

Reading Indian-American Women: Writers, Protagonists, and Critics

by

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To the Indian women who write fiction,
leaving their imprint on the world,
and to those who read their stories.

Acknowledgments

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Abstract

Indian-American women writers are currently experiencing an unprecedented popularity in the American literary mainstream, and two of the most important writers in this genre are Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri. Yet, even as readers embrace these writers' stories, there is a gap in critical analysis; for the most part, critics' responses to these works are limited to an examination of the portrayal of Indian culture within them, while the equally important themes of gender, assimilation, and American culture are largely ignored. The aims of this thesis are to point out the limitations and problematic nature of existing criticism on these writers, and to offer a more comprehensive analysis of two particular works—Divakaruni's "Clothes" and Lahiri's *The Namesake*—that focuses on the development of each story's protagonist.

The first chapter compares and contrasts two critical responses to Divakaruni from critics with two different cultural identities, discussing the influence of the reviewer's self-identification in his or her response to the work. The result is overly simplistic or over personal readings that make generalizations about Divakaruni's writing based on the critic's own relationship to Indian-American culture, while ignoring the particularity of the work.

The second chapter consists of a close reading of "Clothes" that attempts to go beyond the limitations displayed in the critics' responses. The story is analyzed with an examination of all its basic themes: Sumita's dependence on men, her traditional Indian marriage, her attempt to adapt traditional gender roles to modern America, her developing sexuality, her feeling of isolation, and her fantasies about American life. This reading emphasizes how Sumita, suspended between the patriarchal limitations of both Indian and American culture, simply has no access to the tools she needs for feminist self-realization, and therefore resorts to creating her identity based on fantasy.

The third chapter discusses critical responses to *The Namesake*, looking, once again, at reviews by an Indian-identified reader and another one by a non-Indian to gauge the cultural bias of both respondents. It includes a discussion of the dangers of giving in to the impulse to exoticize the characters and their culture, as well as how an overly personal response ignores the actual situation of the characters within the story. Also explored are the implications that come with labeling Lahiri a "second-generation" writer, and how some critics use this classification to talk about her work without really engaging with it.

Finally, the fourth chapter offers a detailed analysis of *The Namesake*. It traces the narrative arc of Ashima, Lahiri's female protagonist, from her immigration into America in the 1960s, to her domestic seclusion during the birth and childhood of her children, and her tentative forays out into the outside American world in her middle age, and finally to her decision to retire six months of every year in India and the other six in America. The focus of the analysis is Ashima's isolation from the outside world, and the events that make her finally change her mind and decide to compromise by half-assimilating.

The purpose of these readings is to show the breadth of the complex thematic and cultural concerns in these works, with the hope that future critics will take a more conscientious and rounded approach in responding to them.

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It is in fiction that I will continue to interpret the term “Indian-American,”
calculating that shifting equation, whatever answers it may yield.

JHUMPA LAHIRI (INTERVIEW IN *NEWSWEEK*)

For the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history.

GEORGE ELIOT (*MILL ON THE FLOSS*)

INTRODUCTION

“At the core of all diasporic fictions... is the haunting presence of India—and the anguish of personal loss it represents. It is precisely this shared experience of absence that engenders an aesthetics of reworlding that informs and unites the literature of the Indian diaspora.”¹

When discussing the diasporic literature of a postcolonial nation like India, an emphasis is often placed—and rightly so—on the figure of India and the culture associated with it, because it serves as the main frame of reference for the “reworlding” that regularly goes on in these works. This is true for literature about India produced in India itself, and also often for the literature of exile, produced at a distance from the country by authors who are nonetheless focused homeward. However, emerging over the last couple of decades, particularly in America, is a new type of Indian diasporic story: the literature of immigration, a classic American theme, now rendered with poignant particularity by female Indian-American authors writing about Indian women moving to and settling in the USA. Although India is still a strong preoccupation, it is no longer the only “core” of this genre: gender and the host culture of the U.S. both become equally important figures in these stories. This shift in fiction has not, however, been accompanied by a shift in the criticism; most critics still respond to these works looking only for India or Indian culture at the core, and the other two facets have been largely ignored. This is particularly unfortunate when it comes to criticism on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri, two of the most notable writers dealing with the experience of Indian-American women. In this paper, I will consider Divakaruni’s short story “Clothes” and Lahiri’s novel *The Namesake*,

¹ Emmanuel Nelson, quoted in Rosemary Marangoly George. “At a Slight Angle to Reality”: Reading Indian Diaspora Literature.” *MELUS* 21.3 (1996): 179-193

looking at the shortcomings in the existing criticism, and offering thorough readings of both works that explicitly address the complex portrayals of gender, culture, and identity within them.²

I am dealing with works that have not yet come under much academic scrutiny; my research suggests that critical scholarship has so far not examined either of these books in great detail, or, at best, is just beginning to do so in a scattered and sporadic effort. Of course, this is often the case for very contemporary works, since there is usually some lag time before critics decide what is worth writing about, but in this case the present unfocused state of scholarship seems unwarranted and peculiar, given the recent increase of interest in hyphenated American voices, and these particular writers' popularity. Indeed, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri are closer and closer to becoming household names in the popular media—their books have won shelf space in all major bookstores, they have both received various national awards, and they are mentioned frequently in newspapers and on the Web.³ People are certainly reading these books, and often responding very positively, and the media are taking interest in these writers as public figures. What is lacking, with very few exceptions, is serious critical analysis of these works—readings of these books often focus entirely on the ethnic Indian component, without looking at the construction of the stories or the implications of their content. At least as far as American publications are concerned, both Indian and non-Indian readers can be guilty of shortsightedness when responding to the work of these writers. This is a trend that undermines the respect that should be accorded to both Divakaruni and Lahiri as storytellers; it effectively

² Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, "Clothes," *Arranged Marriage*, New York: Anchor Books, 1995; Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

³ Among the various distinctions awarded to both authors, Divakaruni won the 1996 American Book Award for *Arranged Marriage*, and Lahiri won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for *The Interpreter of Maladies*.

classifies their stories as topics only of ethnic special interest, and ignores all the other issues contained within.

The first focus of this paper is the limitations that characterize existing responses to such work, both in scholarly articles and journalistic reviews. From its inception, reception theory has emphasized the subjectivity of the reader in negotiating works of fiction, and it is especially the case for this genre that many critics and reviewers respond from an extremely polarized position of cultural subjectivity. Many readers who identify as Indian seem to scan these works looking only for echoes of their own experience, while American readers who are not Indian often approach these stories as exotic artifacts of an alien experience; both are constrained by their locational bias. As a result, both groups lose sight of the works as a whole—the stories are considered only as views of Indian culture, and the writers evaluated only in terms of how they present these views. This leads to passionate and contentious responses, particularly from the Indian-identified readers, since the issue of representing cultural identity is a highly sensitive one for a postcolonial culture like India's.

At the start of his discussion of the reception of postcolonial literature in *The Postcolonial Exotic*, Graham Huggan wonders:

Are postcolonial writers persuaded to represent their respective cultures, and to translate those cultures for an unfamiliar metropolitan readership? To what extent does the value ascribed to them and attributed to their writing depend on their capacity to operate, not just as *representers* of culture but as bona fide cultural *representatives*? And is this representativeness a function of their inscription in the margins, of the

mainstream demand for an ‘authentic,’ but readily translatable, marginal voice? (Huggan 26)⁴

This is precisely what is at play here; to these readers, the perception of the author as representative overrides her role as fictional representer. It is also this process that makes the readers read only for the portrayal of Indian culture within these fictional works, confining the writers to the margins of the American mainstream by treating their works as belonging to a small cultural niche. By focusing on only the first part of the hyphen and reading these works as “Indian,” readers from either location neglect to examine another equally important facet of these stories: the authors’ depiction of American culture, which is often presented with irony or implicit critique.⁵ Even more unforgivably, they lose sense of these works as fiction, looking at them instead as sociological manuscripts or depictions of Indian family life. This leads them to draw conclusions of authenticity with a passion fuelled by much more personal investment than merely an attention to realism. The author’s crafting of her fictional world loses much of its importance in these reviews, as do the narrative, themes, and the characters’ psychological development, and the work becomes only two-dimensional. The author, herself, is also classified under an easy category, and often a simplistic line is drawn between her cultural background and the depiction of her characters. Unfortunately, such reviews represent the rule rather than the exception for both Divakaruni and Lahiri.

It is this trend that needs to be rectified, and, to that end, my second focus in this paper is to offer a more comprehensive way of reading and responding to these works. Of course, it is important to keep in mind the Indianness of both the authors and the characters, but only to

⁴ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London: Routledge, 2001.

⁵ Conversation with Professor Merla Wolk, 15 February 2008.

provide a cultural context; a thorough reading must go beyond that to look seriously at the work as a whole, in all its dimensions. Of paramount importance is an acknowledgment of the stories as pieces of art—what I'm analyzing is the fictional depiction, not the accuracy of the Indian cultural practices mentioned in the story. These authors must be allowed as much leeway with their characters and narratives as we would give any other genre of fiction, and I make sure to accommodate that in my response. To that end, I look at the characters in their specificity, making no sweeping generalizations or claims of universal representation: these two stories have protagonists who are representative of characters in Indian-American women's fiction and are informed by real Indian women—which doesn't mean the characters should be taken as models for the entirety of Indian-American womanhood. Certainly, both Divakaruni and Lahiri write from and about a particular diasporic Indian culture, but they do write *fiction*.

Of course, as I assert the cultural subjectivity of the other readers whose responses I analyze, I cannot claim to be infallibly objective myself: after all, I, too, am a reader with a particular history, and I'm not free of biases to bring to my reading. Moreover, as a young Indian woman who has grown up in America, I have quite a personal interest in the depiction of these female Indian-American protagonists, and perhaps am that much more invested in wanting their experience to reaffirm my own. Still, by acknowledging upfront my own identity and location, and being mindful of the pitfalls of an identity-limited reading, I strive to move beyond the simple knee-jerk biased response, and give these stories the comprehensive and detailed attention that they so clearly deserve. My ethnicity and experience should simply inform my reading, not be the basis of my authority, and my analysis should follow the work as it unfolds in all its complexity. The authors, too, should receive their due respect as creators of independent characters who are more than simply autobiographical reflections embedded in a fictional mirror of convenience.

My analysis here assumes a Western feminist perspective, because that is the culture in which these stories and their authors are located. The books themselves are American products: they were written and published in America by mainstream American publishers.⁶ Divakaruni's stories, of which "Clothes" is fairly typical, very often take place in the interior domestic world of the Indian-American female characters, and so often do include Indian words or references. But *Arranged Marriage* includes a glossary at the end with English translations of all the Indian words, foods, and expressions (and "Indianized British expressions from colonial times") used in the stories—while no explanation is provided for the colloquial American expressions or figures. The imagined reader, then, is implicitly an English-speaking American who does not necessarily have any detailed prior knowledge of Indian language and customs, but who is on the other hand quite likely to be aware of the attention paid to gender in today's mainstream American milieu.

Lahiri's novel, much like most of her other stories, is based heavily on the Indian-American characters' interaction with their surroundings and other Americans. There are very few unexplained references in Bengali in *The Namesake*, and the vast majority of the narrative employs standard American English, even when reporting the conversation of two characters who would logically speak in Bengali. Lahiri often includes female characters who actively negotiate gender roles and complex relationships with men—and this novel gives us Moushumi, who struggles explicitly with contemporary Western feminist dilemmas, like balancing sexual experimentation with cultural expectation, or the politics of adopting her husband's last name. Even Ashima, the protagonist in my reading of *The Namesake*, at times expresses concern about the burden of her role as the dutiful Indian wife, especially when she is pregnant.

⁶ *Arranged Marriage* was published by Anchor Books, a division of Random House, Inc., and *The Namesake* was published by Houghton Mifflin.

The stories, then, are presented in the context of American gender discourse; just as we must anticipate the possibility that readers will look critically at the Indian characters' take on feminism and the West, we must allow for the author's awareness that the outcomes experienced by her characters have loaded cultural and feminist implications. Likewise, when contradictory or misleading portrayals of American women are presented, I read the inclusion of such details as the author's ironic commentary on the opinions and experience of the protagonist. My own analysis is feminist insofar as it focuses on the trajectory of the female characters, and explores the possibility of self-realization for women whose culture has been entirely framed by male authority.

There are numerous contemporary Indian-American women authors whom I could have considered for this project, but I have chosen Divakaruni and Lahiri because I have tremendous respect for both of them as artists. I include "Clothes" and *The Namesake* in particular because they are both good representatives of each author's particular themes and preoccupations. Divakaruni excels in writing about recent immigrants with fresh memories of India faced with the immediate difficulties of life in America, and *Arranged Marriage* is full of stories exploring this theme in various incarnations of protagonist, setting, and conflict. For this reason, "Clothes" serves well as a representative short story, and, because of its length, lends itself to a detailed close reading, which I offer in Chapter II. Lahiri, for her part, often revisits the inner workings of Indian-American families, exploring their attitudes towards assimilation and self-determination, which is exactly the focus of *The Namesake*. The trajectory of Ashima's development, though not the only narrative, is central enough in the novel to warrant a close reading, and this is what I give it in Chapter IV. Finally, I have selected these stories because both "Clothes" and *The*

Namesake deal explicitly with the issue of gender within the Indian diaspora and the cultural conflict that comes about when an Indian character interacts with American culture, which are two of the most important—and critically overlooked—themes of Indian-American women’s fiction.

In my first chapter, I outline the two cultural poles of response to Divakaruni’s writing, discussing one review by an Indian-identified reader and another one by a non-Indian, and the differences between them. I employ Lata Mani’s theory of locational bias in evaluating responses to postcolonial writing, and try to get a sense of the culturally charged subjective framework of interpretation that exists around the writing of Indian-American women. The determination as to whether Sumita is a victim or an empowered heroine seems to depend upon the particular cultural identity of the responder, though both seem to evaluate Divakaruni mainly for the accuracy and richness of the view she offers of Indian culture. I highlight the problems with such a restricted response, and explore the implications of what, exactly, the critics are getting out of this work.

In the second chapter, I carry out my own analysis of “Clothes.” This story, in a broad sense, constructs the protagonist, Sumita, and American culture as parallel entities, and Sumita’s process of redefining her identity with her oblique exposure to America is the driving force of the narrative. The story’s most central themes are directly related to the adjustment process that comes with her immigration to America: Sumita’s dependence on men, her traditional Indian marriage, her attempt to adapt traditional gender roles to modern America, her developing sexuality, her feeling of isolation, and her fantasies about American life. My reading emphasizes how Sumita, suspended between the patriarchal limitations of both Indian and American

culture, simply has no access to the tools she needs for feminist self-realization, and therefore resorts to creating her identity based on fantasy. The story's conclusion leaves her at a moment when she recognizes a need for independence and decides to fight for it, though Divakaruni doesn't offer us any realistic vision of Sumita being able to achieve it.

In the third chapter, I discuss critical responses to *The Namesake*, looking, once again, at reviews by an Indian-identified reader and another one by a non-Indian. I discuss the dangers of giving in to the impulse to exoticize the characters and their culture, as well as how an overly personal response ignores the actual situation of the characters within the story. I point to the noticeable gap that exists in scholarship of Lahiri, despite her acclaim, and suggest possible reasons for its existence. I also explore the question of who constitutes Lahiri's readership, and whether it is appropriate to place her in any particular literary tradition. Finally, I consider all the implications that come with labeling Lahiri a "second-generation" writer, and how some critics use this classification to talk about her work without really engaging with it.

In the fourth chapter, I offer my own detailed close-reading of *The Namesake*. I trace the narrative arc of Ashima, Lahiri's female protagonist, from her immigration to America in the 1960s, to her domestic seclusion during the birth and childhood of her children, followed by her tentative forays out into the outside American world in her middle age, and finally end with her decision to retire six months in India and the other six in America. Throughout the novel, Ashima's life in America is shaped and limited by the confluence of two forces: her gender, and the Indian cultural roles she has internalized and adopted. I analyze the ways in which she keeps herself isolated from the outside world, and the events that make her finally change her mind and decide to compromise by half-assimilating.

This paper is a response to specific works, specific characters within them, and some readers who respond to them, with no claims of trying to cover all the possible topics present in the genre. What is most important is to treat these stories as literature, and explore them in their very particularity. It is by closely illuminating small moments within the larger emerging genre of Indian-American women's writing that we can do these writers the most justice: validating their voices not just by allowing them into the mainstream, but by actually listening to what they have to say.

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CHAPTER I

FALLACIES IN READING: CRITICAL RESPONSES TO DIVAKARUNI

Rosemary Marangoly George, in a survey article of contemporary Indian-American fiction, asserts: “The literature produced out of diasporic experiences has always been in the business of constructing fictions that fit realities that don’t fit realities” (George 180).⁷ What she is suggesting here is that these fictions inhabit a “reality” or a cultural experience that doesn’t quite fit the dominant “reality” of the society in which they are written, and that this process of dual removal from the familiar warrants the attention of readers. “Clothes” takes place in such a space, the often nightmarish interior world of Sumita’s in-laws’ apartment, suspended between India and America, where Sumita forms her impressions of the exterior she has never actually inhabited. If for the duration of the story, we as readers immerse ourselves in the fiction-reality of this world, we see that the story provides us with strong commentary on the external dominant “reality” from which it is removed; and this, indeed is the character of “American culture,” which at various times seems to function alternatively as a vehicle and a foil for our protagonist.

However, as much as this story, like the others in the *Arranged Marriage* collection, is about the protagonist’s exploration and construction of American culture, critical responses to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s work tend to focus only on the depiction of Indian culture therein. The cultural identity of the Indian characters—and, by extension, the Indian author who creates them—becomes the defining feature of the work, and it is with respect to the depiction of the Indianness of the characters and the setting that the various interpretations of the stories

⁷ Rosemary Marangoly George, “Review: ‘At a Slight Angle to Reality’: Reading Indian Diaspora Literature,” *MELUS* 21.3 (1996): 179-193

emerge. Lata Mani, writing about the intersection of feminist and post-colonialist theory in contemporary academic practice, highlights the importance of location in influencing work about postcolonial subjects.⁸ Since readers and writers are both products of particularity and history, she argues, their approaches to these works depend largely on their location—here, she broadens the definition of “location” to encompass one’s particular store of sociocultural experience. As she learns from presenting her work to audiences in different countries, the response to her research varied mainly according to the ethnic self-identification of the responders, thus suggesting that the interpretive framework of an individual is subject to cultural identity.⁹ I agree with the emphasis Mani’s theory of reception places on the “positionality and location [in] the production of knowledge as well as its reception”—which means, when looking at critical responses to Divakaruni’s work, it is just as important to keep in mind the reader’s cultural identity as it is to consider the author’s Indian ethnicity (Mani 25). In fact, it is the case that reviewers often identify their ethnic ties to India, or lack thereof, when writing about the work of Indian-American women authors, themselves identifying successful cultural comprehension as to what’s at stake in this genre. In general, Western readers tend to avoid discussing the complexities of the struggle between Indian tradition and American culture that is so central to these stories, whereas Indian readers tend to be overly sensitive about the image of India displayed to the West by these works of fiction.

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⁸ Lata Mani, “Multiple Mediations: Feminist Scholarship in the Age of Multinational Reception,” *Feminist Review* 35 (1990): 24-41

⁹ She recorded and analyzed responses to her own PhD thesis, which was a study of the Indian practice of *sati*, or burning widows at their husbands’ funeral pyres.

Janice Albert, an American reviewer, opens her review of *Arranged Marriage* for the *English Journal* with: “Westerners have long been confused about India. Columbus tried to answer the question: where, exactly, is it?” (Albert 99).¹⁰ She is explicit about her lack of particular cultural knowledge about India, and aligns herself with the great Western tradition, with the invocation of Columbus, in feeling this way. Her review, titled “How Now, My Metal of India?”,¹¹ then goes on to make references to the attempts of William Shakespeare and E. M. Forster to discuss India, before asserting: “In our own time, we are privileged to have writers of Indian birth sharing through their fiction the experience of life in America” (Albert 99). This assertion makes certain assumptions about the work and the context of its writing: first, that the book she is reviewing, which she herself categorizes as being about the American experience, also reveals some truth about the exotic, unknowable India; second, that the readers (“we”) are the interested “Westerners,” whereas the Indian-American author is defined in contrast to “us” by her “Indian birth”; and third, that the author’s fiction is really a reflection of her experience in America, and therefore authentic. Albert then delves into a paragraph about the career of Bharati Mukherjee, the first Indian-American woman writer to break into the mainstream American literary scene with her popular novels and short stories in the 1980s, presenting Mukherjee as an archetype of the “writers of Indian birth” who inform the West.

In one sense, Albert’s move here resonates with my own project; she is trying to draw parallels between different Indian-American women writers, recognizing a commonality in their subject matter and work. However, her inclination is to take this to an extreme, drawing simplistic connections between the backgrounds of the authors that ignore the particulars of

¹⁰ Janice Albert, “How Now, My Metal of India?” *The English Journal* 86.5 (1997): 99-100

¹¹ The title, she tells us, comes from a line in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, in which Sir Toby addresses Maria as “My Metal of India,” suggesting her pricelessness to him (Albert 99).

their work. She articulates the relationship between Mukherjee's and Divakaruni's writing by referring to Divakaruni (who, incidentally, had also published her first works in the 1980s, at the same time as Mukherjee) as "representing a second-generation of Indian-American writers," markedly using terms of immigration to describe what she sees as the evolution of this literary tradition (Albert 99). Unfortunately, she also conflates the two women, at one time erroneously referring to *Arranged Marriage* as Mukherjee's collection (Albert 99). Now, keeping in mind the rushed circumstances under which many book reviews are written, it would be unkind to attract too much attention to an error, but this particular mistake highlights a pattern that is seen throughout this review (and, indeed, many other responses of American readers). Indeed, this review was published in *The English Journal*, a reputable academic journal, whose editor, too, apparently missed the error. The easy interchangeability of these authors in Albert's mind suggests she is reading these books for cultural material rather than individualistic authorial style, and that the work itself to her is an Indian artifact that can be read for its sociological revelations.

She prefaces the brief synopsis she gives of "Clothes" with: "Divakaruni's women are sympathetic, whole figures, decisively taking freedom in both hands, as vibrantly alive as any of Shakespeare's heroines" (Albert 99). The story, in this reading, is about perseverance and successful self-definition; to Albert, Sumita is a "whole figure" and a successful heroine learning to assert herself. Exactly which Shakespearean heroine she has in mind is unclear; although Sumita's story is certainly one of great misfortune, it can't be called a tragedy in the Shakespearean sense, and on the whole the vague reference to Shakespeare seems very contrived. The story and its protagonist are made more accessible to a "Westerner" by ignoring the muddling details of the actual feminist dilemma, and discarding the particularity of socio-historic setting in favor of an appeal to universality. Albert demonstrates an inability to connect

with the context of the work, which is especially ironic if we consider that she is based in California, the state in which many of Divakaruni's stories are set (and, incidentally, where Divakaruni lives).¹²

The work is only evaluated insofar as it provides a glimpse into the native culture of the immigrant author, which in turn can be accessed directly and easily through language:

The culture of India is abundantly represented in the vocabulary of food, clothing, and pet names. The author has provided a glossary as well as contextual clues, yet some of this vocabulary is easy, even amusing: *filmi* music is Hindi for film music, and a character who accuses another of becoming *amrekan* means the near-cognate "American" (Albert 100).

Albert is simultaneously appreciative of the exoticism of India, as represented in this work through the "food, clothing and pet names", and the accessibility of the references. It is interesting that the representative examples of "the culture of India" that she takes up are sensory details, and not bangle-breaking ceremonies or sociological questions about the treatment of widows, both of which are equally present in the story. The tendency here, then, is to generalize and to simplify, to appreciate the exoticism of the references and the variety of the vocabulary. No quality judgment is made about the value of the work; it is presumed socially valuable because of its status as cultural artifact, and good because of its presentation of "sympathetic" women who are "vibrantly alive"—indeed, apparently of Shakespearean dimension. Albert finds only unequivocal praise for this particular book, and for the genre of Indian-American writing as a whole—the "generational" difference she set up between Mukherjee and Divakaruni is at the end only nominal, since both writers are producing what, to

¹² The introductory material of the review informs us that at the time of publication, Janice Albert taught at Las Positas College in Livermore, California.

Albert, is essentially the same product. She also maintains throughout the review the position of the cultural outsider interested in being informed about the Indian experience, suggesting that these works of fiction fulfill that educational function for her.

* * * * *

It is precisely this type of essentializing impulse displayed by American readers that causes Indian reviewers to respond defensively and cynically to Indian-American women's fiction. Amitava Kumar, reviewing Divakaruni's work as part of his article titled "Louder than Bombs" which does a broad survey of the Indian-American fiction of the late 90s, diverges significantly from Albert in his evaluation of the achievement of this genre and in his opinion about Divakaruni's writing.¹³ Kumar identifies himself as an Indian émigré, at one point speaks of himself reading these works from "a migrant's self-imposed isolation" and responding most positively to works that were able to evoke nostalgia (Kumar 99). Though he is reviewing another of Divakaruni's books and not *Arranged Marriage* specifically, most of his comments in the article are generalizations about the author's style and subject matter, and are therefore relevant to my project. Moreover, the novel he is considering, *The Mistress of Spices*, was published only two years after *Arranged Marriage*, and tells the story of various families within an Indian community in Oakland, California; the setting and context are very similar to that of "Clothes." Kumar regards Divakaruni's work as an Indian-American artifact, emphatically disengaging it from writing targeted at Indian readers, and challenging its authenticity.

¹³ Amitava Kumar, "Louder than Bombs," *Transition* 79 (1999): 80-81

Kumar's first comment about Divakaruni is that the author is too focused on the depiction of dysfunctional Indian subjects, displaying an "all-consuming... preoccupation with the lumpen" (Kumar 86). He then describes what he sees as the result of this preoccupation: "I have come to imagine Divakaruni as a high priestess at the South Asian Victim Olympics: she chooses the events, judges the performances, and awards the medals herself" (Kumar 86). The same protagonists that, in Albert's estimation, were "sympathetic, whole figures, decisively taking freedom in both hands" here become merely victims controlled by a sadistic storyteller, cartoonish in the intensity of their misfortune and their own flaws (Albert 99). This type of dismissal fails to acknowledge the important social issues brought to light by the plight of the characters—Sumita's experience of widowhood, for example—and, more importantly, the fact that these depictions are echoes of real experiences for many Indian women.¹⁴ If Albert's criticism was simplistic in discussing the characters as timeless heroines without context, Kumar's is reductive, with the characters functioning simply as mouthpieces for the author's alleged fixation on melodramatic tragedy.

Implicit here is criticism of Divakaruni for lack of realism in her stories, which Kumar backs up with a textual example of unrealistic speech by one of the characters. Quoting a passage from the novel where a man from Kashmir describes the fighting he witnessed in his native town, he asserts "I have yet to meet a Kashmiri man who talks like this" (Kumar 88). The most immediate charge is one of inauthenticity, which Kumar feels qualified to make based solely, it seems, on his personal experience: he has not met any Kashmiris who talk like that, therefore it is unrealistic. His cultural self-identification as Indian, then, accords him authority as a reader, which he exercises by dismissing the character's speech as "easy-to-swallow

¹⁴ For sociological information on and first hand accounts by women of Indian origin, see: Women of South Asian Descent Collective ed. *Our Feet Walk The Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1993.

nonsense” (Kumar 88). His complaint is that Divakaruni offers only “pithy broken-English translations of Urdu phrases as a substitute for a discussion” of serious underlying political issues; the exotic mixed vocabulary which Albert saw as a strength is regarded here as a poorly rendered smokescreen which distracts from the important concerns that are conveniently ignored (Kumar 88).

This is not to say Kumar would expect Albert to notice the same flaws in Divakaruni’s work as he does; on the contrary, he endorses a similar notion of location-based reception which Mani outlines, and acknowledges that Divakaruni writes in an American context for Western readers. For Kumar as an Indian reader, however, this is an inherent weakness: “it should be obvious [to Indian readers] that the literary goods in question have been stamped, ‘For Export Only’” (Kumar 88). The suggestion here is that stories written for “export” to Western audiences necessarily dilute the Indian experience—he later asks: “What is lost when a people are cheated of the complexity of their lives, cheated of their voices?” (Kumar 88). The answer, according to him, is that Indian readers are alienated since the work is “only” for export, while Western readers are (however misguidedly) satisfied with the apparent exoticism; the two audiences remain very separate. He holds up as an example the review in *The New Yorker* which described *The Mistress of Spices*, a novel in which Indian spices and foods figure prominently, as “so pungent that it stains the page,” explaining: “Remarks like these help explain why so many Indian writers based in the West have succumbed to the same familiar culinary themes” (Kumar 79).¹⁵ The criticism here is that Divakaruni is pandering solely to her American audience by providing them with more of the same stereotypical subject matter they’ve come to expect from

¹⁵ The other example he provides of authors preoccupied with these “familiar culinary themes” is Salman Rushdie, whose novels *Midnight’s Children* (1981) and *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995) both feature Indian spices. Speaking of the comparative value of both authors, Kumar insists that “Rushdie’s tale of the Indian sub-*condiment* are as much about colonialism as cooking [while] Divakaruni sets her sights firmly lower,” again pointing to the lack of explicit political themes in Divakaruni’s work as a weakness (Kumar 86).

Indian writers, while neglecting the desires of her Indian readers. Kumar acknowledges explicitly, with a certain amount of bitterness, that when it comes to this genre, “It’s not so much whether you are writing in New Delhi or New York; it’s for whom and with whom you’re writing that truly matters” (Kumar 101).

Having designated his own view of Divakaruni’s motivations as self-evident, Kumar goes on to commit the same fallacy that characterized Albert’s review: equating the author with her characters. He talks about the helplessness of the characters in the novel, saying the protagonist’s desire to feel needed by her community “comes to sound an awful lot like a novelist’s desire to overcome marginal status in her adopted homeland”—the characters’ quest for assimilation becomes a direct reflection of what Kumar imagines to be Divakaruni’s feelings about her place in American society (Kumar 88). After briefly outlining the stories of some of the fictional characters in the novel, Kumar decides that “their real need is for a novelist they can call their own in this strange land,” which is the role she sees Divakaruni desperately trying to fill for real Indians (Kumar 89). Ascribing such a representational agenda to Divakaruni, however baselessly, allows Kumar to be dismissive of the overall value of her work, especially since his article starts with warning “the new generation of Indian writers whose faces are so resolutely turned toward the West” not to try to be spokesman for their people (Kumar 83).

The one thing he does concede, albeit patronizingly, is that Divakaruni’s unarguable prominence in the literary scene of the 1990s is “reason for optimism” (Kumar 89). In a move to authoritatively contextualize this work within the genre of Indian-American writing, Kumar labels it an infant effort, instructing his readers: “We must remind ourselves that *The Mistress of Spices* is a contribution to a tradition of South Asian writing in America that is still quite young” (Kumar 89). Much like the charge of being cultural and literary “adolescents” that was directed at African-American writers of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, such claims of immaturity

seek to diminish the work of particular individuals, while hinting at the cultural inferiority of their ethnic (or, in this case, generational) group. The only value of Divakaruni's novel to Kumar, then, is its existence as groundwork for future works to come:

Divakaruni is unable to render the speech of immigrant Indian laborers in London or Los Angeles, but the next generation will grow up in the ghettos (or suburbs) of England and America, and they will soon make her attempts redundant.... The era of ventriloquism will soon come to an end (Kumar 89).

Echoed here is the same metaphor of "generations" used by Albert, except Divakaruni is now considered *first* generation, which comes with the connotations of being a sort of primitive ancestor. Kumar's assumption is that authenticity will increase with time, and that subsequent immigrant generations will somehow be more representative of the Indian voice than Divakaruni, immigrant herself—although he has previously established that representativeness should not be a goal for these authors.

This contradictory article, which first denigrates authors who try to be spokespersons, and then accuses Divakaruni of being a poor spokesperson, finally ends with a sharp criticism for "the shopworn mannerisms—and... the desperate yearning for authenticity—that characterizes so much of what passes for Indian writing in the West" (Kumar 101). After reading Kumar's review, however, it seems like the "desperate yearning for authenticity" lies less in Divakaruni as a writer, and more in Kumar as a reader. Looking merely for a reflection of his own Indian experience in the fiction of Indian-American women writers, Kumar is disappointed, while Albert as an outsider avoids engaging with these works in any meaningful way by classifying them as artifacts. These are, of course, both extreme responses to this genre of writing, but the examination of their respective prejudices suggests that successful readers must

avoid the fallacy of only reading for culture, and be conscious of how their own self-identification colors their reading.

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CHAPTER II

THE FANTASY OF AMERICA IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S "CLOTHES"

In my own reading of "Clothes" in this chapter, I try to avoid the trap of responding simply from my own cultural position. Having acknowledged this overwhelming temptation felt by all responders to this type of cultural literature, I try to be constantly aware of the pitfalls and limitations it involves. Of course, I draw from my own knowledge of Indian culture, but only in clarifying the references and traditional relationships mentioned in the story, and not by projecting my own life on to the characters or judging them based on my personal biases. As mentioned in my introduction, mine is a Western feminist reading, but I also try to avoid the opposite trap of essentializing or tokenizing the Indian characters' experience without looking critically at the cultural situation created by the author. I go in with no assumptions about Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni as an author attempting to speak as representative for Indian or Indian-American culture, merely considering her work as fiction. While I do want to emphasize the common features this protagonist shares with characters of this genre, I try not to make overarching generalizations that take away from the particularity of this work. More than anything, I want to analyze the cultural world Divakaruni creates within this story, and the implications it has for the characters that inhabit it. Instead of looking at it as an artifact, I want to give this story the respect it deserves as a piece of art.

"Clothes," although published separately in various other collections, takes its place in Divakaruni's book near the start of the narrative arc that can be drawn through the collection; it

is the second story, following one that is set in India and features a child narrator.¹⁶ “Clothes,” in a sense, offers us the next developmental phase after childhood: it starts with a portrayal of the young protagonist’s girlish life in a village in India, and her bride-viewing, wedding, and post-wedding courtship with Somesh, the Indian-American to whom she is wed. The story then follows her to America, depicting her new life as traditional wife, daughter-in-law, and, finally, young widow in California. Characteristically for Divakaruni, the story is told in the first-person from the perspective of the female protagonist, Sumita, and is rich in emotion and sensory detail. We see Sumita juggle conflicting emotions, like the sadness of leaving home, the excitement of a new husband and a new country, the frustration of being confined to the life of a housewife, and the desire to go out and lead her own life. As Sumita struggles for self-definition, she makes it a point to allow herself to be open to what she perceives to be Western ideas when establishing her identity—but her perceptions are presented by the author as being very skewed because of her limited exposure. This story treats both its protagonist and American culture with irony, showing the impediments to feminist self-realization created by both. “Clothes” highlights the difficulties of a reconciliation between traditional Indian and contemporary consumerist American culture, presenting the reader with a sequestered and naively idealistic protagonist who, denied the opportunity to actually experience America, interacts with it only through fantasy. This, ostensibly, leaves her ill-suited to surviving in America by herself—but, ironically, her first step at self-determination is to make the decision to do just that; Divakaruni suggests that any process of assimilation self-realization for such characters is necessarily preceded by false constructions and misapprehensions.

¹⁶ The other volumes in which it was published include the *Home to Stay* anthology, and McDougal Littell’s publication of *Picture Bride and Related Readings* (where it was included as an example of American minority women’s literature).

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In keeping with the collection's title of *Arranged Marriage*, in "Clothes," Divakaruni gives us a portrayal of the traditional arranged marriage, and the social conditions that help this system work. To that extent, this story serves to highlight how traditional Indian women, especially immigrants, are dependent on men to gain access to culture and knowledge. Indeed, a large proportion of Sumita's experiences and opinions are dictated by the men in her life. Even though the story opens at the "women's lake," with her friends teasing and questioning her about her upcoming bride-viewing, we soon learn that everything about the marriage is orchestrated by her father; she feels obliged to accept the match without question or complaint because "Father had worked so hard to find this match for me" (Divakaruni 18). Indeed, he seems remarkably involved in even the more traditionally feminine aspects of the preparation for her wedding, including buying her sari for the bride-viewing. Her mother, on the other hand, is only present in the story to make timely interjections that reinforce social norms, like reminding her daughter that "every woman's destiny" is to "leave the known for the unknown" (Divakaruni 18) and insisting that Sumita wear red on the flight to America because "red is the color of luck for married women" (Divakaruni 20). This suggests that Sumita has a particularly close relationship with her father, since his attentions to her are more personal and affectionate, which he demonstrates by calling her "Mita Moni, little jewel" (Divakaruni 19), and we get a definite sense that he is sad to send her so far away. However, the difference between the parents in this portrayal also reveals the power dynamic between them: the father makes the important decisions, while the mother merely issues warnings about the upholding of tradition to her children. In her formative stage, then, Sumita learns to look to her father for instruction and guidance.

The next step for Sumita, her marriage, also follows a traditional form, wherein she is handed off from the protection of her father to the protection of her husband. Though she does not complain about this, there is no sense of her as a woman being *able* to complain about it, or having a voice in this matter at all. Even when she does receive and act on advice from women, she still takes her cues from the behavior of men—as is evident in her approach to sexuality. On her wedding night, she is prepared to grit her teeth and submit to the consummation of her marriage even when the advice of her woman friend to “think of something else” fails, and the uncomfortable, unwanted attempt at sexual intercourse only comes to an end when Somesh realizes her unwillingness and suggests conversation instead (Divakaruni 22). He directs the subject of conversation, though, and does most of the talking, while she immediately becomes a willing receptacle of his words and ideas. Here, Somesh is starting to fill the role formerly played by her father, for she attributes her early education entirely to her father: “Father [taught] me to read, his finger moving along the crisp black angles of the alphabet, transforming them magically into things I knew, water, dog, mango tree” (Divakaruni 26). The vocabulary of her childhood world, then, comes directly from her father, and the last didactic act her father performs is showing her California, where she will live after marriage, on a globe. So, starting already from the wedding night, she comes to depend on Somesh to provide her with the vocabulary of the world into which she has married, thus making the patriarchal shift from being subject to her father to being subject to her husband.

* * * * *

Because of her limited exposure before marriage, she is very eager, and a little too hasty, in trying to understand her new country; America starts to be defined by her in opposition to

her current life. When Sumita comes to America, she moves in with Somesh and his parents, and assumes the domestic responsibilities of the traditional daughter-in-law, living within an environment that is exactly modeled on India. In the background, Divakaruni presents America taking shape in the content of Sumita's dreams. In the early part of her marriage, the dull monotony of her life is all the more frustrating because she is ever-aware of "America," a vibrant world of possibilities right outside her doorstep. Her understanding of America is a piecemeal collage of impressions gathered from Somesh and the media, which she further embroiders with her own imagination. She associates American culture with a sort of euphoric freedom, represented aptly by the metaphor of the amusement park, "a place where people go to have fun," about which she says, enthusiastically, "I think it's a wonderful concept, novel" (Divakaruni 25). To a large extent, the sense of freedom and opportunity comes from her envisioning it as an outdoor space in contrast with her claustrophobic indoor world. There is a bright, glowing hopefulness even in the imagery associated with America; she imagines American currency as "green dollars and silver quarters... gleaming copper pennies" (Divakaruni 27), and is delighted with the "sunrise-orange" t-shirt Somesh buys her, which she describes as "the color... of joy, of my new American life" (Divakaruni 25).

In her eagerness to think of this color as somehow tied to America, she overlooks the fact that it has figured prominently in her life in India, too, and doesn't mention the possibility that the joy might come at least in part from the earlier associations; one of the first words she learns to read is "mango tree," suggesting a prominence of mangoes (which are yellow-orange) in her native environment, and not only is the sari she wears in the happy serenity of the women's lake "yellow, like a sunflower after rain" (Divakaruni 17), but her wedding sari itself is "flame-orange, with... gold-embroidered dancing peacocks" (Divakaruni 24). Seduced by the novelty of the t-shirt, however, Sumita sees herself as now living a "new" life in America that is divided clearly

from her “old” life in India—which, though it had been carefree and happy, now becomes merely a prelude to her present.¹⁷ She even assumes the words “Great America,” which are on the t-shirt, “referred to the country” before Somesh tells her that it is an amusement park (Divakaruni 25). This is a touchingly naive mistake; pleased by her kind husband and new clothes, she transfers her happiness on to the country which she still hasn’t really experienced, deeming it “great.” The tragicomic nature of her misunderstanding of America stems largely from the fact that she lives in such a sheltered atmosphere within her domestic Indianized sphere, able to know America only through her fantasies. This imagined culture is defined in extremes, either by its dark unavoidable dangers (in the form of a warning) or its happy promise of liberation (in reference to the idea of the classic American Dream).

Sumita, though eager for a new life, and dreaming of incorporating the new Western possibilities of which she is starting to become aware into her worldview, still has only the old ways of living on which to rely; she still wants to live through her husband. Being new in the country, and from a patriarchal background, Sumita does what would be completely natural to women in her situation: she looks to her husband to be her guide and tutor. Certainly, Sumita takes cues from Somesh when determining what to expect in her future life, both in her identity as a recent immigrant and as a wife. Although there are enough references in this story to Indian convention for us to infer the traditional marriage structure, Divakaruni portrays Somesh as a non-traditional Indian immigrant husband; he is in many ways an all-American New Man: playful, sensitive, and open to broadening the options for his wife. However, knowing that

¹⁷ Although this division of old/new lives is a common trope of immigrant literature, here it is not just a reference to her immigration; traditionally in many Indian communities, marriage represents the coming-of-age event for a woman. There are several proverbs in Hindi and other Indian languages that refer to daughters as “the belongings of someone else,” with the suggestion that a woman’s *real* life only starts after marriage.

Somesh is accustomed to fulfilling one aspect of the role of Indian patriarch by taking care of his aging parents, we cannot expect him to be completely blind to the patriarchal power dynamic Sumita assumes is natural in marriage. Still, he eagerly continues Sumita's education about the ways of the world into which he has brought her, teaching her about things she hasn't encountered before, like roller coasters, and introducing the idea of higher education and future employment. Interestingly, his aspirations for her seem based on an idea of marriage as an equal partnership: he is honest with her from the start about the financial troubles at the store he owns, saying "I just don't want to give you the wrong impression, don't want you to be disappointed," showing a vulnerability in front of his new bride that would be very uncharacteristic of a traditional authoritative husband, and allowing her to comfort him as though he were a child (Divakaruni 23). Though it may seem surprising that Divakaruni has chosen to portray him this way, it is an important comment on the positive influence of the experience of American culture on gender relations within Indian marriage; Somesh's conceptualizing of his wife as an equal partner is in direct contrast to the only other marriage we see detailed in this story—that of Sumita's parents.

Somesh's comfort with American culture is, in theory, an encouraging sign, since, as an assimilated character, he can serve as a model for Sumita to negotiate her own cultural identity; but in practice, she can't achieve full self-determination as long as she is subject to him. Unlike his parents, Somesh wants his wife to transcend the limited role of a traditional Indian wife and embrace aspects of American culture. To that end, he buys her Western clothes and tells her about the ways of life in the West in a way that suggests he expects her to eventually join him in the American world to which he himself has grown accustomed. Indeed, in a move that would be considered scandalous in that social context, he even suggests to her the possibility of her drinking alcohol, saying "really, there's nothing wrong with it.... I'll get you some sweet wine and

you'll see how good it makes you feel" (Divakaruni 21). He himself is a mix of India and America: he sings Michael Jackson and Hindi film songs alike, smokes American cigarettes and refuses to put his parents into a retirement home, buys his wife American clothes. And yet, it is important to keep in mind that as long as he fulfills his function of a teacher to his wife, he remains her superior, and much as he works against the hierarchy inherent in a traditional Indian marriage, he also at times reinforces it. Nowhere is this more evident than in the couple's sexual dynamic: their sexual relationship is initiated and directed entirely by Somesh, and he objectifies her, as is demonstrated clearly in the scene when he buys her lingerie and then, after she has modeled it for him, undresses her for sex, insisting on keeping the light on because "I want to keep seeing your face" (Divakaruni 28).

No matter how Westernized her husband may be, full sexual and social equality is never presented as an important or attainable goal for traditional Indian wives like Sumita. Coming from the patriarchal family background of rural India, she certainly holds no such expectations from Somesh. Unaware as she is of the realities of everyday life in the West, she continues to relate to him in the only way she knows—within the model of a dutiful wife (and, implicitly, a homemaker). Speaking of the future, she says:

[H]e wants me to start college. Get a degree, perhaps in teaching. I picture myself in front of a classroom of girls with blond pigtails and blue uniforms, like a scene out of an English movie I saw long ago in Calcutta. They raise their hands respectfully when I ask a question. "Do you really think I can?" I ask. "Of course," he replies. I am gratified he has such confidence in me. (Divakaruni 27)

Here, the image of her alternate future self becomes tangible to her only after Somesh has given it permission to exist, and we see her taking his suggestions seriously, playing them out in her

head using her limited preexisting vocabulary.¹⁸ Though she develops her own fantasy for the future—working at the store—it is still one defined in relation to him; her orbit would still be around his world. Furthermore, it is his confidence in her that allows her to even imagine this possibility, just like it his insistence that “You’re beautiful” that encourages her to try on the clothes he buys her and think of herself sexually (Divakaruni 28). Sexual awakening comes for her, almost as a side note, while she is playing out the (American) fantasies of her husband.

What Sumita struggles against the most is the typical immigrant experience of isolation from mainstream American culture and society—like many immigrant Indian women, she literally has no one but the family into which she has married for company in this country. This isolation is emphasized for her because of the extremely limited scope of her life: she is not allowed to leave home while her husband works his long, grueling hours at the store, so her entire married world is confined in the house, where she must spend large amounts of time with her in-laws in Somesh’s absence. Dutiful as she may be, the limits of this role crush her youthful, enthusiastic spirit:

Sometimes I laugh to myself, thinking how ironic it is that after all my fears about America, my life has turned out to be no different than [that of my friends in India]. But at other times, I feel caught up in a world where everything is frozen in place, like a scene inside a glass paperweight. It is a world so small that if I were to stretch out my arms, I would touch its

¹⁸ The particular content of this fantasy is also significant: when he suggests teaching, she immediately imagines the type of British school setting not at all unfamiliar to postcolonial Indians, thus conflating the Western culture she has been exposed to in the media back in her home country (British) with the one in which she is now living (American), a common mistake among immigrants, and a recurring contrast (Britain vs. America) in Indian diasporic literature, often taken up by international authors like Salman Rushdie.

cold unyielding edges. I stand inside this glass world, watching helplessly as America rushes by, wanting to scream.” (Divakaruni 26)

In this context, we appreciate more fully Somesh’s significance in her life: he is her only connection with the outside, the creator of dreams and fantasies, without whom her life is limited, closed, and even suffocating. Interestingly, when she puts into words a description of this suffocation, she immediately checks herself with a warning not to become too “westernized,” as though complaining is a Western habit—and right (Divakaruni 26). She has so thoroughly internalized the part of a good Indian woman that she doesn’t even express these fears and frustrations to Somesh; any misgivings or complaints she has about the family into which she has married are kept confidential between the narrator and the reader. For, as much as she loves Somesh, she fully accepts the traditional expectation that he value the wishes of his parents over those of his wife, and so chooses not to appeal to him about her unhappiness. She is similarly mute about her desires and dreams—her “secret plans” of working at the store, though a recurring fantasy, are never divulged to Somesh, as she passively listens to *his* dreams for her future life (Divakaruni 27).

Indeed, what Sumita yearns for in her private thoughts is simply her own version of the classic American Dream, certainly a tangible presence in Indian-American women’s literature, which in this story is presented as an overly idealistic vision incompatible with reality. She uses Somesh’s descriptions of his store to project her own visions of what to expect in the outside world. When he first tells her, right after the wedding, that its name is *7-Eleven*, she finds it “strange... exotic, risky” (Divakaruni 21), never realizing that it is in fact a chain convenience store. And, when he confesses it is not making any money, she immediately resolves to help him, dreaming of “Soft American music float[ing] in the background as I move between shelves

stocked high with brightly colored cans and elegant-necked bottles” (Divakaruni 23). These idealized visions persist even after she comes to America and develops a more concrete fantasy of working in the store, encouraged by his desire for her to study and work. She imagines working the register, which is always full in her mind, and dusting “jars of gilt-wrapped chocolates,” hoping to “charm the customers with my smile, so that they will return again and again just to hear me telling them to have a nice day” (Divakaruni 27). In this vision, hard work and a smile are all she needs to successfully be part of American society, and her efforts in this way can go a long way in helping Somesh.

Sumita’s dream is clearly shown to be not just idealistic but even ridiculous, when taken in the context of what the readers know to be the reality of working at a convenience store. There is also a dark irony in the absurd optimism of the image of Sumita working happily and successfully at the *7-Eleven* because it later emerges that Somesh has been shot in there. Before that revelation, though, Sumita is oblivious to any evils at all in American life, content to imagine herself working alongside her husband in the clothes he has bought her. Remarkably, even *after* she finds out about the perils of living in America from Somesh’s death, there is no change in her dreams; if the dangers of working in the store have even occurred to her at all, they still seem to be nothing compared to the danger of throwing her life away as a widow, which is reinforced visually in the scene where she fantasizes about drowning in her white sari. Somesh’s death in fact polarizes her cultural perception so much that the only way she can envision still living is if she tried to desperately realize her American fantasy.

* * * * *

The implication of Sumita's particular visions of assimilation can seem quite problematic to the American reader—these are often adolescent fantasies where the goal of liberation is tied closely with what is often called the evils of American culture: objectification of women and consumerism. The recurring trope of clothes in the story (starting from the title), and Sumita's willingness to see them as metaphors for cultures or lifestyles, is revealing about her understanding of the options available to her—she approaches cultural identity as something you can try on or change like clothes, with the underlying presumption that belonging can be performed through attire. There is superficiality in this conception of assimilation, but there is also a playful hopefulness: the picture we are presented of Sumita is very much like that of a young girl playing dress-up in adult clothes; she has an underlying belief that, with the right outfit, she can be successful as an American woman. And in one sense the clothes do seem to have an empowering effect, because her sexuality awakens the first time she tries on jeans—she describes herself “marveling at the curve of my hips and thighs, which have always been hidden under the flowing lines of my saris” (Divakaruni 25), thus taking pride and even delight in this repositioning of her usually modestly clad body as an object on display.

Her attempts to resolve the wildly diverging Indian and Western ideas of proper sexual conduct result in an approach that is ultimately very adolescent. On the plane ride to California, when she imagines being reunited with Somesh, she fantasizes that they “will kiss in front of everyone, not caring, like Americans, then pull back, look each other in the eye, and smile”—open displays of romance are, to her, only for movies and “Americans”; she herself must follow strict codes of behavior that prohibit such freedom of expression, much as she would like to indulge in it (Divakaruni 23). Even when Somesh and Sumita engage in modern expressions of sexuality, there is a constant anticipation of the disapproval of traditional Indian moral authority, and the sex acts are hidden, even juvenile. Indeed, there is something illicit about the

shows staged in the bedroom where Sumita models her new Western clothes for Somesh—they have to stuff towels under the door so that his parents don't find out, with the implication that they would disapprove if they did. More like teenagers than a married couple, Sumita and Somesh learn to hide the evidence of their intimate sexual encounters, and the sexual pleasure she now comes to enjoy with him is still somehow secret and forbidden. So, regardless of the (in Sumita's case, fleeting) exposure to sexually liberated Western culture experienced by the members of the late-twentieth-century younger generation, the older traditional sexual norms continue to govern family life for immigrant women—here reinforced by the physical presence of Sumita's in-laws in the house. Because sexual repression is one of the first and most obvious problems confronting her, Sumita's yearning for liberation starts to be focused on the freedom to reveal her body, express her desires and—if we think back to the fact that the couple's sexual encounters begin with Sumita modeling lingerie for Somesh—to objectify herself.

This type of skewed view of American women's liberation often causes characters like Sumita to have more friction within the reality of their cloistered Indian daily lives. For Sumita, having discovered the thrill of being sexual (which she sees as an American privilege), the tragedy of her husband's death becomes even sharper. Widowhood condemns her to wear a ceremonial plain white sari for the rest of her life, the prescribed change in wardrobe symbolizing the regression in her social position from a woman with promise to a woman with no future. At the funeral, Sumita rejects the urge to succumb to this pressure with her rejection of the suicide fantasy, drawing strength from envisioning herself wearing the skirt and blouse set instead of the widow's sari. The colors of this outfit—cream and brown—are noticeably kept separate from each other (divided between skirt and blouse), even as they represent the harmony she hopes to achieve between her Indian past and American future; the dress-up fantasy is now used to make life more bearable. If the orange Great America t-shirt symbolized

her joy in first coming to America, then this outfit represents her hopes for her future in America. Significantly, the former is a piece of merchandising for a theme park, in other words, a glaring tribute to consumerism, and the latter functions as a ticket of admittance that will allow her to work at the store. Her understanding of America, then, is very much limited to commodity culture, and to the things she can either own herself (the clothes Somesh bought for her) or sell to other people (the goods at the store). Thus, what she experiences as a transformation of cultural identity—becoming an American woman—is in fact the beginning of her transformation into a consumer.

Even the rest of her ideas about what it means to be a woman in the West are derived from either fantasy or media images. The first time she tries on the American clothes Somesh buys her, she describes it thus: “I model each one for him, walking back and forth, clasping my hands behind my head, lips pouted, left hip thrust out just like the models on TV, while he whispers applause” (Divakaruni 24). The only other reference to American women in the story comes in the form of “posters of smiling young men raising their beer mugs to toast scantily clad redheads with huge spiky eyelashes” (Divakaruni 27). Both these references are to models, which represent the extent of Sumita’s familiarity with American womanhood, and it is interesting that she accepts the objectification of these women as a matter of fact, even as something to be aspired to. In fact, she gets a sense of delight in placing herself within this mold, often describing the act of looking at herself in voyeuristic terms: she is mesmerized by the close-fitting t-shirt which “outlines my breasts” (Divakaruni 25), and describes her newly shaved legs on display under a short nightie as “the legs of a movie star” (Divakaruni 28). This view of American women (and, increasingly, herself) as visual objects is very much in keeping with her association of America with commodity culture, and it is also not surprising that she admires it, considering there is no space in her limited world for any sort of feminist discourse

against objectification. To her, having always had to wear saris and adhere to conservative standards of modesty, the ability to reveal one's body and use it for titillation is liberation—so she completely embraces the “American” example which is represented, to her, by models. The characterization of the naive protagonist and that of America in this story are in tension with each other from the start, and the ironic disconnect between them is manifested in the problematic assumptions Sumita so frequently and eagerly makes.

This is how we see Sumita: wrapping herself in promises of American fictions, while living in a reality of strict Indian limitations. Wifely passivity, which represents the ideal for women within this family's society, is brought dramatically to the foreground upon Somesh's sudden death in a shooting at the store. Through the shock of the news, Sumita instantly recognizes the path already laid out for her by her society: to give up all hopes for a future and live as a modest, asexual widow, and move to India to take care of her parents-in-law for the rest of her life. The rituals of widowhood that are performed on her—including the bangle-breaking ceremony and the laying out of a white sari for her to wear—symbolically reinforce the end of her fertile married life, and thus the end of her womanhood, in the eyes of her society. Widows have a notoriously low status in traditional Indian society; in some traditions, when the death of a husband is announced, other women of the society first remove all ornamentation from the body of the widow, including all colorful clothes, jewelry, and make-up, often cutting off the woman's hair, to confirm the end of her sexual life. Widows often wear only white for the rest of their lives—particularly tragic for Sumita, considering her fondness for colors and different types of clothes. The ceremony mentioned here is one popularly depicted tragically in Indian films that address widowhood: the widow's wrists are banged against a wall or doorframe to

break her glass bangles (themselves the sign of a new bride), often causing cuts or injuries on her arm. There are some even uglier aspects of the treatment of widows, including a superstition alluded to by Sumita when she says “[My in-laws] didn’t say, even once, as people would surely have in the village, that it was my bad luck that brought death to their son so soon after his marriage” (Divakaruni 31).¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, she flirts with the idea of suicide as she prepares for Somesh’s funeral, because she had come to depend so much upon her husband to be the vehicle to her envisioned freedom that his death makes those dreams seem suddenly impossible.

* * * * *

So, if Divakaruni is indeed being ironic in her presentation of what Sumita understands to be American culture and feminism, where does this leave us in our imagining of Sumita’s future? Or, more broadly, what is the author saying about the potential of success for such sheltered protagonists—can Sumita transcend her lifelong socialization and achieve the feminist ideal of being an independent woman? At one level, the ending of the story feels uplifting and empowering—having resolved to assert herself against her in-laws’ expectations, Sumita holds her own steady gaze in the mirror, and, in a move reminiscent of classic tragic heroines like Scarlett O’Hara, squares her shoulders and stands up straight to prepare for the trials to come. We admire her resolve, and are inclined to be optimistic about her future on her own with the \$3605.33 that she and Somesh were able to save up before his death—until we remind ourselves that we’ve already been shown that all of Sumita’s perceptions of life in America are merely illusions, constructed through imagination and misinformation. We already know her education

¹⁹ The most extreme type of oppression, of course, is Sati, or the burning alive of widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands. For more information about the mainstream treatment of widowhood in traditional Indian families, see Godavari D. Patil, *Hindu Widows: A Study in Deprivation*. New Delhi: Gyan, 2000

is limited and that she has no experience in providing for herself, and, considering the short span of time between the marriage and Somesh's death, we even have reason to worry about her immigration status. Moreover, she has always lived within a patriarchal family structure and conformed to traditional norms; with the lack of any outside influence in her life apart from the American media, it is unlikely that she will be able to forge and adhere to a radically new way of life. Though Somesh inspires progressiveness in Sumita, she is quite unaware of and vulnerable to the evils of American society; as we see from her willingness to sexually objectify herself, she accepts and even internalizes American sexism without question. She may have broken away from some of the cultural trappings binding her as an Indian woman, but, lacking a support system and any long-term economically viable plan for independence, she has no resources that can prepare her to deal with the particular manifestation of patriarchy in the West.

Inherent in Divakaruni's depiction is also a complicated and sometimes critical view of the reality of American culture. The sexualized flavor of the media images in this story suggests American women, too, have barriers to liberation—most noticeably, objectification. From a feminist lens, both the protagonist and American culture as depicted in this story are problematic, and, interestingly, the nature of their problems make them particularly unsuited to each other. What, then, are we to make of Sumita's undeniably heroic decision at the very end to confront her in-laws with the news that she plans to stay in America and work at the store? On one hand, she is already wearing the white sari when she leaves the room, so (following Sumita's own logic), by looking the part of the traditional Indian widow, she is adopting this as her identity, and her decision might well be reversed to make her conform to it. On the other, the reflection in the mirror is that of herself in American clothes, so perhaps she is beginning to see the possibility of both identities coexisting within herself in a way that allows her to navigate

both cultural spaces—finally overcoming the binary she has set up between her Indian domestic life and America outside, and acknowledging the shades of gray in both. The fact that Divakaruni ends on this uneasy and contentious note suggests that she wants her readers to make the decision themselves about the implications for Sumita's future, committing to neither herself. Sumita's life is cut short by her husband's death; we are not able to see her achieve her full potential—this story leaves the resolution to take place in the reader's mind. As I discussed in the first chapter, this move has the effect of dividing her readers even more along lines of different cultural perspectives.

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CHAPTER III

FALSE CONSTRUCTIONS IN CRITICAL RESPONSES TO JHUMPA LAHIRI

Critical responses to Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* generally focus on the second generation Indian-American characters in the novel, and, again, there is hardly any examination of the depiction of America, or the first-generation immigrant's psychological agonizing over the prospect of assimilation. Although it's a family story, critics almost always limit their discussion to the titular character, Gogol, as the only protagonist of the novel, failing to look closely at how its narrative is actually defined not by him but by his mother. This tactic circumvents any discussion of gender, which, as I argue in Chapter IV, is quite a central concern for Lahiri, and also glosses over the complex causes of the various conflicts that arise within the Ganguli family. The struggle is quickly reduced to either a generational one or a cultural one, without a close look at how these two barriers intertwine to complicate the lives of the Indian-American characters Lahiri depicts. And, of course, reviewers inevitably continue to mix in their personal backgrounds with their responses to the work.

In large part, then, the focus of this criticism isn't so different from that of the criticism on Divakaruni. One factor that seems like a significant difference between the two works, however, is that, while *Arranged Marriage* was Divakaruni's first commercial success and her means of entry into the American mainstream, Lahiri had already won a Pulitzer Prize for her debut collection of short stories, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, and so was already well known as a promising young Indian-American writer. I would expect this to create more academic interest in her second book, but my research revealed very little serious critical scholarship on the

novel.²⁰ Although more informal book reviews sprouted in popular newspapers and magazines around the country, they largely contained only bland plot summaries and unqualified, generic praise.²¹ Overall, though *The Namesake* is a detailed and intricate novel, there is a disappointing lack of serious critical engagement with it, despite Lahiri's fame. In fact, the only result of her status as a renowned public figure on the criticism is a common move to make biographical connections between her and her characters, which, though they may have some legitimacy, ultimately only detract from a thorough and rigorous analysis of the world created in her fiction.

The cultural location of the reader, too, continues to be a very influential factor in critical responses to *The Namesake*, and there are some particularly impassioned objections to this work—and the genre it represents—among certain Indian-American critics. An evaluation of Lahiri's portrayal of Indian-American characters seems often accompanied by a discussion of Lahiri being “a second-generation writer,” as though that were an aesthetic sensibility in addition to being an immigration classification, and one that Lahiri is inescapably tied to because of her family background. I want to challenge this conception of second-generation aesthetics, which seems as arbitrary to me as the false dichotomies so often drawn between Lahiri's and Divakaruni's work, because it is, once again, another easy way of classifying the work without engaging with it. Lahiri's narrative and aesthetic practice deserves its own

²⁰ On the other hand, the film adaptation of the novel, which was released in 2007, seems to get a lot more critical attention; many scholarly journals contain articles about the film rather than the novel.

²¹ Some examples of these types of reviews are: Gail Caldwell, “Boy, Interrupted: In *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri traces the path of a life tugged in different directions, as cultures collide,” *The Boston Globe* [Boston, MA] 14 September 2003; Stephen Metcalf, “Out of the Overcoat,” *New York Times* 28 September 2003; Lisa Tsering, “The essence of Identity: Jhumpa Lahiri Straddles Two Worlds in ‘*The Namesake*,’” *India-West*, [San Leandro, CA] 12 September 2003: B1; Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, “Nominal Consideration: *The Namesake*,” *Washington City Paper*, [Washington, D.C.] 30 Oct 2003: 48.

attention as an individual writer's preference, not as a representative of a type based solely on immigrant status, but it is precisely this that it does not get.

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Though *The Namesake*, as Lahiri's much-anticipated second project, saw numerous reviews in the American popular press, it is clear that many American reviewers approached it in the same tokenizing way Albert approached Divakaruni's writing. Amy Reiter, in her review for the popular news and culture website Salon.com, praises the early part of the book, which contains Ashima and Ashoke's arranged marriage and their early years of trying to grow accustomed to America, only to follow it up with:

And if the book takes a somewhat disappointing turn for the familiar as it follows Gogol to New York, where he works as a young architect, it is likely only because this territory lacks the freshness—the pleasing foreignness—of the description of the family's early days in their new country or their trips back home. (Reiter 1)²²

Implying that she is reading the book for “pleasing foreignness” immediately aligns Reiter with those for whom a coming-of-age story set in New York would be “familiar,” and, therefore, casts Lahiri as the “foreign” writer who must provide “freshness” in her stories. The review, largely full of glowing praise other than the aforementioned charge of “disappointing” familiarity, approaches Lahiri as a translator, as a bringer of foreign knowledge to American readers. Making the writer an “other” separates her from the in-group of American readers, and forestalls any

²² Amy Reiter, “‘The Namesake’ by Jhumpa Lahiri,” *Salon.com* (12 Sept 2003), 10 March 2008, <<http://dir.salon.com/story/books/review/2003/09/12/lahiri/>>

possible attempt at identifying or sympathizing with the characters; Reiter is more comfortable when Lahiri stays in the realm of the exotic.

Reiter is clearly looking for a classic immigrant story, confirmation of the melting pot, which is why her only mention of Ashima paints this neat and simplistic portrait:

But as Ashoke relishes the strangeness of his new home, his young wife, Ashima, whom his parents have arranged for him to marry, initially mourns the life she has left behind. Yet for her, too, her born-in-the-USA baby, Gogol, represents the new life she will build in her adopted home, the new roots she will plant and cultivate in America even as her old roots in Calcutta begin to wither and die. (Reiter 1)

This reading entirely ignores all the struggles Ashima experiences when trying to relate to her children, and suggests that cultivating “new roots” in America was an early priority for Ashima, which, as I discuss in the following chapter, is clearly the *opposite* of what Lahiri depicts. Writing as an American reading about the lives of foreigners, Reiter completely overlooks the ongoing internal conflict that comes with immigration, the “lifelong pregnancy” of which Ashima so eloquently complains (Lahiri 49). There is no examination of the in-between world Ashima creates with her attempts at making Indian snacks with American ingredients, only a dichotomous view of Indian versus American culture. Furthermore, defining Gogol as a “born-in-the-USA baby” serves to highlight the distance between first-generation parents and their second-generation offspring without acknowledging the complex divisions within Gogol’s own identity. Of course, Reiter’s article is a media review, not a scholarly paper, but the blind spots contained within it are symptomatic of those that are pervasive in responses to Lahiri. There isn’t even a discussion of gender in her review, which is surprising considering Salon’s usual feminist agenda. Revealed in the article is only a desire for the exotic Indian characters to do

exotic, pleasingly foreign things, while attempting and succeeding at a simplistic ideal of assimilation—the cultural conflict is so easily resolved within a prescribed model, and the reality of the depiction is ignored.

* * * * *

This type of exoticized reading is readily exposed and countered by Janaki Challa, in her article “An Issue of Identity,” wherein she says: “To a non-Indian, reading about curries and spices and arranged marriages may be exotic and alien. However, within our own community, those subjects have arguably become stagnant, clichéd, and commercialized” (Challa 1).²³ Writing just before the release of the film adaptation of *The Namesake*, Challa denounces not only Lahiri’s work but the genre of Indian-American writing as a whole for being tired, repetitive, and catering only to a clueless American audience. As Amitava Kumar had done in her response to Divakaruni, Challa here generalizes about the faults of contemporary Indian-American writing even as she expresses her contempt at the attempts by American readers to lump this type of work into arbitrary immigrant or foreign models.

Challa’s first complaint is a “burgeoning conformity” within the genre: “I can name hundreds of short stories, poems, and novels about the same subjects of arranged marriage, cultural confusion, and angst” (Challa 1). She might be exaggerating about the volume of this type of work—after all, Indian-American authors have only recently captured the mainstream public imagination, and have started being published so widely—but she is exactly right about the recurring themes of the genre: “arranged marriage, cultural confusion, and angst.” While these have seemed worthy enough subjects for Divakaruni and Lahiri, among many others, to

²³ Janaki Challa, “An Issue of Identity,” *India Abroad* [New York, NY] 2 June, 2006: M9

write book after book exploring them, Challa challenges the importance of these issues in the Indian-American community:

Whenever someone writes or talks about “balancing East and West”—they are referring to the media, music, dress, language, trips to India, curfews, rules, parents, expectations.... They are not talking about the real, psychological problems: the historical disconnectedness that denies one a sense of being and belonging, the struggle of the self versus the community. (Challa 1)

The cultural preoccupations of the literature, then, are devalued in comparison to more abstract, individual struggles for psychological self-identification which she designates as the “real... problems” of diasporic Indians. The implication is that all the contemporary writers are false messengers, focusing on frivolous, unimportant issues, and she can give us the true diagnosis of what the *real* struggles are. To begin with, it is problematic enough to construct hierarchies of acceptable topics, but a lack of sensitivity to “historical disconnectedness” is especially preposterous as a critique of Lahiri; *The Namesake* is concerned with this very issue of cultural belonging, and Ashima’s main struggle is exactly one of which “community” she should adopt as her own.

This kind of sweeping claim on Challa’s part begs the question of what gives her the authority to become a spokesperson for the displaced Indian, and once again the answer lies in personal experience; she reveals, by way of explanation, that: “Being a woman of South Indian origin, and having grown up in four different countries, I am sensitive and observant of what a sense of self is to a person” (Challa 1). Clearly, she is approaching this type of fiction from a very personal perspective, and finding that it does not satisfy her priorities. If non-Indians are indeed responding to the characters as though they are “alien and exotic,” Challa’s mistake seems to be

one of excessive self-identification. In the conclusion to her article, as a summary of her attitude toward all the works she has considered, she asserts: “I’m sick of Jhumpa Lahiri’s story after story about Bengalis in America.... I’m sick of rich, adjective-doused stories by writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.... I’m sick of being defined by all these things that do not pertain to me” (Challa 1). Here, again, is an instance of Huggan’s representational fallacy, which I discuss in the introduction: because she is an Indian reader, and these writers are writing about the Indian community, Challa concludes that they must be trying to somehow “define” *her* with their fiction. The major fault of Lahiri’s “story after story about Bengalis in America” seems to be that the stories fail to pertain to Challa, or to address the “real problems” *she* indicates; she allows the authors no thematic or aesthetic liberties, completely losing sight of the works’ essential fictionality.

Both these critical responses lack a crucial component: they never engage with the world created in the story, the painstakingly detailed suburban New England so carefully rendered by Lahiri, or the interior of the family home in which the Gangulis communicate and miscommunicate with each other. By looking to this work only insofar as it represents either a pleasingly foreign (in the case of Reiter) or an authentic (for Challa) vision of Indian-Americans, both overlook the fact that it is first and foremost a work of art. Not once is Lahiri as artist evaluated, even though she has won renown—and a Pulitzer—for her ability to create art; instead she is looked to as cultural messenger, or simple representer. This type of criticism—either hopelessly superficial as a whole, or piercing and strict only when it comes to evaluating the cultural depiction of Indian-American life—illuminates only a narrow slice of the novel, suggesting, by exclusion, that the rest is unimportant. Such a huge omission does no justice to

the work, and keeps texts like *The Namesake* marginalized in the literary canon, even as mainstream readers are ready embrace them.

* * * * *

Challa makes it a point to highlight the difference between contemporary Indian culture and Indian-American culture, then going on to apply these distinctions to prominent diasporic writers as well:

The older generations of Indians growing up in the United States, like Jhumpa Lahiri or M Night Shyamalan, almost doubtlessly cater to the overall American public. Indians who've grown up in India and immigrated to the United States, like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni or Bharati Mukherjee, cater to the "Indian and Americanizing" community.

(Challa 1)

With all her talk of "catering," Challa presents these writers as capable only of speaking to and of their own generational community; there is complete identification between an author's own background and the readership for whom she supposedly writes. This move takes the arbitrary authority Challa established earlier one step further: now not only is she the best judge of what this genre should focus on, but she is also the one who will determine which readers will read what. Readers—*other* readers, that is—are seen as impressionable receivers of cultural reinforcement, capable only of relating to authors with experiences comparable to their own.

Also, she sets up two separate literary traditions, placing Divakaruni, in comparison to Lahiri, in the "younger" generation of immigrant writers. Lahiri, a younger woman who started to write many years after Divakaruni was first published, is allowed admittance to the "older" generation, and is responsible for catering to the "overall American public." Divakaruni, as a

spokesperson for the “Indian and Americanizing” community, is placed in a much more tentative spot, since the dynamic cultural nature of her audience should allow her some leeway in issues to consider. When we look at the works themselves, however, it is Divakaruni’s protagonist, Sumita, who is imprisoned in the inflexible world of India recreated in America, while Lahiri’s protagonist, Ashima, has more freedom and the space to define her identity on her own terms. The simplistic setup suggested by these distinctions starts to collapse almost as soon as it is demarcated, and Challa is left splitting hairs in a genre she has already dismissed, on the whole, as tired and trivial.

Sandip Roy-Chowdhury, in his interview with Lahiri for *India Currents*, makes a very similar move in his summary review of *The Namesake* which precedes the actual interview:

Unlike the Chitra Divakarunis and Bharati Mukherjees with whom she is often compared, Lahiri is very much the “second-generation” writer. That’s why, though *The Namesake* starts with Ashima in her kitchen in Central Square, its real protagonist is the son she is pregnant with—Gogol. (Roy-Chowdhury 1)²⁴

For him, again, knowing Lahiri’s immigration status is enough to classify her as a “second-generation” writer, in contrast to the generic “Chitra Divakarunis and Bharati Mukhrjees” of the world; the suggestion being here is that she is also better, as though a new, more advanced model of an exotic variety of author. Technically, he is right about Lahiri being a second-generation Indian-American, as she has lived in America since she was two years old; the problem here is that the label of second-generation is also applied not just to her, but also to her

²⁴ Sandip Roy-Chowdhury, “Interpretor of the Second Generation,” *India Currents* [San Jose, California] November 2003: 16

work, as though it constitutes a particular narrative focus or aesthetic sensibility. His next move is to use his own classification of this novel as “second-generation” work to push Ashima out of the picture as a potential protagonist, forcibly reading an identification between Lahiri and the character of Gogol. The effect this has is to make the characters seem necessarily autobiographical, detracting from their fictionality and therefore ignoring the significance of their trajectory within the novel. That is why Ashima, though she undergoes major changes within the course of the novel, is abandoned in this review “in her kitchen in Central Square.” In fact, in Indian-American publications such as the one in which this interview appeared, Jhumpa Lahiri’s profile as an Indian-American person of fame always supersedes the exact details of her work. This is tokenization of another kind, whereby Lahiri is only important insofar as she fulfils the role of “author” within the Indian-American community, the exact nature of her work being largely irrelevant. In my own reading, I put the critical spotlight back where it belongs: on the fiction, and the lives of the characters, not the author.

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CHAPTER IV

ALIENATION, ASSIMILATION, AND SELF-DETERMINATION IN *THE NAMESAKE*

The central concern of *The Namesake* is the relationship between identity and location; in this novel, first an immigrant couple and then their children struggle to define themselves in relation to their sociocultural environment. As such, this is a character-driven novel, and my own reading will focus on how the themes of immigration, alienation, assimilation, and feminist self-determination are manifested in the development of the characters. Ashima, the immigrant protagonist in this story, is another first-generation Indian woman navigating life in America—in this case, in Massachusetts, with a husband, Ashoke, who is a college lecturer, and two children. The story unfolds over three decades, spanning the time between Ashoke and Ashima's immigration in the 60s and Ashima's retirement back to India in the year 2000. The narration is not given to Ashima, as Lahiri instead uses the third person omniscient, and it would be inaccurate to say that Ashima is the sole, unquestionable protagonist; after all, a large part of the novel focuses on the experiences of her son, Gogol, the title character. Still, it is Ashima's arrival in and departure from America that frame the narrative, and the focus switches back to her at key events in the family's story. Unlike her children, who end up living their lives in the country in which they were born, Ashima's story is one of adaptation and compromise, and a slow process of understanding and negotiating the Western culture which initially made her so uncomfortable. Throughout her life in America, Ashima inhabits a sequestered world in which she tries to keep her Indian culture alive; within the family, she takes refuge in her traditional maternal role, submitting to her husband's patriarchal authority, and when she does venture out of the house, she does so with the hesitation and uncertainty of an adolescent. It is only after her husband's death and her son's failed marriage—after being forced to confront hard lessons in

independence by the men in her life—that she takes realistic steps of compromise with and assimilation into American culture.

As a sheltered young woman accustomed to living within the defined rules and comforts of a communal Indian society, Ashima experiences quite a culture shock when she first immigrates to America. At the start of the novel, we meet Ashima, pregnant with her first child and having lived in America for only a few years, in a similar position as Sumita from “Clothes.” She has come to America under the same circumstances: an arranged marriage with a man she met only once, an expectation that she would move here and become his homemaker, and the corresponding cutting off from her family and everything that had been familiar to her. Lahiri describes the making of the marriage arrangements as though it is a formal interview: Ashima “was asked whether she was willing to fly on a plane and then if she was capable of living in a city characterized by severe, snowy winter, alone”—a question that confuses her, since she expects to be with her husband, not “alone” (Lahiri 9). What she learns about the way she has agreed to live is the same thing Sumita learns: the crushing loneliness of knowing no one, of having to wait at home for your husband all day just for interaction. Like Sumita, she has no money or life of her own, and thus becomes completely dependent on her husband—a fact that adds to the depression she feels after giving birth to her first child.

Ashima’s situation is made more difficult by the fact that her expectations prove to be very different from her reality. Her loneliness is compounded by an uncertainty in linguistic and cultural frame of reference: like Sumita’s conscious effort to sound fluent in English to the flight attendant when first flying to America, Ashima puts a lot of effort into speaking in proper English to Americans, and is particularly hard on herself when she makes a basic grammatical mistake because “English had been her subject. In Calcutta, before she was married, she was

working toward a college degree” (Lahiri 7). But this education is treated ironically in the book; she is required to recite “Daffodils”²⁵ to her in-laws during her bride-viewing, as though the knowledge of this British poem from the Romantic period somehow qualifies her to marry and live in twentieth-century America. The simplistic conflation of all things “Western” is the starting point of how she relates to America, and her outlook becomes more subtle and complex with the years she spends in the country.

In her initial approach to America, Ashima is cautious yet impressionable; she is struck by the bleak dreariness of the New England landscape, and surprised by the smallness and discomfort of Ashoke’s apartment: “Not at all like the houses in *Gone With the Wind* or *The Seven Year Itch*” (Lahiri 30). The very fact that she makes this observation suggests that she had an epic, romanticized expectation of life in America, garnered from films she watched in India. The particular choice of films is telling, too; both feature rebellious, tantalizing heroines who are sensual and follow their desires—indeed, the very opposite of the cultural model Ashima follows. It is as though she is blind to the social and moral values of the films, focusing on them simply as neutral depictions of American life. America, then, is an entity which first takes shape for Ashima through films, the way it did through television and advertising for Sumita.

Of course, the reality she is faced with is very different: a tiny, drafty apartment, complete with ugly brown curtains and roaches:

But she has complained of none of this. She has kept her disappointment to herself, not wanting to offend Ashoke, or worry her parents. Instead she writes, in her letters home, of the powerful cooking gas that flares up at any time of day or night from four burners on the stove, and the hot tap

²⁵ This is the famous William Wordsworth poem that begins with the line “I wandered lonely as a cloud.”

water fierce enough to scald her skin, and the cold water safe enough to drink (Lahiri 30).

In other words, unable to change the situation she has entered, she takes refuge in focusing on the mundane and the domestic. Her relationship with her husband is so tenuous and new still that she feels she does not have a right to complain about these things. There is also an expectation that she will be wowed by the superior infrastructure of America, which she dutifully fulfills by writing home about things like the gas and running water. It is as though she has realized already that the America she is destined to grow familiar with is more the realm of appliances, stoves, and kitchen sinks than the kind of romance and glamour suggested by those two films she had watched.

* * * * *

As a recent immigrant, and a woman who is subject to a man with whom she has not yet learned to communicate openly, Ashima faces an intense loneliness in America, finding her new life difficult to endure. Motherhood is a big turning point for her; indeed, after giving birth to Gogol, she becomes a perpetual maternal figure for the rest of the book. Because of the increasing pitch of her maternal fears after the arrival of the baby, she isn't able to swallow all her disappointments out of concern for Ashoke's feelings as she used to do. The contrast between her old and new lives presents itself in all its starkness, and the burden of having to constantly make adjustments begins to seem increasingly overwhelming:

Until now Ashima has accepted that there is no one to sweep the floor, or do the dishes, or wash clothes, or shop for groceries, or prepare a meal on the days she is tired or homesick or cross. She has accepted that the very

lack of such amenities is the American way. But now, with a baby crying in her arms, her breasts swollen with milk, her body coated with sweat, her groin still so sore she can scarcely sit, it is all suddenly unbearable. “I can’t do this,” she tells Ashoke (Lahiri 32).

To Ashima, the reality of living in America renders the period following the birth of her new baby nightmarish and frustrating. Again, America is defined in negative terms as characterized by “the very lack of.... amenities”; if this seems jarring coming from an immigrant, we must remember that Ashima didn’t move to America out of a search for better opportunities herself, she merely followed her new husband to the country in which he lived. Also, a closer look at the “amenities” whose lack is a burden to her reveals that what she needs is merely some *one*, another person, to help her with her daily routine of chores. The implication here is that her husband certainly isn’t going to fulfill that role; all he does in response to her declaration of despair is that: “he brings her a cup of tea, the only thing he can think to do for her, the last thing she feels like drinking” (Lahiri 32). This moment shows us the extent of the disconnect between husband and wife, and the forced nature of their shared life, something acknowledged explicitly by Ashoke later on in the passage: “[he] can think of nothing to say, feeling that it is his fault, for marrying her, for bringing her here” (Lahiri 33).

In the excerpt quoted above, we see that when Ashima reaches the breaking point of her loneliness, her tiredness, and her homesickness, it is manifested physically in the femaleness of her post-labor body; the yearning for home is connected with the act of giving birth. Indeed, her struggle with being an immigrant is associated with her female body, this connection reinforced by the fact that her husband, who moved to America out of a sense of adventure, never articulates any such angst. This metaphor reappears, developed in different forms, at other points in the novel, for instance:

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It's an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been an ordinary life, only to discover that the previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding (Lahiri 49-50).

This metaphor has a double significance to Ashima: she feels this “lifelong pregnancy” because of her status as immigrant, and also because of her “foreign” (to America) role as woman in her family. On the one hand, her experience of pregnancy informs her interpretation of the experience of being an immigrant, and here both have a negative connotation; pregnancy isn't defined by the ultimate joy of having a child but by the “complicated and demanding” change in one's life. With suggestions of “perpetual... constant... continuous” discomfort, Ashima implies that assimilation into American culture is not an imminent—or even long term—prospect for her: instead, it's like a permanent baby inside, forcing her to change her life without ever actually arriving. On the other, Ashima also seems to be realizing that her fate in this world, hinted to us from the very start of the novel when she is presented pregnant in the kitchen, is one of constant mothering. Her husband and children will always be her first priority, and she is destined to wait perpetually for their needs to materialize, and have to rush to fulfill them. Pregnancy is also an apt metaphor because it places her, accurately, in the maternal rather than sexual realm; indeed, not for a moment do we witness any expression of desire or sexual affection between Ashima and Ashoke. Unlike the women from *Gone With the Wind* or *The Seven-Year Itch*, Ashima lives her whole life as a chaste, self-sacrificing mother.

* * * * *

Thus insulated by her culture and gender role, she remains resolutely unchanged even when she encounters agents of American culture, developing an anxiety that stems from the prospect of having to compromise herself by assimilating. Ashima's foreignness is brought into sharp relief by the first American family she meets, the Montgomerys, Ashoke's landlords who live on the floors above him. As we see the messy hippie couple, complete with political bumper stickers and advocacy for alternative medicine, and their two wild young daughters, we realize how strange they must seem, as prototype Americans, to Ashima, who is still stiff and formal even with her own husband. The American man, Professor Montgomery, conforms to a stereotype familiar to American readers—the typical liberal intellectual dressed in tattered clothes and flip-flops—but to Ashoke and Ashima, who have no frame of reference for such things, he just looks odd, inappropriate: “Rickshaw drivers dress better than professors here, Ashoke, who still attends meetings with his advisor in a jacket and tie, thinks frequently to himself” (Lahiri 31). The Montgomerys' political activism also illustrates by contrast Ashoke and Ashima's disinterest in the political issues of their adopted host country at this stage; they hear the important news of the time, including the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, filtered through the ceiling from the Montgomerys' television, and continue eating dinner, as though such happenings are remote and irrelevant (Lahiri 31). Mrs. Montgomery is a typical feminist activist who proclaims slogans like “Burn the Bra!” and works for a women's health collective, and who praises Ashima for her decision to breastfeed when she gives birth to Gogol (Lahiri 31). The irony here is that though the American woman sees breastfeeding as a feminist choice, to Ashima, as a traditional Indian woman, there is no “decision” involved; breastfeeding is a requisite act of mothering—the only thing she knows. Feminism, represented in its political realm by Mrs. Montgomery's views, seems wholly irrelevant to Ashima, even absurd, and the two women do not connect at all.

The fact of living in a strange society with such foreign customs emphasizes to Ashima the distance she has come from home—a feeling intensified during her pregnancy and Gogol’s early childhood. Soon after we are introduced to the pregnant Ashima in the opening, we are told: “For the past eighteen months, ever since she’s arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. It’s not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It’s the consequence: motherhood in a foreign land” (Lahiri 5). This seems like a worrisome prospect to her, especially considering how cut off she is from her own parents; the phone on which they receive calls from India is used almost exclusively for bad news, and she goes years without so much as hearing her parents’ voices (Lahiri 44). As Ashima comes to realize with greater clarity the further she gets in to her pregnancy, “she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare” (Lahiri 6). This, then, is her view of America, created in large part by the fact that she is isolated at home while Ashoke is at work—unlike Sumita, who imagined for herself a liberating wonderland outside the confines of her suffocating domestic space, Ashima, in a similar situation, envisions a “tentative and spare” dystopia lacking in the kind of rich community life she associates with India.

* * * * *

Having decided to cling to her Indian roots while raising her American-born children, Ashima finds that the generation gap between her and them takes on an especially sharp and even painful quality. Having children doubly complicates Ashima and Ashoke’s lives, because they are new immigrants as well as new parents. As the children grow up, the parents realize the significance not only of the generational gap between them, but also the fact that, as second-

generation Indian-Americans, their children participate in a different culture and even language: “When Ashima and Ashoke close their eyes it never fails to unsettle them, that their children sound just like Americans, expertly conversing in a language that still at times confounds them, in accents they are accustomed not to trust” (Lahiri 65). The parents, though naturalized citizens, still don’t think of themselves as “like Americans,” and continue to be surprised when their American-born children exhibit signs of being just that. True, for the children’s sake, they are willing to make the sacrifice of changing their traditions, of celebrating Thanksgiving and Christmas, of letting Gogol change his name when he wants to. But they themselves live perpetually in their identity as immigrants, tied by a fragile but desperate cultural and emotional bond to their pre-immigration life in India. Unlike their children, whose experience of growing up is entirely of America, Ashoke and Ashima already have allegiances to people back in India (most significantly, their families), and so cannot re-form those central relationships here: “In some senses Ashoke and Ashima live the lives of the extremely aged, those for whom everyone they once knew and loved is lost, those who survive are consoled by memory alone” (Lahiri 63). This loss, largely incomprehensible to their children, is a pregnancy-like burden that never leaves them, one that precludes for them the possibility of an “ordinary life” of living wholly in the present, like that which their children have a chance to experience. As Gogol realizes only at the end of the novel, “his parents had lived their lives in America in spite of what was missing, with a stamina he fears he does not possess himself. He had spent years maintaining distance from his origins; his parents, in bridging that distance as best they could” (Lahiri 281).

For Ashima, one way to construct such a bridge between her native culture and her children’s is through food. Just as the dominant metaphor for assimilation in Divakaruni’s short story was clothes, here the recurring trope is culinary. The novel begins in 1968, and the first

glimpse we get of Ashima is of her pregnant in the kitchen, making herself a makeshift Indian snack out of Rice Krispies, peanuts, and onions. She starts off, then, squarely in the domestic domain of traditional femininity, which is where she remains for the majority of the novel. The motif of food presents itself from the very first page; and her Indian concoction is presented here as a metaphor for the taste of home, which Ashima particularly misses during her pregnancy. Food also becomes an indicator of her attitude toward America; from the start, she is completely invested in trying to recreate in America the taste of snacks familiar to her in India, but the fact is that what she uses to replicate her memories of India are American foods like Rice Krispies. Even after she has lived in America for a while, the parties that she and Ashoke throw for the Indian families they meet always center on the Indian food she cooks. In fact she becomes a role model for the other young Indian immigrant wives precisely because of her culinary adaptability: “The wives, homesick and bewildered, turn to Ashima for recipes and advice, and she tells them about the carp that’s sold in Chinatown, that it’s possible to make Halwa from Cream of Wheat” (Lahiri 38). Indeed, we are told, she continues her habit of mixing Rice Krispies with peanuts and onions well past her pregnancy, as though her food cravings—and the yearning for home behind them—continue throughout her life in America.

Her active engagement in the kitchen also keeps her tied to the domestic sphere in which she is most comfortable, while reinforcing her maternal role as nurturer and caretaker for her children. As Gogol and Sonia grow up, Ashima and Ashoke begin to make assimilatory concessions; they move to the suburbs, they celebrate Christmas, eat turkey at Thanksgiving, and “in the supermarket, they let Gogol fill the cart with items that he and Sonia, but not they, consume: individually wrapped slices of cheese, mayonnaise, tuna fish, hot dogs” (Lahiri 65). At her son’s request, Ashima allows him occasional American dinners as a treat, dinners which, for his sake, she learns how to prepare. The fact that her children want to eat American food

emphasizes her distance from them, but her willingness to combine this with their traditional Indian fare creates a connection between them. Even among Ashima's own social circle, the first-generation Indian immigrants have Christmas feasts complete with complex Indian dishes.

For the majority of her life in America, her social circle consists only of other Indian-American families, who satisfy her desire for the familiar, and her main contribution to these gatherings is the Indian food she prepares. In fact, the novel ends with her final dinner party, thrown just days before she leaves for India:

People talk of how much they've come to love Ashima's Christmas Eve parties, that they've missed them these past few years, that it won't be the same without her. They have come to rely on her, Gogol realizes, to collect them together, to organize the holiday, to convert it, to introduce the tradition to those who are new (Lahiri 286).

Her dedication to Indian food, then, and her ability to successfully adapt American ingredients to produce it allows her to "convert" the conventional ceremonies of a Christmas Eve meal while establishing a "tradition" of her own. However, her friends are only interested in her function as an organizer, someone who holds the key to the tradition and passes it on to newcomers—Ashima in her maternal culinary role, not Ashima as a person. It is her cooking which will make them miss her; her American self is immortalized in the kitchen.

* * * * *

The years that wear on after her children grow up bring the return of loneliness to Ashima; her domestic world is no longer sufficient to fulfill her, and she is still too apprehensive to plunge into American life in any radical way. In her middle age, she finds herself deserted and

left to her own devices: her children have both moved away from home, ostensibly for good, and her husband has taken up a temporary teaching position in Ohio. “At forty-eight she has come to experience the solitude that her husband and son and daughter already know, and which they claim not to mind.... But Ashima feels too old to learn such a skill” (Lahiri 160). The stability and security that she has come to rely on—her family—has been taken from her, only to leave her alone and exposed, “too old” to adjust to this new way of living that is already familiar to the others. Indeed, Ashoke, who had moved to America as a young man for his education, and Gogol and Sonia, all have careers and goals of their own, whereas Ashima exists mainly to support and comfort them, perfecting the role of self-sacrificing wife and mother so they can focus on their own lives. She maintains permanence in their shifting lives; as her children move from apartment to apartment, Ashima dutifully records each address, becoming “the keeper of all these names and numbers now, numbers she once knew by heart, numbers and addresses her children no longer remember” (Lahiri 167).

Since her craving for continuity goes unfulfilled because of the lives led by her husband and children, she tries to regain stability first with a false recreation of the past, and then by modeling her own life on that of her children. At first, her only source of comfort is the store of old letters from her parents which she has saved:

[O]nce a year, she dumps the letters onto her bed and goes through them, devoting an entire day to her parents' words, allowing herself a good cry. She revisits their affection and concern, conveyed weekly, faithfully, across continents—all the bits of news that had had nothing to do with her life in Cambridge but which had sustained her in those days nevertheless (Lahiri 160).

Her way of dealing with the difficulties she faces in America, then, is to escape through the letters into her parents' world, and this escapism "sustains" her through the implicitly vacuous everyday life she leads in America. Her children eventually stop coming home for holidays, and she has trouble understanding their independence, but doesn't try to force them. She recognizes that they lead American lives with different priorities, and even makes efforts to develop a routine of her own: "three afternoons a week and two Saturdays a month, she works at the public library, just as Sonia had done when she was in high school. It is Ashima's first job in America, the first since before she was married" (Lahiri 161).

Forced to be a little more independent, she lives very much like an adolescent, capable of looking after her basic needs and keeping herself occupied, but needing an adult—her husband—around the house to do the more important things. Encouraging as it is to see her holding a job and participating in the world around her, it is important to keep in mind that this part-time job is a hand-me-down from the high school days of her own daughter; Ashima's college education, which was considered an impressive credential before her marriage, is essentially going to waste. Even her way of handling her earnings is telling; instead of gaining a sense of liberation or self-sufficiency: "She signs her small paychecks over to Ashoke, and he deposits them for her at the bank into their account" (Lahiri 167). She still needs Ashoke, who returns once every three weekends, to do the important tasks around the house, like paying the bills and raking the lawn, and he must always come home by taxi because she is too afraid of driving on the highway to go pick him up from the airport. Although the exact terms may have changed, the principal dynamic of their relationship remains the same; Ashoke is still the male authority in her life. Working, then, isn't exactly liberation for Ashima; it is simply a means to occupy her time when her husband and children, always her first priority, have no use for her.

* * * * *

Even after Ashoke's death, Ashima's subjugation to his patriarchal influence persists; when there is no one left to make decisions for her, she instinctively bases the decisions she makes for herself on what she thinks Ashoke would have done. Ashoke dies of a sudden and unexpected heart attack, throwing Ashima into a long and intense period of grief, through which she nonetheless consistently rejects the option of returning to India. In a telling move, her first resolution is to stay on in America, and she immediately expresses it in terms of wanting to be close to her children. But a closer look at her rationale suggests a weakening of her ties to India:

[F]or the first time in her life, Ashima has no desire to escape to Calcutta, not now. She refuses to be so far from the place where her husband made his life, the country in which he died. 'Now I know why he went to Cleveland,' she tells people, refusing, even in death, to utter her husband's name. 'He was teaching me to live alone'" (Lahiri 183).

After the decades she has spent in America, then, Ashima has finally stopped looking to Calcutta for comfort, rejecting any temptation to "escape" there to lessen her grief. Still, the reason she gives for this isn't that she herself has come to love America; rather, America feels like home because it's where "her husband made his life." What she calls home isn't a place she chooses and loves herself, but a place chosen by her husband—the man to whom she accords a huge amount of respect, as prescribed by tradition, demurring to ever address him by name.²⁶ *He* was the pioneering immigrant, moving here to start a professional life for himself; she was merely the

²⁶ Tradition dictates that a good Indian wife never address her husband by name; she must always refer to him obliquely as "my husband," or simply as "he."

woman chosen to be his companion, who agreed then to attach herself to his fortunes, just as she now feels attached to the country in which he died. While she is still devastated by Ashoke's death, her connection to America remains a patriarchal one; her love for the country born out of the love that has grown inside her, though never articulated, for her husband. Once he dies, she continues to dwell in the physical place where memories of him persist, and turns her attention to her children—particularly to arranging a marriage for Gogol.

* * * * *

The experience of Gogol and Moushumi, the Indian woman to whom Ashima introduces him, clearly demonstrates how certain Indian customs cannot be propagated among Indian-Americans who have adopted a more Western outlook, and this jolts Ashima into ultimately reevaluating her own cultural identity. The fact that Gogol and Moushumi, who had both only had relationships with non-Indians before, are willing to give this arranged marriage a try suggests that the next generation is also subject to the influence of the immigrant parents' traditions and values. At first glance, Gogol's new wife seems to be a radically different type of woman from his mother, free of the constraints that defined Ashima's life; Moushumi is a free-spirited Indian-American who lived in England as a child and Paris as a student, and who sees herself as a sexual and liberated woman. But the very vehemence of Moushumi's strong negative reaction to the lifestyles of first-generation Indian immigrant women suggests that the patriarchal system has made quite an impression on her life: "along with the Sanskrit vows she's repeated at her wedding, she'd privately vowed that she'd never grow fully dependent on her husband, as her mother has" (Lahiri 247). Despite the fact that she and Gogol are immediately attracted to each other during their first date orchestrated by their mothers, their love never

blossoms into full mutual understanding—she feels stifled by the obligations of marriage, and Gogol finds her social circle pretentious and uninteresting. After the marriage has fallen apart, Gogol goes on to reflect that: “They had both acted on the same impulse.... They had both sought comfort in each other, and in their shared world, perhaps for the sake of novelty, or out of the fear that that world was slowly dying” (Lahiri 284). What he articulates here is the alienation of *second-generation* Indians, whose world, a curious mix of the American culture they grew up in and the Indian culture of their parents, is indeed a dying one—it dies with them.

Indeed, it is the angst caused by this realization, and the desire to please her parents, which cause Mousumi to enter into the marriage of convenience with Gogol in the first place, rather than any particular love for who he is. But she ends up seeing him only as a representative of the Indian community toward which she harbors resentment, and feels the urge to rebel against him because of her disgust for the community’s values. Their shared cultural background alone proves insufficient basis for a good marriage; they split up following Mousumi’s decision to rekindle an old affair. Mousumi, for all her sexual freedom and independent lifestyle, still hasn’t escaped the influence of the traditional Indian dutiful wife model—she feels trapped not by her husband *per se*, but just by virtue of being married to an Indian man from her community. This suggests that she necessarily equates her marriage with those of the Indian couples of her parents’ generation; not necessarily a valid conflation, considering the emphasis Gogol places on love and physical affection in his relationships. Mousumi’s infidelity, then, is a manifestation of her internal struggle to understand what it means to be an Indian-American woman—an immature rebellion against a traditional authority that ruled the marriage of her parents but didn’t have to rule her own. By responding to her fears about whether she and Gogol are right for each other simply by cheating on him, she forsakes the chance at meaningful compromise, not just between two people, but between two cultural philosophies of marriage.

The impact this divorce has on Ashima is to make her question her impulse to simply continue an Indian way of life while living in American culture. We are told she feels guilty for introducing her son to his ex-wife, and she doesn't encourage him to get back together with her:

[F]ortunately they have not considered it their duty to stay married, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima's generation do. They are not willing to accept, to adjust, to settle for something less than their ideal of happiness. That pressure has given way, in the case of the subsequent generation, to American common sense (Lahiri 276).

The "American" decision to get a divorce is praised as more sensible than the grin-and-bear-it approach to marital difficulties of Ashima's own generation. She characterizes traditional Indian marriages as being under "pressure... to settle for something less than their ideal of happiness," something that is unacceptable to second-generation Indian-Americans like Gogol and Moushumi. Ironically, she describes the decision to pursue such "ideals" as "American common sense"—all the serious relationships Gogol has been in have ended badly, whereas Ashima and Ashoke had great stability and understanding for many years in their traditional arranged marriage. Although, ostensibly, Ashima is aligning herself with the American desire to marry for love, it sounds more like she is trying to sell herself this "ideal"—after all, Moushumi's problem was not an overly zealous dedication to "ideals" but rather a lack of compromise. There is a suggestion here that both systems of marriage have their pitfalls—and perhaps that Ashima, accustomed to seeing marriage as a simple duty, cannot understand the complexity of the reasons behind her son's divorce, coming to rationalize it, somehow, as "common sense." The uncertainty of her response suggests she will never be able to understand the values of her son and his cultural-generational community, but it also reveals an attempt on her part to make an

effort; by accepting the divorce as the right choice for her son, she is trying to find her footing in situations that occupy a culturally ambiguous place away from India and much closer to America—something she would have squarely rejected in the past.

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This increasing openness in Ashima's outlook which surfaces after Ashoke's death and Gogol's divorce transforms her into the person she has become at the story's resolution, where she makes the choice to adopt a compromise of cultures and locations. At the end of the novel, Ashima sells her late husband's house—finally letting go of the home that reminds her of him—and decides to spend the rest of her life shuttling between India and America, spending six months in each country. This proposed life, in reality a retirement commonly chosen by many first-generation Indian-Americans, is an apt metaphor for Ashima's developed cultural identity: not only is she finally acknowledging both sides of her Indian-American nationality, but she is also embracing the act of immigration, willing to undergo it annually, becoming a permanent migrant. And, having made this decision for herself, she is finally taking responsibility for her own life, becoming the determiner of her own destiny, with no husband or young children to wrap her life around. Although her chosen lifestyle means a future of traveling alone:

The prospect no longer terrifies her. She has learned to do things on her own, and though she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta. She will return to India with an American passport. In her wallet will remain her Massachusetts driver's license, her social security card.... For thirty-three years she missed her life in India. Now she will miss her job at the library,

the women with whom she's worked. She will miss throwing parties...
She will miss the country in which she had grown to know and love her
husband (Lahiri 276, 269).

This recognition of interior change through exterior continuity (“she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun”) is the pivotal point in Ashima’s coming of age—which, for her, happens in middle age, after her long life of dependent adolescence. Here is the evidence of Ashima’s assimilation—not just in the Massachusetts driver’s license and social security card, but, more importantly, in the fact that she has “learned to do things on her own,” and built a life for herself (her relationships with the women with whom she worked, the parties she threw) beyond that of her family. If what she missed about India for all these years was an idea of home, she will now miss America in the same way, for it has become her home too. The failure of the marriage she arranged for her son makes her aware that her values can’t fit very well into American social norms, but she has also let go of her strict old Indian norms, now inhabiting a place that is open to influence from both cultures. Ashima is now a hybrid, someone who has learned to compromise, and to combine the two disparate worlds of which she has been a part in her own life, choosing to balance them equally in her future. Lahiri’s skillfulness lies in how she portrays this change in the protagonist; Ashima has no sudden epiphanies of assimilation, rather, her whole life, monotonous and burdensome as it at times can be, is in fact a slow, steady movement towards a modest final compromise.

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CONCLUSION

“Clothes” and *The Namesake* share the same cultural setting: the tentative space created by Indian-Americans in their host country; and the two protagonists echo each other in background, expected gender roles, and immigrant experience. The difference, however, lies in the details—and both these stories are remarkably rich in the details of the lives portrayed—as well as their resolutions. Whereas Sumita’s widowhood leaves her confined and desperate, Ashima’s widowhood brings her the chance to choose her own future, a choice she, albeit reluctantly, embraces. Lahiri, writing in novel form and allowing for a thirty-year time span in the narrative, is able to fully develop the potential of her protagonist; Ashima, though she experiences the same despair and widowhood as Sumita, eludes the almost melodramatic tragedy of Sumita’s fate, ultimately proving capable of growth and assimilation.

I mention the differences between the stories as a testament to the variety included in the genre, not to emphasize any distinctions between their two authors. Overall, I believe any assertions of Divakaruni belonging to one literary “generation” and Lahiri to another are unfounded; critics who stress such differences are simply drawing false binaries based on Divakaruni’s and Lahiri’s immigration profiles and applying them to the authors’ aesthetics. What I have explored are two particular outcomes, but there are many other stories with many other resolutions that could be analyzed, and still qualify as belonging to the same genre. As we have seen from my discussion of these stories’ two protagonists, the characters created by Divakaruni and Lahiri have more in common than to distinguish them: they both depict a woman on the brink of two cultures and feminist self-realization, negotiating the double forces of traditional authority and American individualism. That both these authors can paint such

resonant pictures, despite the fact that Divakaruni is an immigrant while Lahiri grew up in America, testifies both to how central a conflict this theme of female self-realization is in Indian-American families regardless of generation, and also to the universality of the experience depicted in the stories. It is in the repetition of this type of female protagonist, her repeated reemergence in various forms from various works by various authors in the genre, that she becomes a believable cultural figure, stepping from her fictional realm into a reality that might be familiar to readers. It doesn't necessarily take either a first-generation or second-generation author to effectively render this reality, but it does take a sensitive and eloquent one; skill in realistic portrayal is what, more than anything else, Lahiri and Divakaruni have in common.

Both these women are very much in the middle of their careers—Divakaruni has published eight novels, a collection of poetry, and one more collection of short stories since *Arranged Marriage*, and Lahiri is working on a second collection of short stories due to be published in April 2008. And they are just two in a rapidly growing group of Indian-American women who are finding their literary voice at a time when there is a huge interest in their stories among both readers and publishers. As works of fiction by Indian-American women increase in number and prominence in American society, critics have even more of a duty to pay proper attention to these writers. I hope that a sustained effort will be made to incorporate these works into the critical canon; I don't mean with unqualified praise, but certainly with rigorous analysis, along with a detailed consideration of the recurring themes and motifs in the genre. These writers have carved out their space, both in mainstream American literature and on the bookshelves of millions of readers, and it is the responsibility of critics to offer befitting interpretations of these dynamic works of fiction. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri, along with all their contemporaries, have certainly earned this much.

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