysis focused on the "good-girl" as having influenced the ideal in a marital relationship. In-laws did not feature more prominently in these cases because all three of the women lived in the United States and were removed, physically, spatially, and temporally, from their influence and control. This influence however may be argued as being pervasive and germane to every Indian marriage because of the women's own desire to live up to the expectations of the husband's family even if it is only to maintain the harmony in relationships, as was the case with Pria. In other cases, husbands become the spokesmen and value construct keepers for their parents and want to be treated a certain way socialized as they are into expecting certain behaviors from their wives, as was the case with Naina's husband. The construct of a "good-girl" has gotten internalized so strongly into a woman's sense of self that regardless of construct keepers, even in the absence of traditional extended family controls in the United States, these women continue to live their married lives trying to embody the good and the ideal. The findings from this study also indicate how identities are fluid. Even as the Asian Indian immigrant woman continually negotiates multiple

representations of “other” identities for an external public, internally, her own ideas and images of what constitute the ideal daughter, wife, or daughter-in-law, police behavior. Sadly, patriarchy could not have done a better job in this context.

### **Limitations and directions for future research**

Even though qualitative methodology emphasizes the lived experiences of selected participants, a larger number of participants may have strengthened the argument made in the paper – that internalization of the value construct of “good-girl” is an all-pervasive phenomenon that affects relational contexts for Asian Indian immigrant women in the United States despite being physically, spatially, and temporally, removed from the strong cultural context within India that provides a more conducive environment to such behaviors. The argument could also have been strengthened by including married women with different immigrant statuses. As has been acknowledged in the first section, experiences of women who immigrate before and those who immigrate after marriage or if they had a choice in selecting their partner may influence the nature of their relationships and observing of value constructs. Furthermore, experience of having lived with the in-laws prior to coming to the United States as opposed to having gotten married and come directly to the U.S. shortly thereafter, may also present different findings. The variability of relational status may present some uniqueness that may not have been apparent in the largely homogenous group that was interviewed for this paper.

For future research and for a more refined study, more Asian Indian immigrant women could be interviewed for the same purpose as this paper. An ethnographic approach to understanding how exactly the value construct is pervasive in their lives may also provide good information. The percolation of this value construct into becoming the “ideal” mother and one’s definition of it may be another area of potential research. Research should also be done in how this construct plays itself into other contexts of women’s lives. For example, does being a “good-girl” translate to being the “good-employee” at work and if so, what are the critical and discursive manifestations of such an ideology. Finally, an interdisciplinary examination and interpretation of

the good-girl value construct – for example, through sociological, psychological, historical, and political lenses – may enrich our understanding of the same.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Shakuntala (Translated by A.W. Ryder) quoted in Pandey, 2000

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