

**Contemporary South Asian American Women's Fiction:
the "difference"**

Shashikala Muthumal Assella, BA, MA

**Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

DECEMBER 2015

Abstract

This thesis critically explores the “difference” of contemporary South Asian American women’s fiction and their fictional narratives of women’s lives, away from the ethnic postcolonial depictions of diasporic women. The selected novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amulya Malladi, Bharti Kirchner, V.V. Ganeshanathan, Nayomi Munaweera, Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi and Shaila Abdullah studied here interrogate the depiction of South Asian women characters both within diasporic American locations and in South Asian settings. These writers establish individual identities that defy homogeneity assigned to regional identities and establish heterogeneous characters that are influenced through transnational travel. This dissertation’s engagement with exotic identities, foodways, ethno-social identities and diasporic and native socio-cultural pressures for women, offers a “different” reading of contemporary South Asian women’s fiction. The identities that are being reinvented by the selected Indian, Sri Lankan and Pakistani American women writers destabilise established boundaries for women’s identity in South Asian American women’s fiction by using old and new tropes such as folkloric myths, nostalgia, food and ethnic relationships. The transnational cosmopolitan locations that enable the re-negotiation of identities enable the women characters to fashion their own uniqueness. I argue that a “difference” in South Asian American women’s contemporary writing has emerged in recent times, that looks beyond ethno-social diasporic identities. These changes not only advance the already established tropes in women’s literature, but also address important issues of individuality, personal choices and societal pressure affecting self-reinvention and reception of these women

within their societies. The analysis of under-researched yet powerful contemporary women writers makes this an important addition to the existing literary debates on varied women's identities in fiction. I identify existing trends and evolving trends which help to map the emerging changes, making it a significant contribution to the understanding of the development of contemporary South Asian American women's literature as a distinct body of work.

Acknowledgements

This research wouldn't have become a reality without the kind guidance, patience and support extended to me by my wonderful supervisors; Professor Judie Newman and Dr Ruth Maxey. Thank you very much for encouraging me, and pushing me when I was too lazy to go the extra mile.

I wish to extend my gratitude to the University of Nottingham Vice Chancellor's scholarship, School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies' postgraduate funding and Sir Richard Stapley Trust for providing me the necessary financial support to carry out my research and attend conferences.

Conference panels and audiences at the Scottish Association for the study of America (SASA) conference 2012, Young South Asian Scholars Meet (YSASM) 2012, British Association for American Studies (BAAS) 2013, Memory Studies symposium at the University of Nottingham 2013 and South Asia by the Bay: Feminist Interventions; on Gender and South Asia 2014 have helped me enormously with their feedback and suggestions for various parts of my research. I have benefitted greatly from all the discussions and comments. I am also grateful for the conference organisers of YSASM and South Asia by the Bay for providing me with the necessary funding to attend the conferences and present papers.

My gratitude goes to the journal editors of *Phoenix: Journal of Commonwealth Studies of Sri Lanka*, the editor of the *Encyclopedia of Asian American Culture: From Anime to Tiger Moms* (ABC Clio publication) and the editor of the essay collection, *Exploring Gender in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora*, for accepting

my work for publication and for offering me valuable feedback which enhanced not only the sections submitted for publication, but also the larger project.

I am thankful for the support and camaraderie of my fellow postgraduate students and academic staff at the Department of American and Canadian Studies. I could not think of a more encouraging community. Crucial were the support of the academic staff and administrative staff at the School of Cultures Languages and Area Studies and other friends whom I had the pleasure of meeting during my stay in Nottingham. You all made this journey worthwhile. I owe my wonderful housemates, for being the best one could have.

My special thanks go to Prof Rajiva, for believing in me long before I knew what I could do, to Dinali, for being there every time, and for putting up with my frequent emails, to Sriparna, for friendship and feedback on my work and to Toshini, for being a true ‘sister of my heart’. Most of all, I wouldn’t have had the courage and freedom to come this far without the love and support of my wonderful family: Amma, Appachchi and Malli. This is for you.

CONTENTS

<i>Abstract</i>	i
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Re-fashioning new identities in Chitra Divakaruni's novels	39
Chapter Two: You are what you <i>decide</i> to cook...	108
Chapter Three: Sri Lankan women writers writing the difference	172
Chapter Four: The Other sisters: Pakistani American women writers	223
Conclusion	260
Works Cited	278

Introduction

I am the one
who always goes away.
Because I must –
With my home intact
But always changing
So the windows don't match
The doors anymore – the colours
Clash in the garden –
And the ocean lives in the bedroom.
I am the one
Who always goes
Away with my home
Which can only stay inside
in my blood – my home which
does not fit
with any geography.¹

This research argues for a “different”² reading of contemporary South Asian American women’s fiction³ that has been published between 1999 and 2012. The narratives of women that “went away with their homes intact” to chart their own histories and niches in “different shores,” to use Ronald Takaki’s phrase⁴ are explored in this study in relation to their transnational and hybrid identities that have been created, through the means of sisterly bonds, memories, food and other ethno-social identities. This study argues that the diasporic cultural locations and the re-

¹ Sujata Bhatt, “The one who goes Away,” *The Stinking Rose* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995) 3-4.

² I am borrowing this term from Ronald Takaki’s *Strangers from a Different shore* (1989) and Lisa Lau’s “Making the Difference: The differing presentations and Representations of South Asia” (2005). My use of the term “difference” will be elaborated later in the Introduction.

³ The fiction ranges from *Sister of My Heart* published in 1999 to *Oleander Girl* published in 2012. The reason for their particular selection will be elaborated later in the Introduction.

⁴ See Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, 1989)

negotiated identities created by women, using both socio-cultural affiliations as well as individual desires, enable the analysed women characters in the fiction of Chitra Divakaruni, Amulya Malladi, Bharti Kirchner, V.V. Ganeshanathan, Nayomi Munaweera, Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi and Shaila Abdullah to carve their own niches in the larger tapestry of South Asian diasporic fiction. Despite the use of traditional tropes of memory, food and ethnic identities, the writers and the novels examined throughout this thesis create unique identities for the women characters that debunk stereotypes and insist on their “difference” through a “different” reading of the same tropes.

Contemporary writers ranging from Chitra Divakaruni, of Indian origin, to Nayomi Munaweera, of Sri Lankan origin, explore their ethnic and national differences through fiction produced within a diasporic American setting. The novels range from exotic renditions of motherlands, nostalgic recollections of lands left behind to contemporary negotiations of identity in America. But their main difference lies not only in their contemporary time frame, their immigrant identity, their gender or their different treatment of plots and subject matter. They also differentiate their writing and interests through an analysis of the diverse individual identity formations that mould contemporary South Asian American women characters. The fictions that are being analysed have very few narrative or plot intricacies, travel between the dichotomies of margins and the mainstream, and the writers selected for this study discuss the complexities of occupying such liminal spaces. The individual struggles of women to establish individual identities through personal choices, food rituals, memories and recollected narratives make these

fictions “different” from that of their Other counterparts produced in South Asia or in other diasporic locations⁵ inhabited by South Asians. In these fictions, women become agents of change and take control of their identities that extend beyond cultural and social stereotypes. The analyses of these novels which range from an exploration of the exoticised eastern spaces and cultural narratives to memories of pain (and individual pasts) attempt to read South Asian American women’s fiction away from the east-west binaries. These novels seek out individual identities that assert regional, ethnic and religious differences in the face of amalgamated identities of Americanised diasporic subjects. Do fictional women presented in these selected fictions flout all the stereotypes associated with exoticised ethnic identities connected to their diasporic groups in their search for individuality? Do their ethnic identities become an integral part of their own individuality, according them the power to choose which elements to integrate into their own re-narrated identities? Does the situatedness of the gaze, of the diaspora or of the ethnic groups,⁶ affect the importance of the individuality being related through those narratives? Do various socio-cultural events shape and re-invent individual desires and lives of the women even though they are not directly involved in these activities? Do these fictions create a new South Asian American literary trend, especially for women writers? How do these authors contest stereotypes associated with their fictional renditions of women characters? Most importantly are the tropes used by these authors misread and

⁵ By other diasporic locations, I specifically refer to fiction produced by women writers in Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, Singapore and other countries where a growing corpus of South Asian diasporic literature can be found.

⁶ I refer to South Asian groups that are living in America as the South Asian diaspora in the US and South Asian groups living in various South Asian locations as the ethnic groups, throughout this thesis.

dismissed as stereotypes? These questions will be explored in the course of the following pages, through an analysis of selected novels.

Historical context

South Asian diasporas in America have experienced discrimination, alienation and rejection from their host communities over the years, just like immigrants before them, to “different” shores, to echo Takaki’s term. To counter the loss of missing their homelands and to counter being homogenised and made invisible as the Other, South Asian American writers have been creating critically acclaimed creative work since the middle of the 20th century. They have insisted on their ethno-national differences and asserted their diverse and multifaceted identities arising out of ethno-social and regional differences through their creative works over the years. Despite the widespread popularity and reception of South Asian male writers ranging from Agha Shahid Ali, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth to Romesh Gunasekera and Mohsin Hamid amongst others, women writers from America of South Asian descent have not had the same critical attention with the exception of a select few. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the earliest women writers from a South Asian background to have received recognition and accolades from an American audience. Mukherjee’s novel *Jasmine* (1989) has been accepted as “one of the few works by a South Asian American that is included in Asian American

literature curricula,”⁷ and established a literary measure against which the later women writers from India specifically and South Asia generally were evaluated, in popularity and in their attempts to reach out to the wider American and global audiences. Later writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri also became successful authors with international recognition and followers. Their popularity has created a steady growth in interest towards fiction by Indian American authors.

Indian American writers explore their ethnic uniqueness creating another stereotype in turn with their writings: the Indian American stereotype. The Indian American figure in fiction used to be an embodiment of predominantly north Indian characteristics and mostly Hindu sensibilities over the years.⁸ As these writers established themselves and expanded their literary networks and visibility, there were no distinctions between the writers from India settled in America or the writers from Pakistan or Sri Lanka. They were periodically categorised, by the mass media and in other popular forms of imagination, as ethnic-minority writers or plainly Indian American writers. There was no nod of acknowledgement from reviewers or critics to the different geographic locations from within India or the Indian subcontinent or the South Asian coalition of countries that made the geo-politically distinct unit

⁷ Lavina Dhingra Shankar, Rajini Srikanth, “Introduction: Closing the Gap? South Asian Challenge Asian American Studies,” *A Part yet Apart*, eds. Lavina Dhingra Shankar, Rajini Srikanth, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998) 10.

⁸ This was a result of “totalization” of cultures that resulted from certain cultural/ethnic/religious groups being privileged over the other groups. Since most of the educated early immigrants from India to America were from Hindu backgrounds and were from privileged backgrounds that could afford travel to a western country, this was inevitably brought out in literature as well. For further discussion on “totalizations” of cultures, see Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Tradition and Third World Feminism* (New York, London: Routledge, 1997)

called South Asia.⁹ As Moyez Vassanji has argued, South Asia is “purely geographic, artificial, recent and [...] ‘South Asians’ think of themselves and live as various communities,”¹⁰ but the need to establish an identity as a collective which speaks of the differences amongst the “various communities” became increasingly important as American writers of South Asian origin became established. Even though the blanket term “South Asian” did not specify distinct ethno-religious and cultural affiliations within the region, and even though South Asian became synonymous with Indian,¹¹ the term was used to specify writing from the region, closely interconnected in cultural and religious practices but still different in multiple ways. The lack of distinct recognition for South Asian American writing and writers changed in the early 21st century with growing awareness of the region and its multiplicities due to rapidly expanding diasporas from South Asian countries and other political and economic activities from the region that had an impact on a global level.¹² The domination of Indian Americans within the established group of writers

⁹ South Asia is a geographically distinct area which consists of countries in the Indian subcontinent. It is a politically distinct unit that came into being with the establishment of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which was established in 1980. The initial member states were Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In 2007, Afghanistan was added to the SAARC coalition as a member state.

¹⁰ M.G. Vassanji, “Life at the Margins: In the Thick of Multiplicity,” *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality*, eds. Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996) 116.

¹¹ Nasheed Islam questions the effectiveness of such an umbrella term to discuss diverse ethno-national groups within the constructed confines of South Asia through “In the Belly of the Multicultural Beast I am named South Asian” in *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of South Asian Diaspora*, eds. The Women of South Asian Descent Collective (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993) 242-245.

¹² The awareness of South Asia came about in multiple ways. Growing conflict within the region, especially in Sri Lanka between its two main ethnic groups and tension between India and Pakistan, attracted attention towards the region. The rise of nuclear power play between India and Pakistan, too, played a distinct role in gaining attention. The success of Indian American writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri in winning the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 created a clout of Indian American literary followers. The rise of off-shore call centres for many large-scale business operations, located in India, as well as the acceptance of Hindi movies and their associated culture, too, influenced the growing popularity of the region.

still continued due to their sheer numbers in the US and because of their recognised community groups, and due to their history of arrival in the United States of America. Women writers following in the wake of Mukherjee's success have been prolific in exploring the changing and complex identities of Indian Americans in the diaspora. While Mukherjee has been extensively studied and analysed, her successors such as Chitra Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai have also gained interest from academics and critics for their immigrant tales in novels and short stories.

But what makes the writing of South Asian American women writers so distinct from the writings of other diasporic groups that populate America? And what makes the works of Chitra Divakaruni, Amulya Malladi and others selected for this thesis different from the South Asian American women writers already critically acclaimed? These questions and the rationale for this study will be analysed and answered throughout this thesis, through an analysis of ethnic identities, exotic uniqueness, food practices and nostalgic recollections and other tropes used in their respective fictions.

Terms

Throughout this thesis, a range of literary terms have been used to identify various trends within the novels discussed. One of the key terms that shape this thesis is "difference." I have used the term to mean varied identities, and individuals unlike anything/anyone else, especially in relation to otherness in self-identification. The otherness, which springs from a sense of alienation from the majority, being on the

margins either by choice or because of ethno-social hierarchies, renders the women characters and their identity formations “different” to each other in the selected fictions. The difference from each other in relation to their ethno-religious affiliations and the difference in their treatment of the ethno-cultural restrictions in diverse ways, shape the argument of this thesis. The importance of heterogeneous identities, in the face of cultural and social homogenisation, in asserting their otherness is therefore brought out through the use of the word “difference.”

“Exotic” is another term that brings forth the strange, unfamiliar landscapes and situations that are explored in these novels analysed in this thesis. I have used the term to describe the unfamiliar strangeness that is associated with other countries with the different diasporic groups in the US. The Indian, Sri Lankan or Pakistani cultural traditions and socio-ethnic practices make them the Other to the host white American community, rendering these practices different and exotic. The mythical and mysterious details, especially explored in Chitra Divakaruni’s novels, turn the everyday realities of the Indian American women characters into exotic adventures. As Huggan argues, “exotic is the perfect term to describe the domesticating process through which commodities are taken from the margins and reabsorbed into mainstream culture,”¹³ and in the process not only the margins are altered, but the mainstream too is altered. Thus the exoticism employed by Divakaruni and other authors, through myths, alimentary images and other means, aids the “difference” that is brought forth in these novels, to explore the re-negotiation of identities, of the women characters in these novels.

¹³Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) 22.

The Other, the cultural other to the diverse ethno-religious groups, informs the various discussions of individual identity formations in this thesis. The Other is not always from the different socio-cultural groups of the diasporic communities in the US. It is sometimes comprised of the more powerful ethnic groups within the same community, as in the case of Munaweera's novel, which explores the ethno-political dynamics between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka. The Other sometimes consists of the majority ethnic group in the host community, while gender hierarchies also make women the Other in male dominant socio-ethnic practices. Othering the Other in diverse ways facilitates the discussion of re-narration of individual identity explored by some of the writers analysed in this thesis as well. Re-writing and contesting the exotic differences for the consumption of the varied audiences especially through food practices, myths and ethnic differences allow the writers to render their own cultures and ethno-social practices the Other, and in the process of re-presenting their uniqueness, they also critique the stereotypes associated with South Asians that strip their novels and characters of individual identities.

Despite the loaded meanings and varied interpretations around the term "cosmopolitan," I use the term in its simpler form to mean belonging to the world, and sharing a common morality, to examine the transnational identities created by modern amenities such as the ease of travel and access to common languages, presented in the discussed novels and characters. Throughout the thesis, the novels that are either influenced or produced within the influence of postcolonial pasts of the South Asians conflict with the theoretical interpretations of cosmopolitanism due

to their insistence on accepting and highlighting differences.¹⁴ The cosmopolitan identity that I have highlighted throughout the thesis is influenced by the modern worldviews possessed by the women characters portrayed in the novels who are capable of insisting on their global identities by highlighting their adaptability and their choices that make them unique. Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma's seminal work on *New Cosmopolitanisms: South Asians in the US* (2006) has also been influential in the use of the term "cosmopolitan" with regard to the contemporary South Asian American women authors and their narratives of diasporic women characters.

Through the use of these terms, of which the specific meanings will be further elaborated in the respective chapters, I will argue that these contemporary South Asian women writers chosen for this research employ their various "differences" to establish their own unique identities. I use the above terms to analyse their use of ethno-social diversities and how they use Otherness to challenge socio-cultural hierarchies and their position of being the stereotyped Other. Throughout the following pages, I will argue that the unique female characters in these novels that borrow from ethno-cultural traditions and new hybrid diasporic experiences create independent women characters that defy stereotyped ethno-cultural identities. They re-negotiate their selves, in the face of socio-ethnic pressures and re-invent lives that fit into none of the pre-formed ethnic/cultural roles.

¹⁴ For more discussions on cosmopolitanism and its associated theoretical debates see Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Ethics in a World of Strangers* (London: Penguin, 2007), Peng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, eds. *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, eds. *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) and others.

Scope

The critical reception and evaluation of South Asian American women's literature has been varied and multifaceted. In 1997, Ketu H. Katrak theorised that "the category 'South Asian American' does not indicate a monolithic whole, but rather a collection of differences that are often more compelling and significant than any similarities."¹⁵ The article, appearing in one of the foremost literary companions to Asian American literature edited by King-Kok Cheung, details South Asian American literature as a separate category and explores its heterogeneous roots and multiethnic traditions, highlighting the differences prevalent in the region and in the work produced by writers from the region. Despite the overt claims to heterogeneity and differences, Katrak's analysis was largely limited to an exploration of South Asian American writers of Indian origin and only Sara Suleri and Michael Ondaatje appear to represent the other countries of the South Asian collective. Despite its Indian American focus and its analysis of already established writers from the region, Katrak's article and subsequent studies on South Asian American literature established the prominent characteristics and expectations of South Asian American literature: its heterogeneity and the eschewing of a homogeneous identity. It also established a tradition that traced similarities through differences within the works produced by writers from the region as well. As Cheung states, in relation to Asian American literature, South Asian American literature, too, strives to "amplify

¹⁵ Ketu H. Katrak, "South Asian American Literature," *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 192.

marginalized voices, however dissimilar”¹⁶ through its literature. These marginal voices come in the form of novels that explore regional identities, ethnic tensions and various other individual identities removed from the larger socio-political categories, otherwise forgotten within the folds of South Asian American literary productions.

In 1998, Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth produced one of the first book-length studies on South Asian American literature and its place within the canon of Asian American literature. In *A Part Yet Apart* (1998), they claim that “South Asian American writers have indeed arrived with a bang in America in the 1990s.”¹⁷ As they go on to theorise, it is neither the quality nor the quantity that limits South Asian American literature from passing the true test of inclusion in an Asian American literary curriculum. It is the lack of “presence of South Asian American texts in the Asian American curriculum.”¹⁸ The two criteria that seem to be “operative in the definition of Asian American literature—adoption of America as home and the experience of persecution/oppression/lack of privilege”¹⁹— seem to be not too prevalent in the literature produced by women writers of South Asian descent residing in America. According to the writers, Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989) fits the categories and presents the “conventional Asian immigrant’s story — determined survival against all odds and an ultimate claiming of America,”²⁰ but not the works of other South Asian American writers. Shankar and Srikanth, too, do not

¹⁶ King-Kok Cheung, “Re-Viewing Asian American Literature,” *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 5.

¹⁷ Shankar and Srikanth, *op.cit*, 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 10.

²⁰ Shankar and Srikanth, *op.cit* , 10.

question the inclusion or the performance of South Asian American identities in the fiction of Chitra Divakaruni, Amulya Malladi and others, due to their entry into South Asian American literature canon which followed *A Part yet Apart*. The ambiguities of claiming America enacted in the writers analysed in this study raise questions of their contributions to the expansion of South Asian American literature and their impact on that literary tradition. Have they not adopted America as home yet? Or were they just creating a new American identity, which is still finding its way into the Asian American literary curriculum? Is it an identity that is strongly influenced by their own native cultures, despite their success in publishing and gaining a diverse audience?

To counter the homogeneity presented by the mainstream media despite repeated insistences by South Asian American writers, through their fiction, on the heterogeneity of South Asian Americans in literature, Deepika Bahri's "kaleidoscopic vision" is imperative. The vision that "can encompass past and present histories, relationality and individuality, sameness and difference"²¹ is useful to analyse the contribution of Divakaruni and others to the establishment of heterogeneous, individualised identities that are present in contemporary South Asian American women's fiction. Despite Sheetal Majitha's criticism of their writing for "appear[ing] to celebrate the fluidity and mobility of immigrant identity, [and] reduc[ing] the historical contexts to tensions in the text that are too easily resolved through the tropes of romance,"²² the fiction selected, ranging from *Sister of My*

²¹ Deepika Bahri, "With Kaleidoscope Eyes," *A Part yet Apart*, eds. Lavina Dhingra Shankar, Rajini Srikanth (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998) 40.

²² Sheetal Majithia, "Of Foreigners and Fetishes," *SAMAR*, 14, 05 Feb. 2014.

Heart (1999) to *Oleander Girl* (2012), re-imagines immigrant identities and especially South Asian American women's identities, beyond mere fetishised immigrant experiences of easy transitions and representations.²³ As Ruth Yu Hsiao has pointed out, "Asian American literature reflects the writer's sense of identity as an ethnic minority in the majority culture,"²⁴ and so does South Asian American literature, especially the literature of South Asian American women writers. For such writers, there are multiple margins they have to navigate to define their identities. They are the minority within the majority culture of the American society while they are also the minority among the Asian groups due to their time of arrival in the US.²⁵ Being women, they are also often the Other, the powerless, within the traditional and patriarchal social structures of their diasporic communities. But despite these constraints, the novels examined in this study demonstrate how these writers move beyond the "emissary" or "authentic insider"²⁶ positions to establish their own individual identities through common tropes such as ethnic exotica, food and memory, in their fiction.

²³ *op.cit.* Majithia argues that the representation of the immigrant as an outsider who is always the Other fetishises the Indian American experience in the works of Mukherjee, Lahiri and Divakaruni. She argues that the social contradictions that constitute the conditions of immigrant citizenship are ignored or resolved in easy romantic terms in these fictions. But I argue that despite their apparently easy resolutions, the texts selected for this study engage in social issues and insider-outsider tensions that create immigrant identities for South Asian American women.

²⁴ Ruth Yu Hsiao, "A World Apart; Reading South Asian American Literature," *A Part yet Apart*, eds. Lavina Dhingra Shankar, Rajini Srikanth (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998) 220.

²⁵ South Asians' arrival in the US, especially in large numbers, took place only in the mid 1900s, especially in the late 1960s, thus making their history in the US shorter than that of other Asian groups, especially the Chinese and Japanese.

²⁶ Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997) 133.

As Rajini Srikanth posits, South Asian American writers can be categorised as postcolonial or ethnic, depending on the location, characters and concerns of their writing. While the postcolonial writers “locate their narratives outside the United States [and...] bring into their images and narratives histories and realities that have little to do with the United States” the ethnic writers “focus primarily on the United States [and] the lives of its communities as they wrestle with conditions particular to the nation.”²⁷ But this simple binary is complicated in the selected fiction. Writers wrestle with narratives that start outside the US, but move into the everyday conditions of living as a diasporic subject within the US. There are ambiguities of straddling diasporic identities while back in South Asian countries and the writers map the terrain of migrants who decide to live in the US, while being ethnic. Thus the selected fictions illustrate the way in which multiple identities can be created, beyond simple emissary, ethnic or postcolonial identities, therefore creating new identities that steer South Asian American women’s identity construction into new directions.

Anita Mannur’s groundbreaking work on South Asian American culinary fictions examines the diasporic experience through the language of food which finds an “alterity in the American imagination.”²⁸ Mannur’s conscious attempt to defy the Indocentrism in South Asian American literary productions, especially in culinary fictions, leads her analysis to include fiction from Pakistani American and Sri Lankan American writers. Despite her overt attempts to find the alternate identity of

²⁷ Rajini Srikanth, *The World Next Door: South Asian American literature and the Idea of America* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2004) 44.

²⁸ Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2010) 13.

South Asian Americans within an America that emphasises ethnic diversity, Mannur's critical appraisal leaves gaps to discuss the individual identity constructions of South Indian American and Bengali American women's identity that take place within these culinary fictions, especially written by women authors, which work against the Indocentrism common within South Asian American fiction. Novels analysed in this study contribute to the existing critical material on food-themed novels, filling in the gaps left by Mannur's work on South Indian and Bengali American women's uniqueness expressed through alimentary images in fiction. Mannur's analysis also paves the way for other scholars to examine the importance of culinary fiction within South Asian American women's fiction, for its reversal of white supremacy²⁹ in culinary productions that fuse diverse non-mainstream culinary traditions. Shweta Garg's work: *Culinary Images and Identity: Food In The Selected Fiction Of Three Indian Diasporic Women Writers* (2012)³⁰ further extends Mannur's argument for an alternate diasporic identity in the American imaginary through culinary fiction produced by South Asian Americans. Garg's analysis of Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri leaves out the extremely overt culinary fictions of Amulya Malladi and Bharti Kirchner, whose *oeuvre* has been critically examined in this study.

²⁹ White supremacy in this instance refers to food patterns and choices in food-related literature. Making eastern or "ethnic" food acceptable to westerners or the "white" palate is quite popular in cook book literature. Thus, the western palate is taken into consideration, instead of retaining non-white food traditions. The novels analysed in this thesis address the reversal of such food traditions, through the use of non-western food practices presented in these fictions. This reversal of food practices will be discussed further in Chapter Two of this thesis.

³⁰ Shweta Garg, *Culinary Images and Identity: Food In The Selected Fiction Of Three Indian Diasporic Women Writers* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012)

This research is also concerned with the way in which Sri Lankan American women's writing has been neglected as a unique form of diasporic literary expression or as a distinct variety of Sri Lankan women's writing in English. Minoli Salgado writes of the "spatial tropes that elucidate how the nation is imagined"³¹ in selected works of eight authors who write in English. Although her work is not exhaustive in its consideration of all Sri Lankan writing in English, it provides a stepping stone into the analysis of space and home in Sri Lankan American women's writing. Even as late as 2012, when *South Asian Review* produced a special issue on Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature³² there was barely any mention of the special characteristics of Sri Lankan American women's writing.³³ V.V. Ganeshanathan, who is analysed in detail in this study for her contribution to the development of the Sri Lankan American women's tradition, has been critically evaluated in an article by Grant Hamilton, who reads Ganeshanathan's novel *Love Marriage* as a text of distance and evaluates her diasporic national consciousness as a writer, exhibited through her fiction, as a result of distance created through movement.³⁴ The editors of the special issue themselves acknowledge the different trends that are visible and emerging in Sri Lankan literature, thus recognising the gaps in the collection and its scope. My

³¹ Minoli Salgado, *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) 4.

³² *South Asian Review* 33: 3 (2012)

³³ This critical neglect, though not justifiable, can be accounted for by the newness of Sri Lankan American women writers in the field of Sri Lankan Anglophone literature. I argue that Sri Lankan American women's literature has been influenced by Asian American women's writing and American literary traditions, while it retains Sri Lankan characteristics through subject matter and concerns.

³⁴ Though I do not necessarily agree with Hamilton's analysis, I acknowledge it as an important contribution to the existing critical literature on contemporary Sri Lankan American women's fiction. See Grant Hamilton, "Uncertainty and the Future: A reading of V.V. Ganeshanathan's *Love Marriage*," *South Asian Review* 33:3 (2012): 155-169.

study strives to fill some of the gaps in the critical evaluation and scholarly discussion of Sri Lankan American women's literary productions, both in recreating imagined spaces and in creating a national or a collective diasporic/cultural identity, through re-presentation of ethno-national boundaries within Sri Lanka through their fiction.

This thesis also enquires into the ambivalent spaces of individual identities of women and collective identities of different South Asian ethno-religious groups presented in the selected works. Each chapter in this study surveys the works in question from a broader perspective of diasporic and individual identity formation in women and relates it to various concerns within different ethno-national groups. Individual concerns of selected writers, and tropes such as food, memory and female bonds used to explore their own unique identities, inform the broader study of identity constructions taking place within these novels. These are analysed from the perspective of women from both inside and outside diasporic locations, who negotiate diverse margins.

Arrival in the US

The first Indian immigrants into the USA arrived on the shores of America in the early 20th century, looking for economic prosperity. This first wave was significantly from working class backgrounds while the second wave of immigrants from South Asia arrived in the US after the Luce-Celler Act of 1946.³⁵ Significant

³⁵ This was the Act which gave the Indian Americans and Filipino Americans the right to become naturalised US citizens. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act encouraged and made it possible

changes taking place in South Asia, from gaining independence from colonised rule, escaping socio-religious persecutions taking place in their homelands to emerging as independent economies, encouraged people from South Asia to seek migration to the US during this period, in search of better economic and living conditions. The third significant wave of South Asian immigration to America happened in the mid-1960s. This post-1965 generation of immigrants who migrated to America with better education prospects, from within different social categories and with different diasporic concerns began to express their apprehensions and nostalgic recollections for the lands they left behind in their fiction by the 1990s.

The post-1965 generation depicted in this study is not the diaspora that migrated to America in search of safety from persecution such as that of the Second World War period,³⁶ or a dispersed group of people like the historical Jewish Diaspora. Rather, they are a diaspora of people who have decided to move to a different country of their own volition. The voluntary migration of this diaspora meant that there was a choice for these migrants to stay or return, to adjust or to be left out. Their ability to have choices, coupled with transnational travel and new cosmopolitan values gave them the freedom to highlight their ethno-religious affiliations while living amidst their host communities. Their diasporic choices also shaped their multiple identities and sensibilities because they chose to be Indian,

for more immigrants from South Asia to make their way to America and it also became the reason for a large number of graduate and professional South Asians to make America their destination of choice.

³⁶ Even though the South Asian American diaspora discussed throughout the study is not of people fleeing persecution, the Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic experience specifically and some Sri Lankan Sinhalese diasporic experiences explored in this study result from leaving Sri Lanka in the face of war and ethnic violence. Their experiences are discussed in detail in Chapter Three of the study.

Indian-American, ethnic- American or American within their diasporic communities.³⁷

Throughout this study, the reference to South Asian Americans will refer to the people of South Asian descent making their homes in the US. They are not representative of the South Asian diaspora around the world. The authors selected for the study are not representative of South Asians living and writing from South Asian locations either. As Ronald Takaki has elucidated in his studies on Asian Americans and the history of the Asian immigrant groups in America,³⁸ the arrival of different groups from Asia was triggered by different factors. The post-1965 immigrant groups from South Asia were different from their predecessors in America as well as from their South Asian communities left behind. They came mostly from upper-class, upper-middle-class or middle-class professional backgrounds. They were already aware of their social status and were aspiring to fit into the model minority myth³⁹ propagated by the American mainstream ideologies. They came to America not necessarily in search of refuge but in search of either education or better job

³⁷ Their choice to highlight their ethno-regional affiliations was also aided by the ethnic revival in the US in the 1970s. See Matthew Frye, *Roots Too; White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2008).

³⁸ For further discussions see Ronald Takaki *Strangers from a Different shore: A History of Asian Americans* (1989), *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (1993) and *From Different Shores: Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity in America* (1994).

³⁹ The term was first used in the 1960s during the Civil Rights era. Asian minorities were held up as an example for the people of colour to discredit the claims of inequality and prejudices against minorities, especially towards black people. This has been historically constructed through America's attempt at stereotyping the qualities of Asian immigrants, initially of Chinese and Japanese origins. They were praised for their hard-working skills, success in education and law-abiding lifestyles. The first generation of post-1965 Indian immigrants, too, were upheld in various media researches as the new model minority, because of their income, education and general success in adapting to American multiculturalism. See "Pew Social and Demographic Trends; The Rise of Asian Americans" (Washington: Pew Research Centre, June 2012), 10 Feb. 2014. For more discussions on model minority see Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folks* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001).

prospects. This change of attitude and the stronger national affiliations to their own countries, as a result of their exposure to independence struggles that were fought out in South Asia, distinguish the post-1965 generation of immigrants, especially those that migrated from South Asia. They were different from their South Asian counterparts left behind because of their willingness to leave behind their own motherlands, despite their comfortable lives in their own countries. The easy familiarity with the host country's language — English, unlike that of most of their predecessors — also made a complete difference in the post-1965 generation's experience and establishment as a diaspora in America. All these reasons led to the emergence of a post-1965 diasporic group of writers who wrote from the perspective of immigrants in a different land, but with their own transnational, cosmopolitan identities and ethno-national affiliations.

Rationale

The fact that large publishing houses such as Random House, Macmillan (in St.Martin's Press editions) Graywolf and Piatkus Books chose to publish the fiction selected for this study also needs to be analysed closely to understand the appeal and intended readership of these novels. Since these fictions depict the lives of South Asian women and their experiences in America and South Asia, the decision of the publishing houses to publish these women authors makes a crucial impact in their distribution and on the nature of their anticipated readership. The audience needs to be diverse enough for these reputed publishing houses to invest in these fictions while at the same time the plots need to hold enough intrigue and ethnicised details

to market the work as exotic/ethnic writing. The combination of ethnic details in the plot, exotic appeal apparent in the paratextual material of the selected fiction for this study, together with the appeal of the Other, the South Asian figure both as the writer and as the narrator, ensures a wider, diversified reading audience. Though this study is not about the reception of these fictions and the appeal of these fictions to a white or an Other audience, it is essential to understand the appeal of these novels since they fit into a marketable category of ethnic writing and since they were published by publishing houses of repute and wider dissemination ability. The fictions selected for this research ranging from Divakaruni's novels to Nayomi Munaweera's novel, have all been re-issued in paperback editions⁴⁰ and most of the novels have been translated into languages other than the mother tongue of the writer and English.⁴¹ Thus Chitra Divakaruni, Amulya Malladi, Bharti Kirchner, V.V. Ganeshanathan and Nayomi Munaweera were selected for my study because of their varied audience appeal apparent in the publishing houses and translations that extended their mainstream appeal. The exception to this selection criterion was in choosing Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* (2009) and Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi's *The Colour of Mehndi* (2006). The novels were chosen because of their unusual thematic concerns and as contemporary representations of Pakistani American women's writing.

⁴⁰ All the novels selected for the study have been re-issued in paperback editions except for Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012) that was originally published as a paperback edition. But Munaweera's novel was re-issued by Hachette India and St. Martin's Press in the US in late 2014.

⁴¹ Divakaruni's books have been translated into 29 languages, including Dutch, Hebrew, Bengali, Russian and Japanese. Malladi's books have been translated into German, Spanish, Danish, Dutch, Romanian, Serbian and other languages; Kirchner's work has been translated to German, Spanish, Marathi, Thai and Dutch among other languages. See Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, "A Partial list of Divakaruni's Foreign Publishers." n.d. 27 Sep. 2014, Bharti Kirchner, "Biography," n.d. 27 Sep. 2014, Amulya Malladi, "Books," Web Blog Post. Blog at Wordpress.com. n.d. 27 Sep. 2014.

In an attempt to understand the critical importance and the need for an analytical intervention into the writings of the aforementioned writers, it is worth looking at the reasons behind their popularity and visibility in English reading communities, specifically in America and other countries with an English language readership. Almost all these writers write about important issues, but they are mostly cloaked in myth, exotic details or nostalgic recollections of places left behind. Divakaruni reads the diasporic female experience through a lens of myth and magic, making the rendition palatable to both the diasporic and western audiences. Malladi and Kirchner navigate the planes of diaspora through their references to ethnic food and food rituals. Diasporic women's experience thus is cloaked in "Otherness" making it "different" from that of the host. Their strengths are derived from the diaspora's staple of "home food," thus making the identities and narratives a gourmet experience for the diaspora as well as non-ethnic Indian readers. Female bonds stand out as the Other to the male writers' renditions from the same lands and islands. All those overt reasons work together to make these fictions reach out to a larger audience, one consisting of a diaspora that reads these works for nostalgic reasons amongst others. Because of the overt "re-Orientalist"⁴² elements in these fictions, the writers enjoy a wide reading public, and they also use their personal blogs⁴³ attached to their own websites and social media (Facebook, Twitter) to create awareness for their writing and connect with their diverse readership. Sometimes the popularity

⁴² I use the term from Lisa Lau's "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals," *Modern Asian Studies* 43:2 (2009): 571-590.

⁴³ All the writers except for Nausheen Pasha- Zaidi have personal blogs and/or web pages and social networking sites through which most of them communicate with their readers and keep them up to date with book tours and other social events.

they have gained in their professional capacities also influences their reputation and readership.⁴⁴ Book tours, seminars and literary festivals, too, play a decisive role in the circulation of the selected novels and the popularity of the selected authors.

Thus, combined together with the seemingly “re-Orientalist” tales written for the consumption of the Other, coupled with highly visible and exoticised covers for the books and the public presence of the authors, these fictions reach a great number of readers from around the world and especially in America. Their impact in busting or reiterating stereotypes about South Asian American women as submissive, traditional or non-progressive and creating fictional identities for South Asian American women cannot be underestimated. Despite their contribution to the expansion of South Asian American women’s writing in America and their fictional engagement with the issues of South Asian American women’s identity in diasporic communities, most of these writers have received very little critical attention. Their writings, which have strong female characters battling against the stereotypes and ethnic discriminations in new lands, create individual identities for women characters. These fictions also demystify and debunk claims about a broader Indian or a South Asian identity. They re-imagine and assert regional and ethnic identities through migrant eyes while negotiating American identities. Hence this study examines the larger trends of re-fashioning new ethno-regional identities within diverse South Asian American groups consisting of Bengalis, Telegus, Tamils, Sinhalese and Pakistani Muslims through the fictions and fictitious characters

⁴⁴ For example, Chitra Divakaruni’s position as a the Betty and Gene McDavid Professor of Creative writing at the University of Houston, US, and V.V. Ganeshananthan’s post as a Zell visiting professor of creative writing at the University of Michigan influence their popularity. Social activism in their chosen causes, too, helps these writers reach out to a wider audience.

selected for analysis, and argues for a new critical attention to the women writers of these fictions.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was a leading figure of the post-1965 generation of South Asian American women writers who were free to choose: to be part of America but yet to be apart from the same America and its beliefs, by asserting their own ethno-regional individualities. This generation of immigrants had the social acceptance and the economic power to choose their own hyphenated/diversified identity. Because of the 1970s ethnic revival in the US and because of established Asian American writers before them, writers from Divakaruni's generation could express their re-negotiated ethnic and individual identities more freely. Divakaruni's strong focus on women's experience is not at all a new concern since Asian American women writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan and Bharati Mukherjee have all concerned themselves with the trajectory of women's experience in America highlighting the "double burden" of being the Other to the host as well as to their own communities. As both Partha Chatterjee and Uma Narayan have argued, in relation to the Indian nationalist project on women's place in a westernised world and in relation to their diasporic presence, women are assigned the task of preserving cultures while being at the margins of their own communities due to their gender roles.⁴⁵ Divakaruni, too, uses the same trope of highlighting women's experience on "different shores" but she makes the Other "different." Divakaruni's exoticisation is not only directed at the Indian American characters, but is also directed at the

⁴⁵ Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, eds. K.Sangari and S.Vaid (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990) 238 and Uma Narayan, "Eating Cultures: Incorporation, Identity and Indian Food," *Social Identities* 1:1 (1995): 63-86.

American characters. By creating strong independent characters who defy exotic stereotypes, Divakaruni further contests the claims to exoticisation directed at her novels. Her novels discuss not only the “difference” between east and west, but also the “differences” in female diasporic experiences. The voice of the subdued diasporic Indian woman, who finds strength not only through her appropriation of western cultures, but also through her reassertion of Indian cultural and traditional beliefs makes Divakaruni’s differentiation unique from the other novelists from the Indian American diaspora. The “difference”⁴⁶ surpassed mere “re-Orientalism” and created an identity that is steeped in culture, through which women gain and regain strength.

In this research, Divakaruni’s contribution will be critically analysed positioning her as one of the foremost women writers who examined the re-imagined individual identities of South Asian American women with their exposure to transnational travel and new cosmopolitan lifestyles, introduced through immigration and other contemporary choices. Divakaruni differentiates her fictions from her predecessor Bharati Mukherjee’s acclaimed works through her use of Indian myths, historical legends and most importantly through her hybrid, hyphenated women characters. Unlike Mukherjee’s early novels, where women characters are independent yet decisive about their identity in either appropriating America or in essentialising India, Divakaruni’s characters prefer the fluid identities that can be moulded and re-negotiated according to their individual desires. Instead of a national identity, Divakaruni brings forth an individual identity that does not rely on national

⁴⁶ Lisa Lau, “Making the Difference: The differing presentations and Representations of South Asia in the Contemporary Fiction of Home and Diasporic South Asian Women Writers,” *Modern Asian Studies* 39: 1 (Feb. 2005): 237-256.

affiliations but defines itself based on ethno-regional and most importantly individual needs. Her women characters re-define their identities and assert their uniqueness, not as Indians or Americans, but as individuals with ethnic and cultural affiliations to both India and America. The works of Indian American writers such as Amulya Malladi and Bharti Kirchner that have generated interest among readers and communities, but have gained very little critical appraisal due to their relatively recent publication, will be analysed in relation to their overt use of alimentary images in the identity creation of Indian American women characters. The importance and the individuality of the characters who are explored through food and food rituals will make this thesis an invaluable contribution to the growing critical body of food studies in literature, especially in South Asian/Indian American women's literature. This study specifically examines the expression of emotions through alimentary images and questions how women's space has been defined through food practices. In addition, the appropriation of the palate of ethnic Others to define South Asian American women's individualities will be analysed through an examination of the novels, *The Mango Season* (2003), *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004), *Pastries* (2003) and *Darjeeling* (2002) specifically and through the other novels chosen for this study.

The critical appraisal and analysis of selected women writers from Sri Lanka and Pakistan marks this thesis as an important addition to the existing body of work on South Asian American women's writing. Sri Lankan American women writers are the youngest group among this group of writers to have emerged and their literary concerns are "different" due to their engagement with Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict.

Though there are only a few references to the Sri Lankan experience in America as an immigrant group⁴⁷ compared to the Indian or Pakistani American experiences narrativised in the selected fiction, the lack of such narrative experiences itself is a reason for their selection for this study. “Home” becomes a place that these writers revisit, through their fictional and narrative recollections of ethnic violence. While the Pakistani women writers analysed in this thesis air their concerns about important diasporic issues of mental health, diasporic support networks and community pressures through their fiction, Sri Lankan American women writers grapple with their diasporic and cultural identities, personal and political, in their attempt to establish themselves within the diaspora. Sri Lankan American women writers have been selected because of their growing visibility within the Asian and South Asian American writing circles. Thus, this study’s contribution is important in mapping the emerging trends and concerns in contemporary South Asian American women’s writing.

Concerns old and new

From Divakaruni’s myth-infused exotic tales to Munaweera’s recollections of ethnic conflict, the women authors selected for this study establish a new type of South Asian American women’s writing that is attempting to create its own identity and niche within the corpus of Asian American women’s writing. This thesis argues that by using overtly “re-Orientalist” tropes such as exoticism through oriental

⁴⁷ Among the chosen women writers, only V.V. Ganeshanathan locates the bulk of her narrative development in the US and Canada. Nyomi Munaweera’s protagonists travel between the US and Sri Lanka after a substantial time spent in each location.

myths, landscapes, magic and female figures, food and nostalgia, these women writers subvert the “re-Orientalist” trends and create their own differences that work beyond simple east versus west binaries and postcolonial exotica. The reworking of margins, within the host community as well as within their own diasporic communities, enables the women characters to define their own heterogeneous identities away from the homogeneous identities associated with their ethno-regional affiliations. Thus, by using these individual identities developed inside America’s melting-pot culture, these writers explore the factors influencing individualities within women. Through an examination of these fictions, this study argues for a new reading of these novels which use everyday tropes of female bonding, food rituals and memory among other common tropes to reveal women characters re-fashioning their own lives, while living within the boundaries of socio-cultural frameworks of South Asian and South Asian American diasporic experience.

One of the main contentions of this thesis is to argue for the fluidity of South Asian women’s identities in South Asian American women’s fiction. The hybrid inbetweenness of pre-defined identity markers such as ethnic and national boundaries together with gender hierarchies is expressed through the depiction of female figures in the selected fiction. The fluidity of identities, especially when placed in different socio-economic hierarchies such as in the diaspora is expressed in the novels of the writers chosen for this study.

As Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis have argued, gender, race and the diasporic position matter in the making of a diasporic multicultural identity, which

negotiate the cultural norms of both the host society and the original society.⁴⁸ But as Narayan has argued elsewhere, the third world appropriation of western notions, into their everyday lives, complicates the identity of women in the diaspora.⁴⁹ These complications question the use of a homogeneous identity that is usually attached to a diasporic community by both the host and within their own communities and how these identities erase individualities, especially in contemporary fictions that have gained popularity among diverse audiences. Despite the depoliticisation of the term “third world,” this research argues for the socio-political implications of the fiction produced by South Asian American women in the early 21st century and the need to contextualise these fictions as socio-political narratives that navigate individual and social concerns of finding one’s place, the failure to fit in and diasporic community pressure through mainstream tropes such as ethnicised female figures, nostalgia and alimentary images in fiction. These representations of different communities within diverse socio-political locales enable the fictions under discussion to determine individualised identities for the women characters that are diverse yet a part of the South Asian American diasporic experience. Despite their ability to represent socio-political changes among diverse ethnic groups, women characters such as Devi in *Serving Crazy with Curry* and Yalini in *Love Marriage* among others eschew homogenised identities assigned for the larger group of South Asian American women based on their ancestry and create individual identities that still speak beyond the individual to the collective, on a historically and politically relevant plane.

⁴⁸ Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the Anti-racist Struggle* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁴⁹ Narayan, *op.cit.*

Narayan criticises the “package picture of Cultures”⁵⁰ and shuns the homogeneity assigned to individual women situated within a single culture. She argues that “[t]he picture of the ‘cultures’ attributed to [women in marginal diasporic societies] remains fundamentally essentialist, depicting as homogeneous groups of heterogeneous peoples whose values, ways of life, and political commitments are internally divergent.”⁵¹ Even though this thesis is about first generation South Asian American women’s fictional accounts of South Asian experiences,⁵² at a textual level, it analyses the heterogeneity of women figures in the selected fiction. Writing about individual experiences, these women writers work beyond simple collective narratives, making them into individual tales where the “package picture of [the c]ulture” is used to highlight the “politics of belonging”⁵³ to a particular ethno-national group. As Yuval-Davis defines it, “[t]he politics of belonging involves not only constructions of boundaries but also the inclusion or exclusion of particular people, social categories and groupings within these boundaries by those who have the power to do this.”⁵⁴ The women writers of the diasporic community of South Asian Americans, as well as the women characters created by these writers, construct boundaries within narratives to include and exclude other groups from within their own outwardly homogeneous socio-political settings. Women, since they are the

⁵⁰ Uma Narayan, “Undoing the ‘Package Picture’ of Cultures,” *Signs* 25:4, Feminism at a Millennium (Summer 2000):1084

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 1083.

⁵² Except for V.V. Ganeshanathan, all the other writers whose work has been analysed are immigrants to the US.

⁵³ Nira Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* (London: Sage, 2011).

⁵⁴ Yuval-Davis, *op.cit*, 18.

“identifiable margins”⁵⁵ of their social settings and because of the gendered nature of their socio-religious practices, create their own boundaries to define their belonging. Because of the larger society’s and the diasporic community’s power to define boundaries for them, women define their own boundaries through their sisterly bonds, power over food and food choices and through their imaginary worlds powered with magic fuelled by nostalgia. Thus, the margins of the diasporic politics of belonging are recreated and redefined by the diasporic women writers and their fictional women characters. Therefore, the boundaries become fluid lines that change to accommodate the centres and peripheries depending on the power of the group and the politics of belonging at work in that particular setting.

As Yuval-Davis claims, the “[s]ituated gaze, situated knowledge and situated imagination construct how we see the world in different ways... [and] the differential situatedness of different social agents affects the ways they affect and are affected by different social, economic and political projects.”⁵⁶ The situatedness of the research being carried out at this juncture when this genre of literature has reached a wider audience is important while the social, economic and political situatedness of the novels determine their effect in the larger corpus of diasporic American women’s fiction. The intersectionality of these novels and this study of these fictions, in their different socio-political contexts and their diverse social and individual concerns, are situated in multiple ethno-political locations, defined by the fictions’ varied ethno-political characters. Thus, these concerns make this study’s intervention into the

⁵⁵ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998) 84.

⁵⁶ Yuval-Davis, *op.cit*, 4.

existing body of work on the selected novels an important contribution. This study looks at different concerns of the selected women writers, through a close analysis of their fiction, to map out how the women characters depicted in these novels, reinvent their lives with the help of exotic identities, alimentary images and ethno-social identities that have undergone changes with their transnational travel and cosmopolitan lifestyles.

By no means is this study an exhaustive analysis of all the contemporary fiction⁵⁷ produced by South Asian American women writers in the early 21st century. Demarcations such as their diasporic generation (mainly first-generation authors) and their subject matter (focused on women) have informed the selection of these novels. The fictional narratives of young women also influenced the selection, because they encapsulated the independence and female inter-dependence of the post-1965 generation of South Asian women in America. Thus, the fiction of Chitra Divakaruni, Amulya Malladi, Bharti Kirchner, V.V. Ganeshananthan, Nayomi Munaweera together with Shaila Abdullah and Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi were selected for this study. Longer fictional narratives over short fiction, collected short stories or novellas were chosen for their developed characters and the space accorded in the novel form for characters to evolve in the course of the narrative. Historical narratives, retelling of myths and legends, drama, life writing and poetry by South Asian American women writers have been deliberately omitted to sharpen this

⁵⁷ I use the term “South Asian American women’s contemporary fiction” throughout the thesis to refer to novels published between 1999 -2012. By using the term contemporary, I also allude to their popularity among the contemporary audiences, both in the west as well as in the east. These novels have gained popularity (as was earlier elucidated through their various translations, etc.) but are considered not to be just chick-lit, but works of serious literature that reach out to a wider public, despite not occupying “high-literary” statuses.

study's focus. Poetry, drama and life writing have been excluded also because of the difference in those genres that require different narrative analysis. Thus, neither the selection nor the exclusion of fictions will strive to produce a common identity for the narrated women nor will it depict a specific diasporic identity for the women in South Asian American diasporic groups. But because of the intersectional nature of the analysis, the study claims that these trends and concerns examined through the selected fiction can be useful in defining a place for these fictions within the critically neglected sphere of South Asian American women's literature.

Chapter Summary

Excluding the introduction and the conclusion to the study, this thesis consists of four chapters. The chapters are defined according to broad thematic concerns and with cross references to the works of selected authors across all four chapters. Chapter One analyses the importance of exotic ethnic identities and memory in the self-reinvention of Divakaruni's protagonists. The novels *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004) and *Oleander Girl* (2012) were chosen as the primary texts to examine the importance of Bengali women's re-negotiated individual identity that is achieved through the use of exotic, ethnic myths and recollected nostalgic memories. The gradual development of Indian American characters is traced in Divakaruni's gradual (dis)placement of characters from India to America in these novels. Their marginal position within the diasporic community because of their individualised adventures that differentiate them from the homogeneous diasporic groups is developed through the novels. The reference to

nostalgic recollections of their ancestry to gain strength in America — their adopted land, and the confused identity of the female characters as being born American while being raised Indian — is evaluated in order to find the new identities that are created within those socio-political conditions. The hyphenated identities and the negotiation of these identities by the women who are no longer at the margins but are also not at the centres of their dual societies are analysed through a deeper textual reading of the chosen texts.

The second chapter extends the subversive attempts at developing heterogeneous identities despite the homogeneous “package picture of cultures”⁵⁸ through alimentary images in selected fiction by Amulya Malladi and Bharti Kirchner primarily. *The Mango Season* (2003) and *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004) by Amulya Malladi and *Pastries* (2003) and *Darjeeling* (2002) by Bharti Kirchner are examined to see how the cultural packaging of food, especially within the context of Indian food in mainstream media and the growing popularity of the cookbook culture, has been appropriated by the authors. This chapter examines deeper concerns of hybrid identities and individual identities that are usually submerged within the homogeneous popularity and acceptance of Indian food by American mainstream cultures. Malladi traces individual character development and especially female emotions and gendered spaces through the substitution of alimentary images to explore emotions. This chapter argues that the contemporary South Asian American women’s fiction subverts the usual culinary practices of “altering South Asian palatal

⁵⁸ Narayan, “Undoing the ‘Package Picture’ of Cultures,” *op.cit*, 1084.

preferences” to suit the palate of the white consumers⁵⁹ by incorporating the palates of the racial Others to suit the tastes of another marginal Other, the Indian American diasporic community. The caste and class concerns that govern identities through alimentary choices and identity assertion through the incorporation of one’s own culinary histories are expanded and analysed through this chapter.

Chapter Three traces the contribution of Sri Lankan American women writers to the development of heterogeneous women characters within South Asian American women’s fiction. V.V. Ganeshanathan’s *Love Marriage* (2009) and Nayomi Munaweera’s *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012) are evaluated and used to analyse the development of Sri Lankan American women’s fiction. Their concerns with ethno-social identities that differentiate groups within Sri Lankans are examined through a close reading of the two novels, to find their “difference” against other novels analysed in the thesis.

Shyam Selvadurai and Michael Ondaatje have been the leading figures of Sri Lankan diasporic fiction, especially in Canada. There have not been many male writers of Sri Lankan origin writing from America in recent years. Ondaatje’s and Selvadurai’s concerns about the ethnic conflict expressed through novels and numerous poems act as precursors to the women’s fiction that explores women’s perspectives of the ethno-political concerns of diasporic writing from Sri Lanka. Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* (2000) and *Running in the Family* (1982) explore Sri Lankan settings and sentiments while Selvadurai’s novels *Funny Boy* (1994) and *Cinnamon*

⁵⁹Mannur, *op cit*, 214.

Gardens (1998) examine the pivotal 1983 ethnic riots in Sri Lanka and the development of same-sex relationships among main characters. In contrast, women authors, whose novels have been selected for this thesis, examine issues reaching beyond the ethnic riots and ethnic relations through their fiction. They inspect class and caste issues that are intermingled with ethnic tensions and issues of individuality and identity through their novels. The significance of the emergence of a female narrative voice separates the Sri Lankan American women writers apart from the other diasporic male authors from Sri Lanka. This chapter also examines how the ethnic tensions and alliances prevalent in Sri Lanka have influenced their diasporic representations through fiction and the main female narrators.

Chapter Four evaluates the emerging trends within the South Asian American women's writing through an analysis of the works of two Pakistani American women authors, Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi and Shaila Abdullah. Their novels *The Colour of Mehndi* (2006) and *Saffron Dreams* (2009) question the social pressure exerted by diasporic communities towards their own women and diasporic women's mental health issues springing from silences and adherence to socio-religious traditions from their own native lands. The awareness of the existing problems faced by their own diasporic sisters and the solutions and strengths of the diasporic women's communities are explored through the fiction selected for this research and this chapter brings in the hidden problems and strengths of the Pakistani American Muslim women's community explored through fiction.

Formal literary analytical techniques such as close readings and application of appropriate theoretical frameworks have been used throughout the thesis to

understand the novels and their importance in contemporary South Asian American women's fiction. Literary theories and other critical frameworks have been employed according to the thematic concern governing various chapters. The importance of each novel's situatedness within its own ethno-social context has been analysed with reference to relevant literary traditions, of which postcolonial and diasporic readings of literature have taken a centre stage.

Overall, this thesis argues for a better understanding of the under-researched, contemporary writing by South Asian American women and how their concerns displayed through their fictions call for an establishment of a new critical engagement with this literature. This study will be an important contribution to the development of a critical body of work on South Asian American women's fiction and will be a significant addition to the establishment of a separate corpus of critical material that deals with South Asian American women's literature analysing their multiple ethnic affiliations away from the larger corpus of Asian American women's literature. This research will also assert that through literature, women writers from South Asia in the US address issues that are particularly pertinent to women within diasporic societies. The existing and emerging trends within South Asian American women's literature also affirm the importance and the contribution of the selected writers for this research, in expanding existing definitions of South Asian American women's diasporic identities within America and establishing fiction by South Asian American women writers as a new strand of literature worthy of critical and academic note.

Chapter One: Re-fashioning new identities in Chitra Divakaruni's novels

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, whose works range from acclaimed poetry collections to prize winning novels, is the embodiment of the post-1965 generation of South Asian American women writers and their exploratory spirit. Her novels examine a range of everyday topics including diasporic inclusion, identity, choice and individuality for fictional women in Calcutta and in the US. This chapter explores how Divakaruni makes a “difference” to the literature of Indian American women writers and South Asian American women writers as a group through her exotic¹ and myth-filled narratives of Indian and Indian American women who fashion new individual identities beyond the overt exotica initially apparent in their portrayals. Despite being exotic and “different,” Divakaruni’s female narrators encapsulate essential diasporic experiences of living in America in the novels discussed in this chapter. The novels *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004) and *Oleander Girl* (2012) are used as core texts in this chapter to look at how female exotica and ethnic exotica are used by Divakaruni to bring to life the factors that individualise the experiences of her female characters. Divakaruni’s use of memory as a trope in turn helps to build and create unique identities for the Indian Americans and contemporary generation of Indians that feature in her novels. I will argue that

¹ Throughout this chapter and this thesis, I use the terms “exotic” and “exotica” to refer to things, practices and appearances of things foreign to western culture. In a very specific manner, I refer to things that are portrayed as “different” to US/western cultural norms by the writers as exotica or exotic. Most of these “differences” hark back to postcolonial renditions of former colonies and their practices and especially reflect re-Orientalist attempts by the writers to mark their “difference.”

the individual identities explored through exoticised and ethnicised details in the selected novels create new cosmopolitan and transnational identities that are aided by diasporic travel, for the featured women characters, enabling them to re-invent themselves. They also debunk the stereotypes largely assigned to Indian American women in the US by mainstream media while relying upon the same stereotyped tropes of nostalgic memory, eastern exotica and intriguing eastern mythologies.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an Indian American writer of Bengali origin who moved to America to further her education in the late 1970s. Divakaruni's entry into America in the period when the post-1965 generation of educated Indian immigrants arrived in the US is important in her development as a writer from India, exploring Indian American identity. Divakaruni writes about the lives of Indians settled in America, especially from the point of view of Indian American women, without ostensibly negotiating women's arrival and stay in the US in her novels. Since she is speaking for the post-1965 generation of Indian women, who arrived after most of the battle for integration into American society had been fought by the pre-1965 generations of Indian immigrants, and because Divakaruni is conscious of the ethnic revival that took place in the 1970s with political and social changes in the US society, she portrays Indian American women who negotiate cultural and ethnic stereotypes with ease. This apparent ease of cultural negotiations takes place in Divakaruni's fiction not only because of her post-1965 freedom, but also because of her desire to amalgamate cultural differences and Otherness, not only on American terms, but also on Indian terms. Throughout this chapter, I argue that Divakaruni's characters not only find their own unique identities defying stereotypes, but they also

appropriate America on their own terms, merging Indian needs and American desires to find one's own distinct want, to survive in a "different" land.

Divakaruni's contribution to the development of diasporic women's identity (in fiction) marks an important stage in the development of literature produced by South Asian American women. Instead of writing about the pan-Indian identity of Indian American women, especially north Indian women in America, Divakaruni portrays a definite Bengali Indian American identity for her women characters in fiction. Bharati Mukherjee, whose fictions predate Divakaruni's novels, has brought forth a defined Indian identity through her fictions. But instead of a regional/ethnic identity, Mukherjee's women characters display a pan-Indian identity that is predominantly North Indian. Her characters rely on national identity to traverse through life's many trials. In contrast, Divakaruni's fictions explore the everyday lives of Bengali Indian American women. They face everyday trials and tribulations of being in the diaspora while gaining strength from their histories, myths and other "sisters of their hearts."² The diasporic roots of her female narrators range from women from elite Calcutta families to dream interpreters and young women with broken family histories. The female characters in her novels, spanning different social strata, both from within the diaspora and their homelands, initiate female friendships that help them traverse the hostile and difficult diasporic terrains easily. This female bonding, mythical and exotic detailing and the plots make her fiction fit

² This is used as a term in this thesis to describe the sisterly bonds between women characters in the selected novels. The term is inspired by Chitra Divakaruni's novel *Sister of My Heart* (1998) which is one of the selected texts for this study.

into the category of ethnic-minority writing that is arguably targeting an audience composed of ethnic outsiders and insiders, among its readership.

Sisters and legends: *Sister of My Heart*

In Divakaruni's second novel, *Sister of My Heart* (1999), the exoticisation of the female figure in Indian American fiction is explored in detail. Her debut novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997)³ explores the eastern exotica attributed to Indian women in America through a mysterious spice mistress. The spice mistress Tilo's journey, from a mystic spice island to California, and her re-invention of her own self and identity away from the traditional dictates of being a spice mistress and an Indian woman are portrayed through the novel. Instead of simply creating an intriguing tale of "difference" — of cultural otherness — with a mysterious Indian woman, Divakaruni attempts to address some immigrant issues such as immigrants with non-professional jobs, the hardships of adjusting to a new country, especially for women, in balancing and maintaining cultural roots and other issues such as domestic violence among immigrant Indians. In creating characters that defy the stereotyped, model minority of Indians in America, Divakaruni addresses pertinent issues affecting the post-1965 generation of immigrants through her first novel. Her characters, especially the titular mistress of spices, Tilo, are not static or representative of Indian identity, but rather they negotiate their identities in the face of their transnational experiences and diverse influences. The fluidity and the in-betweenness of Tilo's character that navigates between the real and the imaginary

³ The novel was made into a well-known movie in 2005, with the same name, starring the winner of the 1994 Miss World pageant, Aishwarya Rai, and directed by Paul Mayeda Berges.

through the aid of magic and myths enhance her individuality. As Tilo finds her own distinctive character through her magic, myth and spices, Divakaruni suggests that individuality for Indian American women is not a recipe-that-fits-all. It is a unique identity that comes forth in Tilo's customers, the battered Indian woman Lalita's final recognition of her power to accept that she "deserve[s] dignity, [she] deserve[s] happiness,"⁴ in rebellious young Jagjit's resolution to "give [it his] best shot"⁵ and in second-generation Indian American Geeta's traditional grandfather's resolution to be more diplomatic and understanding of American ways. Thus, individuality is not pre-defined or predictable according to their ethnic identity, and it does not necessarily come forth when they abandon or embrace their ethnic identity. It is a mixture of letting go and accepting changes, internal as well as external, just as Tilo turns into Maya, the illusion.

Divakaruni's second novel, *Sister of My Heart*, which forms the first part of a duology detailing the lives and trials of two young women Anju and Sudha, is mainly set in India. Anju's and Sudha's lives are intertwined in many ways and the sisterly bonds and family secrets bind them further, making their lives and fates interconnected and complicated. *Sister of My Heart* not only places India, especially Calcutta, as an exotic place full of everyday wonders, but also describes the different lives of privileged young women from an upper-class Brahmin family. The legends and mythical stories, both used to add an element of "difference" to the narrative, work also to enhance the characters of the two young women being explored in the novel.

⁴ Chitra Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices* (London: Black Swan, 1997) 272.

⁵ *Ibid.* 276.

Anju and Sudha share a deep sisterly bond that is beyond ties shared by cousins. “[W]e found everything we needed in each other,”⁶ explains Anju about her deep attachment to Sudha. Anju, the rational, analytical one of the pair, bears a responsibility towards Sudha, because she “called her into the world and therefore must do all [she] can to make sure [Sudha] is happy.”⁷ Divakaruni explores this deep attachment between women throughout her novels and particularly in *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire* (2002). Anju’s and Sudha’s relationship develops the female bonds Divakaruni explored in her short stories and expanded in *The Mistress of Spices*. There is an all-female world within the confines of an elite Calcutta family, created in the narrative of *Sister of My Heart*. Anju and Sudha live with three mothers, a retinue of female servants and a scarred, emasculated driver, who is removed from the main house in his role and dwelling. Their existence, described as secluded, in an ancient mansion belonging to the Chatterjees, behind “wrought-iron gates topped regally with prancing lions,”⁸ separates the lives of these female protagonists from the rest of the Calcutta dwellers. Their seclusion and difference, in living amongst other women and having very few interactions with the outside world, enable Divakaruni to create exoticised characters to explore individual identities. As Sudha later elaborates, their lives are very different from the everyday lives of the other Calcutta girls. “I knew most sixteen-year-old girls in Calcutta didn’t live the way we did. I saw them on my way to school, pushing their way onto

⁶ Chitra Divakaruni, *Sister of My Heart* (London: Black Swan, 1999) 27.

⁷ *Ibid*, 30

⁸ *Ibid*, 37

crowded buses, bargaining loudly with the roadside vegetable sellers...”⁹ But that difference does not hinder them from reaching out to taste other differences and carving a niche for themselves within those confined and contested domestic spaces of women oriented and traditional households.

The seclusion of the Chatterjee girls (Anju and Sudha) away from the other girls in Calcutta makes them separate and different. Their differences together with their altered household arrangements lend uniqueness to their characters that cannot be homogenised or stereotyped. They are not representative of the rest of the Calcutta girls. As Sudha elaborates, their secluded upper-caste and upper-class upbringing creates distinct identities for both young women. They are not exposed to the everyday realities of harsh socio-economic conditions or the patriarchal dominance that takes place in everyday matters. Their lives are governed by their three mothers: Anju’s mother (Gauri Ma), Sudha’s mother (Nalini) and Pishi, the widowed aunt who is as dear as a mother. The girls are controlled by women and these women exercise both patriarchal and matriarchal authority over them. They are the carers as well as the chastisers. The traditional patriarchal role of decision making as well as the matriarchal role of providing emotional support are both carried out by the three mothers. The three mothers thus create a “different” world for both Anju and Sudha to grow up in, shielding them from the everyday realities and patriarchal dominance in the society. Thus, when Anju encounters Sunil’s father and his abusive ways towards his wife, she is unable to contain her terror or her anger: “Nothing in my life has prepared me for this...I want to take her away, to wipe her wet cheeks and soiled

⁹ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 66

arms and shake some anger into her.”¹⁰ Sudha, too, cannot find strength or courage to follow her own heart by marrying Ashok because of her lack of exposure to the everyday realities of Calcutta. Because they were brought up in an almost artificial secluded environment, both the girls are initially hesitant about confronting and standing up to the patriarchal norms that threaten to confine them.

Divakaruni creates secluded yet exoticised identities for Sudha and Anju as upper-class young women with family secrets. This othered version of their identity gets subverted and turned into an individualised identity in the second half of the narrative of *Sister of My Heart*. Appropriately named “The Queen of Swords,”¹¹ alluding to the Queen (Rani) of Jhansi,¹² this section explores the individualities of both Anju and Sudha that have been developed through their various hardships in life. The innocent girls of “The Princess in the Palace of Snakes”¹³ are made into independent women who are able to fight for their rights. The two section headings make allusions to the awakenings of individual identities in the two girls and their separate fights for individual acceptance in their different circumstances. Like the princess in the snake palace, neither Sudha nor Anju is able to see beyond their iron

¹⁰ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 182.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 173

¹² Rani of Jhansi, otherwise known as Lakshmibai, is one of India’s national heroines. She was famous for leading a rebel army against the British in the Indian rebellion of 1857 with her infant son tied to her back as the ruler of the princely state of Jhansi. Her heroism encapsulated and celebrated in popular culture and folkloric tales made her a cult figure who is celebrated as the icon of Indian female heroism and duty to one’s country. For more information see “Jhansi Ki Rani Lakshmibai Biography,” 01Mar. 2015.

¹³ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 13. The story alluded to in this section is about a princess who lived under water in a palace guarded by snakes. One day, a prince appears with a jewel which parts the waters and the princess walks out of her underwater palace despite warnings from her snakes. Once on land, she gives birth to a daughter, but is scorned by her prince’s people. She goes to find the underwater palace, but is unable to find it, or the exact place, and still wanders the earth, with her daughter in tow. A common folkloric belief is that the morning star (Venus in the morning sky) represents the lost princess, looking for her underwater palace.

gates till Ashok and Sunil appear in their lives. In the second section, by drawing parallels between Anju who has migrated to the US and Sudha who has married into a tradition-abiding Bengali family, Divakaruni illustrates how individual identities can be moulded despite the lack of exposure to western culture and values. While Anju draws inspiration from her studies in American literature and her exposure to female bonding through her college, Sudha draws her strength from Anju and mostly through her own community of women and legends of women.

As Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay argue, writing about the cultural identities of immigrants, the identifications for immigrants are “constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristic with [each other. Their] identification is never completed and [is] always a process.”¹⁴ Anju and Sudha construct their identities the same way. Neither Sudha nor Anju constructs her identity with a particular national or an ethnic characteristic or codes. They define themselves based on the selected elements of their cultural and social histories, and define each other through one another. They identify their individualities based on their shared histories and shared cultural heritage. Despite the changes to their personal lives, they strive to establish discrete identities. The ability to travel and the cosmopolitan awareness of their rapidly changing worlds enable them to construct their individualities, not via a static concept of pre-fixed stereotypes, but through a fluid notion of change, personality and the negotiation of one’s self-identity.

With these changes in their social status and personal lives, Divakaruni also establishes the individualities of the previously exoticised ethnic identities of the

¹⁴ Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, eds. *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 1996) 2.

young women. Through Sudha's decision to get a divorce to save her unborn girl child and Anju's traumatic experience of losing her unborn child, Divakaruni illustrates the strength of young women, who gain power and agency through their different ordeals in life. One essential element that is brought out through both Sudha's and Anju's life events is the importance of sisterly bonds that have been established in the first part of the novel. Both women, who go through different experiences, draw strength from each other and through their shared belief in each other's strengths. The female bonding that enables and empowers women is further explored through Sudha's experience at goddess Shashti's shrine where the "rich [and the] poor, educated [and] illiterate ... are finally reduced to a sameness in [a] sisterhood,"¹⁵ and through a group of women Anju encounters in her American college. Divakaruni asserts that despite class and ethnic differences, women gain and provide strength to each other. Female empowerment through female bonding can be seen in the other novels by Divakaruni as well. This theme continues as a prominent strand in South Asian American women's fiction discussed throughout this thesis and I explore the importance of female bonding in fiction further in the following chapters. Through *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni establishes the importance of female bonding to face patriarchal oppressions as well. Sunil's mother suffers because of her lack of a support network of female friends while Sudha's mother finds shelter and protection despite her unfortunate circumstances in the sisterly warmth extended to her by the Chatterjee women. Sudha finds the strength to walk

¹⁵ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 235

out of her mother-in-law's house and her rigid adherence to patriarchal norms because of her support network of women consisting of her three mothers and Anju.

Divakaruni further elaborates the power play at work in tradition binding Indian societies through descriptions of Sudha's marital home: the Sanyal household. Sudha is called the new wife (Natun Bau) and is the "keeper of the household, its many cupboards and pantries, trunks and storerooms."¹⁶ Her importance changes with her pregnancy, for till she becomes pregnant the pressure to bear the progeny is steadily exerted on her. The Sanyal matriarch controls her family and her sons' lives. The domineering forces are exerted by a woman on the others in her household because, as Partha Chatterjee argues about mid-nineteenth century Bengal and the women's question related to nationalism, "[t]he home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality."¹⁷ For Sudha's mother-in-law, the family, therefore, becomes a site to enact her national culture, interpreted by her to be a patriarchy which dominates women. Since there are no men to dominate her, the Sanyal matriarch takes it upon herself to act instead of the missing patriarch, to exert male dominance. In her attempt to enact patriarchal rules, she becomes a perpetrator of the same rules that probably curtailed her freedom the most, and in turn controls even her sons, destabilising the same gender hierarchy she desires to promote. Through the use of strong female figures such as the Sanyal matriarch and Gouri Ma who works within the patriarchal dominant rules to keep her

¹⁶ Divakaruni, *op.cit* , 189

¹⁷ Partha Chatterjee, "The National Resolution of the Women's question," *Recasting Women; Essays in Colonial History*, eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989) 243.

family intact, Divakaruni dismantles the myths of patriarchy and women's lack of agency in India. She asserts that women are not only the victims but are the abusers of power relations as well. Women challenge as well as exploit existing patriarchal norms. While Sudha (at least initially) and Sunil's mother become victims of class and propriety requirements of Indian patriarchy, Gouri Ma and Mrs Sanyal both find different ways to counter these power structures. In presenting these different characters and roles of women, exploiting and being exploited through dominant power plays, Divakaruni debunks the stereotyped depictions of victimised Indian women propagated through popular myths and legends. Women have choices to be victims or to be victimisers and, through choices, their individuality is brought out.

Divakaruni exoticises and ethnicises Bengali Indian practices and ideals throughout her narrative. From the beginning, "Sudha was always the captured princess [who needed to be] rescued."¹⁸ Her fragility is further exoticised by Anju and her westernised manners. While Anju is ready to battle the world to achieve happiness, Sudha becomes the sacrificing ideal woman who values her family's happiness more than her own: "I did what I needed to. Being rewarded had nothing to do with it."¹⁹ Her beauty, too, is explained in exotic terms: "there was a radiance about Sudha ...in her dark-blue dhakai sari, with a thin gold chain that gleams at her throat, she is irresistible. Little tendrils of hair curl around her face like a halo."²⁰ While pandering to stereotypical depictions of traditional Indian heroines such as

¹⁸ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 115

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 190

²⁰ *Ibid*, 122

Sita, Draupadi and Damayanthi²¹ in creating Sudha's character, Divakaruni depicts Anju to be the opposite of Sudha, thus unsettling the easy stereotyping of Indian women. Even Sudha develops beyond her sacrificing and fragile self. Despite her beauty and fragility, she hardens her heart and makes her own decisions, for her own happiness, later in the narrative and continues her character development beyond that of tradition-inspired stereotypes in *The Vine of Desire* (2002), the sequel to *Sister of My Heart*. As Christiane Schlote theorises about South Asian American women writers, Divakaruni also attempts to debunk the "Western Orientalist representations of South Asian women as passive victims [by foregrounding] South Asian women's long tradition of activism and resistance"²² through Sudha's gradual transformation into an independent woman. However, the easy exoticisation of Sudha's character goes beyond her beauty. Indian ideals and traditions are exoticised throughout the narrative. The wedding ceremonies of Anju and Sudha are described particularly to situate an ethnic outsider within the narrative to aid their understanding of cultural rituals while Bengali food practices and household traditions are scattered throughout the narrative. These "re-Orientalist" details Otherise Bengali traditions and everyday practices, while making clear class and caste difference between the Chatterjee girls and the rest of Calcutta. While exoticising Calcutta and its upper caste Brahmin household of the Chatterjees, Divakaruni draws a clear line between the everyday lives of Bengalis in Calcutta as well. The exoticisation thus does not create homogeneity, but individual identities for Anju and Sudha instead. They react and act

²¹ Indian heroines celebrated for their excellent character and selflessness in serving their husbands and families in the great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

²² Christiane Schlote, "Interpreters of Transnationalism: South Asian American Women Writers," *Amerikastudien* 51: 3 (2006): 402.

differently because of their privileged social background, and their reactions are not the universal reactions of all young women of Bengali Indian background.

Tabish Khair argues that the “recognition of the centrality of the Other translates not only as repulsion (threat/terror/death) but also as attraction (possibility/transcendence/ love)”²³ in the colonial Gothic, in his discussion of *Moby Dick*. The otherness of Sudha in relation to Anju and vice versa can also be read as the Otherness that springs from attraction and love towards each other. Anju’s outspoken and westernised character with a thirst for adventure and feminism is portrayed in a clear contrast to Sudha’s eastern, tradition-bound and myth and legend-inspired character. Even the girlhood games of these two young women help to highlight the contrast between their characters. Anju plays the prince who rescues hapless yet exotic Sudha while Sudha patiently waits for her rescuer. Anju reads and derives inspiration from Virginia Woolf novels — “Woolf has been a favourite of mine since the time I stumbled upon one of her books at the store... I felt her sadness and her fire”²⁴ — while Sudha’s inspiration comes from Pishi’s tales of myths and legends and later from Indian heroines. Their characters contrast the east-west binaries that are evident in re-Orientalist narratives of South Asian American women writers. At the outset, Divakaruni draws clear distinctions between east and west through Sudha and Anju, making them the Other to each other. But on a deeper level, because of their inseparable bond with each other, the differences become the reasons for their love and attraction. Thus the Other becomes the silent supporter rather than the

²³ Tabish Khair, “Re-Orientalisms Mediations on exoticism and transcendence; Otherness and the Self,” *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics*, eds. Lisa Lau and Ana Christina Mendes (Oxon: Routledge, 2011) 149

²⁴ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 134

antagonist. Divakaruni thus comments on the changing role of the east-west binaries. Instead of being two opposing elements, east and west differences have become the reason for people's interconnectedness, especially from the perspective of the post-1965 generation of immigrants in the US. This interdependence between Others, played through east and west, is explored further through Sudha's reactions and experience in the US in the sequel, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Constant referencing to Indian myths and legends as well as exoticised, almost mythical stories of ruby caves and remote temples²⁵ make *Sister of My Heart* an ethnicised, exotic tale of the unknown to the ethnic outsider. The unknown and the unfamiliar in the novel serve two purposes. On the one hand, these elements differentiate the novel and its value in a market replete with Indian literature in English. The difference, achieved through overt exotica and ethnic details makes Divakaruni's narrative "different" from that of other writers who have been there before her. Her novels explore the South Asian Other, in relation to various other ethnic writing from the US and other diasporic writing. On the other hand the exotica also give the novel an element of magic realism where the boundaries between the real and the imaginary are blurred. In such a liminal space of neither reality nor make-believe, Divakaruni as a novelist explores pertinent issues of female infanticide, treatment of women and girls in tradition-abiding societies and women's struggle to have choices regarding their own lives. The in-betweenness of the spaces, straddling both the real and the magical, enables Sudha to make her choices. The

²⁵ The Ruby caves are in the middle of the Sundarbans (A mangrove forest in West Bengal adjacent to the Sundarbans Reserve forest in Bangladesh) in an undisclosed location while the Shashti shrine where Sudha is taken to pray for a child is in the middle of a forest. Both the locations are different, wild and untamed, thus exoticising the landscape and accentuating the magic and mysteries.

awakening at the Shashti shrine, in the middle of wilderness, surrounded by women in various stages of trance and the surreal nature of the place itself, works as the catalyst in Sudha's understanding of her own power to have choices, away from her mother-in-law's influences. In addition, Sudha's infatuation with the Rani of Jhansi and the folklore surrounding her propels her choices (which reimagine the mythical reinterpretations of a real-life character) in her everyday life. Thus these liminal spaces, replete with magic, myth and Otherness to her everyday upper middle-class existence, offer Sudha the freedom to have more choices. Sudha is able to dream of possible opportunities and choices with her exposure to these Other spaces, thus liberating herself from the traditional constraints of her marriage and everyday life. The same creation of liminal spaces also offers Divakaruni more freedom to discuss pertinent issues of women's position, power play and cultural boundaries with ease.

Myths and legends serve as a source of inspiration and power for Sudha's character on a different level, too. Sudha derives her strength and her tenacity to fight her own battles through the inspirations she draw from the myths and legends alluded to in the narrative. Sudha, as discussed above, becomes the Rani of Jhansi to protect her child since for her, the Rani of Jhansi's battle to save her kingdom is similar to that of hers: to protect her unborn child. The talk story tradition²⁶ of retelling stories initiated by Pishi and then continued by Sudha, taken up in the latter part of the novel by Anju, works as inspiration as well as sustenance in both emotional and traditional senses. Pishi uses stories to unravel family secrets, to elicit unspoken bonds between

²⁶ In her book, Wendy Ho analyses how the talk story tradition enables Chinese American families to share their cultural histories and pass on their traditions. For further reference, see Wendy Ho, *In Her Mother's House; The Politics of Asian American Mother-daughter Writing* (California: AltaMira, 1999).

Anju's and Sudha's fathers and to rationalise Anju's and Sudha's attachment towards each other. Sudha uses stories — mythical, historical and real — to find her own identity. Her character traverses from the snake palace princess to a warrior queen through her belief in stories. She maintains her connection with her mysterious past through her tales and uses the same talk story tradition to pass on her heritage to her daughter: "poised in the sky between our new life and our old one... I tell her a tale to make her heart strong, to graft her life onto. For of all things in this world it seems to me that that is what women most need."²⁷ As C. Vijayasree claims, "Re-creation thus turns into an act of recovery,"²⁸ and for Sudha, the recreation of her past, the unknown and the known, through her story to her daughter, is the only way to recover her past, which has been denied to her, and to map her future. Anju, too, uses the same mode of storytelling — mixing make believe and reality — to heal herself after her miscarriage and when her relationship with Sunil begins to deteriorate. The tradition of storytelling, invoked through constant references to myths and other folkloric legends, thus aids the characters in re-creating their own selves, in relation to their past and their future. The overtly Othered, ethnic elements of the myths and legends used in the novel strengthen the novel's purpose of reaching an uninitiated audience in the west²⁹ while the same stereotyped exotic and ethnic elements

²⁷ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 340.

²⁸ C. Vijayasree, "Alter-Nativity, Migration, Marginality and Narrative; The Case of Indian women writers settled in the West," *Shifting Continents/ Colliding Cultures: Diaspora writing of the Indian Subcontinent*, eds. Ralph J. Crane and Radhika Mohanram (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000) 131.

²⁹ This is because the novel was published in the west in a widely read western language: English. Despite the western audience, the novel has been translated into different languages and has been made into a television drama by a Malayali (from Kerala, a state in southern India) director.

establish the difference of the characters, in their relation to and re-telling of the same myths and legends.

One of the prominent characteristics of Divakaruni's novels, which will be further elaborated later in the chapter, is the lack of outstanding male figures. *Sister of My Heart*, narrated by two young women in alternate chapters, is noticeably missing central male figures or any male figure who makes a significant contribution throughout the narrative. As Ruth Maxey argues, the lack of father figures is a prominent characteristic of the works of South Asian women writers.³⁰ Strong mother figures dominate Divakaruni's novels and in *Sister of My Heart* the narrative makes it evident that it is an account of women's lives: "The pavement dwellers [...]: the mother in a worn green sari bent over a spice-grinding stone, the daughter watching the baby. The father is never there."³¹ It is not only the Chatterjee girls that are living with strong matriarchs, but even the ordinary women and pavement dwellers live beyond the protective shadow of supportive patriarchs. Despite being absent for most of the narrative's key incidents, absent male figures propel the narrative forward by their sheer absent presence. This absent presence acts as the catalyst in *Sister of My Heart*'s narrative development. The disappearance of Sudha's father, together with Anju's father on their quest to find the ruby cave, marks the birth of the two girls. The reappearance of Sudha's father, through a letter, signifies her entry into her marital life, which once again is overshadowed by a strong matriarch. Even Anju, who is unaware of Sudha's secret, faces marital discord and

³⁰ Ruth Maxey, "Mother-Weights and Lost Fathers: Parents in South Asian American Literature," *Wasafiri; International Contemporary Writing* 27: 1 (March 2012): 25-31.

³¹ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 19

financial hardships in America, due to the overarching presence of Sunil's father in their lives. Sudha's divorce and her decision to leave for America are once again shadowed by her former lover Ashok's appearance in her life and the discovery of her father's identity. The male figure thus is an absent presence. It is a presence which signals the overbearing patriarchal influence on women's lives, in India in particular and in South Asia in general. By subverting male power play into an absent presence, Divakaruni makes a strong social statement about the strength of women from the subcontinent as well. Despite being overpowered and overshadowed, women exercise their power through their own means. Divakaruni's later novels, which will be discussed later in this chapter, similarly explore women's subversion of patriarchal forms to suit their own ends.

Hence, Divakaruni's second novel, forming the first part of a duology, explores the "difference" of Indian American women's writing of the post-1965 generation of writers. She otherises the ethnic Bengali values and traditions through her detailed descriptions of Sudha's and Anju's lives. Both young women re-invent their lives, with their exposure to the wider world, one in marriage and the other in the US. Journeys thus help them to fashion new selves that straddle liminal spaces of history, culture and modernity. At the same time, Divakaruni makes these two narrators "different" by asserting their individualities through subtle details. Identities that are based on class, caste and personal character traits make Divakaruni's portrayal of Sudha and Anju not mere re-Orientalist characters, but those of individual women who explore their uniqueness beyond patriarchal power structures and traditional values.

Desires and tangled lives: *The Vine of Desire*

In the sequel to *Sister of My Heart*, Divakaruni extends the trope of sisterly bonds further, but also complicates the linear narrative of deep bonds between women characters by inserting male voices and an omniscient narrative voice that interrupts the narrative. *The Vine of Desire* (2002) starts with Sudha's arrival in the US and the reunion of Sudha and Anju. Through this section, I will argue that reverse exoticisation of the US and the Americanised Indian diasporic people have been utilised by Divakaruni to establish the individuality and the "difference" of her women narrators. The increasing visibility of male characters in the narrative will also be analysed from the point of view of the silent men and the absent presence of male voices in South Asian American women's novels.

"There are three central concerns in the writings of expatriate women — exile, journey and sexuality — through which they articulate a perspective of women's experience of exile in particular and women's alienation in general,"³² argues C. Vijayasree in relation to Indian women's writing from the west. Divakaruni, too, uses the same tropes of exile, journey and sexuality to trace the changes in Sudha's character throughout *The Vine of Desire*. Sudha's arrival in the US marks the beginning of a new chapter for the separated cousins. Sudha enters the US as a woman who has already taken crucial decisions to map out the future of her life. She has decided to walk away from her traditionally accepted and culturally valued marriage to Ramesh Sanyal, have her baby and become a single parent despite the taboos associated with it from her culturally conservative upper-class Calcutta

³² Vijayasree, *op.cit*, 125

society, and has spurned the offer of marriage from her previous lover Ashok. Her self-inflicted exile leads her to the US where she arrives as an independent woman, ready to map her future and with a desire to sever her connections to her painful past and history. Her journey is not only a physical one, but also a metaphorical and an emotional one away from her family, and everything familiar. Her passage not only takes her away from Calcutta to the US, but also enables her to travel away from her own cousin in the US to explore her inner strengths, later in the novel. Her sexuality develops the rift that leads to further exile from Anju and to build her own identity. Hence, Divakaruni uses the same tropes, but uses them with a “difference,” which will be elaborated throughout this section.

Anju, on the other hand, receives Sudha as a salve to her painful past of losing her baby and her rapidly unravelling marriage to Sunil. While Sudha aspires to reconstruct her life in America, believing in the American Dream,³³ Anju’s expectations of Sudha, as her cousin from her past, contradict Sudha’s desires to create herself anew. For Anju, Sudha is her community and her link to her past. As Kelly McBride argues, “[t]he normative understanding of the word [community] is that communities are based on shared experience, identity, or location, and the membership is fulfilling in the sense that one’s own identity is reflected back in a

³³ For Sudha, America is the land of choices — a land where she can let go of her past and reinvent herself. Therefore, her idea of America and its opportunities coincides with the original individuality-oriented American Dream concept. The American Dream, as defined by James Truslow Adams in 1931, while being the national ethos of the United States of America, came to embody the dreams of immigrants. The freedom to “be able to attain to the fullest stature of which [any man or woman] are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (214-215) contained the dreams of second wave of South Asian immigrants, according them the freedom to chose and the recognition for what they are. For further discussions on The American Dream see James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (Piscataway: Transaction Printing, 2012).

positive way.”³⁴ Thus for Anju, the relationship with her past and her identity is created through Sudha who is Anju’s link to her past. In her oasis, Sudha is her key to evading her turbulent present. In her efforts to reconcile with her new life and the new loss (of losing her baby), Anju relies on Sudha initially to find her own self. Later in the narrative, Anju’s community and belonging changes with her newfound friends from the women’s group from college. But this expectation also pushes Anju to imagine Sudha in a stereotyped image that does not allow any individuality to shine through. This dichotomy between expectations and individual desires becomes a central focus in the novel’s narrative development. Anju’s expectations of Sudha to reflect their old life together are Anju’s diasporic self’s recreation of her own nostalgic past through “broken mirrors.”³⁵ These fragmented memories create an in-between space between reality and memory that fractures the relationship between Sudha and Anju, leading to a reassessment and reconfiguration of their sisterly bonds. Divakaruni thus problematises the sisterly bonds, especially between South Asian American women in the diaspora as expressed through her fiction, foregrounding individualities over common desires and diasporic expectations.

The tug of war between Indian cultural traditions and American materialism is played out throughout the narrative. Anju desires to break free like the “Kingfisher women”³⁶ but is initially hesitant. Sudha, too, yearns to break free of traditions, especially from her past and its connections, but despite her “disenchant[ment] with

³⁴ Kelly D. McBride, *Collective Dreams: Political Imagination and Community* (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2005) 9.

³⁵ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991) 10.

³⁶ Chitra Divakaruni, *The Vine of Desire* (London: Abacus, 2002) 42.

stories, [and] the way [her] life veers away from the ones [she] long to emulate,”³⁷ she embraces change slowly, yet very cautiously. Sunil, the representative of the Silicon Valley’s immigrant generation from India, falters between the cultural independence offered through the materialistic world of America and the deep-rooted bonds that bind him to India. Sunil yearns to be economically independent and arrogantly tries to resolve his debts to his estranged father through his monetary prowess. He longs to be Americanised enough to admit openly his desire and love for Sudha, but at the same time, he is concerned about its cultural repercussions according to his Bengali Indian upbringing. The sway between desire, independence and choice makes it difficult for Sunil to accept the end of his marriage to Anju as well. Thus, the clash between American materialism and ethnic cultural traditions plays a significant role in the novel’s narrative development, especially in relation to Sunil’s and Anju’s marriage and Sudha’s involvement in their lives.

While sisterly bonds are questioned and redefined through Sudha’s and Anju’s strained relationship, Divakaruni also examines the importance of India and America in the negotiation of individual identities in both the female characters. Anju, a college student among many other courageous women from all over the world, finds her voice and her courage in her new setting, America, which she had idealised as western freedom even before her arrival in the US. The rebellious Anju of *Sister of My Heart*, who is replaced by a self-doubting, broken character at the beginning of *The Vine of Desire*, finds her voice and her courage through an extensive network of her cultural Other sisters —the women from different parts of

³⁷ Divakaruni, *op.cit.*, 79.

the world — in America. “I really liked this woman — she’s so passionate about things.... She said I had real talent and owed it to myself to develop it,”³⁸ says Anju about her Other sisters met through her American college. The new community of women encourages and goads Anju’s dormant, almost forgotten individual spirit to wake up. Individuality and the importance of individual development thus seep into the narrative. Anju embarks on her journey because she “owed it” to herself, and Sudha, too, follows her instincts, free from her obligations and responsibilities, in America. However, Anju’s initial spirit and independence are broken by America and her diasporic loneliness. As in Jhumpa Lahiri’s “A Temporary Matter,” (1999)³⁹ the death of their baby widens an unavoidable chasm between Sunil and Anju, leading to their ultimate separation. As is explored through South Asian diasporic women’s short stories in the same vein, Anju, too, suffers from depression and guilt resulting from her inability to protect her baby. But Anju regains her independent modern self through the aid of modern American self-beliefs. Her transformation, from the adventurous woman from Calcutta to the self-doubting woman of San Francisco to the independent individual of modern America pays homage to the American Dream of individuality and self-will. More than that, America becomes Anju’s salvation to sanity through the “Kingfisher women.”⁴⁰ Through Anju, Divakaruni thus subverts the diasporic sisterhood myth and introduces a broader sisterhood that enables diasporic individuals such as Anju to regain their confidence.

Anju’s transformation and self-realisation, therefore, are not exclusive outcomes of

³⁸ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 107.

³⁹ Jhumpa Lahiri, “A Temporary Matter,” *Interpreter of Maladies* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999) 1-22.

⁴⁰ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 42.

her bond with her cousin, her past or her American experience. It is a culmination of different things, but mainly individuality aided and encouraged through her American experience and the bonds offered to her through a community of women.

Sudha, in contrast, relies on her cultural heritage and her cultural connections to find her inner strength. Despite the fact that she enters America as a new woman who has decided to take charge of her life, she is defined and contained by her traditions and her cultural history. As Rushdie has theorised in a different context, like all diasporic writers who explore plural and partial identities, Sudha, too, is only “partly of the West. [Her] identity is at once plural and partial.”⁴¹ The west, embodied in the spirit and attitudes of the US and Sudha’s unending fascination with it helps Sudha shake off her reluctances, but at the same time, her salvation comes through her familiar Hindi movie songs and Bengali folk songs. Sudha’s transformation is aided by the American freedom espoused by Sara, the Indian girl she meets in the playground and her admirer/confidant Lalit, a second-generation Indian American doctor. Sudha relies heavily on her recollections and retellings of Indian myths and legends to find courage while, at the same time, she rejects some of her Bengali cultural traditions extolled by her mother. While Sudha, too, does not realise her individual identity only through her experience of America, her journey towards self-realisation is aided by her cultural heritage and her own diasporic community in the form of Trideep’s father, the old man she takes care of when she breaks away from her past and all that is familiar.

⁴¹ Rushdie, *op.cit*, 15.

America and the American experience of the diasporic Indian American women are thus deconstructed by Divakaruni. America and the American Dream are not the only solutions for self-actualisation of females in the Indian American community. They gain strength from their individual histories and individual communities, be it American, female or Indian American. This insistence on multiple forms of bonds and solidarities forged between diverse diasporic and non-diasporic characters to define individualities in women further categorises Divakaruni's "difference." Divakaruni's women negotiate their identities and re-construct their histories to find themselves through their transnational exposures, both geographical and psychological. Thus like Anju, in times of trying personal tribulations, the post-1965 diasporic Indian women could look up to other sources of strength and did not have to rely exclusively on their diasporic socio-cultural networks, because of their ability to interact and move beyond the diasporic safety net among their own. Even outwardly culturally submissive women such as Sudha found subversive ways of using their own communities, myths and cultural histories to find their own voices. Hence, even Sudha's individuality is not exclusively dependent on America but is aided by America as much as it was aided by her own Bengali cultural values.

Divakaruni uses Anju's and Sudha's characters to highlight the multiplicity of identities of the individuals in the Indian American diaspora. As Anju becomes more confident, she becomes less culturally governed. But her character does not deviate drastically from her Indian self, because she has always been critical and defiant of her own constraining traditions. Sudha, on the other hand, develops her own voice in spite of retaining her cultural affiliations and continues to care and nurture her own

traditions and rituals. Her cultural acquiescence does not hinder her from developing her own ideas and beliefs aided by the independence offered to her in America. Thus, Divakaruni debunks the myth of homogenised female characters in the Indian American diaspora as posited by westernised mass media. Women traverse across cultural boundaries, retaining and acquiring individual identities despite sharing the same cultural heritage, as Anju and Sudha do. Hence the Indian American diasporic women in Divakaruni's novels insist on their "differences" and challenge homogenised identities based on their shared communal or regional histories.

Lisa Lau argues that "South Asian women are themselves aware of [the] connection between domestic space and identity and would often seek to effect change in the latter by altering the former"⁴² with regard to South Asian women's writing. In Divakaruni's fiction, this clear connection between the domestic space and personal identity is blurred. Anju's identity is not solely based on the domestic space she occupies or does not occupy. But her identity changes when her domestic space alters. Sudha's arrival unsettles Anju's domestic space and her authority, especially since she is still suffering the aftermath of her miscarriage. Her domestic freedom definitely allows her the space for rediscovering her own identity but it is not the only factor affecting her change. Sudha leaves her own traditional domestic space in India to occupy different domestic spaces in the US, first in Anju's house and later as a nurse for a bitter paralytic Bengali man living with his son. Despite the geographic changes, Sudha's domestic identity as a carer and a nurturing figure does

⁴² Lisa Lau, "Emotional and Domestic Territories: The Positionality of Women as Reflected in the Landscape of Home in Contemporary South Asian Women's writings," *Modern Asian Studies* 40: 4 (October 2006): 1100.

not necessarily change in her various roles. But her identity changes — from the traditional daughter-in-law, to the hard-hearted young woman in her final avatar as a nurse. Therefore, in *The Vine of Desire*, the connection and the clear definition of domestic space and identity get blurred. Divakaruni insists on the ambiguity of spaces occupied, roles enacted and the identities narrated and assigned for women through the multiplicity of identities inhabited by Anju and Sudha in their chosen domestic spaces.

The Vine of Desire also accords more space and voice to its male characters than Divakaruni's previous novels. Divakaruni consciously moves away from a female-oriented narrative by inserting Sunil's and Lalit's voices. Ashok's perspective, too, is given a voice through his letters to Sudha. Sunil's voice, narrated through his monologues with Sudha's baby Dayita, draws on another important aspect of diasporic living — Hindi movies. He reinterprets and narrates Hindi movies to Dayita as a way of releasing his own stress and guilt. Instead of providing the names and the exact references to the films mentioned, Divakaruni uses generalised descriptions mixed with specific stories to bring out Sunil's own memory and the obscurity of diasporic memory. Cultural productions such as Hindi movies thus are alluded to as cultural sustenance to the diasporic Indians living in the US. Movies provide the necessary distraction, cultural nostalgia and, in Sunil's case, the necessary morals to go on living in a different land.

Lalit's thoughts and Ashok's letters both work as counterparts to the perspectives presented through Sudha's and Anju's narrative voices. Lalit embodies the second-generation Indian American experience in his narration. He is liberal and

westernised enough to accept Sudha's past, but at the same time he is culturally conditioned through his Indian family and history to understand Sudha's reservations about her new choices and new life. Ashok, in contrast, represents the fast-changing modern generation of India. Despite not living in the western world, he still attempts to go against the cultural conditioning imposed by his Calcutta society to find his own happiness. Neither Ashok nor Lalit, once again, is presented as a representative of his community and generation. Divakaruni draws them as individuals, with their flaws and individual demands, thus making them the Other to the accepted norms of Indian men, who are tradition-bound and second-generation Indian American men. Ashok is not representative of the traditional Bengali man espousing Bengali Indian family values, nor is Lalit the embodiment of second-generation Indian American men and their values. They both express progressive ideas that are prevalent among some modern Indian men as well as socio-cultural values appreciated by second-generation Indian American men. Sunil, while representing the post-1965 generation of professionals in the US, alludes to the fact that his family history and his relationship with his father have emotionally conditioned him into what he is, rather than his American experience or his familiarity with the values of the diasporic Indian community in America.

The novel also insists on the individualities of its characters by omitting community in the narrative. There is no diasporic Indian community to support Sudha's and Anju's various trials in the US, and there is a prominent lack of representation of community in India. This is a marked difference to the other novels discussed in the thesis, where community, either familial or social, makes a

significant contribution to the personal development of the women characters. Characters both male and female move and make their own destinies in a lacuna of communal ties. The lack of external community, especially in the US, allows the characters to become individuals rather than representatives, while at the same time this lack of community also leads to the questions of how these characters would have developed amidst communal cultural pressures. Through a fleeting reference to the rich Indians in America, through Sunil's customer living in Los Altos Hills at the Chopras' lavish party, Divakaruni once again suggests that all Indian immigrants to the US are not professionals or students. There is another section of the same Indian American community that enjoys the high living of the rich in opulent mansions. As Sudha admires their collection of paintings, it is also made clear that the rich insist on their "difference" from the rest of their rich multicultural community, by displaying their own cultural artefact. Thus, as Marilyn Halter theorises,⁴³ consumer commodities become an identity marker for them, an identity that asserts their individuality.

Therefore, through diasporic American experiences of young women, Divakaruni highlights issues that bring forth conflicts between individual identity and cultural roots. Her women characters, Anju and Sudha, display the complex nature of defining one's own distinctiveness, in the face of American consumerism, ethnic exoticisation and personal choices. The space given to male voices further elaborates the importance of individual choices in the making of distinct characters. Through exile, travel and a dawning awareness of individual choices, Divakaruni asserts the

⁴³ Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000).

uniqueness of her characters, especially of Anju and Sudha, occupying different spaces in the American diasporic landscape.

Memory, Nostalgia and finding oneself

“Memory is historically and culturally specific,”⁴⁴ argues Alison Landsberg, and according to Vijay Agnew, “Memories establish a connection between our individual past and our collective past (our origins, heritage, and history).”⁴⁵ These memories that are specific to a historical and a cultural space change with the adaptation and appropriation by individuals. People make their own memories through different connections to their unique cultural pasts that are passed onto them by their social and cultural groups. Diasporic groups scattered across the globe use this form of adapted and appropriated yet strongly individualised memories to trace their identity and their uniqueness within both the host society and amidst their own diasporic groups. The memories they appropriate are sometimes personal narratives and memoirs, but sometimes, as in the case of contemporary South Asian American women writers whose work has been chosen for this study, these are invented, fictionalised accounts of memories that strive to bring out the individual identities of South Asian American women in the diaspora. Their invented memories endeavour, through their fictitious renditions interspersed with the personal and the cultural, to

⁴⁴ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia U, 2004) 3.

⁴⁵ Vijay Agnew, “Introduction,” *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A search for Home*, ed. Vijay Agnew (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2005) 3.

bridge the gap between the past and the present, the gap between their roots and their adopted homes, and to carve their own niche as a distinct diasporic group.

Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* (2004) brings out narrative memories⁴⁶ that reflect the Indian American diaspora's recollections of their socio-cultural roots in their adopted land and how these reminiscences help individuals to build relationships with their culture and community, whilst maintaining their own uniqueness. *Oleander Girl* (2012), one of Divakaruni's more recent novels, explores how memory, while creating identity, looks towards the US to find it, thus destabilising the fictional stereotype of Indian Americans looking towards India to find their own distinctive cultural heritage. Throughout this section, I will argue that reinvented and recreated memories, both within in the US and in India, create not only socio-cultural ties for the fictional women characters explored in the chosen novels, but also allow them to craft their own unique identities, away from the same ethno-social boundaries. Divakaruni's appropriation of cultural memories, both past and present, to add distinctive characteristics to her heroines will be analysed, highlighting the importance of such socio-cultural positioning, in the development of the new-age cosmopolitan self of the diasporic individual.

Divakaruni's use of fictional characters and exotic, mythical circumstances of Dream-tellers, mysterious caves where strange sororities interpret dreams, helps to reflect the yearnings and beliefs of the Indian diaspora in establishing themselves

⁴⁶ This term is used in this section as synonymous to fictionalised memory presented through Divakaruni's discussed works. This term is used in a different sense to Mieke Bal's (1999) use of narrative memory, which is a social construction, and the memories of real events that are recalled with emotions associated with them which colours the recalled memory. For further discussion see Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, Leo Spitzer, eds. *Acts of Memory; Cultural recall in the present*, (Hanover: UP of New England, 1999).

apart from the other diasporic groups. At the same time, they become identity markers for the Indian characters because of their specifically Indian references. The memories presented by Divakaruni, foregrounded through Bengali Indian Americans, borrow from common South Asian and Indian legends and myths. The Indian diaspora's culinary practices, too, make these cultural recollections specific to Indians in America. Divakaruni makes her narrative memories specifically relevant to the Bengali Indian diaspora, through her use of Bengali Indian diasporic characters and references to Calcutta. At the same time, she creates memories that can have fluidity, thus enabling the same reminiscences to be appropriated by the other South Asians who share some of the same socio-cultural affinities because of the South Asian characters and because of the food and spices talked about. Through a close reading of *Queen of Dreams* and *Oleander Girl*, I will analyse the characteristics of Divakaruni's use of memory as a trope that in turn helps to build and create unique identities for Indian Americans and the contemporary generation of Indians that feature in her novels. Through an analysis of how Divakaruni challenges the established identities of the Indian Americans in the US, perceived by mass imagination as a model minority and as a professionally established group, with the aid of characters such as struggling painters, restaurant owners and DJs, this section analyses how re-imagined and appropriated memories help the Indian Americans in her novels to re-invent their identities. The novels which showcase predominantly Bengali Indian American characters offer an alternative to the other Indian groups living in America to map their histories while at the same time they offer a different history and an identity for lesser-known South Asian American groups. Because, as

Divakaruni claims in a 2004 interview, she “would want very much a South Asian or South Asian American audience who will come to the books and think about issues in their communities and lives,”⁴⁷ the novels analysed in this section strive to evoke a common history through “different” references pertaining to distinct individuals.

Dreaming of unique identities: *Queen of Dreams*

In her novel *Queen of Dreams*, Chitra Divakaruni weaves a tale about a first-generation immigrant Mrs Gupta, a dream interpreter from Calcutta, and her daughter Rakhi (the protagonist in the novel), who is a second-generation Indian American struggling to express her Indian identity through her paintings and her café. Mrs Gupta’s past, brought out through her dream journals, and Rakhi’s present, in her constant struggle to find her Indian roots and her true identity, unravel the plot which takes the reader through Rakhi’s many emotional upheavals in the aftermath of her mother’s death and 9/11. *Queen of Dreams* takes its name from the Hindi song that was very popular in India in the early 1970s, “*Mere sapno ki rani...*” from the movie *Aradhana* (1969), which was a remake of the 1946 Hollywood movie, *To Each His Own*. Thus, by naming the book after a popular song from a movie that was a remake of another film, Divakaruni uses popular memory⁴⁸ as her narrative trope in re-discovering cultural memory.⁴⁹ People following mass culture accumulate memories that are not particularly their own, but are cultural memories or memories

⁴⁷ Ismat Sarah Mangla, “Writing from Two Worlds.” *Nirali*. 01Oct. 2004.

⁴⁸ I use this term to distinguish memories perpetuated by mass culture, such as film soundtracks, food and popular music.

⁴⁹ This term refers to the accumulated memory of a particular culture such as food, traditions, myths, legends, movies, music and popular cultural practices.

that are being presented to the public as possible memories, that they may need to adopt through movies, music, myths and legends. These memories do not need to be particularly felt or experienced during an individual's life span. They become inheritances that shape one's identity and are passed from one generation to another. Therefore, Divakaruni's narrative memories in the *Queen of Dreams* are in accordance with Alison Landsberg's aspects of "[p]rosthetic memor[ies that] emerge at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as movie theatre or museum."⁵⁰ But instead of using the "experiential site of a movie theatre or a museum," the author uses contemporary women's fiction as the site where the interaction between the personal and the historical takes place.

The plot in the novel explores the re-discovery of memory through mainstream cultural media — of films and anecdotes as well as personal memories and dream journals. Rakhi, the second-generation Indian American protagonist, attempts to recreate her past and her memories through her interaction with the personal memories presented to her through her mother's dream journals, and the historical memories narrated to her through her father's recollections and Indian food. Being a Bengali Indian American, Rakhi's historical memories are specifically Bengali Indian. Her father talks about Calcutta *chaer dokan*⁵¹ and her mother records details about Calcutta and her memories of Bengal. But by introducing Hindi songs and Indian snacks, which bring the other Indian Americans to Rakhi's cafe,

⁵⁰ Landsberg, *op.cit*, 2

⁵¹ *Chaer dokan* is a Bengali version of *chai* shop, which loosely translates as a tea shop. But these shops sold snacks and sweets as well as undertook orders for catering.

Divakaruni explores the common Indian identity shared through a common cultural memory. Instead of singing Bengali songs such as “Rabindra Sangeet,”⁵² Rakhi’s father chooses to sing popular Hindi songs, mainly from Hindi cinema. And instead of typical Bengali sweets, Rakhi’s father makes common Indian snacks to be sold in their café. Divakaruni, therefore, consciously makes an attempt to make her narrative memories fluid and interchangeable. Although her main characters are Bengali Indians, she consciously seeks to create a common platform through which the other Indian Americans can identify with the narrative memories presented in the novel. The fluidity and the interchangeability of these cultural memories also emphasise the flexibility of socio-cultural memories. No single nostalgic recollection, especially of the common cultural reminiscence, belongs to a single community. They are varied and exchangeable. Thus, the importance of socio-cultural recollections, especially in affirming ethno-religious affinities, is destabilised, injecting a degree of volatility and a vulnerability to the identities created using such memories.

The dream journals bring out the memories and dreams of Rakhi’s mother and her fellow dream interpreters, whom she associated with in her youth. These dreams are analysed and narrated in the mythical setting of a dream cave where the exotic and the magical take place. Divakaruni invokes the popular concept of Eastern Caves, as was instilled in mainstream cultural memory through E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924) as well as in other mainstream renditions such as that of Aladdin through these dream caves. The caves become a space where the real and the magical intermingle, where young women are able to dream the dreams of the others

⁵² Songs written and composed by Rabindranath Tagore, which is a distinctive genre of music in Bengal.

and their teachers are able to make and erase dreams for them. This liminal space at the edge of socio-cultural norms offers a new identity to these young women. Just like Sudha's myths and legends offer her the necessary strength to overcome her diasporic challenges in *The Vine of Desire* and Korobi in *Oleander Girl* (2012) is awakened from her cocooned upper-class existence through her encounter with her dead mother's spirit, liminal spaces become spaces of personal growth for Divakaruni's women characters. Dreams, which are a product of the unconscious, which represent the desires of one's waking day, become a magical aspect of the character's own identity and destiny inside those caves. Inside these dream caves, Rakhi's mother learns of the desires and the unvoiced, repressed memories of historical figures and ancient kings through their dreams. The clairvoyance skills practised by this cult of women in an unknown part of rural Bengal add mystery and exotica to the plot, making it once again palatable to an ethnic outsider audience, but easy to relate to for eastern audiences too. The Indians and other South Asian Americans would understand the mystery and magic associated with their home countries since South Asia, and specially India, is replete with such clairvoyant gurus, soothsayers and cultural memories of legends of such mystery figures that defy logic and rationality, passed on from generation to generation. Thus, Divakaruni uses the cultural memory of the Indian American diaspora to add an Indian American identity to her characters, as well as making her novel fit into South Asian American cultural memory.

Rakhi's mother encounters her share of clairvoyant experiences through her visit to Calcutta with the other novices studying dream interpretation. The journey,

away from her secluded existence, to a secular, cosmopolitan city becomes a catalyst in her re-negotiation of her identity because it introduces her to a young man, who sings popular songs (of whose popularity she has no knowledge) to her and who would later become her lover and husband. From being an interpreter of dreams, she becomes a dreamer. She is transformed from living in the land of magic to dreaming a different dream, rooted in everyday life. The brush with the popular, through songs and everyday romance, renders her magical existence into a reality. Through Mrs Gupta, the author traverses between magic and reality, while making it a distinct Bengali Indian experience through her Bengali Indian identity. Divakaruni's memories of her Bengal and her childhood memories of myriad Indian myths⁵³ thus get converted into her narrative memory, which she imposes on Mrs Gupta. The same Mrs Gupta imparts her memories to her daughter through her dream journals and through those memories, Rakhi fashions her identity. Thus, dreams become a vehicle for memories, which become the basis for Rakhi's diasporic identity in America. Divakaruni further explores the trope of dreams in placing Mrs Gupta as an immigrant in California, America. Although Divakaruni uses her affiliations with the places she "knows best" to create and place her characters,⁵⁴ Mrs Gupta also transcends the notion of the American Dream by being a dream interpreter in America, the land of immigrant dreams where individuals make their own dreams. Once again, the freedom to travel, from India to America, and the transnational

⁵³ Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, "What Women Share," *Author Essay*, 01Mar. 2015.

⁵⁴ In conversation with Terry Hong Divakaruni explains her use of Calcutta and the Bay Area as the places she "knows best." See Terry Hong, "Responding with Hope to 9/11; A Talk With Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni About Her Latest Novel, *Queen of Dreams*," *Bloomsbury Review*, 24:6, 2004. 01 Mar. 2015.

identities aided by travel help define Mrs Gupta's new dreams and her struggle in amalgamating the new with the old.

But unlike Tilo, the Mistress of Spices⁵⁵ who retains her powers even after her arrival in America, Mrs Gupta finds "all the dreaming gone"⁵⁶ in an ironic twist. She loses the ability to dream in *the land of dreams*. Despite her initial struggle, she regains her power to dream and to interpret dreams when she gives up on her individual dream of happiness in America. Her renewed dreaming is brought to her with the aid of a handful of earth "from the walkway in front of the caves... ground that centuries of dream tellers have stepped on"⁵⁷ and her abstinence from pursuing her individual happiness. Thus in the land of dreams in California, a significant landmark in Indian immigration to the US, as a first-generation immigrant, she has to give up on *her* dreams to become a dream interpreter, which is her heritage and which is part of her identity. Her identity thus comes at the expense of her individuality, which is contrary to the American dream, but it gives her a unique Bengali Indian identity as an immigrant in America, because for most of the Indian immigrants, especially struggling to find their own place in a "different" landscape, individual desires have had no place in their quest for cultural assimilation. This holds especially true for the first-generation immigrants because they have to learn to let go, and accept new ways, to integrate themselves into the tapestry of their adopted communities. In these quests for assimilation, most of the first-generation immigrants

⁵⁵ The protagonist in Divakaruni's 1997 novel *Mistress of Spices*, who is able to heal and see the future with the help of spices.

⁵⁶ Chitra Divakaruni, *Queen of Dreams* (London: Abacus, 2004) 176.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 176.

have let go of their own dreams and desires, and have to accept what they have come to term as *their American Dream*: of hard work and climbing up the social ladder.

Rakhi, the main protagonist and Mrs Gupta's daughter in whose quest for identity the dreams of Mrs Gupta and her dream journals play a significant role, traces her identity and tries to fashion it on the cultural memory that is popular among her immigrant community. "I hungered for all things Indian because my mother never spoke of the country she has grown up in – just as she never spoke of her past."⁵⁸ For Rakhi, her mother's silence about "all things Indian" and the lack of awareness of her Indian Bengali culture drive her desire to connect with her Indian past. Although what "all things Indian" means to Rakhi is never properly identified, in her desire to be connected to India, from a purely romantic point of view (one of Rakhi's *fantasies* is to visit India),⁵⁹ she paints imagined Indian landscapes and scenery as a painter. She who has never been to India attempts to connect with India through her paintings, for which she gleans information through photographs of India: "an imagined India, an India researched from photographs."⁶⁰ Rakhi's desire to connect with a pan-Indian culture makes her resort to memories that are passed on to her by mass culture through which she can create her own memories. Through photographs, Rakhi confronts "images of possibilities now closed, of potentials left undeveloped"⁶¹ because photographs, being products of mass memory and a part of narrative cultural memory, are constructed and are staged moments in history which

⁵⁸ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 35.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 83.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 10.

⁶¹ Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase, eds. *The Imagined Past: history and nostalgia* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1989) 9.

may no longer reflect the reality they capture. Since it was a captured memory that was true for a particular time and space, its reliability and authenticity become problematic in aiding and recreating memory too. Rakhi, for whom India is constructed through re-narrativised borrowed memories from her parents and other cultural productions, does not know the truth about these pictures that depict India for her. Therefore, Rakhi's paintings, through which she is trying to connect to her cultural history, become twice removed from memory, as they are recreations of recollections that were created through a mainstream production of memory — the photographs.

As a second-generation Indian American, what “all things Indian” means to Rakhi is completely different to what it meant to her mother. Despite the difference in perception and remembrance, her mother's memories become Rakhi's connection to her past, because “[n]ostalgia is a cultural phenomenon that connects people across national and historical as well as personal boundaries.”⁶² Rakhi's nostalgia, appropriated through her mother's recollections, is her connection to her national and historical roots. In Rakhi's attempt to connect with her past, which is not being passed on to her through her mother who refuses to talk about her memories of India, Rakhi turns to the fantastic and the magical — her mother's dream journals. Even though Mrs Gupta's memory is also questioned when Mr Gupta recalls the same incidents differently — “she remembers events so differently [...] if it were someone else, I'd say she just made that story up”⁶³ — Rakhi clings to the dream journals in

⁶² Dennis Walder, “Writing, representation, and postcolonial nostalgia,” *Textual Practice* 23(6), (2009): 935.

⁶³ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 163.

their Bengali script which she cannot even decipher without the help of her father, to commemorate her mother's memory and through that to find her own history and identity. Through the unreliable, undecipherable and the translated, which makes the memory twice removed from the real, Rakhi fashions an Indian identity, because of her hunger for "all things Indian." Through Rakhi's constant search for an individual identity that draws on her Indian past, Divakaruni searches an answer for the constant identity crisis faced by second-generation Indian Americans. Is the identity they create for themselves, their true identity? Or is it an identity based on a memory that is as archaic and static as the memory in Mrs Gupta's dream journals and photographs of India? Despite their narrative quality and recalled memories, the dream journals and the photographs become a site for Rakhi to forge her Indianness.

Mrs Gupta fashions her individuality through her different journeys, away from her familiar space of dream caves, tight-knit secretive sororities and later from the familiar space of India. Her memories, of the mysterious dream caves and her past, nostalgically recalled, aids her self-fashioning of her new diasporic identity. Thus, because of the nature and the origin of her memories, Mrs Gupta's identity reflects her strong Bengali Indian cultural heritage. But on the other hand, Rakhi, who fashions her identity on her received memories and her appropriated memories of India, re-creates herself not as a Bengali Indian, but as an Indian American, creating a transnational identity that spans two geographic locations and a lot of cultural memory.

Mrs Gupta uses her memory of specific past events to create her own identity and to connect with her past. But unlike Rakhi who uses her acquired memories to build her identity which she publicly displays through her paintings and her Chai House, her mother uses her memory to be secretive and to distance herself from the collective memory of her Bengali Indian diaspora. Instead of reminiscing about India or Calcutta of her youth, she remembers mysterious dream caves, a cult of women who subverted the idea of the traditional male-oriented *gurukul*⁶⁴ and practised an ancient mystical art form of dream interpretation. Through her exploration of her magical past Mrs Gupta fashions her identity as a unique person and through her dream journals where she records her past memories, she comes to terms with her past. Since, as Walder claims, “[r]ecalling involves coming to terms with the past in an ethical as well as a heuristic sense; it is to connect what [one] remembers to the memories of others, including the memories of those with whom [one] share[s] that past,”⁶⁵ Mrs Gupta reconciles her past with her present, through her memories of the other dream tellers before her as well as other dreams, which were interpreted in her youth. Her desire to separate her memories from that of the cultural memory of the Indian diaspora springs from her feeling of alienation and her nostalgia for her dream caves. “Cultural differences, or the sense of being an outsider or a foreigner, can make the individual feel alienated and heighten the feelings of sadness, nostalgia, and

⁶⁴ *Gurukul* is a term used to describe an ancient form of school in India, where the students lived with the teacher and learnt all the arts. These schools only admitted males and all the students were treated equally, irrespective of their social standing. There was no fee charged from the students and the gurukuls were mainly supported by public donations.

⁶⁵ Walder, *op.cit*, 938.

create a longing for home,”⁶⁶ argues Agnew regarding diasporic cultural differences, and in Mrs Gupta’s memories, her alienation is evident. She is a dream teller and because of her gift she is twice marginalised. First, she is alienated because of her immigrant status in America. She is unable to dream when she comes to California. Dreams here can be interpreted as memories too. Because of her separation from her familiar location, she is no longer able to capture her past. Her past deserts her in this new country. Although her dreams return to her later, in her dream journals she records and re-creates memories that were part of her as well as that were passed on to her through her fellow dream tellers. Dreams, therefore, become synonymous for Mrs Gupta with her memories. But despite being journalised and made permanent through her writing, her memories are not accurate. They are narrated, and they are fragmented. Her dream journals are neither chronologically organised nor are they linear or coherent, the same as her memory. She traces her identity through her dreams, which become memories for her husband and daughter after her death. Through the layering of multiple dimensions of dreams and memories, which also become interchangeable and intermingled at different points, Divakaruni strives to bring out the complexity of Indian diasporic memory. Diasporic memory is not simply a memory passed on from one generation to another: it is the different interpretations of memories various generations carried with them that have defined their individuality.

⁶⁶ Vijay Agnew, “Language Matters,” *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A search for Home*, ed. Vijay Agnew (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2005) 42.

Pamela Sugiman argues that “[a]s a social process, memory is selective... [it] is shaped by its audience... [and it] is also a political project,”⁶⁷ with regards to the internment memories of Japanese Canadian women. The same kind of selective memory is brought out through Rakhi’s father, Mr Gupta’s memories. He awakens and re-creates his memories only after the death of Mrs Gupta, because there was no need for his memories during her lifetime. When Mrs Gupta was alive, she was the main organiser and there was no deep interaction between Rakhi and her father. He is portrayed as the figurehead who does not really have an impact on Rakhi’s life or its many decisions, because Rakhi looks to her mother to define herself. When Mr Gupta recalls his past, he recalls only selective information. He does not talk or reminisce about his life with his wife because he does not want to jeopardise the fragile harmony with his daughter. Instead, his memory filters and delivers only the details that he thinks are relevant to his daughter or her friends. His nostalgia for his Indian past comes out either in his painstakingly prepared meals or in Hindi songs.

Food and the shared cultural memory of Hindi songs bind the Indian diasporic community together in their shared heritage and shared memories. Once again, Divakaruni uses the public and the shared cultural memory of the diaspora to highlight an individual’s narrative memory. Food becomes the main means of asserting the Indian identity of Kurma House through Rakhi’s father’s re-discovered culinary skills. Mr Gupta uses his memory as a personal as well as a socio-cultural project, to gain the respect of his daughter as well as to cater to the audience of the

⁶⁷Pamela Sugiman, “Memories of Internment: Narrating Japanese-Canadian Women’s Life Stories,” *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A search for Home*, ed. Vijay Agnew (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2005) 51-52.

new diasporic patrons of the Kurma House. His painstakingly prepared Indian snacks of “*pakora, singara, sandesh, jilebi, beguni, nimki, mihidana*”⁶⁸ evoke his memories of Calcutta and India, and also make him feel closer to the Indian diasporic community. The snacks he cooks are contrasted with the original snacks in Rakhi’s former Chai House, which were named Delhi Dietbusters — muffins and weak tea⁶⁹ — which were not evocative of Indian memories, but were symbolic of the Americanised version of Indianness that both Rakhi and her Sikh Indian friend, Belle, display. Since “food and eating occupy a significant place in the formation of [South] Asian American subjectivity,”⁷⁰ Mr Gupta’s food attracts new patrons to Kurma House, who identify themselves with their Indian American diasporic subjectivity. They have come to terms with their “difference,” in a land of “different” nationalities, and find solace in their communal gatherings which rekindle nostalgic memories of their lands left behind. Mr Gupta makes further bonds with the Kurma House Musicians through his love of music. The memories evoked through food and music become cultural memories for Rakhi and Belle, who are both trying to find their own identities. Divakaruni subverts the accepted assimilation of the diaspora into the mainstream American culture and makes the assimilation of Rakhi and Belle into the diasporic culture of Indian American heritage important and significant for the two young women, especially for Rakhi who is in search of her identity through the use of popular and public cultural memories.

⁶⁸ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 165.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 53

⁷⁰ Wenying Xu, *Eating Identities: Reading food in Asian American literature* (Honolulu: U of Hawai’i P, 2008) 8.

For Rakhi, realisation and acceptance of her hyphenated identity happens when she visits her ex-husband's DJ event at "Must-Must" and finds a "déjà vu of cultural memory she hadn't expected to find" in that "cavernous and dimly lit"⁷¹ space. Her identity formation as a hyphenated Indian American becomes complete with her acceptance of the double spaces she occupies, and that makes her accept herself as she is, neither completely ethnically othered Indian as she would have wished for before 9/11 nor completely American as she believed herself to be before 9/11, but a mixture of both the east and the west, just like the Bhangra music to which she dances.

9/11 is documented as an important contemporary event in the narrative of the novel. Rakhi and her family are attacked by a group of youth on the evening of 9/11, in the wake of racial attacks on Muslims and other brown skinned/Asians. The attack, though portrayed as a harrowing experience for Rakhi and her family, is not the catalyst in Rakhi's understanding of her hybrid ethnic identity. Despite its historical importance on countless South Asians' re-negotiation of identity, Divakaruni accords little importance to 9/11 and its effect on Rakhi's life. In the aftermath of the attack, Rakhi wonders about her American identity and questions her acceptance in America. But despite her musings and ethnic insecurities, of belonging and being forced to become the ethnic Other, the narrative treads very softly on the socio-political impact of 9/11 on the South Asian diasporic community. Instead of 9/11, the fire in the café and the evil machinations of the manager of the

⁷¹ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 302, 303.

competing mass coffee chain are given more importance, in Rakhi's re-negotiation of her hyphenated identity.

The fluidity and unpredictability of memory in identity formation is brought out through Rakhi's voice and the omniscient narrative voice in the text. Rakhi's voice is strong but it presents her confused state as a young Indian American woman who is looking for her Indian identity through the popular productions of mainstream culture such as food, photographs and paintings. Her idea of her identity alters with 9/11, because of the attack on her family and her business, which makes her undergo a period of self-doubt ("But if I wasn't American, then what was I?")⁷² and later, the same doubt aids her in her acceptance of her new Indian American identity despite the mainstream's different treatment of her and her diasporic group. "People she's never seen before tell her how sorry they are that she's had such a terrible experience. They want to shake her hand. They declare that they welcome her presence in their community... They make her feel like a guest."⁷³ Rakhi's reaction to 9/11, which comes out in the omniscient narrator's voice, employs Divakaruni's personal memories of 9/11 and her reaction to the solidarity in the diaspora and the mixed feelings of the White majority.⁷⁴ Instead of commenting about the deeper socio-political issues that were brought into focus with 9/11, Divakaruni uses the event and its historical importance to assert the individual resilience and adaptability of her protagonist. Thus, the cultural memory becomes a personal memory. Her

⁷² Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 271.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 275.

⁷⁴ See Chitra Divakaruni, "The Reluctant Patriot," *Los Angeles Times*, 21Oct. 2001.

memory of the event thus becomes an individualised recollection that enables Rakhi to understand and come to terms with her ethnic identity and her national identity.

Divakaruni's careful treatment of 9/11 in the narrative and Rakhi's self conflict that resolves itself easily despite the racial attack on her family are indications of both the writer's and her Indian American character's reluctance to engage with the sensitive issue of race and identity in post-9/11 America. Even though Divakaruni addresses racial harmony that connects people in the face of disaster through an allegorical reference to 9/11 in her later novel, *One Amazing Thing* (2010), she does not question the stereotyped racial categorisations that differentiate diasporic groups in the US. America is presented as the melting pot of diverse ethno-racial groups that come together in difficult times. Rakhi's Chinese neighbour puts up an American flag to ward off being the Other, while Rakhi wonders about why she needs to proclaim her allegiance to the US. Race becomes their reason for being the Other, but at the same time in a diasporic American location, ethno-racial differences that make diasporic groups differentiate themselves become invalid in the face of white American anger against terrorists. Despite inserting a clear reference to 9/11, neither Divakaruni nor her narrator Rakhi are willing to engage in the importance of ethnic affiliations that mark one as the Other in the US. Rakhi's surprise at being attacked is easily resolved with her finding about the evil machinations of her competitor from the commercial coffee chain. Instead of America's inability to understand and to truly accommodate its diasporic Others, Rakhi suggests that racial othering is a result of individual machinations rather than a collective response. Thus despite Divakaruni's conscious attempts at debunking the

model minority sentiments in her characters, she still treads very carefully regarding ethno-racially sensitive issues such as race and the Other's place in the US, in *Queen of Dreams*.

"She doesn't have to change to claim her Indianness; she doesn't have to try to become like her mother. Things are breaking down inside her,"⁷⁵ the omniscient narrator comments on Rakhi's gradual understanding of her dual identity of being an American and an Indian. The understanding enables her to come to terms with her individual identity better. She realises that she is not one of many, but is unique. She is neither completely ethnically exotic, like her mother was, but nor is she a complete American, because of her ethnic Indian heritage. Rakhi's acceptance and growth as a person is neither presented in her voice nor her mother's journals, but in a third-person narrative voice. The omniscient narrative voice directs the narrative through its interruptions to Rakhi's and Mrs Gupta's voices, and brings in Divakaruni's personal memories into the narrative memories of the text. The memories of Divakaruni, of 9/11 and its aftermath, the surge of ethnic discrimination and the patriotic fervour, detailed in her essay "The Reluctant Patriot,"⁷⁶ are quite similar to Rakhi's "I don't have to put up a flag to prove that I am American! I'm American already. I love this country."⁷⁷ Therefore, the third-person narrative voice overlaps with the authorial memories and emotions too. The narrative voice also brings in the possibility of Jona (Rakhi's daughter)'s continuation of the tradition of dream telling, because it is through the omniscient narrator that the readers are introduced to Jona's

⁷⁵ Divakaruni, *Queen of Dreams*, *op.cit.*, 245.

⁷⁶ See Divakaruni, "The Reluctant Patriot," *op.cit.*

⁷⁷ Divakaruni, *Queen of Dreams*, *op.cit.*, 264.

ability to dream of the future. As a third-generation Indian American, Jona inherits her Indian grandmother's magical gift of prophesying. This gift, of whose potentials neither Jona nor Rakhi is fully aware, hints at the continuation of family, traditions and memories, even with the third-generation Indian Americans. Through three voices – of Rakhi, Mrs Gupta and the narrator – which overlap and go back and forth in the various developments of the plot, Divakaruni explores the non-linearity and fluidity of memory. As Walder argues in relation to postcolonial nostalgia and memory,

[M]emory [is] something shared: shared memories may involve remembrances, legacies, traditions, heritage, histories, and monuments – and nostalgia, which is commonly taken to mean a distorted memory of the past that is morally questionable.⁷⁸

In *Queen of Dreams*, memory becomes a “questionable” trope to fashion identities on. The Bengali Indian traditions and legacies passed on to the second-generation Indian Americans become the basis for Rakhi to form her identity and connect with her narrativised and fictionalised past. The first-generation immigrants pass on memories to their offspring, which they have appropriated for themselves, on their own terms. Thus, identities based on these “distorted memories” of the first-generation and the mainstream's cultural memory of food, music and photographs also become “questionable” and “distorted.” Rakhi creates her identity through the shared memories she acquires from her parents, legacies, and traditions from the Kurma House musicians, but her identity thus formed becomes “questionable” and

⁷⁸ Walder, *op.cit*, 939.

fluid, since it relies on the legacies, traditions and other cultural productions which can take different forms with different recollections.

As a consequence, memories recalled, narrativised and re-invented in the form of myth-filled dream journals, while enabling Rakhi to understand herself better, become an added element in her own definition of uniqueness. Neither Mr Gupta's nor Mrs Gupta's nostalgic recollections help Rakhi to come to terms with her identity, till she accepts her distinctiveness. In her personal as well as professional struggles as a young woman who has decided to walk away from her marriage and be a single parent, coming to terms with the death of her mother and the secrets revealed in the dream journals, an artist grappling with her creative outputs and as a café owner striving to keep afloat despite a large-scale café chain and its many invasions, Rakhi finds her own strengths and her own voice. Her final culmination in her acceptance of her hyphenated identity and her diversity therefore is an individual journey. She accepts her "difference," not only through her appropriated and recollected memories, but in her own reactions and acceptance of the same memories, which make her who she is, but do not define who she wants to be.

Looking towards the US, to define individuality: *Oleander Girl*

Divakaruni's *Oleander Girl* (2012) is her latest novel that explores the theme of diasporic memory from the standpoint of a new-generation Indian woman. Unlike her previous novels that were discussed in this chapter, *Oleander Girl* changes from looking back to India to looking towards America for self-identity and individuality.

The post-9/11 dilemmas faced by Indian immigrants to the US and the difference of having a privileged social background in India are all explored through the narrative. The novel, which recounts some life events that reshape the life of a young, Brahmin upper-class girl, Korobi, analyses various themes that are not exclusively relevant to the Indian American experience, but which nevertheless push the boundaries of Indian American women's writing and their subject matter.

Korobi, the grand-daughter of a retired judge, is brought up in a very sheltered and a restrictive environment under her stern grandfather's rule. Being an orphan, she has not seen either of her parents and believes them to be dead since her birth. Her grandparents rarely talk of her deceased parents and Korobi lives believing them to be her only relatives. The novel opens on the night before Korobi's engagement to her fiancé Rajat from a nouveau rich family in Calcutta.⁷⁹ Korobi wakes up from a dream to see the ghost of her dead mother at her window, trying to pass on a message to her to go beyond the ocean to find something. Divakaruni in her usual style complicates the margins between reality and magic through the appearance of Anu, Korobi's dead mother. Anuradha (Anu), whom Korobi had never seen or known, becomes Korobi's inspiration and guide into the unknown and propels her to take on adventures that were unimaginable in her sheltered boarding school-educated life. The liminal once again offers a liberating space for the characters to grow and defy pre-destined identities. The sudden death of her grandfather, the unsent, unfinished letter from her mother to her father and family

⁷⁹ In this 2012 novel, Divakaruni uses Kolkata, the new name for Calcutta. To retain consistency in the thesis, I will refer to the city as Calcutta while any references made to the same city in the novel will carry the name Kolkata.

secrets prompt Korobi to leave for America in search of her parents' memories and especially her father. While Korobi is away, battling her own difficulties, Rajat and his family face adversities from their business partners, Naxalite union leaders and Calcutta's hired goons. The novel progresses through these disparate concerns and finds a happy ending in the final reunion between Korobi and Rajat, in a marriage at their family temple. Despite its overt linear narrative, the novel explores various socio-cultural themes.

One of the most striking differences in *Oleander Girl* is Divakaruni's use of time. The novel is set in 2002 in Calcutta. The Godhra riots,⁸⁰ which ignited communal violence and renewed distrust between Hindu and Muslim communities, are alluded to within the first few pages of the novel. Though the riots themselves are not documented, through references to Rajat's encounter with angry men and the escalating distrust between the Bose matriarch (Rajat's mother) and their Muslim driver Asif Ali, communal distrust that sprang between Hindu and Muslim communities is mentioned throughout the narrative. This differentiating of the Other, because of religious reasons, is further complicated through Asif Ali's loyalty to Rajat's sister Pia and his friendship with the Roy household's gatekeeper-cum-driver Bahadur. Instead of the easy nostalgia for either a pre-Independence communal

⁸⁰ On the morning of February 27, 2002, the Ayodhya-Ahmedabad Sabarmati Express train carrying Hindu pilgrims returning from the site of the demolished Babri Masjid was stopped in Godhra, in Gujarat. Under controversial circumstances, four carriages of the train caught fire resulting in the death of 59 people. Following the burning, a three-day period of inter-communal violence ensued in the state of Gujarat where coordinated and organised attacks began on Muslims. False reports circulated in the media, lack of state intervention and lethargy in law enforcement led to outbreaks of violence against the minority Muslims in Ahmedabad for the next three weeks, and intermittent outbreaks of violence against Muslims and Hindus in the following three months. Godhra riots, also known as the Gujarat riots, rekindled the ethnic animosity between Hindus and Muslims in India and there were repercussions all over India.

harmony or a removed-from-reality ethnic unity, Divakaruni portrays the everyday coexistence of Hindu and Muslim communities. They neither disregard their ethno-religious differences totally nor do they forget their human relationships because of their religious beliefs. Asif Ali decides to work for Sheikh Rehman not only because of his religion, but also because of his reputation as a fair employer: “Sheikh Rehman is a legend in the Muslim community...He’s generous with bonuses and overtime pay...sheikh is a stickler.”⁸¹ His resistance to leave the Bose family is Pia. “Although no one will ever know, Pia is the reason he refused when, last year, Sheikh Rehman’s men tried to lure him away,”⁸² and also because Pia reminds him of his sister. By placing human relations above and beyond ethno-racial differences, Divakaruni strengthens the cosmopolitan identities of her characters and makes a social statement about human relations. This importance of human relations is further emphasised through Rajat’s former girlfriend Sonia’s behaviour and Mishra, the manager of the Bose’s New York art gallery, who becomes a bitter enemy of the Boses. Despite their apparent Hindu majority identity, Sonia and Mishra become the villains of the novel. Divakaruni stresses the age-old wisdom of looking beyond skin colour and ethno-racial affinities through these characters.

“The family has inevitably been the site for challenges, changes and compromises,”⁸³ write Sanjukta Dasgupta and Malashri Lal in their analysis of the Indian family and its transitions in literary and cultural texts. Korobi’s family, too, becomes the site for challenges, changes and compromises, both personal and public,

⁸¹ Chitra Divakaruni, *Oleander Girl* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012) 11.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Sanjukta Dasgupta and Malashri Lal, eds. *The Indian Family in Transition: Reading Literary and Cultural Texts* (New Delhi: Sage, 2007) 12.

in the narrative. Incorporating the public spaces and significant socio-political changes into the tale, Divakaruni makes the private a site for the public to act upon. Korobi's personal space and the narrative are constantly ruptured by the public space and its various activities. On the morning of her engagement to Rajat, "[t]he commentator on Akashbani [Kalikata radio station], who is discussing the growing tension between India and Pakistan since the testing of the Agni missile, is interrupted by a news bulletin: over fifty people dead in a train fire in Gujarat."⁸⁴ While this tension between her own countrymen is played in the background to Korobi's emotional turmoil after her mother's ghostly visit, what shakes Korobi the most is the American 9/11, during her visit to the US. "I am dreaming of the Towers...When I'd seen the disaster on Indian TV [...] I'd felt mild sorrow... But in New York, their absence saturates the air I breathe,"⁸⁵ records Korobi. Her sympathy for the fallen Towers and the human lives destroyed with them are a reflection of her own displaced, disoriented self in the US, while looking for her lost father. She is the new-age cosmopolite, who is capable of looking at human suffering, beyond ethnicity and other socio-political reasons. Thus, the public ruptures the personal and challenges the domestic space with the intrusion of the wider world.

The Godhra riots, people's reactions and the significance of human relations above and beyond ethno-racial identities are further explored through Korobi's encounters in the US. The racial discord that looks beyond humanity to ethnic difference is highlighted through Korobi's encounters with New York's urban decay and post-9/11 America. Korobi is invisible beyond her ethnic affiliations in post-9/11

⁸⁴ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 6.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 101.

America where ethnicity becomes a marker of identity. While Rakhi in *Queen of Dreams* experiences 9/11 as an American suddenly made-to-be an ethnic outsider, Korobi's reactions are completely removed from the American experience, except for her humanist sympathy. As Vic, Korobi's friend and detective partner from New York, says, "Nine-eleven injured the people of this city in so many ways."⁸⁶ But being the outsider, Korobi is unable to understand those injuries. For Korobi, the importance of race in the US, especially when faced with demarcating boundaries and insider versus outsider status is an alien concept, as being Indian, she is more attuned to ethnic differences. Post-9/11 America is portrayed as a place of racial differences and collective racial identities that do not look beyond the common race markers. India, with its ethnic discords between various ethno-religious groups, is presented as a place looking for specific ethno-religious markers beyond collective racial differences like in post-9/11 America. While post-9/11 America is struggling to find human relations and the importance of looking beyond ethno-regional affiliations, India, with its long history of ethno-religious discords values human relations above ethno-religious kinships as is explored through the friendship that grows between Asif Ali and Pia, and between Asif and Bahadur. These relationships transcend ethno-religious tensions and barriers and enable Divakaruni to concentrate on an all-encompassing cosmopolitan Indian identity. The re-Orientalisation of eastern values — of ethnic acceptance and multi-religious harmony among the various religious groups in Indis — thus, is once again showcased, through the acceptance and compassion for the Other. Re-Orientalisation here is not an

⁸⁶ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 150.

essentialist strain in Divakaruni's writing. But despite her attempts at contesting exoticisation and showcasing the east to the west, through their different attitudes towards race, religion and ethnic tolerance, Divakaruni too falls prey to upholding eastern values for the consumption of the west, as a contrast against western values. But Divakaruni's claim of eastern values that are contrasted with western disregard for humanity beyond ethnicity is highly selective. She does not make generalised assumptions for India's general public. Her characters, who either form or are working for the educated, upper-class Bengalis with refined tastes for arts and culture with transnational exposures, are able to look beyond ethnic differences and embrace their Other. This cosmopolitan identity born out of the ability to travel and move within and beyond one's own social class differentiates the experiences of the characters in *Oleander Girl*. Korobi thus falls into the category of a "new cosmopolitan"⁸⁷ subject, traversing through class and *desi/pardesi* boundaries, re-assessing her own values and justifying her choices. Therefore, Divakaruni does not make general assumptions or create general identities: rather she creates individual identities that are subjected to the class, caste and position of her characters. Her gaze, directed through her novel and her characters, thus becomes "situated"⁸⁸ within the socio-cultural associations of the moment and elaborates the consequences of certain historical incidents.

Divakaruni also reverses the nostalgic memory of Indian immigrants towards India which she has explored in some depth in her other novels, through *Oleander*

⁸⁷ This is a term borrowed from Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma, from their seminal work on *New Cosmopolitanisms: South Asians in the US* (Redwood City: Stanford UP, 2006).

⁸⁸ Nira Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* (London: Sage, 2011) 4.

Girl. The memory no longer is that of an Indian American living in America, it is that of an Indian girl with an African-American father, living in Calcutta, India. Memory thus becomes a site for exploring individual identity. Korobi's decision to return to India, despite the many allures of America (including legitimacy), is an individual's decision to retain her identity. In *Oleander Girl*, India becomes the place for individual identity assertion unlike in other novels, where America is the location through which personal realisation is achieved. As Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma argue, in the new world, "the boundaries of nation-states [have become] porous not only in terms of people moving in and out, but cultures, customs, and social practices"⁸⁹ also, thus making Korobi's identity a fluid one. The fact that Korobi's "father's African-American [and she is] illegitimate,"⁹⁰ therefore, asserts her fluid identity instead of making her an outcast. Korobi's personal changes through her interactions with America make her realise her priorities, and allow her to find her missing roots, in the form of her mother and her history. But her assertion of individuality and choices are made in India, in Calcutta where her traditions bind her to her socio-cultural roots. Thus while America is a catalyst in Korobi's personal development, her assertion of individual identity as young woman is not wholly dependent on America. Divakaruni's reversal of roles, played by the immigrant location of America and the familial location of India, takes the novel to a new direction that has not been explored in detail in Divakaruni's novels before. This theme signals the confidence of Divakaruni as a post-1965 novelist in her own cultural heritage and her characters' identity. Thus, Divakaruni reverses the argument

⁸⁹ Rajan and Sharma, *op.cit*, 17.

⁹⁰ Divakaruni, *op.cit*, 224, 244.

that “neoliberal, often politically conservative migrants are less invested in issues of social justice than are other less privileged racial minorities”⁹¹ by instigating her characters in *Oleander Girl* to seek out and invest in social change that leads to changes in the political thinking of the characters. Despite creating characters that are politically uninvolved and privileged, Divakaruni invests in social justice in the form of racial acceptance and freedom of choice for women, in her novels, and creates socially responsible characters who negotiate their privileged backgrounds and social responsibility in their own unique ways. While writing from America, she is also able to reverse the importance of the US on her characters’ self-realisation and is able to move away from traditional sites of memory to draw on the new-age developments of diverse locations of memory.

Family ties and traditions also play a crucial role in the development of *Oleander Girl*’s narrative. Korobi, the main protagonist, is depicted as a modern young woman who emerges out of her cocooned upbringing through dramatic revelations about her past and her grandfather’s past through recalled memories. The traditional Roys are juxtaposed with the modern Boses to illustrate the different strata of society in Calcutta. India is not only replete with traditional families, but is populated with rich and cosmopolitan Indians as well. The Bose family and their lifestyle are used to shed light on the new generation of rich Indians. They enjoy a traditional Indian lifestyle and its many perks while also reaping the benefits of being in an open economy that enables them to interact with global markets. Rajat’s and Sonia’s (his former girlfriend) lifestyle of frequenting night clubs and getting

⁹¹ Pamela Butler, Jigna Desai, “Manolos, Marriage, and Mantras: Chick-Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism,” *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 8: No 2 (2008): 21.

together with their westernised friends is not too different from the American lifestyle of many young immigrant Indians. Thus, Divakaruni explores the lives of the rich and the privileged Indians in an Indian setting further illustrating the lack of complete difference in American and Indian experiences, if one belongs to the privileged echelons of society. This difference in social strata also affects the empowerment of women in Divakaruni's novel. Despite being from India, Korobi demonstrates more spirit and individuality to that of Mishra's wife living in America, contrasting their difference in economic independence which leads to choices. As a result, economic independence and social class are brought out as the defining elements of characterising individuality in women. Therefore, once again, Divakaruni debunks the homogenous identity associated with Indian American women characters in fiction in the mass cultural imagination of non-Indians. Women characters in Divakaruni's fiction are individuals representing selected elements of the society. Despite using the common tropes of exoticising them, through physical appearances and value systems, and placing them in "different" settings, they bring forth individual identities through their characters. Consequently, re-Orientalism as a homogenous principle fails in Divakaruni's fiction and her novels explore diverse socio-economic and political reasoning that create individual personal identities.

Divakaruni increases the visibility and agency of male characters through *Oleander Girl* as well, continuing her attempts at giving voice to male characters in *The Vine of Desire*. Rajat and Korobi's grandfather have important roles both in Korobi's life as well as separately. Their agency and power comes through their patriarchal decisions and behaviour. But they are not only supportive characters to

the main female characters. They, too, develop and expand as characters through the narrative. Male voices are used to highlight the visibility of female voices as well. While Korobi's voice changes and becomes more powerful in the narrative, she is also supported by the male voices in the novel. Thus, in *Oleander Girl*, Divakaruni brings out a more harmonious existence of male and female characters, while at the same time insisting on female strength and agency.

Oleander Girl signals the change in Divakaruni's narrative style from characters looking back towards India for identity and roots to characters who are able to traverse both Indian traditions and American westernisation to find their own voices in their own settings. The setting of the novel neither overtly exoticises nor domesticates the narrative and characters. It becomes another cosmopolitan space through which modern issues are analysed and explored. Korobi is neither rooted in Indian tradition nor in American tradition, but she represents the global cosmopolitan⁹² citizen who travels between both eastern and western cultures, in both eastern and western settings, to find her own identity and her own voice.

Conclusion

As was discussed in the preceding pages, it is evident that Divakaruni creates characters who insist on their "difference" — to each other, to the mass perception of the cultural Other and the pan-Indian identity of diasporic women — by re-inventing their own identities and negotiating their transnational cosmopolitan identities. These

⁹² I use the terms global and transnational interchangeably throughout this section and in the rest of the thesis to refer to modern cosmopolitan subjects who are capable of global travel and other international exchanges of values, ideas and concepts.

women characters insist on their individuality and their cross-cultural identities through their diverse needs and interpretations of life and other issues. Characters ranging from Sudha to Korobi use the tropes of exotic ethnic identities to establish their “difference” throughout the narratives. Self-exoticisation of the female Indian American characters thus extends beyond mere re-Orientalism and explores self-made identities that enrich their different diasporic experiences and contest exotic character traits associated with their position as the cultural Other. Divakaruni has neither overt criticism nor explicit praise for Indian American diasporic living conditions. Instead of highlighting the Indian American diasporic experience, Divakaruni draws attention to the development of individual characters enriched by both ethno-cultural histories and American experiences. Thus, highlighting the importance of the individual in a socio-ethnic setting, Divakaruni challenges the socio-ethnic hierarchies prevalent in diasporic communities. The individual while being a part of the ethno-social make-up of the society does not represent the whole diasporic/ethnic community.

Divakaruni’s novels, with exotic settings and using themes such as female bonding and re-assertion of identity through appropriated and borrowed memories, have been criticised over the years for their excessive use of myths, magic and orientalist details, in exoticising the east. Inderpal Grewal critiques Divakaruni’s cosmopolitan multiculturalism as portrayed in *The Mistress of Spices* as a text where the “difference could be consumed through an exotic aesthetic.”⁹³ But the exotic aesthetic, in the form of magic and mythical elements, evident in the novels analysed

⁹³ Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America; Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2005) 75.

in this chapter, and in other fictions by Divakaruni, subverts the simple linear consumption for which she is criticised. The exotic details are used not only to make the consumption of the east more palatable to the west, but to accord the narratives and the protagonists more individuality, thus a difference that can not be easily consumed, or appropriated. As Gita Rajan contends, Divakaruni “relies upon her readers’ familiarity with the many markers of orientalism,”⁹⁴ in *The Mistress of Spices* to bring out the unlimited potential of “truly multicultural, multiracial, multiethnic America.”⁹⁵ While the many markers of orientalism are used, not only in *The Mistress of Spices* but also in the other novels examined through this chapter, what the critics fail to notice is that the same markers of Orientalism give Divakaruni’s characters an individual identity that sets them apart from the multicultural, multiethnic American population. The need to establish individuality, despite the exotic tropes used and the mythical plots employed runs deep in Divakaruni’s fictions. As I have elaborated in the preceeding pages, Divakaruni’s protagonists use the exotic aesthetics and myth infused magical tales to contest the exoticisation and orientalising of the Indian and Indian American women characters associated with these tropes. Their individuality and independence, from the stereotypical depictions of easily consumed multiculturalism, is apparent in their personal choices. Lavina Shankar also criticises Divakaruni’s fictions for their depiction of “exotic and easily digestible India — oppressive, patriarchal, yet spicy

⁹⁴ Gita Rajan, “Chitra Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices*: Deploying Mystical Realism.” *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 2: 2 (2002): 218

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 217. (Italics in original)

and mystical—”⁹⁶ and lack of distinctions based on the politics of class, race and location. But Divakaruni is conscious of her chosen group of diasporic communities, the middle-class Bengali Indian immigrants, and explores their realities, rather than essentialising their experiences as the pan-Indian immigrant experience. She does not make overt claims to make India digestible or to essentialise patriarchal oppression as an Indian experience. As is evident in the later novels, *Queen of Dreams* and *Oleander Girl*, oppression is not only patriarchal and Indian, but is racial, class based and is American. Thus, as I have argued, the distinct differences Divakaruni accords her women characters, enable her to explore class, and location based politics that affect the re-narrativising of their individual identities. Divakaruni, therefore contests these claims by her critics, and uses popular tropes to instill individuality to her characters and explore various contemporary issues faced by Indian women in the US.

The situatedness⁹⁷ of the novels also establishes Divakaruni’s presence as a post-1965 Indian American writer. As Yuval-Davis claims, the “[s]ituated gaze, situated knowledge and situated imagination construct how we see the world in different ways... [and] the differential situatedness of different social agents affects the ways they affect and are affected by different social, economic and political projects.”⁹⁸ Instead of being preoccupied solely with an exclusive concern with Indian history or history of the American diasporic experience or the difficulties of

⁹⁶ Lavina Dhingra Shankar, “Not too Spicy: Exotic Mistresses of Cultural Translation in the Fiction of Chitra Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri.” *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India*. eds. Nalini Iyer and Bonnie Zare (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009) 36.

⁹⁷ Yuval-Davis, *op.cit*, 4.

⁹⁸ *Ibid* .

finding one's place in a new country, Divakaruni situates her novels in the present, with references to significant incidents from the narrative's present. World incidents such as the ethnic massacre in Rwanda and the "Trial of the Century," the O.J. Simpson trial, weave themselves into the narrative of *The Vine of Desire*, 9/11 plays an important role in Rakhi's self re-assessment in *Queen of Dreams* while the Godhra riots and the aftermath of 9/11 play a significant role in Korobi's understanding of her cosmopolitan identity in *Oleander Girl*. By situating her novels' narratives in the intersection of contemporary events and the Indian American experience, Divakaruni insists on a contemporary reading of her novels. These novels therefore, while using the stereotypical tropes of exoticisation, ethnic identities and myth-infused Indian tales, still promote a new understanding of Indian American subjects in the diaspora and especially a new understanding of reading Indian American women's characters and fiction in contemporary times. Chitra Divakaruni, hence, becomes one of the leading figures of the post-1965 generation of women writers from South Asia and develops a new way of understanding and reading Indian American women's experience in fiction.

Divakaruni's use of literary techniques complements her narrative purpose of defining individual characters. The constant dialogues between women characters, either together, or through means of journals/letters, propel her plots forward. In both *Sister of My Heart* and *The Vine of Desire*, both Anju and Sudha continue a constant conversation with each other through their alternating narratives. Some significant narrative developments such as their marriages, breaking down of relationships and re-narrativising of individual identities are presented through both their perspectives,

leading to a balanced perspective on the same issue. The female narrative voices, used throughout all of the novels discussed above, also bring forth a strong feminist interpretation of diasporic experiences. Thus Divakaruni's women narrators not only present their own experiences, but also contribute to the larger feminist agenda of giving a voice to the neglected subaltern subject. While empowering the voiceless with a strong voice, in her later novels, Divakaruni also enables the silent male characters to express their point of view. Albeit brief, the male narrative voices that rupture the plot of *The Vine of Desire* offer a different perspective and an opportunity for the neglected male characters to express their emotions. This, while defying the silent male stereotype in South Asian women's fiction, also offers an opportunity for the everyday male characters to express their deeper emotions that are usually ignored in the larger mainstream stereotyping of male identities.

The deliberate use of first-person narratives together with third-person omniscient narrative voices complicates Divakaruni's novels. While the first-person women voices present strong female characters who define their individual identities, the third-person narrative voice offers a critical distance to evaluate the establishment of their uniqueness. The various influences and experiences that shape the re-negotiation of the same women characters are presented through omniscient narrative voices that complement these novels. While using this as a mode of step-back-in-to-reality, Divakaruni further employs the same technique to situate her novels in context. This situatedness, while offering a reality check, also functions as a critique on her protagonists' journey of self-discovery.

Divakaruni also uses memory and nostalgia as tropes to explore individual identities that get created using received, re-created and appropriated recollections. Rakhi realises her own potential as an artist, as an entrepreneur and as an individual once she accepts her uniqueness, as opposed to her previous belief of an identity created through her Indian heritage. While her identity is not solely based on either her Indian memories or her American memories, it becomes a fusion of memories, selected to establish her own uniqueness. Unlike Rakhi who relates to her past through her mother's dream journals, Korobi's journey of self-fashioning takes her to America, to unearth her memories, of which she had no inclination. The African American identity of Korobi's father can be read as a deliberate attempt on Divakaruni's part to integrate the Other into her Indian American narratives. As Vijay Prashad argues about the model minority status of South Asians in America, Divakaruni too tries to investigate the significance behind "being the answer" to American race relations rather than "being the problem."⁹⁹ This conscious attempt at reconciling race enmities between the Indian model minority and the African Americans is laudable, despite its fleeting appearance in the narrative. It also signals the need of Indians to accept not only the white Americans as their equals, but also other ethnic groups, especially those with darker skin tones. Korobi's identity formation thus is not a simple linear process. It is fluid because of its unresolved issues of legitimacy and ethnicity. But the same process creates a unique identity for Korobi, away from her pre-defined Bengali Hindu identity.

⁹⁹ Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folks* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001) 1-9.

Therefore, this chapter also explores the fluidity and the vulnerability of appropriated and inherited memories in creating individual identities. Memories thus become tools to define characters and aid the re-invention of individual uniqueness for characters of Indian, American and other ethnic origins. Divakaruni thus asserts the importance of appropriating and re-calling memories, not only as Indian Americans, but as people, to help define one's own importance and place in society.

Chapter Two: You are what you *decide* to cook...

“[T]he immigrant’s voice is rendered most palatable when charged with gastronomic power,”¹ notes Anita Mannur in her analysis of food in South Asian diasporic fiction. These fictions, particularly by women writers, use culinary power rendered through references to food to assert their voices within the larger group of immigrants. Overt references to food and food preparation in fiction not only express the immigrant’s voice which is otherwise subdued in the American mainstream, but also differentiates individual identity through the same trope. The immigrant’s identity defined as a homogeneous entity through the mainstream’s rendition of immigrant identity, acquires its distinct flavour through those references to food and foodways.² The exotic Other becomes interesting and even acceptable through their different culinary preferences and thus becomes palatable and almost a part of the mainstream. References to food sometimes “wrench cultural practices out of their context and display them for gain to the curious gaze of the outsiders”³ within the trope of immigrant identity. Food references in diasporic fiction also enable the writers and the immigrant characters to express emotions otherwise ignored both within the diaspora and in diasporic locations.

¹ Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fiction: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2009) 62.

² For example, the references to curry will most of the time indicate an Indian identity while *sari/saree* will most of the time be associated with an Indian woman. These stereotyped associations do not take into account the individuality and the diverse nature of diasporic communities even from within the same geographic location.

³ Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993) 56.

Food is the point of connection between the outside world and the inside world of our bodies, and it is also full of spiritual, cultural and mythical meanings that are beyond meanings usually ascribed to food such as sustenance, nutrient or gastronomic production. These multiple meanings associated with food create an identity for its consumers and transcend food and its principal function of satiating physical hunger. Food thus rises above its mundane function as a nutrient and becomes a “cultural sustenance”⁴ in diasporic situations, which in turn enables the diaspora to draw on the coded language of culture and myth expressed through food to satiate its diverse cravings.

Food constitutes a memory that enables diasporic communities to recollect their specific pasts, their familiar surroundings and most importantly their roots. For the diaspora, traditional food is an essential element of their identity. Their traditions, otherwise neglected and difficult to maintain amidst host communities, find meaning and continuity through food. Therefore, food becomes the trope through which they assert their identity and their affiliations to their motherland and their culture. Excessive references to ethnic food have been *de rigueur* in ethnic writing from America and especially in fiction by ethnic women authors. Ethnic American women writers from Irish American women writers to modern-day cosmopolitan ethnic women authors have used alimentary images in fiction to assert ethnic originality and individual differences among and between each other. Though the use of references to food and the domestic space has been (unjustly) severely criticised by the Chinese

⁴Rüdiger Kunow, “Eating Indian(s): Food, Representation and the Indian Diaspora in the United States,” *Eating Culture: The poetics and Politics of Food*, eds. Tobias Döring, Markus Heide and Susanne Mühleisen (Heidelberg: Winter, 2003) 157.

American critic Frank Chin as “Food pornography,”⁵ it is still a popular trope among South Asian mainstream women writers who present their identities and differences through alimentary images in their work. Despite food being an essential element of South Asian diaspora’s identity confirmation because of its Otherness to American food, some of the writers have chosen food as a means of presenting cultural conflict beyond its use as an element to explore the Otherness and the exotic nature of the diaspora.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Mistress of Spices* (1997) gave Indian spices a whole new meaning. The combination of magic and healing powers in spices, some derived from their specific qualities and some fictionalised, made everyday spices into extraordinary magical components of whose powers only a select few would know. Charged with the special powers of spices, Tilo’s immigrant experience at the margins of both her host and *desi* community were transformed into palatable exotic experiences full of mystery and intrigue. Divakaruni’s *Queen of Dreams* (2004) discussed in the first chapter, furthers the same trope through an Indian-themed café operated by a second-generation Indian American woman, Rakhi. The immigrant experience of Rakhi’s parents and the second-generation experiences of Rakhi and her friend Belle are portrayed through the development of their café, Kurma House. Rakhi’s bond with her father is displayed through food items introduced to the café and through the appropriation of her father’s food memories and practices into her

⁵ The term first appears in Chin’s play *The Year of the Dragon* (first produced in 1974), where the protagonist uses Chinese food presented to the English speaking “tourists” as a form of exoticising his culture in an attempt to survive in a foreign land. Frank Chin, in his overtly prejudiced male-centered analysis of women’s literature dismisses women writers and their attempts at discussing and presenting their culture through myths and everyday traditions of food in their fiction as “fake.” In his haste to dismiss women writers, he does not see the nuanced attempts at presenting ethnic cultures through the tropes of food and food writing that was prominent in Asian American women’s writing.

own life.⁶ Despite their overt attempts to bring to life immigrant experiences, Divakaruni's two novels concentrate on creating an Indian experience that is either exoticised as in the case of Tilo and her spices or mainstream-oriented as in the case of Rakhi's café and its many Indian sweets, through their references to Indian food. In her other novels, Divakaruni explores Bengali Indian food practices and traditions to shed light on her characters and their actions. India, thus consumed through spices and other food items in the novels, becomes an exoticised place full of "different" food, for the consumption of the ethnic outsider, who is initiated into distinct as well as general food rituals through references in the narratives.

"Food, as the most significant medium of the traffic between the inside and outside of our bodies, organizes, signifies, and legitimates our sense of self in distinction from others who practice different foodways,"⁷ writes Wenying Xu in the introduction to her analysis of Asian American food patterns in literature. As food evokes memories and becomes a source of sustenance for diverse diasporic groups in their search for roots and belonging to the cultures left behind in faraway lands, food is used in the works of South Asian American women writers to explore individual identities. They also use the alimentary images prevalent in everyday diasporic experiences of Indian restaurants and Indian takeaway menus and re-work the homogeneous Indocentric images presented through these mainstream connotations to bring forth unique identities. The alimentary images presented in the fiction discussed in this chapter present specific ethno-regional identities visible amongst the

⁶ These details are discussed in depth in the previous chapters.

⁷ Wenying Xu, *Eating Identities; Reading Food in Asian American Literature* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 2008) 2.

diasporic South Asian American groups, especially Indian American communities, and reverse the white appropriation of non-white culinary practices to suit the white palate that have been presented in various cookbooks, to an amalgamation of minority culinary experiences that are hybrid and representative of a diasporic American identity.

Amulya Malladi's *The Mango Season* (2003) and *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004) use alimentary images not only as a means of asserting a specific South Asian ethnic identity, but also as a means of exploring women's space within the diaspora and India. Culinary images are used by Malladi to explore a range of emotions that are either unexpressed or subdued among South Indian American diasporic women in her fiction while Bharti Kirchner's *Darjeeling* (2002) and *Pastries* (2003) employ food and food imagery to express an ethnic Bengali identity in both America and India. Malladi's novels also explore the multicultural influences of living in America among Indian American diasporic groups and being influenced by other Asian American ethno-social groups. The influence of different "Other" groups from America as a means of self-discovery and expression of American multicultural experience, especially by second-generation Indian American women, re-works the different margins within American society, where white is not always the cultural "Other" to measure oneself against or derive influence from. Food writing has been largely neglected as a means of expressing emotions and women's space within the larger society because of the trope's commercial use, in the form of cookbooks and exotica-asserting novels that use alimentary images as an artistic trope of self-exploration whether of characters and otherwise. Throughout this chapter, it will be

argued that food writing, despite its exotic nature of making the “Other” palatable and its reassertions of stereotypes through the use of certain food, enables the characters to establish individual identities against their own communities and against their host communities. The use of stereotypical images of Indian women and alimentary images to subvert the “packaged picture of Indian culture”⁸ in America will be analysed through this chapter, through a close reading of the chosen novels. Individual identities that go against the homogeneous cultural packaging of Indian Americans, especially in contemporary novels by South Asian Indian American women, and how the marginal “Other” is incorporated into exploring Indian American individualities, will also be examined through a close analysis of Malladi’s and Kirchner’s work. Malladi’s fictions have been accorded more critical space in this chapter due to their popularity compared to the selected novels by Kirchner. While Kirchner’s fictions furthered the argument on cosmopolitan individual identities for women through the use of food references, Malladi’s novels stand apart especially because of their depiction of female emotions and the liminal space between domestic and individual territories through the use of alimentary images. Thus, to establish the argument of women’s space, individuality and emotions expressed through foodways in this chapter, I have relied more heavily on Malladi’s novels.

⁸ I use this term from Uma Narayan’s “Undoing the ‘Package Picture’ of Cultures,” *Signs* 25:4, Feminism at a Millennium (Summer 2000): 1083-1086, where she discusses how cultures are perceived as packages, especially in mainstream cultural productions.

Kitchen politics and the search for an identity: *The Mango Season*

In Amulya Malladi's *The Mango Season*, Priya Rao, returning to India after seven years in the USA with the news of her engagement to an American, explores her dual identity as a young woman who has become much more comfortable with US social rules and as a young Indian woman who values her family traditions and attachments, through a culinary journey of South Indian food, especially mangoes and pickles. The use of food, recipes and kitchen politics not only explores Priya's growing discomfiture with her motherland, but also examines the diaspora's need to utilise the best of both cultures. Unlike Salman Rushdie who uses "chutneyfication"⁹ of history to find an identity for his character, Malladi pickles identity/ies to define Priya's character. Rushdie preserves Saleem's identity in *Midnight's Children* (1981) and through him the Indian history as he perceives it through the use of chutneys. In *Midnight's Children* chutneys are another added element that aid Saleem in his process of recollecting and re-ordering Indian history together with his personal history. For Saleem, national history and personal history get preserved with individual memories, the spices in the chutney. While chutneys preserve different elements of the food that is being cooked in a mixture of vinegar and spices, pickles change the taste and texture of the preserved fruit or vegetable as it ferments over a period of time. For Malladi, pickles are an essential element in re-narrating Priya's identity. While pickles explore the varied nuances of Priya's identity formation, Saleem's chutneys are replaceable with any other motif. Malladi pickles Priya's character, changing her identity and her definition of identity through her changing

⁹ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981) 459.

emotions. Just as Rushdie chutneyfies history on a community level, Malladi pickles identities on an individual, contemporary level. Thus, Malladi breaks new ground in the use of alimentary images, by focusing on the individual, and the process of creating and re-inventing the individual self. While Saleem is concerned with the ingestion of history and culture,¹⁰ Priya is concerned not with the preserved final product or ingestion, but with the process of preserving and hoarding cultural memories. Pickles, though preserving food, change the taste and the texture of the same because of the fermenting agents used. Thus, Priya preserves her identity as a South Indian American but her identity changes texture and the initial form because of the emotions and experiences that ferment its original form. As no two chutneys are ever the same, the pickles are also never the same. Priya's identity is pickled, which defines and refines itself over the time as she experiences different obstacles and realities. Priya, therefore, becomes refined and changes over the period of the narrative, since she is being reformed (as the pickles are being fermented) with spoken and unspoken emotions of her family and of herself.

In conversation with her fiancé before her departure to India, Priya clarifies her journey's goal: "What are you looking forward to the most?" Nick asked... 'HAPPINESS,' I said without hesitation."¹¹ Happiness for Priya is not an emotion but a concept which is related to the childhood memory of eating the mango stone, where one needed to fight for it. The exchange between Priya and Nick symbolises her search for the emotion "happiness" and her inability to articulate it in her adopted

¹⁰ See discussion by Mark Stein, "Curry at Work: Nibbling at the Jewel in the Crown," *Eating Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Food*, eds. Tobias Döring, Markus Heide and Susanne Mühleisen (Heidelberg: Winter, 2003) 133-149.

¹¹ Amulya Malladi, *The Mango Season* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003) 2.

language. She is capable of describing her need and want only through a reference to her memory of food. Despite her refusal to accept it at that moment, Priya takes the journey to find happiness, not in rejection, but in acceptance of her new self with diasporic contradictions. Just like the mango stone, which is “sticky” and for which she needed to fight with her sibling, Priya’s happiness is sticky, with emotions unspoken and over-played, and is only derived after her fight with the people she loves the most.

Food consumption and food preparation become a bonding experience for Priya in *The Mango Season*. Priya sneaks off with her grandfather *Thatha* (italics in the original) to eat the “forbidden fruit,”¹² pomegranates, in an attempt to re-establish the bond with her grandfather after seven years. The fruit becomes “forbidden” because of Priya’s childhood incidents of falling sick after eating too many unripe pomegranates. But in an attempt to reunite and recreate bonds, the grandfather and the granddaughter sneak out to repeat the same forbidden act. The shared act of sneaking off together, therefore, works on two levels in the text. On one hand, it is an act to recreate past and reignite bonds. On the other, it is how the otherwise stern grandfather indulges his granddaughter, and shows his love for her. Affection thus is expressed through the subversive means of indulgence in food. The shared act of sneaking off to eat the forbidden fruit reunites them. *Thatha* uses food again to avert confrontation of ideas and emotions with Priya: “I don’t want to argue over something that does not concern you... Make some *avial*.¹³ You make the best *avial*,

¹² Malladi, *op.cit*, 57.

¹³ A dish made with mixed vegetables cooked with coconut milk (my definition)

he ordered sweetly,”¹⁴ making food the sustenance and substitute for emotional bonding.

Food, therefore, becomes a metaphor for the emotional bonds that are not spoken between the traditional grandfather and Priya. She represents the new generation who attempt to be more vocal about their emotions, by being vocal about her rights, her beliefs and values to her family in India and through her emails to Nick. Priya’s grandfather represents the older, more traditional generation of Indians in particular and South Asians in general who expressed their love, emotions and anger through the surrogate means of food and other related rituals of sharing domestic duties or gifts instead of being vocal about them. Instead of accepting that Priya’s argument is valid and that he is losing ground with his point of view regarding marriage and love, *Thatha* orders her to make a dish, while bringing up past memories of how he enjoyed it through a reference to how she makes the “best *avial*.” The reference to food, one that is particularly flattering, placates Priya’s anger for the moment while it also makes the connection between Priya and her grandfather much stronger. Though this is an overtly sexist comment, as *Thatha* defines Priya’s identity making a reference to her gender role in society, from a South Indian caste conscious and gendered social point of view, this is the best compliment he can pay her. Complimenting Priya on her single culinary achievement is the only way he can show his appreciation and pride in her. Therefore, through his open admiration of Priya’s culinary skills, the grandfather replaces his inability to openly appreciate her

¹⁴ Malladi, *op.cit*, 61.

spirit and forthrightness, but nevertheless shows how much he values her. Thus, food replaces emotions that are unspoken and appreciation that is unvoiced.

Malladi uses alimentary references to highlight how the staple sustenance becomes a “cultural sustenance” in Priya’s extended family. Priya’s trip to Monda Market to buy the sour mangoes required to make *Avakai*¹⁵ is fraught with memories. “[T]he strong smell of mango and its juices sank in. And memories associated with that distinct smell trickled in like a slow stream flowing over gently weathered stone,”¹⁶ recalls Priya, while the same trip to buy mangoes stirs emotions of shame and hurt because of her mother’s bargaining: “and memories of my mother bartering over everything came rushing back like a tidal wave.”¹⁷ Thus, food is not exclusively evocative of happy times. Along with fond nostalgia, it also induces emotions of anger and shame. Through alimentary references, Malladi, therefore, invokes the diasporic relationship with food, not only as a nostalgic remembrance of their past, but also as a memory that is suppressed or forgotten within their diasporic settings. For Priya, mangoes thus become a coded cultural experience that stirs up memories and sustains her new identity, either in acceptance or rejection of her past. Malladi further strengthens her use of alimentary images as a trope that explores diasporic sentiments through Priya’s nostalgic remembrances of *goli* soda, *paan*¹⁸ and other food items eaten with aunts, alone and in the company of her elders. These nostalgic

¹⁵ South Indian Mango Pickle.

¹⁶ Malladi, *op.cit.*, 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸ *Goli* soda is a carbonated orange/ lemon flavoured soft drink popular in India. *Paan* is a preparation made of betel leaves, areca nuts and other breath freshening spices or tobacco. *Paan* is consumed not as a food item, but is offered as a tradition and chewing *Paan* can be addictive.

recollections, brought to the fore through food images, strengthen the immigrant sentiments of Priya as well as the importance of food in the identity construction of diasporic/immigrant subjects.

Food rituals such as eating together in Priya's grandmother's house, preparing various mango pickles, cooking numerous meals or helping out with food preparation make Priya an integrated part of the otherwise different life of her parents and relatives in India. Instead of "mixing" smoothly with her family like her food that she was "mixing...with [her] fingers,"¹⁹ which is "intimate," Priya contradicts and challenges her grandparents' stereotypical views on America and black people. The contrast drawn between the smoothly mixed food that is intimate to the rough edges and conflicts in Priya's and her family's relationships highlight the (dys)function of food in re-establishing some beliefs in the diaspora too. Even though food is used to establish traditions and traditional beliefs, the diasporic subjects are unable to follow the same rules and rituals, despite their consumption of the same traditional food. Despite the fact that Priya is able to relate to her forgotten food rituals, she is unable to accept all the other related coded rituals that are consumed as staple beliefs with the food. Priya's diasporic sensibilities make her question her family's traditional values and prejudices. This discontent is further highlighted through Priya's nostalgia for American food. Malladi uses Priya's involvements, either in helping out or by being a mere physical presence in the ancestral kitchen and other food-related activity areas to highlight her changed perspectives, her dilemma as a newly returned diasporic Indian and the emotional

¹⁹ Malladi, *op.cit*, 79.

conflicts between her history and her present. Food, therefore, travels beyond the individual space and encompasses the larger political space where the relations between individuals represent larger social concerns.

Malladi's use of food metaphors such as sticky mangoes, turmeric-stained pickles, frothy coffee and food that is mixed with fingers transcends the mere sensory imagery evoked by the references to food. For the diaspora, food becomes one of the easiest ways to express emotions. It not only evokes nostalgia for the diaspora, but is also the only way for the people who are struggling to come to terms with the expression of emotions in a new language. Since the adopted language of English is unable to express diasporic emotions which are tradition-bound and framed, especially those that are not defined and inconsistent with the adoptive country's socio-political ethics which are "sticky" and difficult to express, the diaspora revert to the common diasporic code language of food to express themselves. Food references thus break the cultural barriers created when travelling between cultures, because it becomes easier to navigate the unknown with the known and the familiar. Diasporic subjects slip back to the familiar not only in search of nostalgia but also as a means of finding their own identity. For Priya, the difficulty arises in negotiating this craving for an emotional niche through food and the negotiation between her adopted culture of America and her South Indian traditions.

The intentional use of sensory language and food metaphors explores emotions that are strained and in abundance at Priya's grandmother's house. The Contents page of the novel reads like a cookbook with its chapters titled "Raw

Mangoes,” “Oil and Spices” [...] “Leftovers,”²⁰ all of which start with a recipe for a South Indian dish. The atmosphere in Priya’s grandmother’s home is measured with the spicy, oily recipes that herald the emotions explored in the chapter. The first chapter, “Raw Mangoes,” which details how to make *Avakai*, deals with raw emotions yet to become fine-tuned and developed with time, just like the mango pickle which is meant to be fermented for four weeks for it to be ready to eat. The emotional conflicts that are undercurrents in the house of Priya’s grandmother are not ready to be resolved in the first chapter, they get resolved in the Epilogue, where the symbolic mango pickle arrives in the US and Nick eats it. The metaphorical meaning of food, which needs to be treated with care, therefore permeates into human relations creating similarities between food and human emotions. Sensory details such as pounding, peeling, chopping and cutting food items are also employed to reveal the emotional atmosphere in the novel and emotions of the characters. Priya’s aunt Neelima (who was not accepted as part of the family because of her difference in caste) is made to “pound dried red chillies” while Lata, the accepted and respected aunt (because of her recent pregnancy and caste) pounds “fenugreek seeds in another pestle.”²¹ The spices reveal the importance or the subordinate position of individuals within the family politics. Chillies, while symbolising anger and resentment, are also a symbol of strength. It is the spice that can destroy a dish and is potent in its sharp taste. Neelima is being tested for her ability to measure up to the task while Lata is given the soothing and medicinal fenugreek seed, since she is already accepted into the fold.

²⁰ Malladi, *op.cit*, Contents page.

²¹ *Ibid*, 88.

When the kitchen becomes the space of arguments, discussions and the revelation of secrets, the characters chop vegetables, peel, cut and scrape through food items to reveal their emotional turmoil, anger and conflicts. Ruth Maxey elaborates and critiques the use of “mangoes” and “grandmothers” as a trope in Malladi’s novel. She states that, in *The Mango Season* “the putatively formulaic status [of using food references are avoided] through a subtly shifting treatment of food which focuses on regional details, [which] signals the link, for Indian women, between food and maternal discourse, inherited gender roles, and the ancestral home.”²² The South Indian identity of the characters, especially of women, and the influence of their Telugu²³ Brahminical background permeate the narrative, through its descriptions of characters making mango pickle and other food items, granting them their specific South Indian identity. Food thus becomes a mark of “cultural work”²⁴ and transcends the boundaries of commercial or exotic fare that provide ethnic uniqueness established in *The Mango Season*. It preserves the cultural identity of the female characters and preserves their ethno-regional affiliations, affording them a uniqueness that is specifically South Indian, despite their diasporic or Indian affiliations.

Malladi deftly uses food and references to food to explore emotions throughout *The Mango Season*. Every time Priya has an argument or a confrontation

²² Ruth Maxey, *South Asian Atlantic Literature: 1970-2010* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012) 165.

²³ Variouslly spelt as Telugu and Telegu. A Dravidian language group which is also used to describe a group of people living in South Central India who speaks Telugu language.

²⁴ I am using the term from Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860* (New York: OUP, 1986). For Tompkins, ‘cultural work’ addresses specific historical situations, but I argue that cultural work can preserve present ethno-regional affiliations as well.

with her mother, she defies her mother by going out and having street food. Priya's desire to have *goli* soda from the roadside vendor²⁵ or to have *ganna* juice²⁶ goes beyond mere food memories or nostalgia for her youth and childhood food, but it is borne out of her instinctive memory of her childhood that propels her to act against her mother's orders and wishes. Instead of having open confrontations where she has to defy her mother and challenge her orders, Priya prefers to have forbidden food from the street vendors in a silent but potent protest against her mother's authority. Priya's complicated love-hate relationship with her mother, which is complex and inexplicable in simple terms, is elaborated through her inability to have an open confrontation with her mother, despite her overt dislike of her mother's overbearing presence. As Sarah Sceats argues, in relation to contemporary women's fiction "for many people the connection of food with love centres on the mother."²⁷ It is true for Priya too. Her connection to food and her relationship with her mother are interrelated. The love for the mother, which is overridden by fear and loathing for her apparent authority, is thus played out through Priya's desire to go against her mother, with an act of defiance through food. Priya equates food, love and authority with her mother, and Malladi uses these factors together to bring out the complex relationship between Priya and her mother using symbolical meaning associated with food and food practices. The play of dense emotions that are hidden behind gender politics and maternal authority in a South Asian context is played out through the use of food as a mode of defiance. As much as Priya is unable to break away from her food habits,

²⁵ Malladi, *op.cit*, 92-96.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 109. *Ganna* juice is sugarcane juice extracted from pressed sugarcane.(my definition)

²⁷ Sarah Sceats, *Food Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 11.

she is also unable to move away from her complex relationship with her mother. Just as she desires an amiable amalgamation between her American sensitivities and her South Indian identity, she also desires to overcome her loathing, fear and love towards her mother and accept her with all her faults. This reaches its culmination at the end of the novel when Priya's mother accepts her choice of an American partner: "Ma was back to normal, bitching and moaning that I didn't call enough and when I did, she bitched and moaned that I talked too long with *Nanna* and wasted my money."²⁸

In contrast to Priya's defiance of her mother, she is taken to an ice cream parlour by her brother Nate when Priya discloses the news of her American fiancé to her family. The ice cream parlour which is a "cozy copy of a '50s Hollywood movie" and had a "jukebox, a red jalopy in a corner, and Enrique Iglesias...telling some woman she couldn't escape his love at the top of his weepy lungs,"²⁹ blends Priya's diasporic identity with her Indian identity and signals her desire to soothe the family's bruised emotions as well as her desire to stay within the parameters dictated by her mother as well as her family. She is not defiant, but has become a diasporic Indian who goes out to an ice cream parlour to have *kulfi*,³⁰ thus staying within the parameters of her South Asian heritage but with her own twist of diasporic identity. While her diasporic leanings are apparent in her choice of an ice cream parlour to compose herself after having an emotional confrontation, signalling the west's

²⁸ Malladi, *op.cit*, 228.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 171.

³⁰ *Kulfi* is a popular frozen dairy dessert from the Indian subcontinent. It is similar to ice cream, but is creamier and denser due to its preparation method.

impact on Indian lives, having *kulfi* instead of ice cream enables her to blend both her identities, of being Indian as well as an individual with western influences.

John Thieme and Ira Raja argue that food serves a social function, by becoming the coded language that is used to define places for people in caste and class conscious South Asian society. They argue that

Food...cannot be divorced from its *social* inscriptions. Its discourses are complex semiotic systems, or metalanguages that offer vocabularies for commenting on virtually all areas of social experience. This is particularly the case in South Asia.³¹

Thus, food functions as a social parameter that defines and delineates spaces for women as well as the diaspora. In Malladi's novel, the food choices and the food preparation reveal details about the caste consciousness, social status and gender politics within Priya's Telugu Brahmin family. "Rajni was not a Brahmin and so she was not allowed inside the kitchen... Sowmya cooked and left the dishes outside where Rajni cleaned them,"³² Priya explains about the maidservant and her role in her grandmother's house. The subtle detail about the maidservant's caste reveals the caste consciousness that prevails in food-related rituals. Even being in the same caste but not from the same state is detrimental in the caste-conscious family politics in Priya's grandmother's house. "'Neelima is a very good person ... She speaks Telugu fluently and cooks our food.' Food was also very, very essential. But not as essential

³¹ John Thieme, Ira Raja, eds. "Introduction." *The Table is Laid: The Oxford Anthology of South Asian Food Writing* (New Delhi: OUP, 2007) xix. (Italics in original)

³² Malladi, *op.cit.*, 26.

as the caste.”³³ Neelima thus becomes an outcaste based on her caste. While she is able to cook the same food, because of her caste she is still not acceptable because of the subtle difference between hers and theirs. While the servant could “clean” the dishes, she was not allowed to come into the kitchen, or cook the meals. Food preparations thus delineate the social spaces that are prevalent in South Asian societies, especially in a caste-conscious India, because the caste hierarchy demands people of only higher or similar castes prepare food for people of higher castes. Since the servant is from a lower caste, she is not allowed to take part in food preparation since it will be deemed “not clean” in a caste-conscious society.

The recipes detailed in *The Mango Season* and the references to food once again reveal the caste system and food choices based on caste and religious beliefs. All the detailed references to food are vegetarian meals and the overt vegetarian choices give insights into the beliefs of Priya’s Indian family. While the elders are proud of their vegetarian Hindu Brahmin diet, the young, progressive generation represented by Priya and Nate defy those food parameters. Priya pines for food from “Home,” which for her has become “Whole Food Grocery Store and fast food at KFC...[and] Starbucks.”³⁴ She no longer is comfortable with the “alien, exasperating and sometimes exotic”³⁵ India and Indian food choices. Exotic for her is not the unfamiliar, but the familiar that has become different. The difference has come about because of her changed preferences, induced by her American sensitivities. Thus, Priya becomes a representative of her generation who defies the set food habits and

³³ Malladi, *op.cit*, 34.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 134.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 134.

gender norms practiced and established by her elders. Nate, in contrast, has “had beef *biriyani*³⁶ at an Iranian Cafe in Mehndipatnam and didn’t care all that much about tradition and culture.”³⁷ Nate challenges traditions from within the gender and caste associated religious boundaries of his social order, signifying the changing power dynamics amongst the younger generation in India. Unlike Priya, he chooses his own food alternatives: *biriyani*, but with a difference to signal his uniqueness through his food preferences. While Nate’s food choices distinguish him from his traditional Telugu Brahmin family, signalling his non-conformity with family politics that are played out through food choices and rituals, Priya’s nostalgia for “home food” strengthens her diasporic affiliations. She misses her mainstream American food such as KFC and Starbucks, because that is what America is for her. Malladi uses the stereotypes and the stereotypical mainstream imagination of aligning KFC, Starbucks and fast food chains to America to reinforce Priya’s diasporic confusions and affiliations. For Priya, America is invoked only through the mainstream and lacks individuality as opposed to the food rituals and choices available in her Telugu Brahmin family. This can also be interpreted as the peripheral presence of the diaspora in America, especially the non-integrated first-generation diaspora. The first generation, like Priya, is able to relate to the mainstream since the mainstream is available and accessible to them, but are unable to relate to food rituals and tradition in America because of their peripheral presence as the Other. Being the Other with different traditions, food rituals and choices, the diasporic subject is unable to understand or relate to the American food traditions except for the widely available

³⁶ A mixed rice dish made with spices and meat or vegetables (my definition).

³⁷ Malladi, *op.cit*, 189.

fast-food choices which are devoid of nationality or ethnicity for most parts. Nevertheless, she craves the communal and the commercial, rather than the individual and the choreographed food rituals at her grandmother's place. From her diasporic location of America, India, too, becomes a commercialised stereotype for Priya as is depicted in the mainstream American imagination. India becomes restaurant food that is mainly consisting of North Indian food varieties and Hindi movies that depict either cosmopolitan urban Indian values or predominantly North Indian cultural rituals. She does not mind "living in South Bay with the Indian Restaurants and Indian movie theatres in arm's reach,"³⁸ and she bonds with Nick's mother through curry powder because Nick's mother "love[s] curry."³⁹ India is a stereotyped and clichéd presence for Nick's mother as much as America is for Priya. The Other is always marginalised and is related to through mainstream renditions of food and food choices. Malladi's use of such mainstream details exposes the otherisation, as practised by both the host as well as the guest in diasporic locations.

Food and food preparation also explore gendered spaces in *The Mango Season*. The kitchen is always occupied by women: married, waiting to be married or evading marriage. Despite the fact that "men have to cook... [and] learned how to cook," when women "sat out" during their "period" so as not to "contaminate"⁴⁰ anything, none of the male figures that appear in *The Mango Season* cook in the narrative. Nate is the only male figure who occupies space inside the kitchen when he returns late from his excursion in an attempt to avoid his mother. Nate's marginal

³⁸Malladi, *op.cit*, 68.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 70.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 44.

existence, of not belonging to the family politics and of refusing to adhere to food traditions, makes him the only presence that is able to transcend the defined political spaces of men's space (of the dining room) and the women's space (of the kitchen). Therefore, the kitchen is turned into a contested space where one can avoid each other, a place for emotional confrontations, and where women fight their battles for acceptance and power. Malladi deftly weaves food, kitchen space and women together into a tale about women and food to elaborate on gender patterns and hierarchies, gender politics and domestic power struggles that play a vital role in home versus diaspora relationships. Sowmya, Priya's youngest aunt who is unmarried, yet waiting for the "right" marriage proposal, otherwise powerless and under the shadow of her father, asserts her identity and authority through her cooking and her kitchen. "You have to learn to cook... And if you don't...just leave *my kitchen*"⁴¹ (emphasis mine). Sowmya admonishes Priya's inability to cook because it is accepted as the duty of a woman to cook. Cooking thus becomes gendered as well as a place where women are able to assert their power. Priya's diasporic identity and American-influenced individuality make it superfluous for her to master cooking, because she is economically stable and is educated as opposed to her Indian aunts. It also gives her power as an individual woman who stands apart from the traditions of her family. But for Sowmya and her other aunts, it is the main mode to assert power in a male-dominant South Indian Brahmin society. While men decide whom to marry, whom their daughters should marry, how many children they are meant to have and financial details, women decide on what to cook and how their kitchens

⁴¹Malladi, *op.cit*, 159.

should be. From Priya's diasporic point of view, this constant need to seek acceptance and approval is invalid and archaic. But for Sowmya, the most important thing when deciding her marriage partner is whether *he* allows her to have a job and whether *she* will have her own house. These subtle details reveal prevalent gender hierarchies in the Telugu Brahmin society which Malladi writes about and of gender roles within India and as perceived by the Indian diasporic women.

As Garg and Khushu-Lahiri contend, "food associated with an ethnic community becomes the quintessential marker of identity."⁴² Through the use of alimentary images in *The Mango Season*, Malladi establishes Priya's identity, which is hyphenated. She is Telugu as well as American. Malladi describes Telugu Brahmin food traditions and South Indian dishes of *masala dosa*⁴³, *avial* and *rava ladoo*⁴⁴ to assert Priya's South Indian Telugu Brahmin identity and marks her as separate from the larger cluster of Indians and Indian American in the diaspora. Priya's sensitivities, defined and changed because of her diasporic affiliations, retain her Telugu Brahmin identity through her food choices but are also changed to accommodate her American diasporic needs. Identity thus becomes asserted and redefined through food memories and food habits. Priya's nostalgia for "good south Indian food in America...all-out vegetarian, south Indian food"⁴⁵ establishes her South Indianness, despite her progressive ideas as a diasporic woman and her desire to have "KFC and Starbucks." Through Priya, Malladi melds the identity politics that

⁴² Shweta Garg, Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri, "Interpreting culinary Montage: Food in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*," *ASIATIC* 9: 1 (June 2012): 80, 26 Sep. 2012.

⁴³ Rice pancakes stuffed with spiced potatoes.

⁴⁴ A round shaped sweet made with semolina and ghee.

⁴⁵ Malladi, *op.cit*, 193.

separate and differentiate Indian sensibilities from diasporic needs and desires. Therefore, food and references to food habits and traditions assert the identity of Priya and the other women characters in *The Mango Season*. The kitchen, the main space for women to prepare food becomes the space to assert and define identities for women. Kitchen politics played out through food preparation create identities for women characters despite the strong patriarchal influences that govern the lives of these Telugu Brahmin women.

Food and food references in the contemporary novels have been analysed by Asian American critics and South Asian American literary critics as an identity marker for the diaspora or as a trope to highlight otherness and the exotic nature.⁴⁶ But the specific use of food to establish female identity and food as a metaphor for emotional development and expression of characters is rather under-discussed in the study of South Asian American women's fiction. Malladi uses food and references to food not only as an identity marker for her characters, but also as a specific identity marker for her female characters and as a vehicle to interpret their emotional development. Food, which occupies a central position in any society as a social ritual, inhabits a social role in a South Asian context because of the caste, cultural and religious rituals associated with it. Malladi skilfully uses all those food references to create novels about food, emotions and identity. While she explores the

⁴⁶ See discussions by Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), Rüdiger Kunow, "Eating Indian(s): Food, Representation and the Indian Diaspora in the United States," *Eating Culture: The poetics and Politics of Food*, eds. Tobias Döring, Markus Heide, Susanne Mühleisen (Heidelberg: Winter, 2003), Wenying Xu, *Eating Identities; Reading Food in Asian American Literature* (Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 2008), Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fiction: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2009), Shweta Garg, *Culinary Images and Identity: Food In The Selected Fiction Of Three Indian Diasporic Women Writers* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012) amongst others.

confusions and “pickled” emotions of a diasporic woman in *The Mango Season*, Malladi uses references to alimentary images in her novel *Serving Crazy with Curry* to analyse the identity formation and self-fashioning of a second-generation South Indian American woman.

Tasting emotions and exploring identities: *Serving Crazy with Curry*

Amulya Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry* asserts the gastronomic power of the immigrant's voice whilst simultaneously exploring individual identities and emotions through references to exotic and non-mainstream food preferences that are depicted in the novel. *Serving Crazy with Curry* investigates the life of a second-generation South Indian American woman, Devi, who comes to terms with her diasporic expectations, identity, and individual desires and failures through her interaction with food in the aftermath of a failed suicide attempt. Through Devi, Malladi defies the professionally established model minority stereotype usually associated with Indian Americans because Devi is a failure and because she attempts suicide. The diasporic politics and family politics, which are gendered as well as coloured by the mainstream's demands on the diaspora, are explored through Devi's interactions and reactions to her family who rally around her after her failed suicide attempt. Malladi explores overt diasporic tensions between the first and second-generation Indian immigrants in America while at the same time bringing into focus important issues such as individuality and identity that are subdued within the expectations and achievements of the Indian immigrant community in America.

Four women from three generations — from the liberal and progressive Indian grandmother Vasu to first-generation Indian American Saroj (mother) and second-generation Indian American daughters Shobha and Devi — express their individuality through their reactions and interactions with food in the novel. Vasu never cooks throughout the narrative and considers food only as a requirement with no coded meanings in it. “I’ll make some *upma*⁴⁷ for us. Don’t worry, we won’t starve,”⁴⁸ she replies to Saroj and hints that for her food is only a source of sustenance. She disregards food and Saroj’s fixation with food. The only food she mentions making, *upma*, requires no special preparation and can be made with very little culinary expertise. For Vasu, foodways is not an elaborate ceremony with coded importance, as it is for Saroj or Devi. Vasu is the embodiment of liberal progressive ideas that are popular among the educated classes in India, and through Vasu, Malladi deconstructs the established stereotypical notions of Indian women as the progeny of epic Indian heroines such as Sita, Parvati, Damayanti and others.⁴⁹ Having been a career woman and a divorcee who has had a long-term love affair with a married man, Vasu does not want an added identity for herself through subtexts of food or food preparations. Rather, she asserts her identity by being unconventional and brusque about her feelings and thus deconstructs the stereotypical myth about Indian women being docile, traditional and submissive.

⁴⁷ Cooked thick porridge from dry roasted semolina.

⁴⁸ Amulya Malladi, *Serving Crazy with Curry* (London: Piaktus, 2004) 14.

⁴⁹ These Indian heroines who appear in Indian epics such as *Ramayan*, *Mahabharata* and the Shiv-Parvati legend have been devoted to their husbands despite being neglected and misunderstood and are taken to be the embodiment of wifely duty to one’s husband.

Saroj's preoccupation with food and food preparation works on two distinct levels. On the one hand, she uses food and her prerogative over food preparation as a means to carve her own niche in an alien landscape: America. She asserts her importance and her sense of self-worth through her involvement in food. "She did all the work at home, took care of them, cleaned their clothes, *cooked food for them* and they just took her for granted."⁵⁰ Her importance in the lives of otherwise acculturated and occupied family members is asserted through her food preparation. She strives to bring normality to her emotionally disturbed family, after Devi's suicide attempt, by cooking. Saroj cooks Devi's "favourite tomato *pappu* and fried potato *sabzi*"⁵¹ in order to reach Devi, who stops speaking after her attempted suicide, and also uses food as an excuse to maintain contact with her daughters who have embarked on their different journeys. On the other hand, Saroj uses food to maintain her difference and individuality in America. She defines her Indianness through her culinary choices. "[B]ecause Indians don't"⁵² becomes her identity marker when she is confronted about her choices. The Indianness that she constructs based on *her* definition of Indianness becomes Saroj's individuality and her identity. Saroj defines herself based on the stereotypical definition of Indianness as eating curry and exoticised food and strives to retain their original form, despite the changed location and landscape. By wearing either a *sari* or *salwar-kameez* and believing that "homemade food and Hindi movies"⁵³ can cure any physical and

⁵⁰ Malladi, *op.cit*, 14 (Emphasis mine)

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 77. *Pappu* is dhal/ red or yellow lentils and *sabzi* is curry with gravy (my definition).

⁵² *Ibid*, 18.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 47.

psychological disorders, Saroj represents the first-generation Indian American women who were meant to be the guardians of Indian culture despite the altered landscape and difference in cultures in America. As Partha Chatterjee points out, “[t]he home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality.”⁵⁴ Saroj, too, maintains the “spiritual quality” of her Indian national culture through a narrativised presentation of Indianness, which is expressed through her food choices and lifestyle choices. She tries to establish her identity through her Otherness and attempts to recreate a nostalgic home away from home in America by insisting on an Indianness that is more constructed than real. Malladi deftly weaves the stereotypes expected and established by diasporic Indian Americans into Saroj’s character, criticising the gender politics that make first-generation Indian women behave in this way and instil the same values in their offspring. As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong notes, “staples [as ethnic food] are Necessity [sic],”⁵⁵ a necessity which enabled the first-generation migrant to continue living in their altered locations. Saroj’s staples, the “Necessity” of South Indian food in her home, is her anchor to her “lost home” in India, the “home” she pines after, and which she has constructed out of the “broken mirrors”⁵⁶ in her memory. She “served only Indian food in the

⁵⁴ Partha Chatterjee, “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question,” *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, eds. K. Sangari, S. Vaid (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990) 243.

⁵⁵ Wong, *op.cit*, 44.

⁵⁶ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991) 10.

house”⁵⁷ and tries to instil faith in India and all things Indian in her changing diasporic family through her food.

Shobha, in contrast to Saroj and Devi, defines her identity through a refusal to cook and be involved in any domestic duties. “She believed cooking was for simpering housewives, not for smart, intelligent career women.”⁵⁸ Her definition of “simpering housewives,” which she derives in reaction to her mother’s overbearing domesticated role in their house, explains Shobha’s own identity. She prefers to be an Indian American by being an exemplary career woman. Her acquiescence to the model minority stereotype of an overachiever with a successful career does not bother her own identity definition, whereas being defined as a housewife disturbs her sense of self-definition. Shobha’s preference of one stereotype against another raises identity issues among second-generation Indian American women. Their preference for being part of the model minority with regard to professional affiliations displays the stereotypical trend of the Indian American diaspora’s desire to be a part of the American mainstream. They prefer to contribute to the American economy by conforming to the perceived notions of American materialism, rather than being only a cultural Other with exotic roots.

Devi, on the other hand, finds her identity and defines her individuality through the methods used by “simpering housewives” – cooking – when her attempt to integrate herself into the model minority as defined by both the Indian immigrant community and the American society fails. Devi’s almost obsessive cooking helps

⁵⁷ Malladi, *op. cit.*, 90.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

her define her identity while at the same time allowing her to express herself. Malladi's use of varied alimentary images to define and describe Devi will be discussed in detail later in this section, because food imagery serves to strengthen, establish and differentiate Devi's personality and character throughout the novel's narrative.

Food imagery thus becomes tropes to speak beyond and over the mere gastronomic references in Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry*. The immigrant's voice, tempered with generational conflicts and individual issues, becomes the seasoning in the gastronomic metaphors presented in Malladi's novel. Unlike the other South Asian American women's fiction that uses overt alimentary images to explore Indian American women's identity and individuality as the cultural Other in America, such as Divakaruni's *Mistress of Spices* (1997) or Kirchner's *Pastries* (2003) and *Darjeeling* (2002), Malladi uses her food imagery to explore not only the individuality of her characters and their identity in the South Asian American diaspora, specifically in the Indian American diaspora but also the new hyphenated identity of the second-generation Indian American women through fusion cooking which will be analysed later in this section. Malladi further uses this imagery to explore emotions that are suppressed or hidden amongst women in the Indian American diaspora because of the overt pressure from their own diasporic community and because of the expectations of the host American society.

Devi, who never showed any interest in cooking, "started cooking"⁵⁹ when she had to move in to her parents' place, while recovering from her suicide attempt.

⁵⁹ Malladi, *op.cit.*, 12.

Devi, already devastated by her inability to measure up to the expectations of her family's and her diasporic community's belief in the model diasporic woman stereotype, attempts suicide to evade the pressure and then when her attempt is thwarted, "stop[s] talking"⁶⁰ and starts cooking. Her cooking comes as a surprise to her family since she has never attempted to cook before. She thus ventures into the territory that she has had no interest or experience in, to find and define herself after her attempt at ending her life. The new life, which she did not particularly want to have, forces her to reinvent herself, and to explore new avenues, because with her suicide attempt, her old life metaphorically comes to an end. Her elective mutism, a trope explored by novelists to analyse the trauma and the rebelling individuality of characters,⁶¹ is used by Malladi to elaborate Devi's individual struggle. Her inability to speak out about her fears and pain is projected through her newly developed interest in cooking. She has had a new lease on life and she decides to reinvent herself as whomever she wants. Her reinvention is coupled with her gastronomic adventures through which she communicates and expresses her emotions. Devi starts cooking to "avoid looking inside her...[to] escape from the silence outside and the chaos within,"⁶² but through cooking, she expresses her true self, her emotions. "When she was angry, the food was spicy, when she seemed happy, there was dessert, and when she looked bored, the food tasted bland."⁶³

⁶⁰ Malladi, *op.cit.*

⁶¹ Women characters with elective mutism can be found in Karen Roberts' Cat in *The Lament of the Dhobi Woman* (2010), Chitra Divakaruni's Lily and Uma in *One Amazing Thing* (2009), Nayomi Munaweera's Lanka in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012) and short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Divakaruni among others.

⁶² Malladi, *op.cit.*, 87.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 77.

Devi's emotions can be charted through the dishes she makes throughout the narrative in *Serving Crazy with Curry*. The first thing she makes, on the day she comes home from the hospital, in retaliation to her mother's "blatant goodness" which had "[n]othing new, nothing different [?] Nothing to say,"⁶⁴ is "The Anti-Saroj Chutney,"⁶⁵ which brings out the anger and confusion at the larger social structures that failed her in her quest for personal fulfilment. Instead of making the traditional mint chutney, Devi creates a "ginger, apricot, and mint chutney along with a good amount of chipotle chilli peppers."⁶⁶ Ginger and apricot, both of which are associated with medicinal use in the east, are used to bring out Devi's reluctant yet gradual desire to heal herself. Ginger is used as a traditional defence against the body's various illnesses in the east and apricots are associated with medicinal use, especially in China. Chipotle chilli peppers while signifying Devi's anger are also a reflection of her multi-ethnic influences, not only from the east, but also from America's various ethnic Others as well. The use of these ingredients signifies Devi's cross-cultural influences as a second-generation Indian American as well as the desire to reinvent herself against the acceptable fusions of whiteness and colour. Instead of recasting herself according to the diktats of her society, which work within the stereotypes of the model minority myth, she craves a new identity in harmony with her South Asian roots and her American identity, which is fused together with the immigrant histories of America. At the same time, they can be read as a need to overcome her past. Mint, the traditional herb used in Indian chutneys, signals Devi's

⁶⁴ Malladi, *op.cit*, 61.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 78.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 72.

cultural leanings, while the chilli peppers express her anger at her mother, both for thwarting her suicide attempt by saving her and for trying to act as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. Devi's anger masks her unsorted emotions towards her mother as well as the rest of her family, just as the sugar syrup in her chutney is just a subtle taste under the smoky and tangy taste of chilli peppers and ginger.

The Cajun Prawn biriyani dish is another creation that signifies Devi's multicultural second-generation Indian American identity. She incorporates her American identity with her Indian identity and creates a popular Indian dish to celebrate the personal triumph of regaining her driver's licence. *Biriyani*, the celebratory Indian dish of Persian origins, is cooked to celebrate her personal achievement. But at the same time, it also signifies Devi's acceptance of her multi-ethnic identity which can incorporate different influences and memories, just as her biriyani is able to accommodate Cajun, American, Indian and Persian influences in one single dish.

Devi desires to be accepted and appreciated by her mother, because in her culinary adventure of self-discovery, Devi recollects her individual, family and diasporic history through a female lineage: from her mother's recipe book in which "Girija's Goat Sabzi"⁶⁷ is written, to her own recipes which become influenced by her mother's recipes. The recipes presented in the later stages of the narrative signify Devi's personal healing and acceptance. From labelling recipes as The Anti-Saroj Chutney, Devi names certain recipes recorded in the narrative as Mama's recipe for

⁶⁷ Malladi, *op.cit*, 66.

two South Indian recipes: *aloo* grenades and *dosa*.⁶⁸ The gradual trust between the two women is explored with Devi's acceptance of Saroj's presence in the kitchen and Saroj's gradual acceptance of Devi's presence in *her* kitchen. The making of *rasam*⁶⁹ powder signals both their acceptance in each other's lives and the acceptance of individual strengths. Saroj regains her importance in Devi's life because "[Devi] needed Saroj's advice [in making] Indian food and spices"⁷⁰ and Devi "admire[s] Saroj's] ability to whip up *rasam* powder without a recipe."⁷¹ The incorporation of *rasam* into Devi's recipes and the incorporation of Saroj's recipes into Devi's narrative, cooked mainly by Saroj, explore Devi's growing respect, appreciation and love for her mother. Just like Priya's feisty independence is admired by her grandfather through his appreciation of her culinary achievement in *The Mango Season*, Devi too resorts to the language of food to express her sentiments. The unexpressed emotions, which Devi is reluctant and unable to put into words, are expressed through her acceptance of Saroj's culinary skills, which were scorned by both Devi and her sister in their efforts to integrate themselves into the American mainstream expectations and standards. The self-realisation thus is charted through the use of recipes in the novel and traces the trajectory of Devi's and Saroj's understanding and acceptance of each other.

⁶⁸ *Aloo* granades is Devi's name for *aloo bonda*, a spicy potato mixture made into balls, dipped in a paste made of flour and deep fried. *Dosa* is a crepe made of fermented rice flour and balck lentils (my definition).

⁶⁹ South Indian spice mix

⁷⁰ Malladi, *op.cit*, 165.

⁷¹ *Ibid*,179.

The only recipe for an Indian sweet (*sooji ladoos*)⁷² in the novel can be read in accordance with Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's analysis of Necessity and Extravagance.⁷³ Devi, who insists that she "didn't want to make the *ladoos*,"⁷⁴ adds an "extravagant twist" to the normal *sooji ladoos* by adding crushed hazelnuts and raisins in the centre. Her desire to please Girish — her brother-in-law, former lover and the father of her dead baby — is expressed in a sugary sweet with an extravagant twist, because "candies, snacks and fancy foods [...] are Extravagance, going beyond what is needed for survival."⁷⁵ Instead of "surviving" according to the set norms of her society and the dictates of her diasporic culture, Devi transgresses the cultural and societal norms by expressing her desire for Girish, even after she decides to break away from him due to her sense of social and cultural norms. After the suicide attempt, this is the first time she expresses a desire to please someone. At the same time, by letting Saroj help her make the *ladoos*, Devi once again tries to reconcile with her mother. Sugar, a commodity that was historically extravagant, becomes the vehicle to express Devi's desire and her need to be reckless with this desire. *Ladoos* thus become symbolic of the latent sexual desires within Devi and her need to be "extravagant" to achieve that, just like adding the hazelnuts and raisins to the otherwise sugary sweet.

⁷² A sweet made with semolina, milk and sugar.

⁷³ Wong, *op.cit.*

⁷⁴ Malladi, *op.cit.*, 148.

⁷⁵ Wong, *op.cit.*, 44.

“Lamb Clitoris”⁷⁶ is another recipe through which Devi expresses her sexual desires — thwarted, spent and otherwise — and the recklessness of her desires. She names the lamb curry-stuffed pita bread, made with unusual ingredients such as pomegranate seeds, avocado and lettuce, as lamb clitoris, since it is the day her “wall of secret fell apart”⁷⁷ around her. The pomegranate seeds and avocado bring forth Devi’s extravagance since those are the unusual ingredients that express the sexual desires that led her to erect the walls of secrets. The lamb, synonymous with innocence, naïveté and purity alludes to her lost baby. By naming her dish Lamb Clitoris — a bold acknowledgement of female sexuality — she explores her sexuality as well as her non-conformity within her society and its regulated rules. Through her innovative food, Devi is able to discover her inner self and heal the pain of losing her baby as well as transgressing the sexual norms of her society. But at the same time as addressing these desires and feelings, she also celebrates her sexuality and her choices by making a bold dish, which has no traditional references to South Indian food but has cultural references to the celebrated Kama Sutra tradition, once again referring to the mainstream’s commodified embodiment of India and its culture.

Alimentary images without recipes also function as supplementary images that explore emotions of and between the characters. The dinner table, which dominates most of the novel’s narrative since that is the place where the rest of the Veturi household sample Devi’s dishes, becomes a focal point in the narrative. The food prepared and eaten embodies the emotions of the people around the dinner table. Devi’s moods influence the food, which is at the same time tinged by the

⁷⁶ Malladi, *op.cit*, 163.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*

general emotional atmosphere in the house. Devi cooks an extra spicy blueberry sauce with chicken when the rest of the family is angry and upset about Vasu's imminent departure, to express her own displeasure. She recollects midnight *kulfi* sessions with Shobha fondly and reveals her love for her brusque and always angry sister. The final food episode, in which two generations of women (mother and daughters) discuss and accept their complex relationship that strengthens their love for each other, is played out over early morning tea. Tea signifies their relationship which has progressed to the calmed, collected and serene stage because the misunderstandings have been cleared and they communicate among themselves. Tea thus becomes a fitting metaphor to bring out the calm, soothing stage in their mother-daughter bond. Tea also signifies the end of sisterly misunderstanding that stopped Shobha from reaching out to Devi and vice-versa.

As Sneja Gunew has observed in "Mouthwork," "the formation of subjectivity arising from the symbolic relationship between food and language"⁷⁸ works in a multitude of different ways within a diasporic context. "The smell of language brings us back to the figuring of language as food – the miasma of memory and the familiar in which food becomes a language or bridge to another way of everyday living."⁷⁹ Food becomes a substitute for language for the diasporic subjects. Food, while functioning as a "bridge" especially between the diaspora and the host, is also a "bridge" for the individuals to travel between the private and the public. For Devi, food is initially a substitute for language during her "mute" stage. Devi's anger

⁷⁸ Sneja Gunew, "'Mouthwork': Food and language as the Corporal Home for the Unhoused Diasporic Body in South Asian Women's Writing," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40:93 (2005): 99.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 100.

is expressed through chilli and her desires through the use of extravagant or unusual ingredients such as sugar, hazel nuts and pomegranate seeds. But she also uses her culinary adventures as a vehicle of rebellion. She mixes traditional recipes such as *biriyani* with Cajun prawn, and *rasam* with pastry. She transgresses the rules of fusion cooking where ethnic or Other is mixed with white⁸⁰ and mixes between the ethnic/exotic, and “fuses ‘Western’ ingredients into ‘Indian’ dishes.”⁸¹ Devi uses cooking as a language to communicate her hybrid second-generation Indian American self. Devi’s expression of emotions and desires is conveyed through her use of food and cooking. In Devi’s case, as with Priya in *The Mango Season*, the smell of food brings back her maze of memories, both pleasant and unpleasant, through which she comes to terms with herself and her identity. Food, especially the recipes that connect Devi to her mother’s diasporic confusions and to her own multicultural influences, make Devi realise her own identity as opposed to her previous self-definition, which was created in relation to her successful father and sister. As Saroj defines her identity and self-worth through her contribution to the family as cook and nurturer, Devi finds her own niche and her own language to communicate through food and cooking. As both language and food are consumed through the mouth, as Gunew argues, language becomes the food and the food becomes the language for diasporic subjects.

⁸⁰ Mannur, *op.cit.*, 214. Mannur argues that traditional food writing, including earlier cookbooks, has always tried to alter ethnic food practices to suit the white palate. In her analysis, she argues for a fusion that alters not the ethnic food practices, but the white food preferences to accept ethnic Other’s food choices. Malladi takes this a step further and tries to incorporate not the white palatal preferences, but the food practices of Other ethnic communities into the food choices of Indian Americans in her novel.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

The South Indian recipes presented in “Mama’s Recipes” in Devi’s cookbook reflect Devi’s acceptance of her Indian heritage. She becomes comfortable with her Indian self and defines herself in relation to her needs and desires while accepting her Indian roots in America. This marks a full circle in Devi’s life since she initially attempts suicide because she was out of “options” and “was a loser. Had always been, especially compared to the success in her family.”⁸² She felt like a “loser” because her family was living up to the expectations of the model minority stereotypes associated with the Indian American diasporic subjects in America. Devi’s inability to compare with that makes her define herself as a misfit, and when she is convalescing she rebels against her Indian identity through her overt rejection of her mother’s “good Indian food.” Ironically, through the same trope that she rejects as commonplace, cooking, she realises her own needs and reconciles with her Indian identity that does not comply with the model minority definitions. Malladi’s use of alimentary images to bring about the individual self-realisation thus comes full circle with the South Indian recipes.

Amulya Malladi uses culinary images and food references beyond mere gastronomic exotica to infuse Otherness in her novel *Serving Crazy with Curry* by making use of the common image of food to explore individuality and emotions. Expressing emotions through the trope of food has been used by widely-read writers such as Laura Esquivel in *Like Water for Chocolate* (1989) and Joanne Harris in *Chocolat* (1999). Both these novels explore how food influences and impacts the emotions of others who consume the food. In Malladi’s novel, food becomes a

⁸² Malladi, *op.cit*, 5.

vehicle to express emotions, thus replacing language. Unlike Tita's quail in rose petal sauce in *Like Water for Chocolate*, which expresses her desire for Pedro, which in turn arouses desire in the people who partake of her food,⁸³ or Vienne's chocolates that induce people to explore their hidden and thwarted desires in *Chocolat*,⁸⁴ Devi's food has no such power. Devi merely uses her food to express her desires in a coded language. The cultural connotations associated with her South Indian food and the "extravagant twists" that she uses with her innovations are for the consumers and the readers to decode and decipher her emotions. As "[h]er understanding of fusion as a mode of survival is not about reducing excess but about celebrating all the ways in which excess can be generative and exciting and vital to survival,"⁸⁵ Devi fuses her food to understand her own hybrid identity. As food is cooked and consumed, Devi analyses and understands her own faults and strengths. She realises the importance of her matrilineal heritage, namely Saroj's influence in her life and accepts her dual identity and her own strengths that are not part of the model minority stereotypes assigned to Indian Americans.

Krishnendu Ray's argument that Bengali Americans' "trouble with food [which] has to do with two things: home and heritage [both of which define] one's self in terms of a place and a past"⁸⁶ is a valid argument to define Malladi's use of food and culinary images in both *The Mango Season* and *Serving Crazy with Curry*.

⁸³ Laura Esquivel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, trans. Carol Christensen, Thomas Christensen (London: Doubleday, 1993)

⁸⁴ Joanne Harris, *Chocolat* (London: Doubleday, 1999)

⁸⁵ Mannur, *op.cit.*, 215.

⁸⁶ Krishnendu Ray, *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali American Households* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2004) 131.

Malladi uses Priya's food choices and culinary exploits to define her identity and her character, which is influenced by her South Indian past and her American present. Devi's food choices and cooking define Devi's present, which is influenced by her South Indian American past. Both Priya and Devi define their place in American society by insisting on their individuality, which they assert through their culinary experiments and their culinary journeys. The protagonists use alimentary images to discuss and explore issues of identity and individuality in alien settings, both within their homelands and in the diaspora. Their emotions and confusions otherwise ignored or subdued surface through their interactions with food. Malladi thus differentiates her use of alimentary images, transcending the representation of the Other and the exotic, by using the same mainstream trope of exoticised food to analyse deeper meanings of identity and individuality of diasporic Indian American women. Exoticised food imagery thus becomes not only a market strategy for creating an interest among different groups of people, but also a means of establishing an individual identity away from the stereotyped mainstream rendition of Indianness as defined by *sarees*, Chicken *tikka* and *naan*.⁸⁷ The identity of South Indian American women is asserted away from the accepted and established stereotypes about Indian American women through their individuality as presented through their different food choices. Their emotions and individual identities find a voice through their food choices and their culinary creations. Thus, Amulya Malladi's *The Mango Season* and *Serving Crazy with Curry* establish an individual identity for the main women characters both within their own diasporic communities

⁸⁷ *Naan* is a type of thick flat bread, while *tikka* means bits or pieces.

and within the host American society through the use of alimentary images that explore individuality, identity and emotions. These images also leave space for the novels to cater to the mainstream's expectations of exoticised settings, food habits and rituals, thus following the tradition of women's writing of exploiting the kitchen to explore their own identities.

Pastries, Tea, religion and identity: Bharti Kirchner and her use of food in fiction

Bharti Kirchner, a celebrated cookbook author and a prolific contributor to *The Writer* magazine, explores food, hybrid identity and ethnicity of diasporic women through her novels, which use references to food both in the titles as well as in the narratives. Being an Indian American author who lives and writes from Boston about India, Indian food and Indian diasporic culture, Kirchner investigates the diaspora's unavoidable relationship with food and alimentary images to examine its own cultural leanings and authenticity.

Kirchner has published four cookbooks – *The Healthy Cuisine of India* (1994), *Indian Inspired* (1993), *The Bold Vegetarian* (1995), *Vegetarian Burgers* (1998) – which enjoyed wide publicity and popularity. They signify her Indianness through their overt allusions to India and vegetarianism, whilst at the same time alluding to her Americanness through references to burgers. *Pastries* (2003), which carries the subheading “A novel of desserts and discoveries,” hints at the trope of food in the narrative to unveil identities and emotions. Her other novel, which will also be analysed in this section with regards to its relation to food, alimentary images

and hybrid identity, is *Darjeeling* (2002) which evokes memories of the famous Darjeeling tea and with it, India and its varied cultures, food habits and traditions.

Darjeeling: A novel of tea and Bengali identity

Darjeeling (2002) explores the colonial ideas of exotic locations and patriarchal societies from a postcolonial standpoint that rewrites the colonial ideologies of class and status. The analysis of class, patriarchy and exotic landscape is from the perspective of the centre rather than that of the periphery. The “place become[s a] showcase for specific issues over time,”⁸⁸ and India thus becomes the place to discuss and project eastern exotica through its myriad traditions and in particular in Kirchner’s books, the place to assert an authenticity through food references. The Indian American women characters are exoticised and their food choices are made inaccessible and exotic through their Bengali names for sweets and food. The lack of explicit descriptions for the food (except in select instances where the food items and the preparation methods are listed in detail) and the need to assert the authenticity of the food as Bengali traditional sweets as opposed to a hybrid or westernised food, also asserts the reimagining of colonial boundaries from a postcolonial position that tries to create an ethnic otherness to market itself. As Huggan has argued, this otherness, an exotic otherness ascribed to culturally familiar food, presented to a different audience “turns the literature of non-western world into

⁸⁸ Arjun Appadurai, “Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery,” *Comparative Studies of Society and History* 28:2 (Apr 1986): 358.

salable exotic objects.”⁸⁹ The postcolonial exoticisation of colonised India, especially Darjeeling where the weather and the tea gardens were extolled for their beauty and serenity, are re-celebrated and glorified in Kirchner’s novel. The marketing of the exotic thus reasserts the colonised views, but from a postcolonial time, with postcolonial values of asserting Indianness, especially Bengali Indian traditions, within the same colonial frameworks of extolling the the cultural otherness.

Darjeeling examines the family bonds and sisterly relations between two young women, Aloka and Sujata, with a tea estate as their backdrop and the cause for their conflicts. Both women emigrate to the west – Aloka to New York and Sujata to Victoria, British Colombia – endeavouring to escape family politics, unfortunate love triangles and in search of new identities. The plot details the journeys undertaken by women of an established upper-class society to assert themselves or their beliefs and does not necessarily need the aid of either tea or other food references that are abundant in the text for the progression of the narrative. Nevertheless, Kirchner uses references to tea and other Bengali food items such as sweets and fish preparations throughout the plot to assert both Aloka’s and Sujata’s Bengali Indian identity. “Lentils and rice make a Bengali. I grew up mostly on *dhal-bhat* myself,”⁹⁰ comments Aloka’s and Sujata’s grandmother (hereafter referred to as Grandma) in a conversation about Bengali identity and India’s consumption of lentils, asserting Krishnendu Ray’s statement on Bengali food habits which details

⁸⁹ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) 10.

⁹⁰ Bharti Kirchner, *Darjeeling* (New York: St.Martin’s Griffin, 2002) 31. *Dhal-bhat* is steamed rice eaten with a lentil curry/soup.

their preference for “rice, fish and tea.”⁹¹ Thus, the affirmation of Bengali identity in the novel is achieved through references to food despite food having no central role in the novel’s plot development. Other references to food in the narrative achieve the same effect as well. There are references to food, in order to assert the diasporic Bengali identity of Aloka and Sujata, despite their western locations. They cook and consume Bengali food items, to claim their Bengali Indianness and in an effort to show their loyalty to Bengali culture. As Krishnendu Ray argues in his analysis of Bengali American food patterns and culture,

Cooking is where culture meets nature... Cooking is never just about nutrition. Bengalis have loaded the process of cooking and eating with meanings about “meals,” kinship, family, and communion.⁹²

Kirchner asserts the same argument with her elaborate kinship rituals and traditional references to food in *Darjeeling*. For Aloka, cooking Bengali dinners of *kumro bhate*⁹³, *maachh bhaja*⁹⁴ and *luchis*⁹⁵ for her husband Pranab’s lunch was a show of her devotion to and belief in him. She, even though a career woman herself, prioritises her husband’s meal preferences, because it is how kinship and family are maintained in her interpretation of traditional Bengali families. Meals, which provide an insight into Aloka’s life in New York, acquire a different meaning because Kirchner uses them as a mode to espouse Aloka’s tradition-bound Bengali Indian identity. References to Sujata’s meals in Canada, and even the sweets and snacks

⁹¹ Ray, *op.cit*, 14.

⁹² *Ibid*, 47.

⁹³ A traditional Bengali dish made of mashed boiled pumpkins.

⁹⁴ A Bengali fish fry

⁹⁵ Deep fried flatbread made of wheat flour.

made for Sujata and her potential bridegroom Mrinal in Darjeeling, establish the importance of food to ascertain the community and family ties. Sujata prepares *labra*⁹⁶ and rice even though she is determined to prove to her family back in Darjeeling of her changed westernised independent self. She indulges in *puli-pithas*⁹⁷ and orders to prepare *khichuri*⁹⁸ and *chire bhaja*⁹⁹ when she returns to Darjeeling as an independent, established businesswoman from Canada. Food thus acts both as a means of asserting cultural roots and of expressing and preserving communal and family traditions. Kirchner's use of these food references establishes the kinship and family ties among and between the characters in the novel. The characters establish their identities as Bengalis through their food choices. It also helps them re-assert their identities as Bengalis when they return from the west. The simple commodity thus performs the cultural role of establishing ties between people with similar food habits, but it never rises beyond the stereotyped representation of depicting a group of people or their cultural roots, unlike in the novels of Amulya Malladi and Chitra Divakaruni where food references strive to build identities and individualities to the women characters and contest exoticisation.

Kirchner exoticises Bengali food habits and choices through her use of food references in *Darjeeling*. Food items are listed in italics and are not described. The foreign-sounding names make simple dishes such as rice and lentils sound and appear more exotic. When food items are described, they become elaborate

⁹⁶ A mixed vegetable dish eaten as a side dish with *khichuri*.

⁹⁷ A Bengali variety of dumplings made of rice flour stuffed with a mixture of coconut and sugar.

⁹⁸ A mixture of rice and lentils. It is generally known as a comfort food and an easy-to-make dish.

⁹⁹ A snack made of fried flaked rice mixed with fried peanuts, salt and black pepper.

descriptions which affirm Bengali culture and traditions. She establishes class and caste biases through the food habits of her characters and insists that certain cultural practices such as drinking tea signify class and culture. “When people purchased Gupta Tea, they took home a respected dynasty’s tradition, they drank, as it were, an elixir of success.”¹⁰⁰ Tea becomes a marker of class as equivalent to the ability to rise above coarse immigrants. Aloka, a valued progeny of a tea estate owner, is able to adjust better to the challenges of her immigrant life because she is from a well-established higher social class, whereas her husband Pranab fails as an immigrant because he is unable to adjust to the new life and because he hails from the background of a tea estate worker: the lower-middle classes. The association with tea and Darjeeling is described in exotic terms, making the familiar tea appear to be an elixir from an exotic land. The overt exoticisation, achieved through alimentary images and poetic language infused with symbolic meanings and influenced by the Sanskrit language, caters to an audience that is unfamiliar with the food terminology of Indian, and especially Bengali, culture.

Kirchner also caters to an ethnic outsider audience unaware of Bengali Indian traditions and male patriarchy through her novel *Darjeeling*. From the elaborate descriptions of Bengali weddings (“From the turmeric ceremony to the ‘auspicious night’, a traditional Bengali wedding included nearly fifty mandatory rituals”¹⁰¹) to Rabindrasangeet the novel offers simple and subtle information to an ethnic outsider about Bengali culture and traditions. Tea, along with the tea estate, also becomes embedded in the same descriptive narrative as an insight into the culture and lives of

¹⁰⁰ Kirchner, *op.cit*, 55.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 51.

upper-class society. Despite the fact that Aloka's and Sujata's father suppresses a workers' uprising with the police force and tries to control everyone and everything around him to suit his vision and his liking, he is not openly criticised. He is the head of the family, and even Grandma bows to his decisions, despite trying to alleviate the suffering of her grandchildren. The casual acceptance of Bengali men's inability to get used to modern times and needs – "We don't teach our boys how to cook... Even though our boys act modern, they are actually tradition bound at heart"¹⁰² – also asserts the acceptance of patriarchal values. Patriarchy thus becomes the norm and is casually accepted and tolerated. Women characters in *Darjeeling*, despite their initial rebelling, succumb to the greater strength of their male counterparts or accept these hierarchies while asserting their own identities in a subtle manner. Unlike in Divakaruni's fiction, which discusses Bengali Indian traditions and family hierarchies, Kirchner's novel does not attempt to highlight the choices available to women, away from male-centred ethno-social power play in society. Kirchner thus appeals to her Other audience through the assertion of traditions and values of her Bengali Indian and Bengali Indian American characters by using such references to traditional power hierarchies and kinship practices. Food acts as a defining element in this assertion of traditions. The favourite dishes of the men are cooked for them by the women, even in immigrant locations, because it is a way to show their devotion to the men. The transgression of food practices is overlooked in men ("he goes out for a hamburger every now and then"¹⁰³) because they are considered to be above

¹⁰² Kirchner, *op.cit*, 118, 143.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 118.

such mundane tasks as preparing traditional food, especially if they are from an upper-class background.

These casual acceptances of patriarchy and references to food make *Darjeeling* stand apart from other food novels such as Malladi's *The Mango Season* and *Serving Crazy with Curry*. While Malladi's novels discussed in the previous section acknowledge patriarchy and class biases that are performed through food rituals, they also attempt to debunk stereotypes by creating feisty women characters who subvert the same through the use of food and food practices. Kirchner's novel, in contrast, accepts the stereotypes and colonial images of women's subjugation and patriarchal order through food and food rituals and thus reworks the colonial exotica as a market ploy to attract a culturally/ethnically different audience. Even though the women characters, especially Grandma, Sujata and Alokā all assert their power and importance, notwithstanding their deference to male power play, through subtle means of food, independent choices and sacrifices, their importance as individuals is downplayed in their overt admiration for traditions and cultural norms. Kirchner's heroines assert their otherness, from the rest of the Indian women, not in defiance but in acquiescence to their traditions. Even as Sujata rejects both Pranab, her old lover, and Mreenal, the person whom she had started to like, she does so because she is conscious of her class and prominence in society. "I think the real problem, Mreenal, is you don't want to be overshadowed by a woman who would, at least locally, be more prominent than you,"¹⁰⁴ she tells Mreenal, rejecting him, and highlights her position and class that is not equal to Mreenal's, at least in Darjeeling. Even Alokā,

¹⁰⁴ Kirchner, *op.cit*, 278.

who considers herself cosmopolitan, reverts to a pseudonym when she gets attracted to a street musician, leagues away from her own comfort zone. Kirchner's women, therefore, assert their "difference" while working within the socio-cultural parameters ingrained in them, the typecasts of "dutiful daughter, suffering wife, faithful friend, reliable relative."¹⁰⁵ Thus, *Darjeeling* asserts women's individuality, aided by their hybrid experiences, but within the socio-cultural frameworks that are in place in traditional societies. The novel thus does not present women that defy traditions, but women who are able to assert their own form of "difference," of being independent and yet tradition bound, while working within established socio-ethnic parameters.

As Roland Barthes observes about French cooking, "food permits a person to partake each day of the national past,"¹⁰⁶ and Kirchner's use of alimentary images in the novel too serves to strengthen the national identity and the past of her characters. The culinary deeds allow the women to partake in group activities that make them part of the same ancestry and the same group. The preparation of *channer payesh*¹⁰⁷ by the two sisters to celebrate Grandma's birthday marks the end of their enmity. Through that culinary exercise, they realise their shared ancestry and belonging to the same social order and class. Ironically at the same time, both the sisters decide to let go of their reason for dissent: Pranab, who is from a lower social order and who "did not have the character."¹⁰⁸ Thus Kirchner establishes social class and shared

¹⁰⁵ Kirchner, *op.cit*, 254.

¹⁰⁶ Roland Barthes, "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food consumption," *Food and Culture: A Reader*. eds. Carole Counihan, Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 1997) 24.

¹⁰⁷ A dessert made out of milk, cottage cheese, sugar and cashew.

¹⁰⁸ Kirchner, *op.cit*, 295.

ancestry of the Bengali Indian sisters through their culinary experience. The significance of using milk in the dish and sugar, signifying bonds that are made pure and sweet, not to mention the traditional bonds of sharing the same blood ties and milk kinship¹⁰⁹ is also important to mark the change in their sisterly relationship. But despite the fact that it is a culinary experience that brings them together, the use of alimentary images does not add vastly to the development of the narrative. The sisterly bonds could have and would have developed over conversations or any other activity, and would have produced the same results. The alimentary images, therefore, assert a shared cultural history that makes the bonding easier and affirm the class differences that have been brought forward throughout the narrative. *Channer payesh* is not an easy dish to make and it is no longer sold in markets for the consumption of the masses. Making it requires skill, time and resources, which only a select few have. Thus, the culinary image determines the stereotypes about female bonding over food and food rituals and does not make any attempt to break the stereotype by asserting individual identities or character traits for the women involved in the food preparation. The domestic space of the kitchen thus becomes a space for the sisters to reconcile, rather than a space to exercise their choices. Kirchner, therefore, asserts traditions, the importance of maintaining ethno-social affiliations and the significance of class and power hierarchies through her narrative. Despite all the stereotypes, she still manages to instil a “difference” in her protagonists, but the difference is in their negotiation of traditional socio-ethnic

¹⁰⁹ The significance of sharing the same mother’s milk is traditionally considered to be binding and important, especially in South Asian parlance when talking about blood ties.

power structures, rather than in their individual attempts at breaking away from the power hierarchies.

A journey of self-discovery: *Pastries*

Bharti Kirchner's *Pastries* (2003) also creates identities for women through culinary images. But unlike *Darjeeling* which strives to present a tradition-abiding female character through food references, in *Pastries* Sunya Malhotra, a struggling baker in Boston, finds her inner peace and resistance to commercialised forces through a mixture of religion and baking: the *sunya* tradition of Buddhism¹¹⁰ and a master baker in Kyoto. Sunya finds her inner strength and peace to battle the commercialising giants that threaten to swallow her independent business through an eastern religion and a trip to the east, Japan. The "Other" for Sunya thus is neither the white host in her Boston neighbourhood nor her European training of baking French pastries; it is the Japanese tradition of *sunya* Buddhism and the baking practices conditioned by spiritual training. Thus, the fusion in the novel is not that of making the east palatable to the west to suit the western palate, but making a fusion between two eastern traditions and creating a palate that is comforting to the east within the confines of a western diaspora. The connection between food and the spiritual journey is highlighted through what Sunya bakes and how she encounters the *sunya* tradition. The culinary images draw attention to the Indian American identity of Sunya as well as the postcolonial identity of the novel. Instead of cooking or making

¹¹⁰ *Sunya* means void or emptiness. Rather than being a particular tradition, the concept of being "not-self" (*anatta*) which can be achieved through meditation and letting go is signified by the meaning *sunya*.

traditional Indian dishes as one would expect the second-generation Indian Sunya to do, she bakes French and American pastries. Unlike Rakhi of Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* (2004), who looks for her identity through her connection to India and Indian food, Sunya does not strive to find her identity through her Indian heritage. She is comfortable with her hyphenated American identity, and except for a couple of food items sold in her bakery, she does not market her Indian identity. Sunya's second-generation sensibilities thus are in marked contrast to both Alok's and Sujata's nostalgic re-negotiations of food in *Darjeeling*. For Sunya, the quest for inner peace and identity is not about negating her American past or embracing her Indian ancestry. Her search for inner peace and identity leads her not to India, where the journey usually leads the second-generation of confused *desis*¹¹¹ in search of their identities, but to Japan where she encounters her estranged father, her identity and her lost faith in herself.

For Sunya Malhotra, "India exists only in the news, Mother's spicy cooking, the Alfonso mangoes...and the yoga sessions."¹¹² It is the same commercial and alimentary stereotypes that evoke India for many other Americans. But Sunya's associations are mainly centred on the sensory since it is her mother's "spicy cooking" and "Alfonso mangoes" that evoke India for her, not just curry and mangoes. The detailed alimentary-evoked nostalgia or identification with such images differentiates Sunya from the host of Americans who would categorise India as the land of the exotic. For Sunya, the exotic is specific and sensory, because of her

¹¹¹ I am borrowing this term from the movie *American Desi* (2001) Dir. Piyush Dinker Pandya. ABCD or American Born Confused Desi has been used in the common parlance to refer to second-generation Indian Americans who have become westernised.

¹¹² Bharti Kirchner, *Pastries* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003) 3.

Indian ancestry. But despite her association with India thus and through her name, she does not look for an Indian identity or an Indian spiritual experience to find her self-identity, which makes her quest for identity a unique experience.

As Arjun Appadurai claims, “[c]ookbooks allow women from one group to explore the tastes of another, just as cookbooks allow women from one group to be represented to another.”¹¹³ Sunya’s association with French and American desserts help her become a part of the western world, to which she is both an outsider because of her Indian name and Indian ancestry and an insider because of her American upbringing and her western sensibilities. Thus, through food and cooking, Sunya is able to explore her American culture as well as other western cultures, despite her Indian American affiliations. By establishing herself as part of the mainstream, the majority culture, Sunya rises above the identity complexes of the second-generation diasporic Indian Americans such as those that were felt by Devi in Malladi’s *Serving Crazy with Curry*. Her association with the west enables her to explore the “extravagance”¹¹⁴ of indulging in sweets and desserts, which would have been hard for her if she were embedded in her own Indian American identity complexes. Kirchner’s use of sweets and desserts, especially the “Sunya cake” to represent Sunya and her inner turmoil, reveals her desire to be part of the mainstream culture. For Sunya, the mainstream extravagance is the norm and not the transient emptiness: the *sunya* tradition through which she later finds her inner peace. At the same time, Sunya’s ability to conquer the western desserts and make her mark through her

¹¹³ Arjun Appadurai, “How to Make National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30:1 (Jan 1988): 6.

¹¹⁴ Wong, *op.cit.*

divine Sunya cake also makes her a representative of the same mainstream with extravagance and indulgence. Her contribution and the eventual conquering are important, not only because of her own Indian American cultural heritage, but also because of her individuality as a woman. She represents herself as a global citizen and a cosmopolitan new-generation immigrant because of her Indian ancestry, her affiliations with Japan and her life in America. Thus, Kirchner uses food and food products to create a global identity for Sunya, making her the postcolonial answer to the exoticised colonial image of the east. Through Sunya, the east is able to meet the west and provide an answer to the ever-increasing identity issues of the confused second-generation of diasporic groups. But it is also made complex by the westernised eastern subject finding answers to multifaceted identity issues solved through an interaction with not just South Asia, but East Asia as well.

Unlike *Darjeeling*, which is nostalgic about an Indian past and creates special bonds with India, Kirchner's heroine, Sunya, has no nostalgic bonds with India. Her mother, an Indian who immigrated to Seattle after her marriage, opens a doughnut shop after her husband disappears from their lives. The significance of opening a doughnut shop, the quintessential American snack, rather than a spice shop or an ethnic food shop, is important in analysing Sunya's American identity. Sunya is "an American... [her] parents were born in India, but [she's] never been there. [She doesn't] really know much about Asia. [She has] no Asian identity, religious affiliation, or aura, whatever that might be."¹¹⁵ This self-definition, which is devoid of cultural affiliations but which is full of the desire to be identified and recognised

¹¹⁵ Kirchner, *op.cit*, 112.

as part of America, can be traced back to her mother's preference to have doughnuts rather than the "fancier, more refined flaky pastry from India,"¹¹⁶ *sohan papri*. The desire to be American and admire what is American is evident in *Pastries*. Kirchner uses the first-generation migrant stereotypes of becoming American by appreciating and appropriating American goods and habits through Sunya's mother. But also she draws on the American Dream of being able to achieve success through hard work. Despite being a single mother with no previous experience of having run a business in America or India, Sunya's mother rises above all adversities through her doughnut shop while offering "exciting variations, such as lime-ginger, double cinnamon, and cashew-cumin-cardamom,"¹¹⁷ celebrating her Indianness. Thus, the food, doughnuts or French pastries, becomes trademarks in Kirchner's narrative to offer glimpses into the characters' re-narrated self-identity, rather than their actions. Sunya, too, explores her Indianness despite her claim to be American, by offering mango *kulfi* in her bakery. Ethnic food becomes an exoticised ware to sell together with other American or western food items in both the doughnut shop and in Sunya's bakery. It does not rise above being "different" and the stereotype to become an individual statement about either, the Indianness or the hybrid Indian Americanness.

Religion is made alluring and made to fit into the stereotypes of eastern religions offering peace and sanctuary from everyday chaos. Sunya travels to Apsara bakery in Kyoto in search of her lost ability to create divine desserts and inner peace. References to Kyoto and eastern religions are all brought together to cater to the

¹¹⁶ Kirchner, *op.cit*, 220.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 221.

expectations of the west about the east. The “compact, restrained and disciplined”¹¹⁸ Japan, the spiritual master-cum-baker Mori Matsumoto and the *sunya* tradition that is explained in detail all add to the eastern enchantment of the narrative. This once again makes it easier for the exotic ethno-cultural Other to be absorbed into the mainstream, because as Huggan has theorised, “exotic is the perfect term to describe the domesticating process through which commodities are taken from the margins and reabsorbed into mainstream culture.”¹¹⁹ Thus both Sunya with her different ethnic roots and her preference of eastern values and baking methods are accepted and commodified in the novel, making it acceptable to a multicultural audience. While the concept of *sunya* or transient emptiness is explained, and the “one-pointedness”¹²⁰ is elaborated, Kirchner imposes American stereotypes through Sunya by making her “question and double-check everything.”¹²¹ These forceful assertions about the east, American rationality and eastern spirituality make the narrative a treatise on the difference between the east and the west. Even religion, the *sunya* tradition of Buddhism, is used to exoticise the narrative. By using a difficult concept in Buddhism, the emptiness and the nothingness of being, to explore the identity of a young woman, Kirchner differentiates the east and plays into the stereotypes about the east in the west, as a place of spiritual abundance and magical self-discoveries.

Religion, used as the “Other” to the western commercialised values and competitiveness, plays an influential role in developing *Pastries* and Sunya’s

¹¹⁸ Kirchner, *op.cit*, 292.

¹¹⁹ Huggan, *op.cit*, 22.

¹²⁰ Kirchner, *op.cit*, 298.

¹²¹ *Ibid*.

character. Despite being played through stereotypes of the east exhorting inner peace as opposed to the west's insistence on monetary success, the *sunya* tradition taught by a Japanese baker to an Indian American is representative of the new affiliations amongst the immigrants in finding their own space and place within American society. As Sunya hands over her responsibilities at the bakery to her pastry chef Bob, who is of Japanese ancestry, and embarks on a journey to recover her lost baking abilities, she finds her identity as well as her strength to withstand the commercial competition from Cake Plus through her journey. The *sunya* tradition leads her to her father whom Sunya had never seen and as she learns of him and his sacrifices to find himself, she lets go of her strong possessive hold on her bakery and her masterpiece, the recipe to her *sunya* cake. Sunya learns to “relinquish her ego while in the kitchen”¹²² and to put aside emphasis on daily realities and to practise compassion through Matsumoto and Bikkhu Karun, who was her father. As Mannur notes, the novel “sugarcoats the very difficult realities [Sunya] faces as a businesswoman who has to contend with big business penetration by presenting her problems as being resolvable through her search for psychic realignment.”¹²³ But despite its overt romanticised stereotypes which resolve all personal and professional issues for Sunya, in the pairing of eastern Asian traditions — of Buddhism and Japanese philosophy together with an Indian American woman — Kirchner explores the new identities that emerge for Indian American women in the US, especially for the second generation of Indian Americans who have been exposed to diverse

¹²² Kirchner, *op.cit*, 301.

¹²³ Mannur, *op.cit*, 107.

immigrant cultures and traditions because of their American identities and their immigrant histories.

Pastries uses cinematic descriptions to analyse food items and the sensory descriptions compose a uniqueness to the food items described. This together with Kirchner's ability to draw on the stereotypes about the east, as a place for spiritual sanctuary, a place to find class and a place where gender roles are still more distinct and prominent than individuality, makes both her novels fall into the established stereotypes of South Asian American women's writing where the domestic sphere is exploited to achieve a cultural distinctness. Kirchner, therefore, exploits the established stereotypes of the tradition-abiding women who look back to their culture and heritage to find answers for their personal problems such as Aloka and Sujata in *Darjeeling* and the fully established American women of the second-generation Indian Americans who look to the east, but not necessarily to India, to find answers for their spiritual needs such as Sunya in *Pastries*. The stereotypes, forcefully and strongly established through the novels, do not leave space to acknowledge the confused women of the diaspora who have to struggle to balance between the modernity and rationality of America and the traditions and exotica of India. The sense of belonging Kirchner's characters display leaves no space for the doubts and anxieties that plague diasporic subjects and the identity crisis faced by many second-generation Indian Americans in maintaining their cultural ties with India and living in America.

As I have already argued, Kirchner's use of alimentary images does not add to character development but only enhances the qualities that those women

characters display. Food items heighten the sense of exotica in the novels and make the narrative sensory. By adding colourful and almost tangible descriptions of food items, Kirchner caters to an audience that turns to these novels for a taste of the exotic. The Otherness of the alimentary images and the mystery surrounding these different food items, as well as the known yet different food explained in sensual terms, enables the novels to commodify the traditions and the ethno-regional differences explored in the narratives. These novels also help propagate the stereotypes about South Asian American women who fashion their identities either by embracing or embedding themselves in their traditions or by embracing American values, thus feeding into the already established mainstream appeal for such reading matter. Kirchner's women characters, who travel between cultural hybridity and traditional cultures, still assert their ethno-cultural otherness through their diverse and individual food patterns, but remain within pre-desigend ethnic and social boundaries, to fit into both Indian and American socio-cultural norms.

Conclusion

The alimentary images that are presented in these fictions establish diverse identities for South Asian American women, especially for the Indian American women characters discussed throughout this chapter. Food not only is an exoticised ware that is used to sell one's own ethnic identity when amidst different "Others," but is also a factor that determines one's own ethnic affiliations and individualities in society. Malladi's Priya finds her loyalties questioned when she is back with different food cravings and different gustatory experiences other than her South

Indian Telugu Brahmin food choices. Devi, on the other hand, experiments with her hyphenated identity and its multifaceted experiences as a young woman of South Indian origin born and living in America. Her food choices assert her multicultural influences and these food choices also differentiate her from the rest of her family, who find these culinary choices and combinations a novelty. Malladi uses these overt food choices and alimentary references to explore the emotions of the women characters as well. By using South Indian food and Indian fusion food as her tropes, Malladi breaks new grounds to explore diasporic women's emotions through common domestic spaces of kitchens and cooking.

In contrast, Kirchner uses food not as a means of establishing the individuality of her female characters, but as a mode of exploring their ethno-regional affiliations and hybrid influences gained through diasporic experiences. As Aloka and Sujata navigate their different terrains and personal upheavals, their ethno-regional affiliations to Bengali traditions and to Darjeeling tea become their distinctive feature. They bond over their choices of food and reconcile over cooking and food. Thus, the stereotypical uses of food as a trope are explored in *Darjeeling* while food becomes a trope through which a fusion of the east and west is achieved in *Pastries*. Despite the trope's stereotypical uses in Kirchner's books, the alimentary images establish her writing and, in turn, her women characters as hybrid, diasporic, and reliant on their Indian ancestry.

Both Malladi and Kirchner use omniscient narrative voices to explore the characters of their protagonists. These third-person narrative voices offer social commentary and background information for the women protagonists' self-

discovery. The journeys, various situations and reasons for re-inventing their personal identities are thus presented. While the story is that of a female narrator, the all-pervasive narrative voice explores the importance of giving voice to the silenced, especially in Devi's case. Priya, in contrast, introduces the outside world to her tensed domestic confrontations, through her emails to her African-American boyfriend. While Nick's emails situate Priya's personal concerns within the larger society, they also aid in exploring Priya's deep-seated insecurities and longings, despite her different interactions with her family. Malladi also uses the existing cookbook conventions, by presenting recipes at the beginning of each chapter in *The Mango Season*. The recipes not only diversify the novel's narrative, but also place the novel in an ever changing space between cookbooks and narrative fiction. This in-between quality of the novel assists in complicating the narrative and its depiction of Priya's self-reinvention. *Serving Crazy with Curry*, in contrast, steers clear of such prominent traditions, and inserts recipes into the narrative. Thus Malladi explores two different modes of creating intricate narratives in her novels, one by using the already established form of cookbooks to narrate an individual's self-discovery, and the other by using recipes, found in cookbooks, to reflect emotions and the re-negotiation of a young woman's individual identity. Unlike the tradition of cookbook writing which has a linear narrative devoid of dense emotions, Malladi's novels portray multifaceted characters with complex emotions who navigate their difficulties through their various relationships to food and food preparation methods.

Kirchner, in contrast, does not use recipes in her novels, but chooses to use Bengali terms for her food references in *Darjeeling* making her narratives stand

apart. Her Bengali terms are not explained, adding an otherness to her novel. *Pastries* employs western desserts to explore Sunya's trajectory from being insecure to being confident. The *Sunya* Cake thus becomes a motif in the novel, which symbolises the main protagonist's emotional journey. Kirchner therefore explores the hybridity and the acceptance of American/diasporic conditions that re-ignite ethno-cultural affiliations to the east through her novels. Her women characters become independent not in defiance of their cultural affiliations, but in acceptance and exoticisation of their roots. Their acquiescence, to the prescribed cultural stereotypes, enables their ethno-cultural traditions to be accepted and be absorbed into the centres of their host cultures as well.

But both writers consciously give prominence to women's voices, and deliberately omit male voices. While this helps in establishing and exploring the development of individual identities in women, the same silence leads to the lack of male perspectives on these protagonists' journeys of self-discovery. But by situating the larger narrative within socio-economic changes of modernisation and globalisation, both Malladi and Kirchner are able to balance the lack of non-female perspectives in their novels.

Thus, food as a trope in South Asian American women's literary productions establishes the uniqueness of the discussed novelists, as Indian American writers. India, which gets evoked through alimentary images, re-works the homogeneous Indian identity and asserts individual and ethno-regional identities through food choices. Food becomes a substitute for emotions, and food enables the characters to navigate their cultural history and multicultural American influences smoothly. Food,

even in contested spaces of kitchen and familial grounds, becomes an identity marker and an outlet for unspoken emotions and inner turmoil. Food, therefore, enables South Asian American women writers to debunk a pan-Indian identity, assert individualities and more importantly to re-assert their multifaceted identities as women writing from an American diasporic space about diasporic South Asian women's experiences. While Kirchner's novels explore the hybridity of the diasporic Indian women characters and the assimilation of the same characters into the American society, Malladi defies such easy assimilations and insists on individual choices and identities that defy socio-ethnic homogenisations, thus asserting unique identities.

Chapter Three: Sri Lankan women writers writing the difference

“[W]omen continue to be disproportionately assigned the task of ‘preserving national culture and traditions’,”¹ contends Uma Narayan in her analysis of the position of third world women within the host diasporic cultures. Women inhabiting diasporic locations, especially from newer immigrant communities that are rendered marginal by the insider-outsider dichotomies of living amongst the Other, are particularly burdened with the “task” of continuing and preserving their “national cultures and traditions.” This communal desire to “preserve” national culture and traditions springs from the marginal position of the diasporic subjects and the alien status diasporic groups occupy within the host culture and amidst other diasporic groups. Being the Other to the host community, diasporic groups constantly define the margins for a perceived centre consisting of the majority culture. South Asian Americans define their own margins within the larger group of Asians. Even among the South Asians, centres change due to their numbers, time of arrival and historical importance. The diasporic groups with heterogeneity in their “national cultures and traditions” create various peripheries and margins within the larger group of their own diasporic community. For the South Asians in America, the Other is not always the white Americans, but their own diasporic brethren from different regions, religions and ethnic groups of South Asia and from their own countries. The burden of “preserving national culture” thus becomes crucial in such diasporic communities where women are encouraged to engage in intra-communal, rather than inter-

¹ Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, traditions and third world feminism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997) 28.

communal or inter-ethnic activities, therefore relegating them to the margins of the margins. Being women, they are traditionally the Other to their male counterparts in the same diasporic community. Especially Asian, or specifically South Asian, women from patriarchal societies choose to be the vessels of tradition and culture, therefore engaging in cultural and social activities among their own kind. From their doubly marginalised positions, women, therefore, take on the task of maintaining the cultural integrity of their own communal practices and traditions, because they are meant to be the guardians of the traditions and cultures for their communities, while the men cross over to the cultures of their Others in search of better prospects.

Contemporary South Asian American women writers, too, explore this marginal position of women in the diaspora from various angles and perspectives in their writing both within and without diasporic locations. As Lisa Lau maintains, South Asian diasporic women writers “are different, very different, from their Western and South Asian counterparts.”² Lau finds the geographic locations and the socio cultural affiliations of the South Asian diasporic writers and their own South Asian counterparts as the main difference between the groups. But the cultural otherness, that comes from following different religions, and most importantly from being in varied ethnic groups, even while being in the same country, are disregarded in Lau’s essentialised categorisation of diasporic and non-diasporic difference between the women writers. In their “different” forms, of being the cultural Other, and of fully belonging neither to the mainstream American culture due to their

² Lisa Lau, “Making the Difference: The differing presentations and Representations of South Asia in the Contemporary Fiction of Home and Diasporic South Asian Women Writers,” *Modern Asian Studies* 39: 1 (Feb. 2005): 241.

diasporic state nor the minority cultures within their ethnic communities in America because of their hyphenated and hybrid identities of occupying various margins in America, South Asian diasporic women writers explore the position of women in their respective cultural groups within America to bring out the uniqueness and difference in their particular sub-cultural groups. Even though Lau's argument is mainly concerned with the "difference" between the East and the West and the "difference" between diasporic and home narratives, diasporic writers explore their differences beyond these binaries. Within their sub-groups, they explore the "difference" between and amongst their own groups on gendered, ethnic, racial and religious terms. These sub-groups are sometimes situated under the larger umbrella of national cultural groups yet apart from the dominant cultural practices or ethnic traditions of the larger diasporic sub-community.

Sri Lankan authors writing in English, too, strive to explore these multiple "differences" and have gained increasing critical attention in recent times, both from within the country as well as from around the world. In recent times, Sri Lankan critics such as D.C.R.A Goonetilleke, Thiru Kandaiah, Chelva Kanaganayakam, Ruvani Ranasinha, Minoli Salgado, Yasmine Gooneratne and Maryse Jayasuriya among others have criticised and analysed the contribution of Sri Lankan Anglophone writers to world literature and to the Anglophone literary tradition within Sri Lanka.³ The critical attention has been mostly directed at prolific male

³ The *South Asian Review*'s 2012 Special edition on "Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature" 33:3 (2012) has brought together many critics based in Sri Lanka, and also in other parts of the world, critically investigating Sri Lankan contribution to world literary traditions. For more information see Selvy Thiruchandran, *Stories from the Diaspora: Tamil Women, Writing* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2006), Ruvani Ranasinha, "Writing and reading Sri Lanka: Shifting politics of cultural translation, consumption, and the implied reader," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48: 1 (Mar.

authors such as Michael Ondaatje, Shyam Selvadurai, Romesh Gunasekera and Shehan Karunathilake on their recent publications while the female authors from Sri Lanka contributing to the same canon have been neglected or have been set aside after an initial interest in their publications. Among the diasporic women writers, authors such as Karen Roberts, V.V. Ganeshananthan, Mary Anne Mohanraj, Ru Freeman and Nayomi Munaweera who write about Sri Lanka from America have generated much less critical attention than their male counterparts.⁴ Critical attention has also overlooked the contribution of these authors to the development of a distinct Sri Lankan American writing tradition, which is clearly emerging and which needs attention because of its contribution to the South Asian American women's writing because of its distinct influences from established literary traditions of American women's writing. Through this chapter, I will analyse the contribution of contemporary Sri Lankan American women writers V.V. Ganeshananthan and Nayomi Munaweera to the development of a Sri Lankan American identity through their fiction. The use of racial differences to narrate the ethnic conflict and its impact on the two main ethnic groups in Sri Lanka mark the novels *Love Marriage* (2008) and *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012) as distinctly Sri Lankan fiction, related by

2013):27-39. Minoli Salgado, *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*. (London: Routledge, 2007), Chelva Kanaganayakam, "Literature and the Politics of Ethno-Nationalism in Sri Lanka," *The Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities* XXVI (2000): 29-43, Chelva Kanaganayakam, "Dancing in the Rarefied Air: Reading Contemporary Sri Lankan Literature," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 29:1 (Jan. 1998): 51-65, D.C.R.A Goonetilleke, "Sri Lanka's 'Ethnic' Conflict in Its Literature in English," *World Literature Today* 66:3 (Summer 1992): 450- 453, Maryse Jayasuriya, *Terror and Reconciliation: Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature, 1983-2009* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012).

⁴ V.V. Ganeshananthan's novel has generated some critical engagement, especially in the *South Asian Review's* 2012 special edition and in *Phoenix: Sri Lanka Journal of English in the Commonwealth* (Vol X & XI. 2013 and 2014), while Munaweera's novel analysed in this chapter have been critically neglected for the most part.

writers residing in America, clearly defining its contribution to the emerging category of South Asian American women's fiction. The heterogeneity even among the people from the same country while still maintaining wider Sri Lankan concerns, together with the larger issues of women's agency and negotiation of identities discussed by contemporary South Asian American women authors, will be analysed in this chapter through a close examination of the two novels.

The use of existing traditions from both Asian women's fiction and American women's fiction, of the mother-daughter dyad and of landscape, is one of the prominent tropes of some of Sri Lankan American women's novels. Ru Freeman and Karen Roberts both use the universalist tropes of mother-daughter relationships in their fiction to explore their Sri Lankanness. The representation of gendered and ethnicised spaces makes their narratives representative of Asian American women's fiction. They invoke Sri Lankan memories of servants, vivid landscapes and the complex nature of mother-daughter relationships through their fiction while their "difference" is established through the individualised and ethnicised characters, traditions and concerns that make them carve out their own distinct niche of Sri Lankan Americanness.

Both V.V. Ganeshanathan and Nayomi Munaweera break away from this homogenised depiction of a Sri Lankan identity through a representation of the masses to focus on ethno-national relationships that bring forth the individual characters of both Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. Both the novels, dealing with the 1983 ethnic riots and the resulting ethnic war of three decades, were chosen specifically because of their "different" — in their ethno-regional focus — yet

similar portrayals. The 1983 riots began on the 23rd of July 1983, when thirteen government soldiers were killed in an ambush by an armed group in Jaffna. On the 24th July 1983, the bodies of the soldiers were brought into an already agitating capital where organised mobs were ready to take revenge on the Tamils that allegedly killed the Sinhala soldiers. The mobs, organised and armed with electoral registers, swept through the streets of Colombo, burning Tamil homes, ransacking them and killing innocent victims. This carnage, known in Sri Lankan history as the *Black July*, ravaged and burnt the capital for two days and then was quelled through government and military intervention. The initial lack of response from the government to contain the violence and the lack of police or military intervention to protect innocent civilians have been criticised over the years by historians, political analysts and fiction writers alike. The ethnic riots then shifted to the central areas of the country where the Tamil population was largely of recent Indian origin. Though the riots were subdued eventually, the July riot compelled many Tamils to seek refuge by migrating to other parts of the world and is marked as the beginning of Sri Lankan ethnic conflict which devastated the country for three decades.⁵ Ganeshananthan's and Munaweera's novels offer young women's experiences of the ethnic conflict from two diverse perspectives. I argue that in their attempts to present a unique Sri Lankan narrative, the novelists contest the "re-Orientalisation"⁶ and

⁵ For further analysis see S.J. Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the dismantling of democracy* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1986) and R. Wijesinha, *Declining Sri Lanka: Terrorism and Ethnic conflict: The Legacy of J.R.Jayawardene (1906-1996)* (New Delhi: Cambridge UP India, 2007).

⁶ Term borrowed from Lisa Lau's "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals," *Modern Asian Studies* 43:2 (2009). Further analysis of the term and its application to Sri Lankan American women writers and their work will be done in the latter parts of this chapter.

exoticisation of Sri Lanka and its myriad prejudices and issues, thus signalling their own individuality within the larger groups of Asian American and South Asian American women writers. I contend that this distinctiveness separates them from the other women writers from South Asia and thus makes them inimitably Sri Lankan American and their subject matter Sri Lankan American concerns. These characteristics also make them members of the sub-group of South Asian American women writers within the corpus of Asian American writers.

Thus, Ganeshanathan, of Sri Lankan origin living in America, writes about a group of Sri Lankan Tamils in the United States and Canada in her debut novel, *Love Marriage* (2008), while Munaweera narrates the two interconnected lives of a Sinhalese girl from Colombo, Sri Lanka, and a Tamil girl from Jaffna, Sri Lanka, in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012). Even though the Tamils are not a minority within the diasporic community of Sri Lankans in America,⁷ their ethnic distinctiveness and specific cultural and ethnic traditions mark them as different to the other ethno-religious groups from Sri Lanka: Sinhalese, Burghers and Muslims. The apparent minority status, associated with their numbers within Sri Lanka, makes them the Other to the Sinhalese, even when away from Sri Lanka. The position of centre stage in diaspora, because of their community strength, and numbers, thus shifts the power play of ethnic groups when away from Sri Lanka, thus making Ganeshanathan's narrative an important contribution to the analysis of ethno-social identities explored in Sri Lankan American women's fiction. The ethnic Other's perspective on the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, especially from a diasporic

⁷ During the civil war period in Sri Lanka (1983-2009), Tamils migrated to many European countries, America and Canada in search of safety and asylum.

perspective makes Ganeshanathan's novel stand out in contrast to that of Munaweera's novel which will be analysed later in this chapter. Ganeshanathan's *Love Marriage* is thus "different" in its own right to Munaweera's predominantly Sinhalese narrative. The difference is not only on the ethnic identities explored in the novels, but also on the narrative exploration of the ethnic Other's role within the Sri Lankan social structure. While Munaweera consciously incorporates her Sinhalese protagonist's ethnic Other through the Tamil protagonist Sawaswathi, Ganeshanathan steers away from balancing the ethno-racial make-up in her novel and presents a young Tamil diasporic woman's perspectives on the ethnic conflict. *Love Marriage* explores the difference of Sri Lankan Tamils in America as opposed to the larger host community of Americans and the diasporic community of other South Asian ethnic groups. In both Ganeshanathan's and Munaweera's novels, women occupy a larger space but still within the framework of being the preservers of cultural traditions of their own ethnic community. The re-negotiation of ethno-cultural identities as opposed to individual identities, in the face of ethnic riots, ethnic differences and race relations is examined in both the novels, making it an interesting addition to the existing works of Sri Lankan American women and to the larger group of Sri Lankan Anglophone fiction writers. Throughout this chapter, I will closely examine how the ethnic "differences" written into the narratives of individual women characters contribute to the development of new cosmopolitan identities enabled through travel and the understanding of individual ethno-social identities.

Writing for the diaspora, from the diaspora: Ganeshanathan's *Love Marriage* and the diasporic narrative

Love Marriage unfolds the ethnic difference of Sri Lankan Tamils in North America, as opposed to the diasporic Sinhalese Sri Lankans, while also narrating the story of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict from the perspective of the Tamils, especially from the points of view of the diaspora and of the Other to the majority Sinhalese: the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).⁸ The novel essentially is about the difference of opinions and values of two young women, the diasporic second-generation American Tamil, Yalini, and the rebellious, former LTTE cadre member's daughter, Janani. They are forced to interact and communicate for the first time because of Janani's father's terminal illness, which allows him to travel to Canada (because it was impossible for him to enter the USA as a former LTTE member, due to political reasons) to be with his sister, Yalini's mother, who also travels to Canada for the reunion. Family memory, ethno-social memory and individual memories are evoked to trace commonalities and family ties between these two different young women through death, pain and marriages. But the novel mainly weaves itself around and through the universal theme of marriage: the bonding that unites individuals, families, diverse geographical locations, political views and ethnic identities. Chelva Kanaganayakam states that the in general Sri Lankan writing in English is "accessible to a Western audience, and is therefore seen to be potentially subversive.

⁸ The LTTE was the military reincarnation of the Tamil New Tigers (TNT) group in 1976. It was established under the leadership of Uma Maheswaran and the military command of Velupillai Prabhakaran. Prabhakaran later became the leader of the LTTE, which evolved into a terrorist group fighting for a separate state within Sri Lanka. He was killed in 2009, which signalled the end of a three-decade-long civil war in Sri Lanka.

[It] is about politics but not about taking political sides.”⁹ The same is also applicable to *Love Marriage*. As the novels written in English are accessible to a limited audience or an English-literate audience in Sri Lanka, the politics of the novels have much less of an impact on the larger socio-political landscape. The Western audience is removed from the political landscape of Sri Lanka because of their distance to the political atmosphere in Sri Lanka and the cultural significances, but at the same time by using the same “major”¹⁰ language (English) to write, the impact of the novel on an uninformed audience is immediate. Thus, the novel *Love Marriage* is about the “politics” of Sri Lanka, but is “not about taking [a] political side” on Sri Lanka’s political upheaval or development. As Maryse Jayasuriya posits, “V.V. Ganeshanathan dismantle[s] myths of identity, [thus making it easier] for erstwhile adversaries to recognize each other’s humanity”¹¹ through her narrative fiction which refuses to take a political stand while engaged in the politics of narrating the Other. Ganeshanathan maintains her narrative’s “difference” as a diasporic writer, because she is the Other to her western audience and is the Other to the Sri Lankan writers who write in English, because of her ethnic and geographical location. She maintains her narrative distance easily from Sri Lankan ethno-politics due to her geographic distance and is able to relate to a Sri Lankan experience of war and its related issues, because of her second-generation ties to Sri Lanka. Though the physical distance

⁹Chelva Kanaganayakam, “Literature and the politics of ethno-nationalism in Sri Lanka,” *The Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities* xxvi (2000): 37.

¹⁰ The term is influenced by the Deleuze and Guattari essay on “minor literature” (1986) with reference to literature of Franz Kafka. See Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* Trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986).

¹¹ Maryse Jayasuriya, *Terror and Reconciliation: Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature 1983-2009* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012) 162.

enables her fiction to relate the Other, the Tamil migrant with ties to the LTTE, without getting embroiled in the critical debate of what is right and who is right, it also functions as the strength in her narrative. Nevertheless, the same distance can be critiqued (and have been critiqued) as being the reason to be removed from reality too. Despite these crucial elements that shape her novel, she does not claim to narrate the complete truth, or the multiple views surrounding the ethnic conflict through her fiction. She occupies the liminal space of an outsider regarding the government-led politics and the LTTE-led politics of Sri Lanka, which resulted in the ethnic conflict and the mass exodus of Tamil Sri Lankans to many diasporic locations, because “[n]one of the stories would be absolutely complete, but their tellers will be absolutely certain.”¹² Ganeshanathan’s “difference” is not only her physical location and her diasporic identity, but her subjective stance which marks her as politically “subversive” and “different” to her fellow Sri Lankan American writers and Sri Lankan American women writers. She examines the diverse relations and ties between diasporic Tamils in America and Canada through various marriages and family bonds, insisting on their “difference” from the rest of the diasporic community and from other diasporic writing from Sri Lanka.

Ganeshanathan begins *Love Marriage* with the statement “In this globe-scattered Sri Lankan family we speak only of two kinds of marriage.”¹³ Thus from the first sentence, the Sri Lankan diasporic identity of her narrative is established. Following Lisa Lau’s point in relation to diasporic South Asian writers and writing generally, Ganeshanathan’s opening sentence indicates that she, too, is “conscious

¹² V.V. Ganeshanathan, *Love Marriage* (London: Phoenix, 2009) 120.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1.

of being a representative of [her country of origin].”¹⁴ The Sri Lankan diasporic identity works as the “difference” that Ganeshanathan is establishing through her novel. She is different to the other diasporic Sri Lankan authors writing from various other diasporic locations and she is different to the Anglophone writers from Sri Lanka. Her fiction is the ethnic Other to diasporic writers of varying ethnic identities from the same diasporic location of the US who speak of their culturally diverse diasporic ties, and her multicultural identity is the Other to the writers from Sri Lanka who are not “globe-scattered.” From the very beginning, the “difference” of the fiction is thus established. But at the end of the first page, she intensifies her diasporic difference further by establishing her distinct ethnic identity: “This Tamil family speaks of the latter [the love marriages] in whispers.”¹⁵ Tamil identity is thus established for her narrative, making it a diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil account about marriages, bonds and politics. Ganeshanathan employs the tension created through the introduction of national, diasporic and ethnic identities in the first page of the novel to sustain the interest and intrigues of her audience, from diasporic locations and within Sri Lanka, for varied reasons. For a culturally different reader, the ethno-national identities revealed will create an interest about the Other or summon nostalgia about their own lost homes. Despite the narrative’s subversive political stance, the readers are moved to either appropriate the history presented through the narrative or to reject the novel’s version of Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict related politics. For a Sri Lankan reader of the same fiction, the identities and histories invoked will bring forth memories of the ethnic conflict and ethno-politics and power

¹⁴ Lau, “Making the Difference,” *op.cit*, 248.

¹⁵ Ganeshanathan, *op.cit*, 1.

hierarchies prevalent in Sri Lanka, thus creating curiosity in them, in turn prompting them to a conscious reading of the ethno-national details presented in the novel. As Lau contends, such diasporic fiction is also “not only a reflection of diasporic life; it also plays a part in the propagating of [certain] ideas and ideals which contribute to the shaping of the identity of the diasporic community,”¹⁶ and this is especially so for the diasporic community Ganeshanathan writes about. *Love Marriage* strives to present a humane picture of the Tamil community, affected and involved in the ethnic war in Sri Lanka, and in turn debunks stereotypes of diasporic Tamils as sympathisers of the LTTE.

Love Marriage consciously sets out to inform and intrigue an uninformed audience. The chapters in the book are numbered in Tamil instead of using Hindu-Arabic/Greek-Roman numerals or the standard spelling of numbers using English. The numbers are spelt in English, but the language used to count is Tamil.¹⁷ The Tamil identity of the plot is thus highlighted but at the same time it is another strategy of the author to create a “difference” to identify her narrative and her authorial position as a diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil writer. The non-translated Tamil numbers further the ethnic otherness because they are alien and it is the Other: the Other to the known forms of numbering and the Other in their non-translated state. This difference is felt by the western audiences mainly because of their alienness to the language, but not strongly by Sri Lankans who would have had an inkling of basic numbers, even if they are from other ethnic communities. The use of the 1983 riots as the pivotal moment in the first-person narrative of Yalini is also a tactic used

¹⁶ Lau, *op.cit*, 242.

¹⁷ Ondu for one, rendu for two ...ompathu for nine.

by Ganeshanathan to create uniqueness. Yalini, the protagonist, is born “in the early hours of the morning, on a day in late July, And as [she] entered this new world, [her] parents’ old one was being destroyed.”¹⁸ The references to July and to the old world being destroyed trigger collective cultural memories in a Sri Lankan reader about the July 1983 riots that marked the beginning of the three-decade-long ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese and the separatist Tamil factions in Sri Lanka. But Ganeshanathan takes care to inform the uninformed about the July riots in detail over the next few pages. The riots are described from the point of view of the Tamil diaspora who watched it from afar living in different locations. Through such a detailed analysis of the 1983 riots, the reasons and the emergence of the LTTE, Ganeshanathan establishes her narrative’s identity as diasporic rather than a postcolonial analysis of ethnic relations aimed solely at postcolonial Anglophone audiences in Sri Lanka. The politics of publication and the difference in the place of publication enhances her narrative’s distinct diasporic identity rather than that of the postcolonial identity, because she publishes away from the postcolonial pressures usually affecting the Anglophone authors publishing from South Asian locations.

As Lau has claimed about the ethnic identity asserted in South Asian women’s contemporary fiction, descriptive details throughout *Love Marriage* about the ethnic identity of being a Tamil in Sri Lanka and America, too, attempt to “make [the author’s] individual voice[s] heard over a cacophony of long-standing stereotypes and expectations.”¹⁹ Yalini asserts her father’s “difference” by claiming that, “[a]t home in Sri Lanka, my father says, we do things differently. We do not

¹⁸ Ganeshanathan, *op.cit*, 15.

¹⁹ Lau, *op.cit*, 252.

bear out ancestors all our lives. They are only written down when we die.”²⁰ He is not another diasporic person, but a person with a “different” history: different from that of Other diasporic immigrants like him, with a unique Sri Lankan history. He is insistent about his Sri Lankan ancestry and the tradition of not bearing ancestors as opposed to what is done in the west: the Tamil tradition of taking the father’s given name as a surname instead of a surname that is passed on for generations, as is the custom in the West. For him carrying the surname or the family name is akin to bearing ancestors, with whom he has no emotional ties. Home for him is still Sri Lanka because that is where his personal history begins. Thus, he asserts his identity, first as a Sri Lankan, then as a Tamil and finally as diasporic by finding the “difference” between the *home* and the present place. Instead of working with the stereotypes of the ethnic communities in Sri Lanka, replete with dominant Sinhalese and subdued and wronged Tamils, Ganeshanathan offers a fresh perspective on the Tamils from a diasporic point of view. When Janani’s suitor visits her in Canada, “they untie[d] their shoes and [left] them at the door, as was the custom of Tamils even in the West,”²¹ and Yalini’s mother takes out her “Indian serving set: a small silver bowl of cashews, another of deep fried noodles, spicy nuts and lentil, a third of crispy *vadai*.”²² The identity of Ganeshanathan’s narrators and the narrative leaves no space for doubt. It is the Tamils from Sri Lanka living in the west that people her novel. The distinction is clear in the traditions, and even in the memory characters evoke. As Janani, Yalini’s cousin from Sri Lanka, who is the daughter of a former

²⁰ Ganeshanathan, *op.cit*, 64.

²¹ *Ibid*, 92.

²² *Ibid*, 93. *Vadai* or *vada* are fritter-type deep fried, savoury snacks made of various types of gram flour.

LTTE member, accuses Yalini, “The War is like Tamil for you. Something you would learn about only if you had to, not because you chose to. We have heard about the Tamils abroad. The convenience of their belief.”²³ The Tamils abroad have the choices of being sympathetic towards the ethnic war or not with their diasporic freedom. But the Tamils in Sri Lanka, especially if living in the war-affected areas, do not necessarily have the same choice because of their close physical proximity, emotional involvement and stronger power hierarchies at play. Yalini, despite her liberal outspoken character, does not defend the position of Tamils “abroad.” The silent acknowledgement works to strengthen Yalini’s own acceptance of her lack of understanding of her ethnic history. She acknowledges the insubstantive knowledge of Tamil culture and heritage among second-generation Tamils in the diaspora, but is ready to defend their links with the same culture in which they have been raised because as she moves away “from [her parents’] war-torn house in [their] peaceful country [... she] became more like them than ever before, because no matter how American [she] was, [she] was the only Sri Lankan”²⁴ among her American contemporaries. The “difference” is she is not *only* Sri Lankan, because she feels American as well, but she was the “*only Sri Lankan*.” Among many other immigrants and Americans, representing her cultural identity, Ganeshanathan is able to examine that “difference” both in her narrator and in her fiction throughout *Love Marriage*. Instead of being universally Sri Lankan, with a homogenised national identity, Yalini becomes more attuned to her Tamil ethnic identity and creates a Sri Lankan identity that would be considered specifically ethnic and not national in Sri Lanka. Thus, the

²³ Ganeshanathan, *op.cit*, 41.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 19.

identities expressed through *Love Marriage* become the markers of “difference” amidst diasporic audiences and readerships, while the novel creates a difference marked by an ethnic identity, among a Sri Lankan audience.

Ganeshanathan assumes the position of an “authentic insider” or an “emissary”²⁵ through her novel’s descriptive details assuming a readership that is unaware of the myriad cultural details and political nuances present in Sri Lankan history, especially that of the history of the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. “Twenty-five years after Vani hid under the table in the 1958 riots, there were riots again in Colombo [...] In the riots of 1983 the soldiers burned Kalyani’s house.”²⁶ The 1983 July riots and the repercussions of the language act of 1956²⁷ which led to the 1958 riots are thus chronicled through the experiences of Yalini’s mother (Vani) and aunt (Kalyani). The mass exodus of the Tamils displaced from Sri Lanka to India, America and Canada is inserted into the narrative through great-uncle Logan’s escape, “they took a boat to India, and from there spent most of their money buying plane tickets to England. After a few months in England, they decided to try for

²⁵ Narayan, *op.cit*, 133.

²⁶ Ganeshanathan, *op.cit*, 128.

²⁷ This was an act passed in the Parliament of what was then Ceylon to counter the use of English (a colonial legacy) as the administrative language of the country by replacing it with Sinhalese. This was followed through by the elected Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike as one of his election campaign promises. The bill led to mass rioting and heavy internal migration of the Tamil-speaking communities in Sri Lanka because of its discrimination against them. This was followed by what is known as the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayakam pact (Tamil Language Act- Special Provisions) in 1958, which allowed Tamil to be used for certain administrative purposes and as the medium of instruction in schools and higher education institutes where the majority of the Tamil-speaking communities lived. Though this still enabled the two communities to use English as their second language which was meant to be taught in schools, the language gap and the discrimination felt by the Tamil communities led to later dissatisfactions which ultimately culminated in the three-decades-long ethnic conflict. For further analysis, see Wijesinha, *op.cit* and Thambiah, *op.cit*.

Canada.”²⁸ These descriptions woven into the narrative shed light on the narrative’s development as well as a means of informing the uninformed. While providing the unacquainted with information about Sri Lanka’s ethnic groups and ethnic war, *Love Marriage* also provides an insightful analysis of the ethnic war from a Tamil perspective. The novel is full of information about the LTTE and their movement with slight alterations to the names of the leaders because of Kumaran, Yalini’s uncle’s involvement with them before his arrival in the west. The narrative thus weaves in cultural memories and historical information filtered through an ethnic lens to inform and educate the readership that is unaware of any of the ethno-national histories of Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. The popular western version of Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict — of a majority versus minority ethnic differences that led to an armed conflict — does not necessarily take into account the history behind the conflict that reaches beyond the early 1980s and the ethno-national differences between the communities in Sri Lanka. Thus through an outwardly apolitical fiction, Ganeshanathan brings forth the views of the Tamil community from and in Sri Lanka and their cultural otherness: the nation’s history, its ethnic violence and the historical reasons behind it.

By providing a westernised voice through the character of Rajani, the daughter of a Tamil father and a Sinhalese mother living in Canada, Ganeshanathan brings in the westernised views of the second-generation Sri Lankan diaspora in the west. Even though Yalini, too, is from the same second-generation Sri Lankan diaspora, her awakening interest in her Tamil ethnic identity and its impact on her

²⁸ Ganeshanathan, *op.cit*, 127.

character do not make her a representative of the second-generation diasporic Sri Lankans. Rajani acts as the voice of a critical observer in matters of ethnic importance and identity. Rajani's mixed ethnicity allows her the freedom to criticise both the groups, and through her, Ganeshanathan can safely criticise both the Sinhalese and the Tamils without attracting criticism based on her ethnicity or her racial partiality. By situating Rajani in Canada, she justifies the distance and the "difference" Rajani feels about Sri Lanka and its conflict. Canada as a diasporic location also provides Rajani the critical distance as well as the required integration into Sri Lankan culture because of her integration and interactions with the diasporic Sri Lankan community as opposed to Yalini's limited exposure to the rest of the Sri Lankan diasporic community in America. Being the child of a cross-ethnic marriage, between a Sinhalese and a Tamil, Rajani has had more exposure to both the communities from her parents. As Rajani tells Yalini "Don't be sorry. We didn't do this, this stupid war, this stupid fighting. They did this. Your Uncle and the Sinhalese politicians."²⁹ Rajani's voice balances the narrative and brings out the purpose of Yalini's narrative: "cure the future by knowing the past."³⁰ *Love Marriage* thus becomes a record of history, as seen through diasporic eyes, tinged with collective memory and cultural identities, but not an account of historical grudges or of victories. This conscious effort to strike a balance between ethnic identities and histories reflects the "emissary" position as it is posited by Uma Narayan. Because Ganeshanathan is conscious of her identity and responsibility as a diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil author, she is cognisant of her need to maintain a "balanced" version

²⁹ Ganeshanathan, *op.cit*, 148.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 247.

of her narrative. The location of publication, in the west, further complicates her narrative's desire to be the "authentic insider." Because it is published from the west and since it is published in a "major language" that is of the west, Ganeshanathan's novel is indirectly forced to present all the insider details, thus making her narrative, representative of the diasporic Tamil Sri Lankan experience and identity. Since she is the "authentic insider" – the diasporic Tamil representative from Sri Lanka – she is able to inform the diasporic audiences and analyse ethno-national politics from her position of difference, as the diasporic subject. To maintain her cultural otherness, to that of Sri Lankans writing about the same ethnic conflict and to that of the other diasporic writers, she needs to provide an evened-out narrative despite its specific ethnic affiliations. Therefore, Rajani's informed voice, which is both westernised and from a mixed ethnic background, is used effectively through the plot of *Love Marriage*.

The extensive details about Janani's marriage ceremony, which are interspersed with Yalini's memories of Hindu temples, the rituals and customs observed in temples and the traditions of dressing and behaviour, all add up to the diasporic appeal of the narrative in *Love Marriage*. When Yalini is getting ready to attend Janani's wedding, her mother supervises her dress and dressing. She is thus assisted because of her "difference" from the rest of the Tamils who are aware of the traditional and cultural forms of dressing for the occasion. Yalini, in contrast, looks at everything through a second-generation diasporic lens, needing explanations for every act and justifying every fact; "My mother pronounces me dressed only after she dips her little finger in black *pottu* and anoints me with this paste, which is used

to mark the foreheads of UnMarried women. *In Sri Lanka, this is done everyday.*³¹ By using these little explanations while interspersing the same narrative with Tamil words such as “*pottu*” to signify the dot marked on the foreheads of Hindu women, Ganeshanathan insists on Yalini’s and her own narrative’s “difference.” The word play on unmarried, marking the married separate from the unmarried, through a different use of capital letters, once again marks Yalini’s difference. She is not a married woman, but an UnMarried woman who has decided to be not married. The insistence on explaining how things are done in Sri Lanka signifies her intended audience, because if this was written in Sri Lanka, a Sri Lankan audience would not necessarily need to be informed. These explanations strengthen the author’s awareness of her position as an “emissary” of her Tamil Sri Lankan culture from a diasporic location to a western audience. This autoethnographic detailing of the novel, with explanations and glossing, ensures that Ganeshanathan’s “difference” fits in with the continuing tradition of Asian and South Asian American women’s writing. But as Lau claims, this kind of detailing can be read as an “imagined and fictionalised diasporic experience”³² rather than a depiction of reality, since it is the only way to “prove [something] to Westerners”³³ and the justification for Ganeshanathan’s narrator’s own way of “practi[sing her] culture on a daily basis.”³⁴

³¹ Ganeshanathan, *op.cit.*, 256. Italics added.

³² Lau, *op.cit.*, 242.

³³ *Ibid.*, 248.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

“He had actually become more Sri Lankan by going away,”³⁵ Yalini observes about her uncle Kumaran’s renewed ethnic and national identity after his time in London, which ultimately led to his involvement with the Tamil Tigers. Just as Kumaran has become more Sri Lankan by travelling away from his homeland, so the distance Ganeshananthan has from the Sri Lankan ethno-national space as a diasporic author makes her narrative become a stronger reflection of Sri Lankan Tamil diasporic conditions and values. The heightened form of self-awareness as a cultural other is a result of the west’s expectations of third world individuals and writers to be “virtual encyclopaedias of information on all sorts of different aspects of their ‘cultural heritage’”³⁶ as well as the writers’ need to inform the diasporic as well as western readers of their own difference, the ethno-cultural otherness. The family histories embedded in the story, situated in Sri Lanka and the imagined space of Jaffna through Yalini, (even her name is a derivative of Jaffna in Tamil), all infuse a stronger Sri Lankan identity in the plot because it is written away from Sri Lanka to an audience not only of Sri Lankans. Thus, following the tradition of other established South Asian American women authors such as Chitra Divakaruni who explores India and especially cities such as Calcutta, and Bharati Mukherjee who considers the diasporic Indian identity and writes for an American audience, Ganeshananthan explores Sri Lankan and Tamil ethnic rituals and traditions for the ethnic outsider through *Love Marriage*. Ganeshananthan can, therefore, be placed within a longer tradition of diasporic women’s writing from America while she

³⁵ Ganeshananthan, *op.cit*, 219.

³⁶ Narayan, *op.cit*, 132.

breaks away from the traditional forms of Sri Lankan women's writing in English³⁷ – of writing back to the colonial powers, and in framing the narrative through nostalgia, within Sri Lankan settings –through her spatial placement of characters in America and Canada. And by insisting on her “difference,” through subject matter, location and plot development, she further embeds herself in the South Asian American women writers' diasporic tradition rather than the postcolonial tradition of Sri Lankan women writers who write in English. Ganeshanathan does not contest the colonial traditions or the colonial heritage as her contemporary postcolonial writers from Sri Lanka do, but charts an American identity and the American search for identity similar to that of her contemporary South Asian writers from across America. Instead of contesting her colonial traditions and establishing her national identity, Ganeshanathan's narrative, expressed through Yalini's voice, strives for a unique ethnic identity that marks it as different, thus establishing Yalini's “difference” as a narrator and Ganeshanathan's inclusion in the contemporary South Asian American women writers' canon and establishing her stance as a Sri Lankan women writer from the diaspora.

Love Marriage further asserts the heterogeneity of women characters by portraying different individuals from the same ethno-social community, and with the same traditional affiliations. Depicting Janani and Yalini as extreme individuals, one dedicated to her past and handed-down beliefs and the other striving to find herself, while navigating her heritage and present, enables Ganeshanathan to shed light on

³⁷ See works of Sri Lankan Anglophone women writers such as Punyakante Wijenaike, Yasmine Gooneratne and diasporic authors Karen Roberts, Chandani Lokuge for their exploration of Sri Lankan settings, postcolonial identity and nostalgia.

how women's agency changes with choices. Janani's past— with her involvement with the LTTE and her rebellious stance towards her ethnic identity and its entitlements — is contrasted with the privileged, diasporic and distanced ethnic identity of Yalini throughout the narrative. Both the women choose their own paths, Janani through her marriage, and Yalini through her renewed interest in her Tamil identity and her re-asserted hybrid identity. Their choices enable them to assert their “difference” to each other, as the cultural other and as distinct individuals. The individualised depictions of Sri Lankan Tamil women also reverse the homogeneous Sri Lankan identity or the ethnic identity usually ascribed to women characters in diasporic literature, as Sinhalese women or as Sri Lankan individuals with anglicised Sri Lankan identities, and bring to light individual concerns that aid in the development of diverse characters, especially within diasporic locations.

Thousand *broken* mirrors to reflect ethnic individuality

The curious development over these few recent decades is that Orientalism is no longer only the relationship of the dominance and representation of the Oriental by the non-Oriental or Occidental, but that this role appears to have been taken over (in part at least) by other Orientals, namely, the diasporic authors [...] Diasporic South Asian writers are in a position of power and dominance, particularly where the issue of literary representation and image construction is concerned.³⁸

³⁸ Lisa Lau, “Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals,” *Modern Asian Studies* 43:2 (2009): 572. I am using the terms Orient and Occident in relation to Lau's interpretation, despite the terms' loaded meanings.

Lisa Lau's argument concerning the Re-Orientalism by the Orientals especially in the fiction of South Asian American women involves overt stereotypes and generalisations and thus needs to be critically analysed and discussed.³⁹ Lau's generalised claim of diasporic women authors' depiction of the east, because of their position of power in the diaspora is not as linear as she portrays. Diasporic women authors' image construction and literary representation are not solely based on their position of power in the diaspora, but are dependent on their class and socio-ethnic positioning that reflect their native/ethnic power positions. But despite the shortcomings in Lau's analysis, the analysis provides an essential springboard to the examination of Sri Lankan American women's fiction, especially that of Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012). Munaweera's debut novel, which was long listed for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2012, explores the inter-ethnic communal ties and the ethnic war that ravaged Sri Lanka for nearly three decades through the trope of an inter-ethnic romance, and for the first time in Sri Lankan American women's fiction, through the eyes of an expatriate Sinhalese American narrator. The plot develops parallel to the development of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka but the narrative traces Sri Lanka's colonial history from the time the British colonisers left the Island in 1948. The careful tracing of history and detailed documentation of historically important political and ethnic developments make Munaweera's novel become another addition to the re-Orientalist project that

³⁹ This analysis will be done in the latter part of this section where Lau's positioning of re-Orientalism will be critically analysed via Minoli Salgado's critical interpretation of the same theory and my analysis of Nayomi Munaweera's position within the discourse on re-Orientalism.

Lau criticises South Asian writers of, as an overt attempt at representing the Oriental to the Occident, by an Oriental.

In the following section, I argue that Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is not merely a diasporic writer's representation of the east to the west, through the use of "power and dominance" as a South Asian American woman writer, but is a much more subtle rendition of South Asian American identity and "difference" as a Sri Lankan American woman writer. Munaweera's own multiple geographic and ethnic locations, as a Sri Lankan who grew up in Nigeria and migrated to America, play an important role in her novel's development. Her Sri Lankan identity is evident in her plot and its deep concerns with the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and its various repercussions in the ethnic and personal relations among Sri Lankans. Her geographic dislocations to Nigeria and America are pronounced in her narrator Yasodhara's reactions and observations as a new immigrant in America. The sense of immigrant displacement both in physical spaces and imaginary and real identities is keenly observed and represented in Yasodhara's narrative, thus making *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* the first Sri Lankan American woman's narrative that explores the geographic location of the Sinhalese diaspora in America. As discussed above, Ganeshananthan discusses the Tamil diaspora in America and Canada, while Mary Anne Mohanraj, an American writer of Sri Lankan origin, explores the diasporic lives of Tamils in America through her short stories. None of the contemporary Sinhalese American women writers have discussed the diasporic population or the diasporic locations of Sri Lankan Sinhalese in America previous to this. Karen Roberts and Ru Freeman, both writing from the US, have chosen Sri

Lanka as their sites of narrative location in their contemporary fiction. Roberts' acclaimed *The Lament of the Dhobi Woman* (2010) presents the trials of an upper-class young woman, Cat, coming to terms with the lack of motherly affection in her life and the surrogate mother-daughter relationship that develops between Cat and her ayah. Freeman's novels, *A Disobedient Girl* (2012) and *On Sal Mal Lane* (2013), both trace the lives of Sinhalese families and *On Sal Mal Lane* further analyses the ethnic violence of 1983. The Mother-daughter dyads explored in these fiction and the Sri Lankan settings replete with urban landscapes and rural nostalgia make them stand apart from Munaweera's novel on Sri Lankan diasporic experiences. Thus in a lacuna of Sri Lankan Sinhalese diasporic representation in fiction, by women authors, Munaweera's novel strives to voice the neglected representation of Sri Lankan Sinhalese, with diasporic affiliations to America, through her novel.

It is 1948 and the last British ships slip away from the island of Ceylon [...] groaning under the weight of purloined treasure. [J]ewel encrusted thrones of Kandyan kings, the weapons of Chola warriors, priceless texts in Pali and Sanskrit, Sinhala and Tamil.⁴⁰

Island of a Thousand Mirrors begins with these lines, setting in context the shared history of the Tamils and the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka and the shared history of discrimination and injustice suffered by both factions under colonial rule. But despite the seeming inclusivity of Sri Lanka's pre-colonial and colonial history, the positioning of Sinhalese and Tamils charts the themes for the rest of the narrative: an exploration of Sinhala and Tamil ethnic relations in Sri Lanka despite their outward

⁴⁰ Nayomi Munaweera, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (Colombo: Perera Hussein, 2012) 9.

differences and diverse ethno-national affiliations, to Kandyan kings and Chola warriors. The “stylized lion” on the new nation’s flag which dominates the flag, relegating the “orange stripe” to the margins, and the inception of a new flag born out of dissatisfaction with the representation, replacing the lion with a “snarling tiger”⁴¹ that is already hinted at in the beginning of the narrative, give ample hints about the progression of the narrative. The ethnic conflict that escalated after the departure of the colonisers, which resulted in the creation of the alternative flag with a “snarling tiger,” is thus made into the main theme of the narrative at the beginning of the novel, leaving no questions about Munaweera’s need to establish her “difference” and her “power... [in relation to] literary representation and image construction.”⁴² Thus, as Lau has argued elsewhere,⁴³ in relation to South Asian women writers and their contemporary fiction, Munaweera too establishes herself as an “authentic insider” in relating the story of Sri Lanka’s ethnic riots and three decade-long ethnic war. The power of commanding an audience other than Sri Lankans because of her geographic location in America and her use of English as the language of the novel makes Munaweera fit into the category of a re-Orientalist because she is writing about the east, for an outside audience. But instead of being a simple re-Orientalist, the novelist negotiates gender and ethnic identities, too, through her novel, therefore making the novel a new addition to the existing canon of South Asian American women’s writing where ethnic and gender identities are negotiated vis-à-vis the diasporic identities of the South Asians in America.

⁴¹ Munaweera, *op.cit*, 10.

⁴² Lau, *op.cit*, 572.

⁴³ Lau, “Making the Difference,” *op.cit*, 241.

Critiquing Lau's re-Orientalism, Minoli Salgado points out that "[a]lternative hierarchies — of gender, language, community and class [...] that fracture and unsettle any easy opposition between the diasporic and national subject need to be addressed"⁴⁴ in Lau's claims of re-Orientalism by diasporic South Asian American women writers. Lau's criticism, on diasporic authors essentialises their power and outsider position, according the diasporic writers an authority of power. But as Salgado argues, there is no acknowledgement of the subtle power hierarchies and other socio-cultural positionings of the diasporic authors in Lau's criticism thus making it an insufficient argument to validate the cultural otherness explored by the diasporic authors. As I will argue, subtle class positions and spatial locations of the narrators enable Munaweera's novel to analyse understated power hierarchies among insiders and outsiders, both within Sri Lanka and in the diaspora. *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* negotiates these class, community and gender hierarchies embedded in Sri Lankan society to break away from being categorised into a re-Orientalist narrative. While most of the narrative in the novel is from the perspective of an upper-class Sinhala girl/woman, in the latter parts of the novel, the narrative focus shifts from Colombo-born, diasporic Sinhalese female Yasodhara to a Jaffna-centred Tamil woman, Saraswathi. The hierarchy between the ethnic groups, from the affluent to the war-ravaged, is pronounced in the second narrator Saraswathi's section. There is no easy opposition between the west and the east in the novel; rather, it is an opposition between the majority and minority within the east and then,

⁴⁴ Minoli Salgado, "The New Cartographies of Re-Orientalism," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46: 2 (June 2011): 207.

as the narrative progresses, the opposition between the western-influenced minority represented by Yasodhara and her sister, Lanka, and the rest of the Sri Lanka.

The novel traces the families of an Ayurvedic doctor from the south of Sri Lanka and an Oxford-returned judge from Colombo — both Sinhalese. They form the Sinhalese upper-class background of Yasodhara. The Tamil protagonist, Saraswathi, is from a traditional family background where the mother teaches Bharata Natyam⁴⁵ and the physically frail and deformed father plays drums at the Hindu temple. Both the Sinhala families enjoy easy access to power and have children who reach higher social status either through education or marriage. Nishan, the son of the Ayurvedic doctor who becomes an engineer through hard work, marries the youngest daughter of the judge, Visakha. Their union results in the birth of Yasodhara, the main Sinhalese narrator of the novel. Given Yasodhara's family background and that she grows up in the heart of Colombo, her perspectives are biased because of her class and community positions within Sri Lankan society. Thus, by creating a principal narrator who functions within class and community hierarchies, Munaweera destabilises the claims to Re-Orientalism but creates a more nuanced meaning of class and community through her plot. The other narrator, Saraswathi, represents the Tamils in Sri Lanka and is based in Jaffna, the northern parts of Sri Lanka. She is an embodiment of Tamil culture and values as perceived by the Other: the Sinhalese. Saraswathi learns to dance Bharata Natyam, has long hair and wears flowers in it, and when violated by the Sinhalese soldiers, joins the LTTE movement to get revenge. Saraswathi thus is the Other, not to the west or western

⁴⁵ A classical form of dance that originated in the temples of Tamil Nadu, India.

values but to the Sinhalese and the urban Colombo-dwelling Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. The easy opposition that Lau analyses between the diasporic and the national subjects thus gets destabilised because there are more layers to the Oriental discourse with which Munaweera's text attempts to engage.

Munaweera's narrative is full of ethno-social details of the Sri Lankan society. The importance of the Ayurvedic doctor's name change which was carried out with "[a] handsome bribe to replace his family name, Aposinghe, with its fishy associations and marketplace odors, [... to] escape the limitations of fate to win both medical training and wife,"⁴⁶ is described succinctly, enabling insiders to understand the nuances of caste consciousness associated with the name change. The same information distinguishes the "difference" between other South Asian American writing and Sri Lankan American women's writing, especially by Munaweera. The caste consciousness that is not too deeply embedded in Sri Lankan society but which is still a marker of distinction to compel an Aposinghe to change into a "princely sounding Rajasinghe"⁴⁷ is thus revealed with only a slight criticism attached. The criticism is made apparent later, because despite belonging to a low-caste family, by the time Nishan seeks out marriage, he is accepted because of his profession as an engineer and caste consciousness is banished. Through these subtle changes recorded in the narrative, Munaweera is able to chart the changing social values in Sri Lankan society from the pre-colonial days to the postcolonial beginnings of a period of ethnic conflict. The caste consciousness of the society is replaced by the ethnic wariness of each other in the ensuing postcolonial, post-independence days in Sri

⁴⁶ Munaweera, *op.cit*, 14.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Lanka. When the judge's wife Sylvia Sunethra rents out the upstairs of her house to a Tamil family some years before the ethnic riots of 1983, she complains of "[B]loody Tamil buggers [...]" This is our land! Anything that grows on it belongs to us. They should keep their fingers off our things,"⁴⁸ in relation to her tenants' access to her mango tree. But through Sylvia Sunethra's rant, the author is able to echo the growing sentiments of the Sinhalese in post-independence Sri Lanka. The idea of land and the Sinhalese sense of entitlement to it, perpetrated by Sinhalese politicians, was being repeated by the masses, much like Sylvia Sunethra, during these pre-ethnic conflict days, hinting at the ethnic unrest yet to happen. Munaweera is able to hint at the impending ethnic breach through the anti-Tamil sentiments of Sylvia Sunethra who claims to "embrace change and progress,"⁴⁹ much like the other Sinhalese elites at the time but only on the surface.

The insider's knowledge is further displayed through the descriptions and interest in the ethnic riots of July 1983 and the ensuing ethnic conflict. But Munaweera's narrative differs from many other ethnic conflict-related plots because she is able to describe the riots from the perspective of a child narrator, Yasodhara, who is from an affluent, sheltered, Sinhalese family background. Yasodhara's narrative, complete with extensive details of rioting, by the lower-classes, without any logic or care for the value of human lives, is also biased because of her ethnic affiliations and class hierarchies. She is able to record the majority sentiments of the Sinhala urban population to the Tamil youth uprising that led to the three decade-long ethnic conflict and the establishment of the LTTE. The youth leader, who later

⁴⁸ Munaweera, *op.cit*, 38, 39.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 39.

becomes the militant leader of the LTTE, “speaks of splitting the island, he speaks of a Tamil homeland. People scoff, ‘rag tag boys armed with sticks and stones [...] who does this kid think he is? A bell-bottomed Elara?’”⁵⁰ The reference to the historical King Elara⁵¹ – a Chola king, who is recorded in history to have been a just ruler – who invaded and ruled the northern parts of Sri Lanka is representative of her insider’s knowledge. The bias of the Sinhala urban elites, as well as the reaction to the emerging ethnic awareness as displayed through violence, is presented through Yasodhara’s narrative. The majority Sinhala sentiments, especially of the non-elite masses against the Tamils and the Jaffna “rag tag boys,” are not reflected through Yasodhara because she is not representative of the masses but of the minority among the masses: the elite urban dwellers. Thus, Yasodhara’s reaction to the 1983 riots and the preceding burning of the Jaffna library is the astonishment of a bystander. When Shiva, her Tamil childhood friend from the house upstairs, confronts her, “[y]our people burned our history’ [,she] stare[s] at him, not knowing what to say”⁵² because the erupting ethnic violence is alien to her in her language, class and community’s hierarchical society. Thus, though Yasodhara’s narrative highlights the “difference” in Munaweera’s novel against that of Ganeshananthan’s *Love Marriage* in terms of Sinhalese voices and perspectives, it also talks about the binaries between the

⁵⁰ Munaweera, *op.cit*, 70.

⁵¹ King Elara ruled parts of Sri Lanka from 205 BC to 161 BC, but was conquered by King Dutugemunu who is recorded to have unified the country under a single ruler for the first time after a long period of invasive rulers from South India in parts of Sri Lanka. Chronicles of Mahawamsa (of Sri Lankan ancient history and kings) records that even King Dutugemunu respected King Elara because of his just rule and wise reign by erecting a monument in memory of him on the spot where he was slain in battle.

⁵² Munaweera, *op.cit*, 76.

majority and minority sentiments within the Sri Lankan community, making it more than a simple insider-outsider narrative of Sri Lankan American writing.

Yasodhara's family, the representative of the majority ethnic community in the narrative, decides to emigrate after the 1983 July riots. Though the Tamil tenants from the house upstairs also disappear and introduce a temporary estrangement to Yasodhara's and Shiva's relationship, the conscious decision of the Sinhalese urban upper-class family to migrate to America in search of safety and security away from the ethnic violence marks a unique change, especially in comparison to the narratives of Shyam Selvadurai and Karen Roberts, where the marginalised, and never the representatives of the majority, always flee the country in search of security. The immigrant experience and the diaspora's reactions to the ethnic war are contrasted with Saraswathi's experience of living amidst the war. In her host country as an immigrant, Yasodhara "learn[s] that in America even the most familiar objects have previously unimagined manifestations"⁵³ and she and her family "learn the lesson of [their] inadequacies"⁵⁴ and "lessons about shame learned by watching eyes."⁵⁵ Their shame comes from being relegated to the position of the outsider by their host community in America who cannot understand their culture, practices and communal and ethnic hierarchies in Sri Lanka. They are forced to negotiate the place of the minority by deciding to leave their majority position in Sri Lanka in search of security and safety. Saraswathi, on the other hand, is forced to negotiate the minority position imposed on her by the raging ethnic conflict in her own country and because

⁵³ Munaweera, *op.cit*, 103.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 110.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 111.

of her ethnicity, which positions her into a lower stratum in the ethnic hierarchy of the Island. Munaweera thus explores the differences between being the insider and the outsider from diverse perspectives, destabilising the binaries of Lau's Re-Orientalism.

Munaweera's exploration of ethnic binaries both within and outside Sri Lanka enables her to differentiate herself and her fiction's identity while the strong focus on women in the narrative makes her a part of the South Asian American women's writing tradition. As Shirley Geok-lin Lim has argued, in relation to Asian American literature in general, Munaweera, too, uses both the trope of the victimised female who is subjected to the rules of patriarchy and the disempowered male figures in the narrative that in turn empower the female narrators and their narratives.⁵⁶ Earlier in the novel, neither the Ayurvedic doctor nor the judge is named but their wives are named and individualised, respectively as Beatrice Muriel and Sylvia Sunethra. Visakha, Yasodhara's mother, is contemptuous towards her husband and it is Yasodhara who decides to break her marriage to her unfaithful husband who was chosen for her by her parents, taking control of her life and deciding for herself. Saraswathi, when raped by Sinhala soldiers, finds the strength to kill and murder her ethnic Other by joining the LTTE and becoming a suicide bomber. Saraswathi's father is a frail, old man with a crippled leg while her mother is the person she turns for strength. Even the Leader of the Movement, who is a male figure, is never named. Even though Saraswathi believes him to be her hidden strength, he becomes the agent of violence in her nightmares: "nightly it is not the soldiers who rip me

⁵⁶ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories in Asian American Literature," *Feminist Studies* 19:3 (Autumn 1993): 580.

apart, but our Leader himself.”⁵⁷ The Leader is turned into a violator because of his initiation of the chain of action that ultimately led to Saraswathi’s rape. The Leader thus becomes a culprit in an indirect way, losing his importance, and that in turn makes Saraswathi into a strong woman capable of defying her perpetrators, both direct and indirect. Saraswathi is forced to leave behind her feminine ways and the gentle grace of her dancing and her dreams because of the war, initiated by patriarchy and represented by the Leader and the soldiers. Hence, patriarchy and patriarchal order have been the reasons for Saraswathi’s loss of innocence and the subsequent loss of individual identity, because she is forced to become another violated woman, seeking vengeance after her rape and entry into the LTTE. Because of these events, Saraswathi subconsciously replaces the outward reverence towards the Leader with hatred towards her violators and dominators. In Saraswathi’s dreams, therefore, patriarchy is once again rendered powerless and despised, because of its instigation of violence and restrictions towards women. In the end, Saraswathi chooses to make her own decisions by sacrificing her own self, as a statement against both power hierarchies and, in an indirect way, the patriarchy that was responsible for her loss of individuality and freedom.

After being subjected to the male power and patriarchal order, both Yasodhara and Saraswathi decide the course of their own lives, thus rendering the male disempowered. Yasodhara decides the course of her own life, while Saraswathi becomes empowered through her death, in which she makes her body a weapon by becoming a suicide bomber. The violations committed on her body thus get reversed

⁵⁷ Munaweera, *op. cit.*, 179.

by the violations committed through her body. Shiva, who re-enters Yasodhara's life when Lanka comes to Sri Lanka to contribute to the rehabilitation of the war-ravaged country, is rendered non-powerful amidst the discourse of women that negotiates identitarian spaces and ethnic, communal and national spaces. Lanka's death, which is caused by Saraswathi's suicide bombing attempt in Colombo connects the varied narratives from different hierarchies together, thus rendering the majority and minority binaries and class divisions futile in the narrative of ethno-national identities. At the end of the narrative Yasodhara returns to her marginal existence in the diaspora in America amidst other diasporic individuals, but reinvents her twofold national identity through her relationship with Shiva. The ethnic coalition between the majority and the minority in Sri Lanka is both rendered marginal and diasporic through their "Other" state as the immigrants in America. Samudra, the daughter of Yasodhara and Shiva, becomes the new identity that is as seamless as her name denotes: the ocean, where neither the majority nor the minority ethnic hierarchies of the homeland, nor the insider-outsider discourse of the diaspora, are valid. Samudra is a combination of both the majority-minority ethno-national discourses of Sri Lanka as well as the new diasporic subject who recognises America as her homeland, thus having no marginal complex.

Island of a Thousand Mirrors analyses myriad ways of identifying ethno-national identities both within and outside Sri Lanka, exploring the diasporic affiliations and interests in Sri Lanka and its ethnic war through references to Sri Lankan Americans through Yasodhara and her family and friends. They are the spectators of a civil war in the Island they left behind physically but still carry within.

They “watch this war from a distance, as spectators [and] do not have the privilege of indignation or anxiety.”⁵⁸ The physical distance and the guilt of being away from all the suffering in the country makes the diaspora overzealous in their attempts to compensate for their own comforts. “That island is our motherland. We owe it to her to help her in her time of trouble. This money will help keep kids from becoming orphans. It will keep people alive,”⁵⁹ rallies Yasodhara’s uncle, trying to gather the only strength and help they can offer from their place as the diaspora. Lanka decides to return to Sri Lanka because “[I]t is what [she] can give”⁶⁰ to help the country that she left behind in its time of need. This diasporic guilt in being privileged to be away from suffering and the channelling of that guilt into different actions of coming back, to add their strength to the country in need (as they perceive it) and the attempts to financially compensate for their lack of presence, is finely captured through the reactions of Yasodhara’s family and friends in the novel. Munaweera does not attempt to depict the everyday lives of people in Sri Lanka in the non-combat zones because she is unable to capture the essence of everyday normality of those people from her diasporic position. But she presents the diasporic guilt carried by the Sri Lankans living in other lands. The guilt-induced charity and the exoticised otherness created by distance, among the diasporic Sri Lankans, due to their unfamiliarity with the everyday situations created by the war, are explored subtly through Yasodhara’s uncle’s reactions. Western media representations of the war they left behind, and the heightened awareness of all the atrocities committed during such periods, make the

⁵⁸ Munaweera, *op.cit*,117.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*,121.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*,169.

diasporic Sri Lankans to be more sensitive towards ethno-national identities. Munaweera captures these nuanced, ethno-national loyalties, through her depiction of the lives of Sri Lankans living away from the war in her novel.

Her narrative is thus from a diasporic location exploring diasporic sensibilities and beliefs. War is portrayed from the perspective of people engaged in the war and not from the perspective of the people leading everyday lives amidst the war. The diaspora's reactions to the war are fashioned on the news items and reports of the war gleaned from their relatives and friends from Sri Lanka. Therefore, the diasporic reactions to the war are stronger and more intense than that of the people living in and amidst the war. Hence, *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* explores the "difference" between the diasporic sensitivities to the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and the difference between the two ethnic groups in their engagement in the war from extreme locations: from the war zone and the guilt-ridden diasporic locations. None of the *mirrors*, from Sri Lanka or the diasporic locations, reflects the true sensibilities or the reactions of the masses. They are *broken*, as Rushdie had pointed out in *Imaginary Homelands*,⁶¹ because Munaweera is creating a narrative based on the broken fragments that her narrators gather from their different positions and the ones she constructs as a writer from a diasporic location. The simple Orient and Occident dichotomy explored in Lau's article is also problematised through Munaweera's rendition of diverse forms of difference explored through her novel. Further, Munaweera's treatment of gender and sexual differences in her narrative subjects also destabilises the exotic marginality of the postcolonial writers as examined by

⁶¹ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991) 9.

Graham Huggan, where he argues that self-exoticised marginality becomes a tool for marketing one's difference to the west.⁶² Instead of creating an exotic marginality, Munaweera's use of individual women characters in opposing ethnic environments establishes independent women characters who work beyond mere commodification of differences. As Ana M. Dias Martins argues in "Gender and the postcolonial exotic," the use of "gender and sexual difference strategically [work to] counter, in situated contexts, global as well as local patterns of commodification of cultural difference."⁶³ The use of powerful women, explored within the context of ethnic war and other ethno-national strife in Sri Lanka, counter the stereotyped gender definitions and ethnic characteristics in the novel, thus defying ethno-national commodification of postcolonial texts, from Sri Lanka. Therefore, Munaweera's use of powerful female characters and the "difference" of inter-ethnic relations too, counter the expected and established patterns of Re-Orientalism. The differences created by Munaweera establish a Sri Lankan identity and a specific Sri Lankan American identity for her novel *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*. The novel's deliberate move away from home narratives which are located in Sri Lanka and concerned with micro-concerns of class consciousness within upper-class families, and surrogate mother relationships between ayahs and their charges, places the novel within the tradition of contemporary South Asian American women's writing, which explores Sri Lankan American diasporic sensibilities with larger concerns of ethno-national identitarian politics.

⁶²Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁶³ Ana Margarida Dias Martins, "Gender and the 'postcolonial exotic'," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48:1 (Mar. 2013): 150.

Conclusion

As Lau argues, the representations of South Asia, of South Asian culture, and particularly of South Asian women by the women writers – representations which emphasise and explore the sensitivities, mindsets, expectations, characteristics of South Asian women – are being largely created from without South Asia by the diasporic writers, and imposed upon South Asia as representative of their identity, or at least, a significant part of their identity construction.⁶⁴

Both Ganeshanathan and Munaweera, whose novels were discussed in this chapter, write and publish from diasporic locations, thus constructing identities for Sri Lankan women away from Sri Lanka. But instead of creating identities for South Asian women that are imposed on them, and make them construct their identities based on these pre-formed identities, both the novelists allow individuals to emerge through cultural practices and norms. The authors' access to transnational travel, cosmopolitan worlds, publication and a wider reading audience aids in their dissemination of Sri Lankan characters, created through their fiction. As Ruvani Ranasinha argues, the “*location* of publishing continues to have a considerable impact”⁶⁵ on diasporic Sri Lankan authors who are “willing to engage with politics and explore Sri Lanka’s past in order to understand, rather than simply rehearse its

⁶⁴ Lau, “Re-Orientalism,” *op.cit.*, 574.

⁶⁵ Ruvani Ranasinha, “Writing and Reading Sri Lanka: Shifting politics of cultural translation, consumption, and the implied reader,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48:1 (Mar. 2013): 35.

conflicted present.”⁶⁶ While their diasporic locations prompt better chances at international critical attention, the engagement with socio-political developments in Sri Lanka gain them the English-speaking readership’s attention from Sri Lanka. Thus their fictional identities and narratives cater not only to the uninformed, but also to the insiders, who are curious to learn of their ethnic Other. The depiction of wronged and thus rebellious young Tamil girls, young upper-middle class Sinhalese women and their negotiation of ethnic and individual identities depicted in these fiction create sometimes generalised, but for most parts distinctive, female characters with strong Sri Lankan affiliations. But instead of creating a common Sri Lankan identity, both the novelists employ ethno-social details to form unique female characters that represent ethnic groups as well as fashion their own individual identities because of their diasporic locations and exposures. Ganeshananthan’s characters assert and establish their Tamil identities through their references and adherences to Jaffna and by reverting to traditional food and practices. Janani’s wedding takes place in Canada, but is attended by women dressed in sarees, and the traditions are adhered to. Even when the wedding hall is set afire, they rebuild and decorate it, to reflect their traditions in the left-behind land of Jaffna. Yasodhara’s first marriage is an arranged marriage conducted through “[t]he Great Husband Hunt”⁶⁷ that matches their left-behind values of horoscopes, caste and social status. Thus, while these authors invoke stereotypes and ethnic identities through their characters, either believed or perceived by the west or by the east, through their

⁶⁶ Ranasinha, *op.cit*, 36.

⁶⁷ Munaweera, *op.cit*, 156.

novels to highlight their “difference” as writers from Sri Lanka, they also establish individual characters that represent different ethnic groups from Sri Lanka.

Love Marriage and *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* further explore how the larger social concerns of being in the diaspora can create new Sri Lankan identities that value ethnic affiliations, but are still influenced by liberal attitudes. Rajani is the new voice of the new Sri Lankan identity who believes being responsible for the mistakes of her parents’ generation is not her duty. Rajani and Yalini both accept their new selves, which can embrace ethno-national traditions, but retain the critical distance to discuss and critique the same customs. Lanka and Yasodhara both can look at their ethnic Other and rationalise about their ethnic differences and even about the violent outcomes of being discriminated. Even though Yasodhara’s ethnic acceptance culminates in a clichéd marriage to the Other, her ethnic awareness allows her to understand the role her own ethnic group played in the three decades of war. Thus, the critical distance accorded through diasporic locations and transnational travel enables the women characters to develop cosmopolitan identities that look beyond ethno-social affiliations to a broader humanist tradition of acceptance. Their recognition of their own “difference” aids them in the creation of these new identities.

Both Ganeshanathan and Munaweera subvert the stereotypes by making their women characters become visible and central in the plot despite their roles as young women representing ethnic groups. Ganeshanathan’s Yalini is not the stereotypical member of the Tamil diaspora in America and Canada simply because of her parents’ ethnicity, but she is also the embodiment of the

west's rational thinking, because she becomes the omnipresent voice that is capable of analysing Kumaran's military stance towards a separate state. She is "the only Sri Lankan"⁶⁸ amongst all the other Americans, but she is not *only Sri Lankan*. She is both Sri Lankan and American. She is not a simple traditional woman embodying her ethnic traditions and culture. Munaweera's Yasodhara is also similar to Yalini in her American identity. She is Sri Lankan Sinhalese in some of her nostalgic recollections of the Island left behind, her adherence to traditional beliefs and her acceptance of the traditional marriage to the person her parents approved and found for her. Despite her liberal attitude to life, these choices signify her need to be convention-abidingly Sri Lankan. But at the same time, she is American because she is able to distance herself from the ethnic conflict and do her part in the diaspora, thinking from a diasporic angle. She becomes the benefactor to the war-ravaged groups rather than negotiating the ravages of war. The reversal of the stereotype is in Lanka who decides to come and live in Sri Lanka despite her privileged position as an expatriate and in Yasodhara's decision to leave the country for the second time. But Munaweera, too, subverts the stereotypes by instilling individual choices into her characters, while working within the ethno-national stereotypes in her fiction.

Both Ganeshanathan and Munaweera use the prominent trope of women's voices in their novels to bring forth the silent strength of women characters in their novels. Yalini's narrative is punctuated by the recollections of her family members. Their forgotten memories find an outlet through Yalini's narrative, and especially Kumaran's voice is accepted and made legitimate, through Yalini. The re-telling of

⁶⁸ Ganeshanathan, *op.cit.*, 19.

personal histories, through the younger generation, previously explored through Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* (2000) becomes applicable in Yalini's narrative as well. But instead of re-narrating memories, passed on to her, Yalini appropriates and analyses the personal experiences of her family and relatives, passed onto her, to map her future and her place in her larger diasporic community of Sri Lankan Tamils. Munaweera, in contrast, uses the alternating voices of two very different young women to draw the ethnic differences and the varied influences and perspectives on the same ethnic war. The alternating voices, a popular trope that has been used in other Asian and South Asian American women's writing, enables Munaweera to portray both the ethnic communities, despite using stereotypes to present the Other, the Tamil militant. Both the writers use deliberate ethnic markers, such as traditions, ethnic terms and most importantly dominant ethno-social perspectives on the ethnic conflict to differentiate their narratives, and the individual identities that are formed for the young women, in their novels.

These novels analyse and present Sri Lanka from Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil perspectives, highlighting the ethnic affiliations of the characters more than their national affiliations. Munaweera insists on analysing the family names and urban locations of her characters to establish their personalities and ethnic affiliations. Sinhalese characters are urban and upper middle-class with Anglophone backgrounds while the Tamil characters are given generic and as-perceived-by-the-Other stereotypical characteristics. These generalisations as well as stereotyped ethnic identities make these novels one-sided narratives that are unable to bring out a common Sri Lankan identity, but only bring out a Sri Lankan Sinhalese or Tamil

ethnic identity. The same ethnicised identities created through these novels make them a part of the contemporary South Asian American women's fiction, which discard pan-regional or pan-national identities in place of ethno-social identities that enable the women characters to re-imagine their individual identities.

As C. Vijayasree argues with regard to Indian women writers settled in the west, the “three central concerns in the writings of expatriate women – exile, journey and sexuality”⁶⁹ are explored by the novelists discussed in this chapter as well. The journeys symbolise their acceptance of their own selves and, at the same time, make them the proverbial exiles who need to travel away to find their individual identity. Both Yalini and Yasodhara take the journeys, physically from one country to another as well as metaphorically, through memories, both their own and inherited, to fashion their identities. The negotiation of their sexualities, either in understanding gender dictates of socio-ethnic hierarchies or in search of desires, fuels their journeys of finding themselves. Thus the Sri Lankan American women authors, too, conform to the existing traditions that are explored by Indian women authors settled in the west. While the narrative structures retain the same women-focused plots and female narrative voices, the central concerns, too, remain the same, thus making them part of the larger network of Anglophone writers from the Indian subcontinent.

As Arjun Appadurai argues, in relation to the disjunctures in the global cultural flow, the idea of the “ethnoscape” of “imagined worlds” is used by Ganeshananthan and Munaweera, too, to recreate an “imagined world” as diasporic

⁶⁹ C. Vijayasree, “Alter- Nativity, Migration, Marginality and Narrator: The case of Indian women writers settled in the West,” *Shifting Continents/ Colliding Cultures: Diaspora Writing of the Indian Subcontinent*, eds. Ralph J.Crane, Radhika Mohanram (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000) 125.

writers.⁷⁰ Munaweera draws upon the urban “ethnospace” inhabited by the Sinhalese upper-middle class to recreate an imagined world. Yalini’s imagined Jaffna embodied in her name and her family history becomes her “imagined space” through which she searches for her identity. While Colombo, the urban space, becomes an imagined space through which the pre-1983 ethnic harmony is brought out in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, Yalini’s Jaffna is a collection of fond memories by the people who left it in the early parts of 1980s or even before that. Neither Colombo nor Jaffna as spaces in the novel captures the present, and thus they become imagined spaces. Furthermore, the ethnic exclusivity of the recalled communities creates ethno-social spaces, within the narratives that explore distinct ethnic affiliations, without the added disruption of incorporation of differences, except in controlled additions, such as in the case of Shiva’s family, the intended cricket match between the soldiers of Sri Lanka Army and the Tamil school boys and Yalini’s oldest uncle Neelan’s marriage to “the Enemy [...the] Sinhalese intruder in a Tamil family.”⁷¹

In his analysis of the use of history, Lowenthal propounds that “we mourn worlds known to be irrevocably lost — yet more vividly felt, more lucid, more real than the murky and ambiguous present.”⁷² The ethnic riots that signalled the beginning of ethnic violence and war in Sri Lanka for three decades become the most important point of reference for both the novelists because of its association with the

⁷⁰Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” *Theorizing Diaspora*, eds. Jana Evans Braziel, Anita Mannur (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) 31.

⁷¹ Ganesananthan, *op.cit.*, 132, 180.

⁷²David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past; the heritage crusade and the spoils of history* (New York: The Free Press, 1996) xi

end of an era. The riots always become a point of reference to establish ethnic identities and to describe the Other, especially for the diasporic writers. The world before the riots is “irrevocably lost” and thus the writers “mourn” the loss of innocence and supposed ethnic harmony of the pre-1983 era through their novels, writing from diasporic locations. Their diasporic locations make it impossible for them to know the present, especially from within Sri Lanka; thus, they revert to the lost yet “more vividly felt” past rather than the “ambiguous present” in their narratives.

Munaweera’s depiction of Sinhalese mothers and their power within and outside family relations in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is in sharp contrast to Ganeshananthan’s *Love Marriage* which explores the strong patriarchal leanings within the Tamil society. Nevertheless, only the nominal power of the father figure is examined by Ganeshananthan and the power of the father in the narrative is always overridden by the quiet power of the mother, who is able to achieve her wishes because her husband’s love towards her makes him give in to her wishes. While Yalini’s father is visible and is at least a nominal power figure, neither he nor the uncle, Kumaran, plays a central role in the development of the women’s decision-making or development. Yasodhara’s father is depicted only as a figurehead while it is the women in her family who propel the narrative forward. Even Saraswathi’s father is made into a powerless, physically deformed person, denying him any authority or power. Thus, except for Ganeshananthan’s depiction of male figures, who have some form of, even if nominal, authority, the other characters become spokespersons for a feminist discourse within the women’s writing tradition.

‘Home’ often carries a heavy ideological weight for the Asian American woman writer, who, in common with other ethnic or diasporic writers, may have undergone a separation from the ancestral homeland. In many texts the idea of the homeland looms large in the search for identity, whether it is an actual remembered site, or a mythologised location.⁷³

Helena Grice’s analysis on the importance of home as an ideological space for negotiating identities is not only true for Asian American women’s writing. The same can be argued for the site of “home” in Sri Lankan American women writers’ fiction as well. Home, embodied through the narrative space of Sri Lanka, the Island destroyed because of the ethnic war, becomes the location for Munaweera to base her narratives in search of identity. The invocation of the past and her recollection is more rooted in history. Even though her narrative is partially biased, because of its main focus on an urban Sinhalese woman, and partially constructed, because she is catering to the majority belief of a LTTE cadre through Saraswathi, the “homeland” she recalls is what is remembered by the diaspora. It does not provide enough insights into the everyday lives of the Sri Lankans, except for the otherised details of Sri Lankan life, to make it a Sri Lankan narrative. Even Ganeshanathan’s Yalini recalls a “homeland” through the memories of her dying uncle and it becomes a “mythologised location” which is lived through memory.

⁷³ Helena Grice, *Negotiating Identities: An introduction to Asian American women’s writing* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002) 200.

Xiaomei Chen argues that “women’s texts are in effect dialogues even within the formations which seek to exclude or marginalise them,”⁷⁴ in her analysis of Amy Tan’s and Zhang Jie’s use of women’s space in their novels. This analysis of Chinese literature is relevant to Sri Lankan American women’s literature too. The Sri Lankan women writers discussed in this chapter try to negotiate the margins that are visible and sometimes hidden but prevalent within Sri Lankan society to emphasise the hidden dialogues that form the same society through women’s perspectives. As I have argued, these writers use their ethnic differences and distinct ethno-spatial narratives to highlight their place in the larger Sri Lankan society and most importantly within the larger corpus of diasporic literature. By using “ethnic insider” knowledge both the novelists critique the stereotypes that are associated with diasporic literary productions. Instead of creating homogenised Sinhalese/Tamil character, the writers use the insider knowledge to create individual women who re-negotiate their identities despite their cultural/social traditions. Yasodhara and Saraswathi negotiate the gendered spaces by being diasporic and militant in turn, thus subverting the gender roles prevalent within the society. Ganeshanathan explores the prescriptive gender roles that prevail in the Tamil society and especially how these gender roles travel to diasporic locations despite their removal from the main culture and its influences. The different interactions between women and amongst women bring out diverse perspectives and open up varied dialogues within and between the said women characters. These dialogues challenge the forces that constrain them and present individuals that exist within these social formations.

⁷⁴ Xiaomei Chen, “Reading Mother’s Tale – Reconstructing Women’s Space in Amy Tan and Zhang Jie,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 16 (Dec 1994): 132.

Thus, these writers present Sri Lankan women and their identities formed within the social structures prevalent in Sri Lankan society in their attempt to create Sri Lankan American women's fiction that can relate to Sri Lankan American women in the diaspora. The mostly one-sided narratives bring out the question of representation these Sri Lankan American authors aim to achieve, too. Their conscious neglect of the political discourse that shaped the Sri Lankan American diaspora's identity can be read as a marketing strategy for these writers who wish to avoid contradictions and repercussions. But the same neglect can also be argued as their effort to give voice to the neglected lives of women, trapped within the larger socio-political issues in the country. Their narratives highlight the lives of women, negotiating ethno-social differences and stereotypes while negotiating ethnic identities. These writers, therefore, still emerge as distinctly Sri Lankan American writers because of their "different" plots which negotiate ethno-social identities in search of distinctive women characters that travel between homelands and diasporic locations, fashioning new identities.

Chapter Four: The Other sisters: Pakistani American women writers

Contemporary Pakistani American women writers form another group of post-1965 women writers from South Asia who have been critically neglected in contemporary literary criticism. Pakistani women's writing in English has been made popular through the works of authors such as Bapsi Sidhwa and Sara Suleri. Sidhwa was the first writer in the post-1965 era to establish Pakistani women's writing in English in the US through her various novels including acclaimed works such as *Ice Candy Man (Cracking India)* (1988) and *An American Brat* (1993), and she attracted world attention towards Pakistani women's writing in English. Pakistani American women's writing, therefore, is not a new category in the canon of South Asian women's diasporic writing.

Despite her recognition, Sidhwa's work, which established Pakistani identity among diasporic writing from the US, has not been representative of a distinct Pakistani Muslim American identity portrayed through Pakistani American fiction. Sidhwa's novels engage with the history of Pakistan, partition and the gender issues prevalent in Pakistani society, especially as perceived by the upper middle-class educated Parsee community, and explore Parsee American experiences, about whom she writes intimately. Despite Sidhwa's geographical location in Houston, USA, she is still recognised as a Pakistani writer who writes in English rather than a Pakistani American writer who has both Pakistani and American identities. Her use of Parsee characters instead of Muslim characters also singles her out from the contemporary

Pakistani American Muslim women's writing that will be considered in this chapter. While the Parsee characters in Sidhwa's novels associate themselves with Pakistan and its socio-political atmosphere, their religion and rituals have a different impact on their characters to that of Islam on the Pakistani American women characters in the Pakistani American Muslim women's fiction that will be analysed in the following pages. Sidhwa's use of traditional tropes, such as partition and gender divides, and class and gender discrimination in Pakistan, as well as the self-discovery of a young Parsee girl in America, also make her different from the group of women writers who write on Pakistani Muslim American experiences from women's perspectives using light thematic issues, despite their importance in addressing the concerns that are pertinent to the continuation of Pakistani American Muslim women's day-to-day lives in America. Sara Suleri's acclaimed memoir *Meatless Days* (1989), while discussing the socio-political changes that were taking place in Pakistan in the early years of the 1990s, interweaves autobiography with history to create a picture of Pakistani upper-middle class lives during that time. Suleri's work does not address Pakistani American experience directly and because of its autobiographic elements does not represent the fictional identities for women created by women. But unlike Sidhwa and Suleri, the new generation of Pakistani American Muslim writers prefer to deal with issues of everyday life and diasporic conditions and its challenges, rather than discussing issues such as political differences and history, gender discrimination and women's place historically within the socio-ethnic makeup of Pakistani culture.

This chapter examines two recent novels by post-1965 Pakistani American Muslim women writers who have not been critically acclaimed or recognised within South Asian American women's writing. Their themes and preoccupations with Pakistani Muslim women's multiple identities in America and their negotiation of religious and ethnic identities make these two novels an interesting and necessary addition to this thesis. Pakistani American Muslim women's "difference" in the face of stereotyped South Asian American identities and Muslim women's identities perpetuated in popular media will be discussed in this chapter through an analysis of the different thematic concerns of the selected novelists. The importance and the burden of maintaining and negotiating "differences" that are assigned to diasporic women and the consequences of being different both within one's own ethnic community and in the host community will be examined through the discussion of mental health issues highlighted in the selected novels. Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi's *The Colour of Mehndi* (2006) and Shaila Abdullah's *Saffron Dreams* (2009) are also significant in their appearance in the literary arena in the aftermath of 9/11. The impact of 9/11 not only changed the perception of Muslims in the US, but also altered the Muslim American's acceptance of their own ethno-religious identities. Pakistani Muslim women too had to re-evaluate their individual identities based on their host diasporic society's reactions towards their ethnic and regional affiliations. Thus, in the aftermath of 9/11 Pakistani Muslim American women's literary representation underwent significant changes. In contrast to their predecessors, who were able to narrate regional differences and the ethno-social otherness of being in the diaspora, post-9/11 women writers strive to address numerous issues of ethnic

and religious representation, in a changed America. The change in the ethno-social landscape in America and the acceptance, rejection and negotiation of Pakistani American identity which is interlinked with Muslim religious identity will be explored through this chapter, highlighting the “difference”— from their other South Asian American diasporic women writers, and from other Pakistani American writers of non-Muslim origin — and the importance of Pakistani American women writers’ contribution to South Asian American women’s writing in the US.

Through this chapter, I will also analyse the impact of emotional and mental health issues on diasporic Pakistani American Muslim women and the reasons, resolutions and measures these fictional women take to overcome their diverse emotional burdens. In this chapter, through an examination of the selected novels, I will explore the impact of religion- and ethnicity-influenced family structures on the emotional and mental health of the women characters.

In/Sanity at the edge of ethno-social spaces: *The Colour of Mehndi*

“A Pakistani American woman’s journey on the edge of sanity” is the subtitle to Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi’s *The Colour of Mehndi*, her first novel as a Pakistani American Muslim woman exploring the emotional issues of a second-generation Pakistani American Muslim woman. The importance of Pakistani American identity, stressed in the subtitle to the novel, highlights the importance of addressing issues of Pakistani American women as distinct from the homogeneous sub-grouping of South Asian American women. This homogeneity assigned to South Asian American women in mainstream media in the US assumes them to have an affiliation to the

Indian identity that has been popularised by South Asian American authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Divakaruni, all of whom have an Indian ancestry and an Indian background. The popularity, the widespread acceptance and the physical presence of the Indian diaspora in America sometimes overshadows the awareness of other South Asian Americans' presence in America, and it also veils the individual ethnic and religious identities of the non-Indian South Asian American diasporic communities and especially women of the diaspora.

The Colour of Mehndi chronicles the life of Nazli Akram-Hyder, a Pakistani American Muslim woman with two children who is battling diverse emotional issues of stress, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), depression and possibly post-natal depression, which is not addressed and treated. Her emotions and her inner voice are given prominence, because she records her thoughts on a tape recorder, which is later discovered by her son, Zeeshan, who provides an outlet to Nazli's forgotten narrative through the novel. Nazli's voice, which is forgotten and erased from the lives of her children, gets heard through Zeeshan's re-narration of her mother's life. But instead of re-telling Nazli's life, Pasha-Zaidi frames the novel with Zeeshan's prologue and Nazli's epilogue, while the rest of the narrative is from Nazli's point of view, through her tape-recorded journal entries. The first-person narration and the interesting use of unfinished sentences, which are employed throughout the novel to signal events in Nazli's recent past that she would want to change or forget, make the internal dialogue insightful in understanding the ultimate reasons for Nazli's suicide. The use of memory recalled by Nazli to strengthen and as a reference point to her life's

presence also functions as a trope through which Nazli tries to untangle the mysteries of her life and its complications.

*"I pretty much look like any other Pakistani woman,"*¹ Nazli, the main protagonist identifies herself in the narrative. She situates her identity through an affiliation to her racial ethnic group identity rather than that of an individual. The novel's depiction of two main voices, of Nazli and her Zeeshan, helps portray her desire to have an individual identity and her inability to do so at the same time, since she lacks the agency to act. The first part of the novel interestingly is told from the perspective of Nazli's youngest son, who has no memory of his mother. But it is he who uncovers the tapes in which Nazli records her thoughts, and it is her voice and her narrative from her perspective that unfolds throughout the rest of the narrative. The voice that is given a place through another's narrative is an apt metaphor for Nazli's life. Even though she is in the land of individuality, the US, Nazli is unable to give voice to her desires and speak out about her needs and wants during her lifetime. She has to record onto a tape recorder as "an outlet for all the[se] married-life frustrations,"² because her frustrations are never heard or attended to either by her partner or her family. She becomes a woman who battles her demons alone. Her self-definition of being a "Pakistani Woman" rather than a Pakistani American woman is the key to her self-inflicted effacement of individual needs and identity. Her desire to be the perfect Pakistani woman, who has no voice of her own (as defined by Nazli) but who lives through and in the voice of her male relatives, poses questions of

¹ Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi, *The Colour of Mehndi* (Mumbai: Frog Books, 2006) 16 (italics in original).

² *Ibid*, 17.

misinterpreted impact of Islam on Nazli's and other Pakistani American women's individuality and presence in their American society.

Nazli opts to become a part of the "chosen marginality"³ by asserting her Pakistani identity over her hybrid Pakistani American identity. The potential of these chosen spaces to "both empower[ing] community as well as for upholding the most regressive aspects of culture as fixed and static"⁴ is evident in Nazli's subsequent inability to cope with the traditions and demands that are part of her Pakistani cultural identity. Nazli loses her self-worth because she was trying to become a part of Pakistani culture by giving up her own personal dreams and goals to devote herself to her family. But she falls short of these cultural specifications because of her American upbringing which makes her believe in individual freedom and dreams. This inability to reconcile her hybrid identity with the burden of carrying the traditional image of the Pakistani woman (which Nazli opts to identify with) makes the already emotionally vulnerable Nazli topple towards permanent despair and low self-esteem.

Nazli Akram-Hyder wishes her own "existence to be different"⁵ not because she doesn't want her husband or her children, but because she feels stifled and restricted in her present situation as a housewife in Phoenix while her husband is "in

³ Ketu Katrak argues that the diaspora decides to become the chosen marginality within the spaces where community is displayed, such as festivals, dress, music and food. I argue that by defining herself with the ethnic origin of the mother country, Nazli, too chooses to marginalise herself within the diasporic community of America. Ketu H. Katrak, "Changing Traditions: South Asian Americans and Cultural/ Communal Politics," *The Massachusetts Review* 43: 1(Spring 2002): 77.

⁴ Katrak, *Ibid.*

⁵ Pasha-Zaidi, *op cit*, 16.

charge” and “make[s] the rules.”⁶ Nazli’s husband Samir’s need to assert his authority as the provider and the authoritative patriarch stems from his family and their religious leanings, which are hinted at through his brother Adnan’s fundamentalist views on women in Islam: “A man is a step above a woman... A woman’s world is her home. She should make that her priority.”⁷ Even though Samir never concedes to his brother’s views on Islam and women, he is conditioned by his traditional upbringing where his mother is a housewife. Samir’s mother is nonetheless a strong independent woman who drives the men in her family to fulfil her wishes. Her character, though not as progressive or as modern as Nazli’s mother at the outset, is not restricted by her belief in traditions and rituals. Nazli, in contrast, has grown up with a mother who struggled to maintain a professional life amidst all the diasporic hardships in America, despite her husband’s sudden death, and she attempts to fit into Samir’s family values because she believes that it will make her a part of his family and earn her respect and appreciation from Samir. She gives up her profession (as an elementary school teacher in New Jersey) and decides to take care of her children by staying at home. She justifies this as her life choice and wants to be appreciated for her sacrifice. While Samir is ready to appreciate his mother’s support as a traditional woman or his colleague’s life as a modern career woman, he is unable to appreciate Nazli’s sacrifices, in deciding to stay at home to raise children and struggle with the demands placed upon her by her own interpretations of culture and tradition. The lack of appreciation from her husband for her professional

⁶ Pasha-Zaidi, *op.cit*,23.

⁷ *Ibid*, 64.

sacrifice and his constant taunting causes her to become emotionally vulnerable, and that results in a cascade of emotional stress and family issues.

Nazli not only sacrifices her profession in her attempt to fit into her extended family's traditional values within a culturally defined framework, but she also sacrifices and changes her personality from a forthright and vivacious woman to become indecisive and subdued. She inadvertently tries to emulate her mother-in-law Mrs Hyder's manner of "appear[ing] fragile and submissive"⁸ because she thinks those are the qualities followed by many Pakistani women. Her desire to be included and please the traditional Hyder family during the early years of her marriage ultimately costs her both her own dreams and her personality, neither of which are appreciated or acknowledged by her husband. Nazli constantly admonishes herself for not being "the kind of wife [Samir] needed"⁹ and at the same time wants him to "*love [her] for who [she is]*."¹⁰ Thus, her desire to please and to be appreciated, which is universal among humans, takes a different turn since she finds her attempts inadequate and insufficient. Her insecurities are apparent not only on a personal level but also on a social level. Nazli is unable to integrate herself into the society around her, be it the white or the diasporic, because of her insecurities as a person, which were a result of her childhood trauma of being sexually abused by a neighbour and her sense of otherness as a diasporic Muslim woman. Her inability to become the perfect woman for Samir springs from her failure to be integrated into his traditional family structure. Nazli hides and suffers from an inferiority complex about her self-

⁸ Pasha- Zaidi, *op cit*, 190.

⁹ *Ibid*, 71.

¹⁰ *Ibid*. Italics in original

worth among her own Muslim diaspora because she “didn’t quite fit in with the Pakistani crowd. She was too down-to-earth for their standards,”¹¹ and the blow to her self-esteem comes because she is unable to be incorporated as a member into the tradition-bound Hyder family either. This complexity accelerates her other mental health issues, which have had their roots in her childhood, but instead of having the support of her family and the support network available to Devi of *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004) to overcome her emotional trauma after losing her child and attempting suicide or Anju of *The Vine of Desire* (2002) to overcome her depression after the disintegration of her marriage and the loss of her baby, Nazli battles her demons alone and finally succumbs to them.

Nazli also suffers because she is trying to cater to the different needs of her family, of being a traditional woman while also maintaining the demands of modern American life. The demand on her to uphold her Muslim identity (from her in-laws) while being the modern American woman (from Samir) takes its toll on her, because she is denied the support to accommodate all these burdens in her life. Her past experiences, especially the emotional trauma caused through her encounter with the “Monster Man,”¹² who psychologically abuses her by exposing her to a porn magazine and through his threatening gestures while on her own, and the subsequent sudden departure to Pakistan to avoid any repercussions, leave her with a lifelong complex of guilt and a sense of inferiority. She measures herself against others and never comes out of the guilt of making her mother return to Pakistan: “my being the cause of their sudden arrival in Karachi wasn’t enough of a guilt trip for a ten-year-

¹¹ Pasha-Zaidi, *op.cit*, 118.

¹² *Ibid*, 49.

old.”¹³ These issues that could have been addressed earlier on and could have enabled Nazli to receive treatment when she was young get neglected by her overworked mother, Bano Akram. Nazli’s mother’s first reaction when Nazli is molested by the “Monster Man” is to leave the apartment block and the country. She never considers staying on and fighting. She does not avail herself of the support networks available to her as a resident in the US, despite being an educated woman. Bano Akram returns to her own country, because she considers herself the outsider in a different US social network when she is faced with fighting it or asking for help from it. The classic South Asian diasporic mentality of not asking for help except from within one’s own network of diasporic community is evident in her behaviour. Bano Akram, even though a resident of the US, is not comfortable with the US and its support networks. She would rather return to her familiar country, because she is the outsider in the US while she still is the insider in Pakistan. This dichotomy between the insider and outsider mentality that is evident in first-generation immigrant behaviour leaves a lasting impact on Nazli because she, too, is made to suspect the support systems of the adoptive country, and to fend for herself.

Though this is not typical of every diasporic subject’s behaviour, Nazli’s and Bano’s behaviour in seeking help only among the diasporic groups and not venturing out towards the other systems and networks available to them via the host society is evident in their own segregation as the Other within the US social and cultural networks. The diasporic inability, especially among the first-generation of diaspora, to think of themselves as part of the larger social fabric makes them ostracise

¹³ Pasha-Zaidi, *op.cit*, 58.

themselves from the larger community. This mistrust springs from the inability to relate to social practices and the inability to integrate oneself in the rubrics of the larger society due to one's own socio-religious and ethnic practices. Bano Akram becomes more confident as she succeeds in her profession and integrates herself into American culture. Her confidence springs from her professional success which acknowledges her integration into American society, and most importantly its acceptance of her, despite her cultural Other status. Kamaal, Nazli's brother, decides to shed some of his religious beliefs regarding alcohol consumption to avoid being on the fringes of his own social and professional circles. Kamaal too seeks acceptance from his host society, and thus compromises on his own religious beliefs to fit into the society. Self-worth and importance are achieved through their achievements in the professional arena and most importantly through their chosen compromises, in letting go of their cultural traditions and religious beliefs. Nazli acts as a confident and cheerful person despite her confessions of having developed an obsessive compulsive behaviour towards numbers when working as a Customer Service Agent at Trans-Air and successfully completing her degrees. Her individuality and her ability to value herself as a member of the diaspora are taken away from her when she gives up her profession. Therefore, for a diasporic cultural Other, the most important thing that helps the integration and the acceptance into American society is the approval from the host American society. For Nazli and her family, who can be read as the representatives of the many diasporic subjects seeking contentment in America, acknowledgement that comes in the form of professional and personal success are important, to achieve their individual identity. Thus, the

demand to maintain a perfect family life steeped in traditions as well as to maintain her self-value without any appreciation of her sacrifices combined with no recognition for her efforts, both from her own diasporic group and her host American society lead to Nazli's slow mental and emotional instability and deterioration.

This trend of the diaspora, in asserting their value through their personal achievements, is evident in other novels such as *The Vine of Desire* (Anju), *Serving Crazy with Curry* (Devi) and *Love Marriage* (Yalini). All the women characters, when faced with difficulties, revert to an assessment of their own values as a member of the larger society through personal achievements either on a professional or personal level. Nazli initially overcomes her social outcast state by “get[ting] As [because t]hat was the only thing she could control”¹⁴ and she is assured of her own importance because of her achievements. After her marriage, her only sense of self-worth springs from nurturing her children. Despite her importance of being a mother to two sons, she loses her confidence again after seeing her children being comforted and comfortable around her mother-in-law, and not needing her. Nazli's personal assessment of her lack of importance and her inability to claim her lost self-assurance leads to her ultimate downfall and subsequent suicide. But this leads to the larger questions of how restrictive or supportive the diasporic social structures can be. Nazli is reluctant to access the US support system of doctors or psychiatrists but she is also unable to access the religious and ethnic networks of support available to immigrants, especially evident through her family history of being supported after her father's sudden death. The taboo associated with mental health issues, hinted at

¹⁴ Pasha-Zaidi, *op.cit*, 82.

through Saroj's reaction to Devi's psychiatrist in *Serving Crazy with Curry* and Nazli's own reaction to psychiatrists, sheds light on the South Asian collective reaction towards mental health issues. Because of the larger network of family structures that are supportive, South Asians in general do not believe in accessing outside help regarding mental health and emotional stress issues. As evident through Devi's family and the strength offered to the person in need, South Asians generally believe that the family and the familiar help can aid individuals to cope with stress and emotional trauma. In Nazli's case, no one is ready to take note of her emotional needs. Her need to be appreciated and encouraged to become a modern career woman is neglected by her husband and his family, and this leads to Nazli's ultimate fall.

The other reason evident for Nazli's suicide is her inability to bear the burden of her traditions. Nazli grows up in a fairly moderate house where the children know their religion but are not expected to adhere to it strictly. Kamaal is not shown to suffer any deep guilt when he has to break the socio-religious traditions of abstaining from alcohol consumption, but Nazli suffers on behalf of him: "He definitely did not drink alcohol. *Not my brother!*"¹⁵ She carries the greater guilt, because of the traditions that she is meant to uphold as the daughter-in-law of the Hyder family: "*We don't drink, [Samir] We're Muslim too.*"¹⁶ Nazli also suffers guilt because of the tradition of women being the guardians of the ethnic and religious rituals within the diaspora. As "women of Indian origin are assigned a significant and peculiar role in maintaining expatriate Indian identity in [England, and in other] immigrant Indian

¹⁵ Pasha-Zaidi, *op.cit*, 111. Italics in original

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Italics in original

communities,”¹⁷ the Pakistani women in immigrant communities are also charged with the same burden: to maintain their Pakistani Muslim identity not only as an ethnic identity but also as a religious identity that is separate from the other ethno-religious groups from the same region. The responsibility thus assigned exerts subtle pressure on the women to sustain and nourish their cultural heritage, a fact which sometimes they are not too aware of, such as in the case of Nazli who grew up in America for most of her life. Unable to understand some of the meanings behind certain traditions and unable to react or resist, either as a new bride or later as a dependent wife, Nazli reaches breaking point after her second baby is born. The lack of attention, appreciation and the other ignored mental health issues, such as obsessive compulsive disorder and emotional trauma at being harassed as a child, all culminate in Nazli’s probable post-natal depression, which ultimately leads to her suicide. Thus, despite being a close knit community, Nazli’s diasporic group fails in providing her the individual attention, needed to survive amidst diverse socio-religious pressures.

This also brings into question the diasporic Pakistani American community’s access and use of healthcare services provided to them in the USA. Since Nazli is an American citizen and since she has had access to and information on healthcare facilities available to her, she could have had the required help from professionals for her mental health issues. But she does not seek help from these facilities and this poses questions. The accepted taboo of being mentally unstable and the need to live within the set rules and be accepted from her diasporic society pushes her not to

¹⁷Uma Narayan, “Eating Cultures: Incorporation, Identity and Indian Food,” *Social Identities* 1:1 (1995): 73.

acknowledge her need. She is afraid of being proven to be a person suffering from mental instability and she may have been scared of being labelled an unsuitable addition to the Hyder family, because she diagnoses herself to have “a disease, [OCD] which [she] most likely ha[s], which [she] will never know for sure because [she doesn’t] have the guts to actually consult a professional... and [she is] just not ready to admit that [she is] going off the deep end.”¹⁸ Pasha-Zaidi leaves these questions unanswered in the novel, allowing open-ended interpretations and assumptions about who to be blamed, to draw attention to the traditions and subtle pressures on women within the diasporic community. In the end, Nazli’s suicide is as much her fault for not taking care of herself as it is the community’s and her immediate family’s fault for not recognising and catering to her needs as an individual.

Pasha-Zaidi addresses issues that are not within the comfort zone of most contemporary South Asian American women’s novels. Mental health issues in women have been addressed by authors such as Divakaruni, Malladi and Ganeshananthan in their separate works, but those novels tend either to strengthen the diasporic claims of curing their own insanities through their strong network and support system of family and friends or prove the individual’s strength through minor lapses into insanity and mental health issues. Anju, Devi and Yalini battle their temporary depressions and suicidal thoughts through their extended network of women, sisters and families. While mental health issues are hinted at and elaborated, as in the case of Devi and her suicide attempt, they are not explored deeply as issues

¹⁸Pasha-Zaidi, *op.cit*, 70.

that might affect the everyday lives of Indian or Sri Lankan American women. They fight against stereotypes, and draw strength from their “different” sisters, but access help and support from their women companions. Writing from a different socio-religious background and from a different ethnic group, Pasha-Zaidi addresses underexplored themes of a woman’s inability to bear the stress of being “*desi*” as well as being American and upholding the traditions and other familial pressures. By venturing into the controversial areas of ethnic and religious pressures on women and their different reactions to them through the characters of Nazli and Bano Akram, Pasha-Zaidi strives to address issues that are relevant and pertinent to the South Asian American community but which are not addressed in depth in contemporary fiction produced by South Asian American women writers.¹⁹ But while being ahead of the curve and discussing issues that are underexplored, Pasha-Zaidi does not address the issues of historical relevance to the apparent pressure on women to preserve their traditions in America or the different groups of Pakistani Americans that are in the USA. In ignoring the historical facts relevant to Pakistani immigration to America and the diverse groups of Pakistani Americans in the USA, Pasha-Zaidi situates her novel apart from the already established Pakistani American writing that was made popular by Bapsi Sidhwa and later through Sara Suleri’s *Meatless Days*. While both Sidhwa and Suleri champion an individual identity for the women in their works, both the novelists do not explore the impact of religion and socio-ethnic

¹⁹ Samina Ali’s *Madras on Rainy Days* (2004), discusses the stress, burden and the questions of sexuality in the life of an Indian American Muslim woman who returns to India for her marriage. The novel reveals the mental anxieties and agonies of being a young Muslim woman in India set against a backdrop of rising Hindu-Muslim tension in the country and the complexities of life behind the veil. It has not been included as part of the novels discussed in this chapter to retain this chapter’s concentration on the fictions by Pakistani American Muslim women.

pressures on Pakistani Muslim individuals in America, because of their different subject matters: Parsee women for Sidhwa and mixed-race upper-class individuals in Suleri's work.

Pasha-Zaidi thus distinguishes herself and stands apart from the already established writers from Pakistan, differentiating her writing and carving a niche for herself through her different subject matter. She stands apart from the other ethnic groups of South Asian American women writers as well, through the "different" concerns expressed in her novel. The need to create a different space for Pakistani American women writers is evident in her treatment of ethno-religious details in the novel. The explanations of different Pakistani terms at the end of the book for ethnic outsiders who would find the different terminology and different religious rituals incomprehensible, make the novel the Other to contemporary South Asian American fiction, already analysed in this thesis. While the more established writers, from the South Asian diaspora prefer to retain their "difference" by not opting to explain the various ethno-regional terms, Pasha-Zaidi chooses to insist on her ethno-cultural otherness, by providing explanations, thus making her narrative "different." Pasha-Zaidi also breaks new grounds for the other Pakistani women writers writing in English, by addressing under explored themes such as mental well-being and subtle yet persisting pressure exerted on women by their own ethnic communities. While women's need to assert individuality has been addressed by other Pakistani American authors, the difficulty in balancing both the worlds — of traditions and cultural bonds with Pakistan and everyday demands of diasporic America — and re-negotiating individuality are explored by Pasha-Zaidi through her novel. As Feroza

Jussawalla has argued, discussing inclusion and adaptability in diasporic locations, Nazli, too, is unable to become a “chiffon sari”²⁰ in the adopted land of America not only because of her unwillingness to adapt her role, but also because she does not receive the necessary encouragement or appreciation for her attempts to change herself.

Hence, through Nazli’s life, Pasha-Zaidi makes a strong statement about the diasporic burdens of Pakistani American women. The socio-religious responsibilities that can deter their individual search for happiness are brought out through incomplete chapters and sentences that highlight Nazli’s mounting depression and isolation. Despite bringing into focus these important issues of women and their hidden socio-cultural burdens, Pasha-Zaidi removes her narrative from the everyday implications of being a Muslim woman in America. Though there is a fleeting reference to time with “we are in the middle of 2001,”²¹ when Nazli is contemplating her life’s complexities, the implications of 9/11 in Nazli’s life and the growing anti-Muslim sentiments in the US are not incorporated into the narrative. The silence itself speaks of the growing lack of interest in the larger world, on Nazli’s part. Nazli has become preoccupied with her own life and its meta narrative of finding her own strength and her failure to do so, to pay attention to the changing landscape of ethno-religious tensions in America. Nazli’s story, therefore, becomes removed from the everyday realities that go beyond individual identity and mental health issues, and

²⁰ Feroza Jussawalla contends that the diasporic experience of Indian American women is similar to a chiffon sari that is easy to maintain despite its ability to fulfil the role of traditional attire. The ability and the willingness of the diasporic women to balance both the demands of tradition and modern American life is thus similar to a chiffon sari that can be worn easily in America and still held as a symbol of tradition. Feroza Jussawalla, “Chiffon Saris: The Plight of South Asian Immigrants in the New World,” *The Massachusetts Review* 29:4 (winter 1988/1989): 595.

²¹ Pasha-Zaidi, *op.cit*, 98.

focuses on the unique experience of battling socio-religious pressures while coping with diasporic demands. Nazli not only is expected to be the Pakistani Muslim woman in America, but also is under pressure to be the Pakistani American woman with a successful career and personal life. Being an individual with “different” mental health demands and personal insecurities, Nazli breaks down under these socio-ethnic pressures, thus leading to her suicide. Pasha-Zaidi’s narrative thus becomes “different” not only because of its overt lack of engagements with the larger socio-political issues of ethnicity and religion of a Pakistani American Muslim woman, but also because of her emphasis on discussing mental health issues that affect a distinct Pakistani American woman.

Balancing the American Dream

Shaila Abdullah’s *Saffron Dreams* (2009), published by the Modern History Press in the Reflections of America series, strives to unveil the mysteries that shroud Pakistani American Muslim women’s histories in America through a tale of trauma and healing in the aftermath of 9/11. The context of its publication, as part of a “series [that] highlights autobiography, fiction, and poetry which express the quest to discover one’s context within modern society”²² is a fitting description of *Saffron Dreams*. The novel tells the story of Arissa, a Pakistani American Muslim woman, and her journey of self-discovery with her differently abled son in the aftermath of

²² “The Reflections of America Series,” *Modern History Press*, 02 Apr. 2013.

9/11 which claimed her husband's life, in an America that changed its reactions to the veil (hereafter referred to as the hijab) and Muslims.

Through this section, I argue that the emotional trauma suffered by Arissa after 9/11 makes her a stronger woman in contrast to Nazli, who succumbs to her socio-ethnic pressures due to her mental instability, as discussed in the previous section. I also argue that the main reason for Arissa's emergence as a survivor is her familial support network and her venturing into American society in search of individuality, acceptance and support. Abdullah also highlights the myriad differences in the experiences of a Pakistani American woman in America and highlights how the Pakistani Muslim American experience is different to the other immigrant experiences of South Asians in America. Her different religious background makes her stand apart from the rest of the South Asian diasporic women, with various other ethno-religious affiliations. Being Muslim, she also becomes representative of other socio-ethnic stereotypes, in addition to being South Asian, in America. Thus, Abdullah brings forth the double marginality of a Pakistani Muslim American, battling personal issues, living in America, in the aftermath of 9/11. Abdullah also portrays how all these different women characters face emotional trauma in different contexts, through the narrative journey of Arissa's life. Through an analysis of *Saffron Dreams*, I argue that though the Pakistani women's experience is essentially different in a socio-religious context, the reaction and healing process from trauma is similar despite the difference in ethnicity from the other South Asian groups in America, specifically from India and Sri Lanka.

Being a Pakistani Muslim woman in America, Arissa feels and becomes the Other in her society. Her hijab defines her as a Muslim woman and she reacts to things as the Other. In “a tale of grief and happiness, of control and losing control, of barriers and openings, of prejudices and acceptance, of holding on and letting go,”²³ Arissa defines herself as the ethnic Other in relation to the beliefs and values of America, especially in a post-9/11 context. The harassment she suffers in the subway station reasserts her belief in her “difference” as one of the “homesick individuals in an adopted homeland [who] couldn’t break free from [their] origin[s].”²⁴ The feeling of wanting to preserve one’s origin and the need to “break free” in the “adopted homeland” makes her the outsider who is unable to merge completely because of her inability to “let go.” The inability of the American society at large to “let go” of the stereotypes attached to Arissa also makes her journey of self-realisation harder. The stereotyping from both sectors, from the immigrants towards the Other face of America, towards the youth with “a half shaven head with a swastika tattoo on it [...] combat boots [and] chains around the hip,”²⁵ labels them the ethnic Other to the immigrant South Asian Americans. The “silent blank stares of strangers, the angry wounded looks wanting to hurt, the accusatory sidelong glances” at the immigrant Other from Americans, because of their religious faith and ethnic attire, propagates the othering that leads to harassment and prejudices faced and nurtured by both groups. Arissa embodies the face of the ethnic Other because of her inability to fit into the larger society due to her faith and attire, and at the same time she herself

²³ Shaila Abdullah, *Saffron Dreams* (Ann Arbor: Modern History, 2009) 6.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

others the marginal sections of the American society because of her prejudices against them, due to her own preconceptions. Arissa's personal history of being upper-middle class in Pakistan and the post-1965 generation's desire to be the model minority, gaining social respectability, makes her look at the margins of her adopted American society with distrust. Meanwhile, the same kind of misconceived knowledge of Muslims and Islam in the wake of 9/11 makes her host American society mistrust Arissa in her hijab. Through this power play of differentiating the ethnic Other, Abdullah highlights the ethno-racial disharmony that disrupted the American social setting, especially in the aftermath of 9/11.

Situating the bulk of the narrative in the aftermath of 9/11, Abdullah draws attention to the changing ethno-political landscape of America, especially towards Muslim women. Faizan's (Arissa's husband) death which was the result of 9/11 prompts Arissa to take control of her own life. Abdullah highlights the irony of the situation, when Arissa is harassed on the subway. Unlike the other victims of 9/11, Arissa does not receive the requisite sympathy from the society around her, because of her ethno-religious "difference," of being a Muslim with South Asian features. Thus, despite her own tragedy, she is ostracised and targeted as the cultural Other. 9/11's many political implications thus gets explored, despite its subtle analysis of the racial discrimination in the US, throughout the narrative. The post-9/11 world where Arissa's ethnicity and religion are highlighted also allows Abdullah to discuss how ethno-cultural visibility as a diasporic subject can work as a double-edged sword. It can afford you the required acknowledgement, that is essential for

individual identity formation, as well as make you the outsider to the accepted practices of the host society.

Arisa's childhood and the neglect she felt at being rejected by her mother – "I wish I never had you, Arissa![...] It's because of you that your Abu and I were never happy together!"²⁶ – becomes her "baggage for many years"²⁷ and adds to her outsider mentality. She is not comfortable being on the inside and considers herself the eternal outsider. But her relationship with Faizan, her husband, and with her father and her in-laws enables her to reassert her value as a member of the larger society and to cope with her emotional stress and the exclusion of being the outsider. The familiar support system also assists her in her adjustments to society in America in the post-9/11 period. The exclusion Arissa faces within American society is mainly due to her religious affiliations. She is looked on as the outsider because of her hijab and because of her religious beliefs. She, unlike the majority of Indian Americans, is not the outsider only because of her exotic difference, but also because she believes in a different faith and because she dresses differently. Abdullah portrays the stress and pressure created through this difference through the character of Arissa's friend, Juhi. While Juhi is able to flout all the traditional social norms by having multiple relationships and a child without a partner, she does not feel "different" or "Other" because there is less prejudice against her based on her dress or religion. But Arissa has to live with all the stares and blatant insults because of her outward display of ethno-religious affiliations expressed through her attire. Thus, while being the exotic, because of her "difference," Arissa also becomes the Other,

²⁶ Abdullah, *op.cit*, 24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

not only to the Americans, but also to the other individuals from the same region. Through Arissa's discomfort, Abdullah comments on American multiculturalism, which accepts the Other on its own terms, exerting subtle pressure on them to become non-different, by becoming one of many accepted others, like Juhi.

In the face of social ostracism, Arissa decides to let go of her hijab to integrate herself into the American society. Letting go of her hijab signifies her willingness to sacrifice her traditions for the sake of her unborn child. Having to cope with a differently abled child with multiple learning and health difficulties, Arissa lets go of her outward appearance of tradition and the marker of difference by shedding her hijab. But this act and the subsequent success Arissa has with regards to her life in America once again questions the multiculturalism of America. The multicultural America that is shattered after 9/11 subtly pressurises the outsider in Arissa to conform to the majority by letting go of her mark of difference, the hijab. Without the hijab, she is reintegrated into the society as another exotic outsider, who is still the Other, because of her "difference" as the immigrant from South Asia, but on the terms dictated by the multicultural society in America. As Donna Gherke-White argues, Muslim women across America decided to exhibit and reassert their Muslim identity within the American public sphere in the aftermath of 9/11 because they wanted to be seen not as the outsiders they were perceived to be but as an integral part of American society.²⁸ Despite the data and case studies that prove women of Muslim origin decided to display their difference through an exhibition of their otherness in wearing the veil, there were some women who gave up the marker

²⁸ Donna Gherke-White, *The Face Behind the Veil* (New York: Citadel, 2007).

of difference, the veil, to look less visible in a racially segregated society. They let go of these ethno-religious markers, because “Muslim women who wore the *hijab* bore the consequences of blatant stereotyping [and t]hey became the objects of both harassment and pity as Americans began to wonder what kind of women they were that they participated in their own oppression.”²⁹ Arissa thus copes with her emotional stress and the demands on her by her extended family and her obligations to her dead husband by merging into society rather than endeavouring to make a statement about her religious views. Unlike Nazli in *The Colour of Mehndi*, Arissa is able to weather the emotional storm because she finds her own importance in relation to and for the lives around her. The familial support once again acts as the defining element in Arissa’s ability to cope with the emotional stress and grief.

[T]here was never a discussion about how long Ma and Baba would stay. The unspoken understanding was that they would stay as long as it took for me to heal and move on – the unconfirmed but stable promise of selfless parents, a product of a culture a continent away.³⁰

The importance of cultural heritage, even in the face of offering family strength, is important to Arissa’s life. She finds the selflessness and the promise of help, offered to her by her in-laws, as not only individual goodness, but also as a reminder of her own cultural traditions that produced such strong family support systems. Thus, while the same culture restricts and binds Nazli and her quest in finding her own self, for Arissa, it offers comfort and strength because they are exerted in a different way.

²⁹ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, “The post 9/11 ‘Hijab’ as Icon,” *Sociology of Religion* 68: 3, Muslim Integration in the United States and France (Fall 2007): 263.

³⁰ Abdullah, *op cit*, 77.

Through Arissa's acceptance of her traditional family support, Abdullah once again asserts the individuality of the situation and the application of socio-ethnic traditions. The culture of a "continent away" can be both liberating as well as constricting, depending on its individual acceptance and application. Thus, rather than criticising Pakistani traditions and cultural values, that are specific to Pakistan as well as common to South Asia, Abdullah emphasises the individual choice of applying and accepting these traditions and cultural norms.

The other element that enables Arissa to define her identity in America is her discovery of her own importance through her professional alliances to a woman's magazine, her paintings and her emotional obligation to finish her husband's novel. Arissa's emotional healing thus begins in her search for individuality. Her ability to take care of her differently abled son and the demands he has on her life, her personal achievements of getting a new job and learning to drive together with her success at completing her husband's novel all add to her self-worth and aid her in finding her "context" in modern American society. While 9/11 plays the role of a catalyst in defining Arissa's strength as an individual, her religious identity works as the hidden strength in her character development. Though Arissa gives up her outward appearance of being a Muslim woman, by letting go of her hijab, the narrative highlights her traits as a Muslim woman, because she becomes more religious through her strengthened beliefs in herself: "It was a matter of perspective – to an onlooker I had removed my veil, but from where I stood, I had merely shifted it from my head to my heart."³¹

³¹ Abdullah, *op cit*, 3.

Pasha-Zaidi's narrative details how religious traditions become another restrictive factor for Nazli while Abdullah's Arissa is able to find strength through her religion even while denouncing its outward restrictions and definitions. When Arissa finds out about the defects in her unborn baby and the challenges such a child will offer her, she turns to her religion, not in blind faith but as a source of refuge and strength. "For the first time in many days, I took the rosary from the bedside table and started praying.[...] I saw it all, the benefactor's name on my lips, as the chronicle of my life opened up in my mind and spread its pages before me..."³² Despite the family traditions, influenced by their socio-religious background, that restrict Nazli's search and acceptance of individuality among her family, she reaches for the comfort of her religion to invoke protection and to maintain peace in her life: "At times [like this] [Nazli] got such an overwhelming sense of peace that it scared her. [...] Do a *dua*."³³ In this context, Pakistani American women writers endeavour to denounce the myths surrounding Islam as a restrictive religion which confines women and leads them to suffer emotional pressures. Instead of that, both Abdullah and Pasha-Zaidi emphasise the importance of individual belief in oneself and the familiar support system extended to the diasporic women in America to battle mental health issues and societal pressure. At the same time, both the novelists accentuate the impact of the diasporic society's pressure on its own women, through Arissa's relationship with Zaki, the Pakistani American man who "did not understand [Arissa's] obsession" with finishing her husband's novels and who had a

³² Abdullah, *op cit*, 70.

³³ Pasha-Zaidi, *op cit*, 28.

“judgemental attitude”³⁴ about her work, and through Nazli’s relationship with her husband and in-laws. But despite all the negative feedback and subtle pressures exerted on both Arissa and Nazli, their own communities expect them to get along with the same restrictive elements, because they “need[ed] some support”³⁵ because they are women.

The individual’s importance asserted through her personal achievements is the key to Arissa’s survival through her post-9/11 trauma. Arissa’s own accomplishment-propelled healing is in contrast to her reaction to trauma in Pakistan when her mother left the family. While in Pakistan, Arissa finds strength through her role as the caretaker and through her duties as a member of the family. Arissa’s happiness and self-worth, when in Pakistan, depended on the personal success of her sister and brother and on being someone on whom the others could depend. But when she is in America, she finds her self-value through individual achievements. Different reactions to individual values, from family-oriented to personal-oriented, signify Arissa’s development of her American self despite her diasporic history. Arissa lets go of her collective identity to find her individual character when in America, embodying the values of the American Dream. Abdullah’s use of individuality as opposed to communality in the healing process that is evident in contemporary South Asian women’s fiction in English makes *Saffron Dreams* more “American” in its tone. As Mukherjee has shown in *Jasmine*, and Divakaruni and Malladi have established through their novels *The Vine of Desire* (2002), *Queen of Dreams* (2004) and *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004), the individuality of the female

³⁴ Abdullah, *op cit*, 205.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 213.

characters in America is important in overcoming emotional trauma and situations of mental stress. Arissa becomes an artist and an important writer at *Chamak*, a South Asian women's magazine, and she heals herself while rewriting her husband's unfinished novel. All these traits make her a part of the American tradition of South Asian women in fiction. Unlike in Asia, where the community plays a significant role in the development of the individual identity, in America, immigrant women have to affirm their individuality, separate from their community identity, to become part of American society, whether it is diasporic or mainstream.

Despite the individuality and assertion of Americanised identity, all these diasporic women inhabit diasporic communal spaces rather than an all-out American space. Anju in *The Vine of Desire* is able to assert her individuality through her academic achievements but is always with her women's group or with her cousin sister. Rakhi in *Queen of Dreams* always occupies an Indian diasporic space either within her Chai shop, with the musicians or in the Bhangra night club. Her interactions with the wider American community are limited to her interactions (bordering on hostility) with the manager of Java — the coffee shop chain. Devi in *Serving Crazy with Curry* is cocooned inside her family and only interacts with her extended family of Indian Americans and experiments with South Indian food with an American twist. Following the same tradition Arissa's interactions with the outside world are always framed within diasporic South Asian limits. She works for a magazine that explores South Asian issues and her extended family is around her to offer support. She has a brief relationship with Zaki, a Pakistani American man, and is friends with Juhi, an Indian American. Her only interaction with a person of non-

South Asian origin is with Ann Marie, the white lady who comes forward as one of the last people who interacted with Faizan to offer comfort to Arissa in her time of loss. The bonding with her is on the common grounds of personal loss and coping with trauma. From all these, it is evident that the extended community of the South Asians or one's particular community is helpful in overcoming emotional stress and mental trauma. Arissa's assertion of individuality thus happens within the confines of her extended community, therefore offering her a familiar space to overcome her mental health issues and making it easier for her to interact and react to various personal issues. This element of cushioning the impact of an immigrant individual's quest for self-assertion through individuality in an ethnicised communal space makes way for the individual to assert an identity in the larger American society with confidence. Nazli lacks this support of the extended community system and the family support system extended to Arissa and all the other female characters discussed above. The difference of reactions to mental health issues and emotional stress, therefore, lies partly in the individual's ability to assert oneself and partly in the community's extended support network.

Abdullah draws attention to the lesser known and discussed issues of a widow's place in the diasporic Muslim community and the difficulties of bringing up a differently abled child in a diasporic social set-up without the support of an extended family structure. The subtle pressure on Arissa to go out and meet a nice man is not only on the basis of her welfare, but is also on the basis of a widow's inability to be alone in America: "you have to look out for your own future [...] you

need some support.”³⁶ At the same time, Arissa is unable to fathom the harsh reality of suddenly becoming a widow because of the negative connotations associated with it. “Baywah, the Urdu word for a widow. It hit me like a cold slap of the snowy winter whenever I heard it [...] curse. Broken by loss.”³⁷ The traditional connotations associated with the word make it bitter for Arissa and turn it into a curse that changes her life. The traditional patriarchal family structures prevalent in South Asia and the ingrained traditions within women to depend on male relatives and partners for protection make Arissa feel doubly vulnerable during the initial period of her bereavement. She has to carry the double burden of coming to terms with her loss and facing the unvoiced, yet apparent, criticism of her fate which comes to her through her traditions and her cultural background. Thus, Arissa’s vulnerability is not only because of the loss of her loved one, but also because of her socio-religious background which makes her a lonely victim, facing a loss because of her own fate. Abdullah sheds light on the desolation faced specifically by Pakistani women in America, and generally by South Asian women in America through Arissa’s initial despair. But at the same time, Arissa’s decision to stay in America, despite her ability to go back to Pakistan and the familiar comfort of extended support, underlines the resistance and the need for South Asian women to establish themselves in America, despite the odds. The other issue of raising a differently abled child stresses the support systems available to the parents of these children, despite their nationality. While the novel may not be a narrative of espousing America’s developed healthcare

³⁶ Abdullah, *op cit*, 213.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 117.

system, it subtly contrasts the better chances available to Raian, Arissa's son, in the US as opposed in Pakistan.

America, while being the land where dreams are shattered, thus also becomes the land where new dreams are made possible for Arissa. By portraying the land in this way, Abdullah perpetuates the South Asian belief that America is a land of possibility, therefore harking back to the original American Dream concept. The American Dream is possible, but at the same time the individual has to find self-worth through individual means and has to accept American beliefs such as individuality to succeed. Arissa is able to achieve her dream, because she lets go of some of her beliefs, and integrates American individuality into her life to become a winner. At the same time, she accesses the support systems made available to her through the American system, thus making both her and her son's life easier. Nazli in *The Colour of Mehndi* becomes a failure because she refuses to reach out to the support systems available to her via the American system. In contrast, Arissa is more American than Nazli despite her late arrival in America. These issues, rarely discussed in the novels by contemporary South Asian American women, are central to Abdullah's work, thus signalling the "different" concerns of the Pakistani American authors and their difference from the larger group of contemporary South Asian American women writers. They discuss the same issues of women's place in the diasporic society of America just as the other South Asian American authors discussed in this thesis do. But women's agency in decision-making and establishing oneself in America is important to the Pakistani American women writers because of the widespread belief ascribing their limitations to their religious affiliations. As "the

muslim [sic] woman as subject is always being constructed through negativity and disavowal,”³⁸ Abdullah’s portrayal of Arissa as a woman who combats negativity and renunciation creates a different genre of its own. The individual identity of a young woman battling loss and added elements of prejudice is highlighted in the novel while at the same time underscoring her identity as an individual from a different socio-religious background. Thus in the “Third Space”³⁹ in America, among the other ethnic groups from South Asia and among the host communities from America, Arissa’s “different” identities as an individual – as a Muslim woman and as a Pakistani American woman – are all woven together to emphasise the importance of establishing an individual identity. For the diasporic women characters, the importance of establishing their own uniqueness away from the stereotyped homogeneous identity of being just another South Asian American is therefore highlighted in the Pakistani American Muslim women’s fictions analysed in this chapter.

Conclusion

The novelists discussed in this chapter assert their “difference” as contemporary Pakistani American Muslim women writers through the varied concerns in their novels. The importance of women’s space and the importance of balancing and negotiating diverse roles expected of diasporic women that have been

³⁸ Shahnaz Khan, “Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space” *Signs* 23:2 (Winter 1998): 465.

³⁹ Shahnaz Khan argues for a Third Space for Muslim women, which is separated from the Islamist gaze (which identifies the Muslim woman as a repressed unit of a larger social circle) and the Orientalist gaze (which views the woman through racist colonial imagery) that is perpetuated in diasporic situations in the first world. Shahnaz Khan, *Ibid.*

highlighted in the selected novels, establish both Pasha-Zaidi and Abdullah as new-age writers with concerns that defy stereotyped representations and acceptances of South Asian Muslim women. They also stretch the boundaries of South Asian American women's writing by drawing attention to the subdued issues of women's responsibilities and burdens through their fiction. The importance of taking note of mental health issues prevalent among immigrant South Asian American communities and the ethno-social pressures exerted on diasporic women in the same groups, that lead to overt and implicit mental health issues, are thus brought into light through these fiction. By placing the stress on these issues, these writers establish their own individual identities in the face of mass-media-asserted homogeneous identities and insert diversity into contemporary South Asian American women's writing.

Pasha-Zaidi and Abdullah both use women's narrative voices to highlight their concerns of women's individual identity in their fiction. Nazli's narrative is a story within a story. The initial accounts of Nazli's life, recorded in self-narrated tapes and through emails to her sister-in law, are forgotten by everyone till her son, Zeeshan rediscovers them. The storyline thus gets framed within the narrative initiated by Zeeshan, in search of his forgotten mother and his connection to her. Thus, the silent life of Nazli, is given a space to relate her story. This re-framing of one narrative within the other appears in Abdullah's novel too. Arissa decides to finish her husband's unfinished novel, not only as a means of fulfilling her promise to him, but as a way to heal her own trauma, too. She decides to "rewrit[e] the whole manuscript [...] in the voice of another – the disembodied voice of the protagonist's

dead mother.”⁴⁰ While Nazli’s voice becomes the main narrative voice in *The Colour of Mehndi*, Arissa’s first person-narrative reveals her own struggles and desires. At the same time, the reframing of another storyline, within her own, in the voice of a woman, establishes the need to voice the silenced lives of Pakistani Muslim women, within the main as well as the meta narratives, in Abdullah’s novel. The prominence given to women’s voices further anchors both Pasha-Zaidi’s and Abdullah’s place among contemporary South Asian American women writers discussed in this thesis, by continuing the tradition explored by Divakaruni and others.

Both the writers establish their own “difference” through the use of ethnic identity markers that set them apart, as Muslim Pakistani women writers. Their protagonists wear hijabs, attend Muslim American gatherings and practice Islam, while living in the US. The ethno-religious identity, brought out through such subtle details, sets them apart and gives a different meaning to their individual struggles, especially when re-negotiating their identities. While the importance and the influence of Pakistani Muslim identity are established through cultural details, the same identity markers work to defy stereotypes about Pakistani Muslim women. Nazli, despite her mental health issues, strives to maintain her independence and individuality, and her religion does not hinder her progress. Arissa finds strength through her religion and it becomes one of her sources of comfort in hard times. Therefore, in portraying the protagonists as young Muslim women, navigating the diasporic social pressures and individual desires, both the novelists attempt to

⁴⁰ Abdullah, *op.cit*, 102

demystify Islam for their readers, and offer an alternate reading to Islam and its influence on Pakistani American women.

As this chapter has elaborated, the significance of women's individuality, especially in maintaining their own importance and acceptance among "different" societies, is highlighted in the novels of both Pasha-Zaidi and Abdullah. Uniqueness for Nazli comes at a price, and she loses her identity in her search for acceptance from her own immigrant Pakistani community. Her desire to be accepted makes her lose her sense of self-worth, her sanity and ultimately her life. But as Pasha-Zaidi elaborates, it is not only the prescriptive traditions of her Pakistani American Muslim society that made Nazli suffer. In the end, it is Nazli's personal choices that propel her towards mental instability. In contrast, Abdullah elaborates how personal choices, coupled with a strong network of familial support, can heal deep emotional scars and help women regain their lost self-assurance and importance even within the same traditional values practiced in Pakistani Islamic immigrant societies. In the end, as both novelists argue, it is personal preferences that enable women to assert their individualities, even while being the Other to both American host communities and other ethnic groups from South Asia. But through two different journeys of two Pakistani Muslim American women, both Pasha-Zaidi and Abdullah bring into the forefront the importance of addressing mental health issues among immigrant women and how support networks can impact the healing process of women, stifled by diasporic conditions and traditional value systems.

Conclusion

The post-1965 generation of contemporary South Asian American women writers has been making significant contributions to the development of a distinct South Asian American identity in contemporary fiction through their novels. This thesis has argued, through its close analysis of Indian American, Sri Lankan American and Pakistani American women's fiction, for a "different" reading of these novels. The thesis, thematically organised into four chapters, looks at how the selected women writers develop women characters that negotiate diverse socio-cultural issues and stereotypes, through the use of popular tropes such as identity, food and memory. The "difference" I argue for is in the ethno-cultural otherness of the women characters, the interpretation of the tropes used, away from ethnic exoticisation and postcolonial re-Orientalism, to understand the expansion and re-negotiation of individual identities, when exposed to easy transnational travel, and other cosmopolitan amenities. The under-researched writers and their works examined in this thesis, as well as the convergence of distinctly different texts, discussing varied women-centred issues, makes this study and its input into the analysis and understanding of the texts a necessary contribution to the understanding of their literature. The works of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amulya Malladi, Bharti Kirchner, V.V. Ganeshananthan, Nayomi Munaweera, Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi and Shaila Abdullah, which examine issues ranging from Indian Bengali women's struggle to become independent to Pakistani American Muslim women's search for personal fulfilment, while balancing socio-religious pressures and diasporic

demands, call for a “different” reading. This “difference” sheds light on the post-1965 sensibilities of the writers and their distinctive characters that eschew homogeneous regional identities in the face of transnational travel, hybrid identities in modern societies and heterogeneous individuals. This thesis, therefore, has attempted to analyse the importance of these fictions and the writers to the establishment of a new critical awareness of contemporary South Asian American women’s fiction with strong South Asian roots through the close examination of selected texts.

Divakaruni was named one of the 20 most influential global Indian women by *The Economic Times*¹ in early 2015 along with other well-known figures such as Bharati Mukherjee and Mira Nair. A brief note highlighted each woman’s contribution and importance. The subtext accompanying Divakaruni described her as the “Diva of the diaspora,” further establishing her presence and importance as a diasporic figure. Though being the “Diva” of the diaspora does not necessarily complement the need to give more critical attention to her creative works, the recognition, that accepts her presence as an influential diasporic women writer is worthy of note. Amulya Malladi’s *The Mango Season* was included in the 10 books selected by the Scottish Book Trust that are set in modern-day India in 2014. These accolades for the writers based in the US, writing about India, Sri Lanka or Pakistan, signal one thing: they are an important addition to the existing literary canons and genres, with their own “differences.” They represent their diasporic groups, and establish their own heterogeneous socio-cultural influences, through their fiction.

¹ Ishani Duttagupta, “Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni; Diva of the diaspora,” *The Economic Times*, 24 Jan.2015.

Their “difference” consists in writing about the experiences of contemporary diasporic women, who assert their individualities and specificities, through the use of exotic, re-Orientalist re-writings and self-reinventions of history, female bonding and ethno-regional traditions. As I have argued throughout this thesis, writers ranging from Divakaruni to Pasha-Zaidi, who write about their diverse socio-ethnic identities while located within the US, develop their own distinctiveness in their selection of myriad issues and their treatment of women characters, who re-negotiate their own selves through their varied experiences.

As discussed in the first chapter, Divakaruni’s women characters, who re-negotiate their own identities and selves when faced with diverse situations to ascertain their own individualities, bring forth the desires of contemporary women in the diaspora to be acknowledged as individuals away from homogeneous identity markers. The novels, ranging from *Sister of My Heart* (1999) to *Oleander Girl* (2012), also signal the need of a post-1965 generation of South Asian female writers to establish their own identity, as writers with contemporary concerns – of negotiating transnational identities and diasporic acceptances among other concerns of identity and assimilation – reflected through their fiction. Divakaruni’s fiction and its female-oriented gaze have also earned her a place between highbrow classical diasporic writing and popular chick-lit fiction. Her fiction has become well-known yet veers away from being merely popular. Thus, despite portraying women and their journeys of self-realisation, Divakaruni’s distinctive contribution consists in retaining Bengali myths and folklore to explore women’s (especially diasporic) experiences. Divakaruni’s fiction ushers in a new literary phenomenon and she becomes a

precursor to a new group of writers who delve into South Asian American women's individual histories, memories, fears and nostalgia to create fiction. Divakaruni's bold move in the late 1990s with *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) ushers in a new writing style that explores the freedom of the post-1965 writers in creating fiction about women with distinct ethno-social identities, re-evaluating their individuality, through tropes such as myths, food and exotic otherness.

While Divakaruni contests exoticisation of her women characters and the plots filled with myth and magic through a subtle reversal of the same tropes to analyse women's agency and choice, I have argued that her use of independent women characters also contests the homogenisation of Indian women in diasporic Indian literature. In contrast, to other women writers from the Indian diaspora, ranging from Bharati Mukherjee to modern writers such as Indu Sundaresan and Shoba Narayan who write from the US, Divakaruni uses exotic tropes to not only create magic realism that aid her narratives, but also to create unique women characters who are able to re-negotiate their diasporic identities through their own ways of appropriating both their ethnic cultural roots and host community values. Divakaruni therefore becomes a precursor to a new group of writers who are exploring the individuality of characters who neither shun nor absorb their ethno-regional affiliations in blind faith to re-invent their new diasporic selves.

Divakaruni uses the popular trope of female exoticisation to explore individual identities in her protagonists in her earlier novels (*Sister of My Heart*, and *The Vine of Desire* (2002)). As was discussed in the first chapter, the exceptionality accorded to these female characters moves beyond mere otherisation through

exoticisation, to speak of other pertinent issues of female individualities and adaptabilities in the face of westernisation and Americanisation. Issues of diasporic identity conflict, facing and negotiating racial discrimination and the bitter tales of immigrants whose dreams of the promised land are shattered in the face of personal tragedies are brought to life through the use of the magical, liminal space of folkloric myth that permeate her narratives, making it a trope through which identities can be redefined. Divakaruni further individualises her characters by stressing their Bengali Indian identity as opposed to a pan-Indian identity. By presenting her female narrators and characters as individuals in search of their own strengths and weaknesses rather than representatives of a common Indian or South Asian identity, Divakaruni establishes the uniqueness that sets her apart from her predecessors and peers. Though there has been an increase in critical evaluations of Divakaruni's work, some of the criticisms that focus on Divakaruni's immigrant narratives,² fail to acknowledge the individuality that is accented through differences, despite the use of exotic through magic and myth to discuss her female narrators and their lives. Divakaruni's subtle use of these features, of women steeped in matrilineal traditions and sororities and narratives replete with references to cultural traditions, myth, folklore and food items, emphasise the inimitable South Asian identity of her narrators. These South Asian characters venture in search of their individuality, through personal choices, breaking away from the larger cohort of their diasporic communities, and re-invent their own selves. Divakaruni, therefore, asserts her own

² See Husne Jahan, "Colonial Woes in Post-Colonial Writing: Chitra Divakaruni's Immigrant Narratives," *South Asian Review* 24.2 (2003): 149-169, Chandran P. Chinnu, "Signification of Dream and Dream Telling in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*," *New Man International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 1: 7 (July 2014): 27-35, among others, to see the binary east versus west analysis of Divakaruni's work.

identity as contemporary author and explores how “Indian immigrants have shaped Indian values and cultures to their needs in the US.”³ She also establishes the new wave of South Asian American women’s narratives through her individualised protagonists who speak beyond the postcolonial exotica and myth surrounding them, within their othered narratives.

The first chapter also analyses how Divakaruni explores the importance of memory, both personal and inherited, through her novels *Queen of Dreams* (2004) and *Oleander Girl* (2012). These novels offer insights into Divakaruni’s multiplicity as a writer in her selection of tropes. She reveals individualities through selective memories used by her protagonists to construct their own identities. Divakaruni creates characters that thrive on “prosthetic memories” that are worn artificially on the body, interchangeable and exchangeable.⁴ Her female narrators discussed in these novels use cultural memories passed on to them by their cultural, ethno-religious backgrounds to fashion their identities as Indian Americans and as individuals. They exchange their present memories of America, and in the case of Korobi in *Oleander Girl*, of her past as a Bengali Indian, to carve out different hyphenated identities for themselves through their acquired and appropriated memories. Because of this distinctly American form of self-imagining, of creating one’s own dream and identity in and through a new land, where they create and edit their pasts, the narrative memories created and narrated by Divakaruni also become representative of memories that create generalised identities for the Indian American women that she

³ Duttagupta, *op.cit*

⁴ Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The transformation of American Remembrance in the age of mass culture* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004).

depicts in her fiction. Female characters thus use their cultural, historical and personal memories to develop their own uniqueness in their self-constructed narrative in the US. Memory thus becomes a cultural inheritance for Divakaruni in these novels. Despite its importance in assisting individual identities, memory retains its importance as a vehicle of tradition and of cultural appendage in *Queen of Dreams*. The novel explores Indian American women and their multiple difficulties in constructing their own distinctiveness in the face of commonly held stereotypes and American values. As I have argued throughout the chapter, their memories, appropriated or created, define their personalities and accord them the uniqueness they aspire towards. Through the use of popular tropes such as memory and nostalgia to create individual women characters, Divakaruni critiques the stereotypical use of such tropes in diasporic and postcolonial writings by immigrant authors. By using over-used tropes to establish uniqueness that defy homogenisation and ethnic stereotypes, she further establishes the importance of focusing beyond ethno-racial affiliations in contemporary fiction. Divakaruni's contribution in furthering common tropes such as memory to define individual identities, therefore, opens new avenues for contemporary fiction not only produced by South Asian women residing in the US, but adds weight to other diasporic and Anglophone authors such as Anita Rau Badami and others.

Divakaruni is also the only non-Muslim writer among the selected authors in this thesis to draw attention to the heightened racial differences in post-9/11 American society through her novels *Queen of Dreams* and *Oleander Girl*. The importance of community, despite one's own ethno-religious affiliations, in the face

of racial discrimination, is highlighted through both Rakhi's and Korobi's experiences in the US, following 9/11. While Rakhi's heightened sense of Otherness in the wake of 9/11 attracts attention to the race based cultural negotiations in the US, Korobi's perspective as the outsider — the Indian visiting the US — highlights the importance of race in the US and the varied view points regarding race and ethnicity in India. While these issues are being explored, Divakaruni treads very carefully on the issues of race, stereotypes and identity in the US for diasporic non-Muslim South Asians. Her stance, of occupying the middle ground and drawing attention to individual actions rather than communal or societal activities against South Asians, in the aftermath of 9/11 signals her desire to be a mediator, between the west and the east. While racial and ethnic affiliations are re-valued in the face of racial attacks, US as diasporic location does not become the catalyst in such self identifications. US, the diasporic location is portrayed as both liberating and accepting, while varied individual activities are condemned for igniting racial and ethnic disharmony. Thus, Divakaruni examines individual identity formations in the discussed novels, in a post-9/11 America, where ethno-racial discriminations are not given a political tinge, but are seen through a personal lense, which aids the conflicts to be easily resolved.

The second chapter develops the trope of food and alimentary images commonly used in South Asian American women's fiction to investigate the re-inventions of individual identities. Through this chapter, I have argued for a reading of food imagery in fiction beyond common uses of exoticisation and otherisation. Alimentary images presented in the fiction of Amulya Malladi and Bharti Kirchner move beyond re-Orientalisation of the east and the Other, to become substitutes for

emotions, individualities and as a means of establishing power hierarchies within the contested spaces of diasporic communities and gendered domestic spaces. *The Mango Season* (2003) and *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004) have been examined especially in relation to the expression of emotions through alimentary images and contribute to the overall thesis of establishing the protagonists' individual identities. Malladi's use of South Indian foodways and fusion food to critique gender hierarchies and contested spaces inhabited by women both within India and in the US, fortifies the post-1965 South Asian American women's tradition of using popular tropes such as food to discuss significant issues of identity and individuality. Kirchner's *Pastries* (2004) also contributes to the discussion of the reversal of exoticisation by making Sunya exoticise Japanese spiritual practices and baking traditions instead of finding answers to her personal and professional problems through her western location in the US and through western baking practices. The hybridity of the characters, in appropriating diverse influences with ease, makes Kirchner's women characters different in their unique way. In contrast *Darjeeling* (2002) brings out the re-Orientalisation of Bengali Indian values through food practices. Once again the hybrid, transnational impact on Indian characters who decide to use select influences on their lives to bolster their power hierarchy and individuality is highlighted through the narrative. As post-1965 writers, both Malladi and Kirchner display "differences" in their female narrators to highlight their individualities as distinct from the stereotypes about Indian women prevalent among the ethnic outsiders, as submissive and tradition-bound. While Malladi emphasises South Indian traits and food preferences to draw attention to the unique personalities

of her heroines, Kirchner draws on Bengali traditional food and American food practices to underline the cultural influences on the identity formation of her protagonists. Divakaruni, too, has used extensive references to Bengali food in her novels, but in Kirchner's novels, food becomes more than a commodity: it acquires deeper traditional meanings, especially in *Darjeeling*. Therefore, this chapter not only re-asserts the "difference" of Malladi and Kirchner as post-1965 writers but also confirms their importance in understanding the contemporary writings of South Asian American women.

This chapter also insists on the importance of alimentary themed novels in the contemporary diasporic writing. While there have been an array of cookbook themed writing from British Asian writers to South Asian American writers, the importance of incorporating alimentary images to analyse women's agency and different emotions in fiction have not been explored by many diasporic authors save for a select few. The use of memoirs/autobiographies to analyse the impact of food, on diasporic communities have become popular in modern literature in recent time, signalling the importance and the interest on alimentary themed fiction among diasporic literature. Thus, these authors and their fictions which have been under-researched and not compared in previous literary criticism, shed light on the developing genre of food writing used by contemporary South Asian American women writers, not only as an exotic trope but also as an added element in their fictions to set themselves apart from the other Asian and Asian American writers.

The third chapter moves away from the different uses of diverse tropes in re-negotiating women's identities to highlight the "difference" of Sri Lankan American

writers, as the cultural other to different South Asian American diasporic writers and their use of ethnic identities, to bring to light their distinctive socio-cultural backgrounds. Sri Lankan American women writers discussed in this chapter have been publishing since the early 2000s but have rarely been acknowledged as South Asian American writers due to their recent addition to the body of writers with South Asian ancestry. In contrast to the history of Anglophone writers from Sri Lanka, who have been exploring tropes ranging from postcolonial identities to national and ethnic differences in times of riots and ethnic war, Sri Lankan American women writers discussed in this chapter analyse the importance of ethno-regional identities through their fiction. Their fiction looks at the Sri Lankan experience leading up to and during the period of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and analyses unique female experiences of being Sri Lankan through those times. V.V. Ganeshanathan's *Love Marriage* (2009) and Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012) analyse socio-political issues that shaped the lives of Sri Lankan women both in and outside Sri Lanka, faced with the ethnic conflict. Both Ganeshanathan and Munaweera use the trope of ethnic conflict and the resultant emotional and socio-cultural alienation to build up their female protagonists and their uniqueness as Sri Lankan American women. The use of distinct ethnic markers to differentiate two different perspectives to the same ethnic war, sets these two novels apart not only from the rest of the novels analysed in the thesis, but also from each other. Ganeshanathan's attempt at providing the ethnic Other's story, through a young Tamil Sri Lankan American woman, stands in contrast to Munaweera's depiction of the Sinhalese Sri Lankan American woman and the Tamil militant living and fighting

in Sri Lanka. Ethnic markers thus become important in developing individual identities while the same ethnic affiliations provide the necessary distinction to differentiate their novels. The distinct character of these Sri Lankan American women writers' narratives has not been critically analysed from the perspective of their Sri Lankan Americanness, and throughout the chapter, I emphasise how these women writers have contributed to the development of a unique Sri Lankan female identity through their novels. The re-invention of self, in the face of ethno-social adversities, while both in Sri Lanka and in the diaspora, is analysed in this chapter through a close reading of the two novels, while establishing their "difference" as Sri Lankan American women's fiction. In developing a distinct Sri Lankan identity, these writers have also expanded the already established Asian American women writers' characteristics of building strong, individual female characters that defy stereotypes, both as Sri Lankan women and as Sri Lankan American women.

The final chapter extends the argument concerning the distinctiveness of non-Indian American writing from the South Asian region. Pakistani American Muslim women writers discussed in this chapter contribute to the development of the core theme of this thesis by demonstrating their "difference" as Pakistani American writers both in their use of female individualities and socio-cultural concerns. Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi's and Shaila Abdullah's novels explore how socio-cultural pressure exerted on diasporic Pakistani Muslim women in the US determines lifestyle choices and individual identities through their female protagonists. One of the prominent tropes analysed in this chapter is how mental health issues, especially among diasporic Pakistani American women, have been portrayed in these novels.

By exploring the social set-up among the tightly knit diasporic groups such as the Pakistani Muslim Americans, and by bringing to light how close-knit diasporic social ties can lead to both depression and a way out of depression and other difficult situations, both Pasha-Zaidi and Abdullah examine the underexplored trope of female mental health issues in South Asian American literature. The trope, explored in Malladi's *Serving Crazy with Curry* through Devi, gets fully expanded and developed through a diasporic lens in the novels analysed in this chapter. The situatedness of the novels, both set immediately before and right after 9/11 also makes the contribution of these novels important in analysing the development of a distinct Pakistani American women's literature. While Pasha-Zaidi consciously maintains silence about the impact of 9/11 and its repercussions on Muslim ethno-religious identity, Abdullah uses it to draw attention to the changing nature of perceptions about each other, both for the ethnic other — the Pakistani Muslim American — and for the host American society. While Divakaruni has also examined the impact of 9/11 on identity formation of Rakhi in *Queen of Dreams*, Abdullah highlights the ethno-religious discriminations directed at the diasporic other, because of their religious beliefs. I have used these novels specifically to critique how socio-religious influences exerted within diasporic settings can have an impact on female identities and individualities. Pakistani American women writers also grapple with the stereotypes accorded them in the aftermath of 9/11 to shed light on how religion does not necessarily constrict their life choices, but can become a source of strength depending on individual preferences. The differences brought out in this chapter move also beyond simple ethno-religious boundaries and make inroads into the

development of a new awareness: about issues that have been neglected in contemporary South Asian American fiction and suppressed due to stereotypes and common typecasting of Muslim women and South Asian women. As I have argued throughout the chapter, the difference in Pakistani American women writers' work not only lies in their own "difference" but also in their development of individualities beyond stereotypes, while using the same common tropes of coping with family pressure and unforeseen tragedies.

All the writers, ranging from Divakaruni to Abdullah have used female voices in their narratives to explore women's identities in their fiction. First person narratives and omniscient narrative voices that give insights to the women characters, aid in the establishment of independent women characters who re-negotiate their identities within diverse socio-ethnic frameworks. Alternating women's voices in the plot becomes a common technique that enables Divakaruni and Munaweera to explore the Other's perspective. Framing meta-narratives within other storylines provides the writers with the freedom to voice the silenced, and to reveal the not-so-comfortable themes of mental health and socio-community pressures. All the writers use distinct ethnic markers to set their characters apart from the larger cohort of South Asian and South Asian diasporic subjects, thus, ascertaining their own "difference" among the others.

As has been argued throughout different chapters, highlighting diverse tropes that underscore the importance of individuality and the re-narrativising of self by women characters have been trademark characteristics of the post-1965 generation of female writers. These writers and their use of common tropes such as myths, legends,

alimentary images and ethnic details in fiction have been critically misread by the critics because of the tropes used. The cultural otherness these writers have brought out through their narratives have been overlooked because it has been clothed in ethnic and exotic details. As I have argued, these tales of women and their different choices that allow them to re-negotiate their identities need more critical attention, that look beyond these common tropes. The writers themselves ranging from Divakaruni to Abdullah have contested easy exoticisation and categorisation of their fictions by introducing complex women characters who negotiate their own identities through personal choices. These authors address common concerns of women's self-acceptance, reconciliation with their own pasts and recognition by their own communities for being individuals through their novels that have become popular among both American and eastern audiences. Their difference lies in the fact that they have tried to debunk stereotypes while using the same tropes of exoticisation, food, nostalgia, ethnic affiliations and socio-religious diversity. These writers, ranging from Divakaruni to Abdullah, have all established their own distinct identity as Bengali American, Sri Lankan Tamils living in America and Pakistani American Muslims among others, but they also become one cohesive group that discusses pertinent issues relevant to all South Asian women living in America and writing from America. Despite their exclusivity in portraying their own differences, the common cultural values, explored throughout all of their fiction, bring them all together under the wider umbrella of South Asian American women and also the Asian American women's writing tradition.

A critically important contribution of this thesis consists of its concentration on South Asian women writers' depiction of female characters and the development of female individuality through diverse tropes. The importance of female protagonists' distinctive characteristics is particularly relevant to the writing of contemporary women writers from South Asia, since this was the period when professionally and academically competent women entered the US. Therefore, the writers whose work has been analysed in this thesis make a significant effort to destabilise stereotypes about South Asian women through their fiction and most importantly challenge the homogeneity accorded to these women in the diasporic communities in the US. Their ethno-religious differences highlighting their heterogeneous histories brought out through each of their narratives also make it possible for the female narrators to re-invent their selves outside of those ethno-religious identities. Thus, while underscoring "differences," the writers discussed also make a strong statement about the choices that create individuality among contemporary South Asian American women.

By bringing together hitherto critically neglected writers, who have nevertheless gained popularity through their fiction, as is evident through their market reach, especially in various translations and their social media presence, this thesis makes a significant contribution to the expansion of the field of contemporary South Asian American women's literature and its criticism. As I have argued in the introduction to the study, these novels have gained commercial success and recognition. But despite their commercial popularity, these novels have been neglected in critical analysis due to their recent entry into the already established

diasporic and ethnic literary market and, perhaps most importantly, due to their use of common tropes such as postcolonial exoticisation, female bonding, socio-ethnic relations and food in the narratives. As I have argued before, these tropes have been misread and overtly simplified in critical analysis, relegating these fictions and these writers to the realm of light-fiction. But despite their seemingly simplified appearances, these fictions contribute to the understanding of contemporary South Asian American diasporic subjects and their ability to balance both their ethno-regional affiliations and American sensibilities without exclusively choosing one over the other. The analysis of these tropes, which need to be read in a “different” light to that of traditional stereotypes, marks the significance of this study’s contribution to the existing knowledge of contemporary South Asian American women’s fiction. Despite its attempts at carving out new grounds for research, through the study and comparison of under-researched authors and novels, this thesis is far from exhaustive in its analysis of contemporary South Asian American women writers. It leaves many avenues of analysis open for further discussion, especially in the fields of alimentary imagery, ethno-religious relations and female mental health issues in contemporary South Asian American women’s fiction. These tropes, neglected and or stereotyped, can shed new insights into reading contemporary South Asian American women’s narratives and can lead to new understandings about what makes them distinctive.

Hence this thesis makes an attempt at understanding the emerging trends within South Asian American women’s writing in terms of using tropes such as nostalgic memories and alimentary images to explore emotions in fictions as well as established tropes of ethnic individualities and exotic representations of the east. I

have argued for an understanding of the “differences” used in the selected fiction to demarcate emerging trends in South Asian American fiction through an analysis of the aforementioned tropes. The individualities brought out through differences thus become a trademark of the fiction of contemporary South Asian American women who have written about the “sisters of their hearts,” through their fictional renditions. The uniqueness of South Asian American women’s experience of writing about the re-negotiated spaces and new transnational cosmopolitan identities of women, both within and without diasporic boundaries brings forth the new concerns of South Asian American women and opens new avenues for future critical engagement with their contemporary fiction.

Works Cited

- “A Disobedient Girl, Ru Freeman.” Online video clip. *Youtube*. Youtube. 13 Jul. 2009.
Web.30 Mar. 2012.
- Abdullah, Shaila. *Saffron Dreams*. Ann Arbor: Modern History, 2009. Print.
- Adams, James Truslow. *The Epic of America*. Piscataway: Transaction Printing, 2012. Print.
- Afzal-Khan, Fawzia, and Kalpana Seshadri- Crooks, eds. *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000. Print.
- Agnew, Vijay. *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2005. Print.
- Alam, Fakrul. “Guest Editor’s Coloumn.” *ASIATIC* 6:1 (June 2012): 3- 6.Web.
- Alba, Richard. D. *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1990. Print.
- Aldama, Frederick Luis. “Unbraiding Tradition: An Interview with Chitra Divakaruni.” *Journal of South Asian Literature* 35: 1 & 2 (2000): 1-12. Print.
- Alessandrini, Anthony C. “My Heart is Indian for All That : Bollywood Film between Home and Diaspora.” *Diaspora* 10: 3 (2001): 315-340. Print.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 2006 (new edition). Print.
- Anthias, Flora, and Nira Yuval-Davis. *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the anti-racist struggle*. London: Routledge, 1993. Print.

- Appadurai, Arjun. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Theorizing Diaspora*. Ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. 25-48. Print.
- . "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30:1 (Jan.1988): 3-24. Print.
- . "Theory in Anthropology: Center and Periphery." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28:2 (Apr. 1986): 356-361. Print.
- . *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Public Worlds 11. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996. Print.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Ethics in a World of Strangers*. London: Penguin, 2007. Print.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds. *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. 2nd Edition. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Avakian, Arlene Voski, eds. *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Exploring the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking*. Oxford: Berg, 2005. Print.
- Ayyagari, Kameshwari. "Cuisine in Indian Literature." *Muse India* 37. 2011. Web.
- Bahri, Deepika . "With Kaleidoscope Eyes." *A Part yet Apart*. Ed. Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998. 25-48. Print.
- Bahri, Deepika, and Mary Vasudeva, eds. *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996. Print.
- Bal, Mieke, Jonathan Crew, and Leo Spitzer, eds. *Acts of Memory: Cultural recall in the Present*. Hanover: UP of New England, 1999. Print.

- Banerjee, Mita. *The Chutneyfication of History: Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, Bharati Mukherjee and the Postcolonial Debate*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2002. Print.
- Banerjee, Suchismita. "Interrogating the Ambivalence of Self-Fashioning and Redefining the Immigrant Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*." *ASIATIC* 6:1 (June 2012): 10- 24. Web.
- Bhalla, Tamara Ayesha. *Between History and Identity: Reading the Authentic in South Asian Diasporic Literature and Community*. Doctoral Diss. U of Michigan, 2008. Print.
- Bhalla, Vibha. "Couch Potatoes and Super-Women: Gender, Migration, and the Emerging Discourse on Housework among Asian Indian Immigrants." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 27: 4 (Summer 2008): 71- 99. Print.
- Bhatia, Sunil. *American Karma: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Indian Diaspora*. New York: New York UP, 2007. Print.
- Black, Shameem. "Recipes for Cosmopolitanism: Cooking Across Borders in the South Asian Diaspora Fiction." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 31: 1 (2010): 1-30. Print.
- Brazier, Jana Evans, and Anita Mannur, eds. *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. Print.
- Brennan, Timothy. *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation*. London: Macmillan, 1989. Print.
- Brooker, Peter. *A Glossary of Cultural Theory*. London: Hodder Arnold, 2003. Print.

- Butler, Pamela, and Jigna Desai. "Manolos, Marriage, and Mantras: Chick-Lit Criticism and Transnational Feminism." *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 8: 2 (2008): 1-31. Print.
- Campbell, Matthew, Jacqueline M. Labbe, and Sally Shuttleworth. *Memory and Memorials: 1789 – 1914 Literary and Cultural Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Chan, Jeffery Paul, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds. *The Big Aieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese Literature*. New York: Meridian, 1991. Print.
- Chatterjee, Partha. "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question." *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*. Ed. K. Sangari and S. Vaid. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1990. 233-253. Print.
- Chatterjee, Priya. "De/ Colonizing the Exotic: Teaching 'Asian Women' in a U.S. Classroom." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 21: 1/2. Asian American Women (2000): 87-110. Print.
- Cheah, Peng, and Bruce Robbins, eds. *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998. Print.
- Chen, Winnie. "Curry on the Divide in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham*." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 36: 3-4 (2005): 1-23. Print.
- Chen, Xiaomei. "Reading Mother's Tale – Reconstructing Women's Space in Amy Tan and Zhang Jie." *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 16 (Dec 1994): 111-132. Print.

- Cheung, King-Kok. *Articulate Silences*. London: Cornell UP, 1993. Print.
- , ed. *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. Print.
- ."Re-Viewing Asian American Literature." *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*. Ed. King-Kok Cheung. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. Print.
- Chinnu, Chandran P. "Signification of Dream and Dream Telling in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's '*Queen of Dreams*'." *New Man International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 1: 7 (July 2014): 27-35. Web.
- Chiu, Monica. *Filthy Fiction: Asian American Literature by Women*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2004. Print.
- Chrisman, Laura, and Benita Parry, eds. *Postcolonial Theory and Criticism*. Cambridge: English Association, 2000. Print.
- Asian Pacific American Legal Center, and Asian American Justice Center. "A Community of Contrast: Asian Americans in the United States: 2011," n.d.Web. 23 Sep.2013.
- Counihan, Carole M, and Penny Van Esterik, eds. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Counihan, Carole M. *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power*. New York and London: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Crane, Ralph J, and Radhika Mohanram, eds. *Shifting Continents/ Colliding cultures: Diaspora writing of the Indian Subcontinent*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. Print.

- Das Dasgupta, Shamita., ed. *A Patchwork Shawl: Chronicles of South Asian Women in America*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002. Print.
- Dasgupta, Sanjukta, and Malashri Lal, eds. *The Indian Family in Transition: Reading Literary and Cultural Texts*. New Delhi: Sage, 2007. Print.
- Davé, Shilpa, Leilani Nishime, and Tasha G. Oren. *East Main Street: Asian American Popular Culture*. New York: New York UP, 2005. Print.
- Davé, Shilpa, et.al. “De-Privileging Positions: Indian Americans, South Asian Americans, and the Politics of Asian American Studies.” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 3:1 (Feb. 2000): 67-100. Print.
- Davidson, Cathy N., and E.M. Broner, eds. *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980. Print.
- Davis, Rocío G., and Sue-Im Lee, eds. *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetics in Asian American Writing*. Philadelphia: Temple U, 2006. Print.
- De Mel, Neloufer. *Women and the nation's narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001. Print.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Trans. Dana Polan. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986. Print.
- Desai, Jigna. *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Dias Martins, Ana Margarida. “Gender and the ‘postcolonial exotic’.” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48:1 (March 2013): 145- 158. Print.

Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. "A Partial list of Divakaruni's Foreign Publishers." n.d. Web.

27 Sep. 2014. < <http://www.chitradivakaruni.com/about/foreign-publishers/> >

---. *Oleander Girl*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2012. Print.

---. *One Amazing Thing*. New York: Hyperion, 2009. Print.

---. *Queen of Dreams*. London: Abacus, 2004. Print.

---. *Sister of My Heart*. London: Black Swan, 1999. Print.

---. *The Mistress of Spices*. London: Black Swan, 1997. Print.

---. *The Vine of Desire*. London: Abacus, 2002. Print.

---. "The Reluctant Patriot." Los Angeles Times. 21 Oct 2001. Web. 04 Feb. 2012.

<<http://articles.latimes.com/2001/oct/21/opinion/op-59757>>

---. "What Women Share." *Author Essay*. Random House. n.d. Web. 01 Mar. 2015.

<<https://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/0199/divakaruni/essay.html>>

Döring, Tobias, Markus Heide, and Susanne Mühleisen, eds. *Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Food*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag. Winter, 2003. Print.

Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concept of Pollution and Taboo*.

London: Routledge, 1966. Print.

Duttagupta, Ishani. "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni; Diva of the diaspora." *The Economic*

Times. n.d. Web. 24 Jan. 2015.

<<http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/slideshows/people/the-20-most-influential-global-indian-women/chitra-banerjee-divakaruni/slideshow/45749855.cms>>

Ellwood, Robert. *The Politics of Myth: A Study of C.G.Jung, Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell*. Albany: State U of New York P, 1999. Print.

Esquivel, Laura. *Like Water for Chocolate*. Trans. Carol Christensen and Thomas Christensen. London: Doubleday, 1993. Print.

Farmanfarmaian, Roxane. "Writing from a Different Place." *Publishers Weekly* 248: 20 (17/05/2001). Print.

Frye, Matthew. *Roots Too; White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America*. Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 2008. Print.

Fong, Timothy P. *The Contemporary Asian American Experience: Beyond the Model Minority*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1998. Print.

Freeman, Ru. "About Ru." n.d. Web. 30 Mar. 2012. <[http:// rufreeman.com/about-ru-freeman/press](http://rufreeman.com/about-ru-freeman/press)>

---. *A Disobedient Girl*. London: Viking, 2010. Print.

Gabaccia, Donna R. *Immigration and American Diversity: A Social and Cultural History*. Malden: Blackwell, 2002. Print.

Gandhi, Leela. *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998. Print.

Ganeshananthan, V.V. *Love Marriage*. London: Phoenix, 2009. Print.

Garg, Shweta, and Khushu-Lahiri, Rajyashree. "Interpreting a Culinary Montage: Food in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*." *ASIATIC* 9:1 (June 2012): 73- 83. Web.

- Garg, Shweta. *Culinary Images and Identity: Food In The Selected Fiction Of Three Indian Diasporic Women Writers*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic, 2012. Print.
- Gherke- White, Donna. *The Face behind the Veil*. New York: Citadel, 2007. Print.
- Gooneratne, Yasmine. *Celebrating Sri Lankan Women's English writing: 1948 – 2000 (Vol II)*. Colombo: Women's Education and Research Centre, 2002. Print.
- Goonetilleke, D.C.R.A. *Sri Lankan English Literature and the Sri Lankan People 1917 – 2003*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2005. Print.
- . "Sri Lanka's 'Ethnic' Conflict in Its Literature in English." *World Literature Today* 66:3 (Summer 1992): 450- 453. Print.
- Grewal, Inderpal. *Transnational America; Feminsms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2005. Print.
- Grice, Helena. *Negotiating Identities: An introduction to Asian American women's writing*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002. Print.
- Gunew, Sneja. "'Mouthwork': Food and Language as the Corporal Home for the Unhoused Diasporic Body in South Asian Women's Writing." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40: 93 (2005): 93-103. Print.
- . *Framing Marginality: Multicultural Literary Studies*. Carlton: Melbourne UP, 1994. Print.
- Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck. "The post 9/11 'Hijab' as Icon." *Sociology of Religion* 68: 3. Muslim Integration in the United States and France (Fall 2007): 253-267. Print.

- Hall, Stuart, and Paul du Gay, eds. *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London: Sage, 1996. Print.
- Halter, Marilyn. *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity*. New York: Schocken Books, 2000. Print.
- Hamilton, Grant. "Uncertainty and the Future: A reading of V.V.Ganeshanathan's *Love Marriage*." *South Asian Review* 33:3 (2012): 155-169. Print.
- Harding, Sandra, and Uma Narayan. "Introduction. Border Crossing: Multicultural and Postcolonial Feminist Challenges to Philosophy (Part II)." *Hypatia* 13:3. Border Crossing: Multicultural and Postcolonial Feminist Challenges to Philosophy (Part 2). (Summer 1998): 1-5. Print.
- Harris, Joanne. *Chocolat*. London: Doubleday, 1999. Print.
- Hasan, Anjum. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Sri Lanka." *The Caravan* 14:7 (Jul 2012). Web. 02 Jul. 2012.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "Mothers and Daughters." *Signs* 7:1 (Autumn 1981): 200-222. Print.
- . *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. London: Harvard UP, 1997. Print.
- Ho, Jennifer Ann. *Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels*. New York and London: Routledge, 2005. Print.
- Ho, Wendy. *The Politics of Asian American Mother-daughter writing*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 1999. Print.

- Holtzman, Jon D. "Food and Memory." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 361-378. Print.
- Hong, Terry. "Responding with hope to 9/11; A Talk With Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni About Her Latest Novel, *Queen of Dreams*." *Bloomsbury Review* 24: 6. 2004. Web. 01 Mar. 2015.
- Hsiao, Ruth Yu. "A World Apart; Reading South Asian American Literature." *A Part yet Apart*. Ed. Lavina Dhingra Shankar, and Rajini Srikanth. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998. Print.
- Huggan, Graham. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Hussain, Yasmin. *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity*. Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005. Print.
- Islam, Nasheed. "In the Belly of the Multicultural Beast I am named South Asian." *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of South Asian Diaspora*. Ed. The Women of South Asian Descent Collective. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993. 242-245. Print.
- Iyer, Nalini, and Bonnie Zare, eds. *Other Tongues: Rethinking the Language Debates in India*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009. Print.
- Jahan, Husne. "Colonial Woes in Post-Colonial Writing: Chitra Divakaruni's Immigrant Narratives." *South Asian Review* 24.2 (2003): 149-169. Print.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986): 65-88. Print.

- Jayasuriya, Maryse. *Terror and Reconciliation: Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature, 1983-2009*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012. Print.
- Jayasuriya, Maryse, and Aparna Halpé, eds. *South Asian Review: Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature* 33:3 (2012). Print.
- Jayathurai, Dashini. "Drawing Maps of Pain: An Interview with V.V.Ganeshanathan." *South Asian Review*. Sri Lankan Anglophone Literature 33:3 (2012): 305-313. Print.
- Jayawickrama, Sharanya. "At Home in the Nation? Negotiating Identity in Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40:2 (May 2005): 123-139. Print.
- "Jhansi Ki Rani Lakshmibai Biography." n.d. Web. 01 Mar. 2015.
<http://www.liveindia.com/freedomfighters/jhansi_ki_rani_laxmi_bai.html>
- Jones, Constance A., and James D. Ryan. *The Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. New York: Facts on File, 2007. Print.
- Junn, Jane, and Natalie Masuoka, eds. "Asian American Identity: Shared Racial Status and Political Context." *Perspectives on Politics* 6: 4 (Dec 2008): 729 -740. Print.
- Jussawalla, Feroza. "Chiffon Saris: The Plight of South Asian Immigrants in the New World." *The Massachusetts Review* 29:4 (Winter 1988/1989): 583-595. Print.
- Kabir, Nasreen Munni. *Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story*. Oxford: Channel 4 Books, 2001. Print.
- Kain, Geoffrey. *Ideas of Home: Literature of Asian Migration*. Michigan: Michigan State UP, 1997. Print.

Kanaganayakam, Chelva. "Dancing in the Rarefied Air: Reading Contemporary Sri Lankan Literature." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 29:1 (Jan. 1998): 51-65. Print.

---. "Literature and the politics of ethno-nationalism in Sri Lanka." *The Sri Lanka Journal of Humanities* xxvi (2000): 29- 43. Print.

---, ed. *Arbiters of a National Imaginary: Essays on Sri Lanka. Festschrift for Professor Ashley Halpé*. Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2008. Print.

Karunanayake, Dinithi, and Selvy Thiruchandran, eds. *Continuities/ Departures: Essays on Postcolonial Sri Lankan Women's Creative Writing in English*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2011. Print.

Katrak, Ketu H. "South Asian American Literature." *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*. Ed. King-Kok Cheung. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997. Print.

---. "South Asian American Writers: Geography and Memory." *Amerasia Journal* 22:3 (1996): 121-138. Print.

---. "The Aesthetics of Dislocation: Writing the Hybrid Lives of South Asian Americans." *The Women's Review of Books* 19: 5 (Feb. 2002): 5-6. Print.

---. "Changing Traditions: South Asian Americans and Cultural/ Communal Politics." *The Massachusetts Review* 43: 1 (Spring 2002): 75-88. Print.

- . "Food and Belonging: At "Home" in "Alien-Kitchens." *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Exploring the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking*. Ed. Arlene Voski Avakian. Oxford: Berg, 2005. Print.
- Khan, Shahnaz. "Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space." *Signs* 23:2 (Winter 1998): 463- 494. Print.
- Khare, R.S., ed. *The Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists*. New York: State U of New York P, 1992. Print.
- Khushu-Lahiri, Rajyashree, and Shweta Rao. "India on a Platter: A Study of Gurinder Chadha and Paul Mayeda Berges' Cinematic Adaptation of *The Mistress of Spices*." *Postcolonial Text* 4: 2 (2008): 1-13. Web.
- Kim, Elaine H. "Defining Asian American Realities Through Literature." *Cultural Critique* 6. The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse (Spring 1987): 87-111. Print.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage, 1989. Print.
- Kirchner, Bharti. "Biography." n.d. Web. 27 Sep. 2014.
<<http://www.bhartikirchner.com/index.htm>>
- . *Darjeeling*. New York: St.Martin's Griffin, 2002. Print.
- . *Pastries*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2004. Print.
- Koshy, Susan, and R.Radhakrishnan, eds. *Transnational South Asians: The Making of a Neo-Diaspora*. New Delhi: OUP, 2008. Print.

- Kumar, Amitav, ed. *Away: The Indian Writer as an Expatriate*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Kunow, Rüdiger. "Eating Indian(s): Food, Representation, and the Indian Diaspora in the United States." *Eating Culture: The poetics and Politics of Food*. Ed. Tobias Döring, Markus Heide, and Susanne Mühleisen. Heidelberg: Winter, 2003. 151-175. Print.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. "A Temporary Matter." *Interpreter of Maladies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999. 1-22. Print.
- Landsberg, Alison. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 2004. Print.
- Lanham, Fritz. "Chitra Divakaruni and One Amazing Thing." *Asia Society*. 02 Feb. 2010. Web. 11 Oct. 2014.
- Lau, Lisa. "Emotional and Domestic Territories: The Positionality of Women as Reflected in the Landscape of the Home in Contemporary South Asian Women's Writings." *Modern Asian Studies* 40:4 (Oct. 2006): 1097-1116. Print.
- . "Making the Difference: The Differing Presentations and Representations of South Asia in the Contemporary Fiction of Home and Diasporic South Asian Women Writers." *Modern Asian Studies* 39: 1 (Feb. 2005): 237-256. Print.
- . "Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals." *Modern Asian Studies* 43:2 (2009): 571-590. Print.
- Lau, Lisa, and Ana Christina Mendes, eds. *Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics*. Oxon: Routledge, 2011. Print.

- Lee, Rachel C. "Reading Contests and Contested Reading : Chang-Rae Lee's 'Native Speaker' and Ethnic New York." *MELUS* 29: 3/4. Pedagogy, Canon, Context: Toward a Redefinition of Ethnic American Literary Studies (Autumn – Winter, 2004): 341-352. Print.
- Leiwei Li, David. *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent*. California: Stanford UP, 1998. Print.
- Lewis, Reina, and Sara Mills, eds. *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2003. Print.
- Lim, Shirley Geok-lin. "Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories in Asian American Literature." *Feminist Studies* 19:3. Who's East? Whose East? (Autumn 1993): 570-595. Print.
- . "Identifying Foods, Identifying Selves." *The Massachusetts Review* 45: 3 Food Matters. (Autumn 2004): 297 – 305. Print.
- Lovesey, Oliver. "Postcolonial Self-Fashioning in Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 32:2 (1997): 35-50. Print.
- Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. Print.
- Lowenthal, David. *Possessed by the Past; the heritage crusade and the spoils of history*. New York: The Free Press, 1996. Print.
- . *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: U of Cambridge P, 1985. Print.

- Madsen, Deborah L., ed. *Beyond the Borders: American Literature and Post-Colonial Theory*. London: Pluto, 2003. Print.
- Majithia, Sheetal. "Of Foreigners and Fetishes." *SAMAR*. 14. Web. 05 Feb. 2014.
- Mangla, Ismat Sarah. "Writing from Two Worlds." *Nirali*. 01 Oct. 2004. Web. 03 Feb. 2012.
- Malin, Jo. *The Voice of the Mother: Embedded Maternal Narratives in Twentieth Century Women's Autobiographies*. Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 2000. Print.
- Malladi, Amulya. "Books." Web Blog Post. Blog at Wordpress.com. n.d. Web. 27 Sep. 2014. <<http://authoramulya.wordpress.com/the-sound-of-language/>>
- . *Serving Crazy with Curry*. London: Piaktus, 2004. Print.
- . *The Mango Season*. New York: Ballantine, 2003. Print.
- Mannur, Anita. *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2010. Print.
- . "Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora." *MELUS* 32:4. Food in Multi-Ethnic Literatures (Winter 2007): 11-31. Print.
- Maxey, Ruth. *South Asian Atlantic Literature, 1970-2010*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012. Print.
- . "Mother-Weights and Lost Fathers: Parents in South Asian American Literature." *Wasafiri* 27:1(March 2012): 25-3. Print.
- McBride, Kelly D. *Collective Dreams: Political Imagination and Community*. University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 2005. Print.

- Meeks, Brian, ed. *Culture, Politics, Race and Diaspora: the Thoughts of Stuart Hall*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2007. Print.
- Meer, Aameena. "The Artist's voice since 1981." *BOMB* 29 (Fall 1989). Web. 25 Nov. 2013.
- Mishra, Vijay. *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- . *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Mitra, Bansari. "Princess of the Snake Palace: Myth as Empowerment in Chitra Divakaruni's Novels." Paper presented at American Folklore Society Panel: "Folklore in Postcolonial Literature" MLA Convention: Philadelphia. 30/12/2006.
- Mohanraj, Mary Anne. *Bodies in Motion*. New York: Harper Collins, 2005. Print.
- Munaweera, Nayomi. *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*. Colombo: Perera Hussein, 2012. Print.
- Narayan, Uma. "Colonialism and Its Others: Considerations on Rights and Care Discourses." *Hypatia* 10:2 (Spring 1995): 133-140. Print.
- . "Eating Cultures: Incorporation, Identity and Indian Food." *Social Identities* 1:1 (1995): 63-86. Print.
- . "Undoing the 'Package Picture' of Cultures." *Signs* 25:4. Feminism at a Millennium (Summer 2000): 1083-1086. Print.
- . *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism*. New York and London: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Narayan, Uma, and Sandra Harding. "Introduction. Border Crossing: Multicultural and Postcolonial Feminist Challenges to Philosophy (Part I)." *Hypatia* 13:2. Border

- Crossing: Multicultural and Postcolonial Feminist Challenges to Philosophy (Part I).
(Spring 1998): 1-6. Print.
- , eds. *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial and Feminist World*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000. Print.
- Neufeld, Rob. "Chaucer in earthquake city! Divakaruni's latest has victims relate life-changing moments." Book Review of *One Amazing Thing* in *AC-T Book Reviews*. 19 Mar. 2010. Web. 11 Oct. 2014.
- . "Interview with Chitra Divakaruni about *One Amazing Thing*." *The Read on WNC*. 16 Mar. 2010. Web. 11 Oct. 2014.
- Newman, Judie. *Utopia and Terror in Contemporary American Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2013. Print.
- Nguyen, Mimi Thi, and Thuy Linh Nhuyen Tu, eds. *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*. Durham: Duke UP, 2007. Print.
- Osella, Caroline, ed. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* XXXI: 1. (April 2008).
Special Issue- Food: Memory, Pleasure and Politics. Print.
- Palumbo-Liu, David. *Asian/ American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*. Redwood City: Stanford UP, 1999. Print.
- Pasha-Zaidi, Nausheen. *The Colour of Mehndi*. Mumbai: Frog Books, 2006. Print.
- Pereira-Ares, Noemí. "The politics of *hijab* in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. 48:2 (2013): 201-220. Print.

- Perera, Walter S. "Sri Lanka: Compiled and introduced by S.W.Perera." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46: 4 (2011): 743-756. Print.
- . "Sri Lanka." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 47: 4 (2012): 607-618. Print.
- . "Sri Lanka." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 40: 4 (2005): 235-251. Print.
- "Pew Social and Demographic Trends: The Rise of Asian Americans." Washington: Pew Research Center, June 2012. Web. 10 Feb. 2014.
- Podnieks, Elizabeth, and Andrea O'Reilly. *Textual Mothers/ Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women's Literature*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2010. Print.
- Prashad, Vijay. *The Karma of Brown Folks*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2001. Print.
- Priborkin, Klarina. "Mother's Dreams, Father's Stories: Family and Identity Construction on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*." *South Asian Review* 29:2 (2008): 199-219. Print.
- Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991. Print.
- Rajan, Gita. "Chitra Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*: Deploying Mystical Realism." *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 2:2 (2002): 215-236. Print.
- Rajan, Gita, and Shailja Sharma, eds. *New Cosmopolitanisms: South Asians in the US*. California: Stanford UP, 2006. Print.
- Rajan, V.G. Julie, and Atreyee Phukan, eds. *South Asia and Its Others: Reading the "Exotic."* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009. Print.

- Ranasinha, Ruvani. "Writing and reading Sri Lanka: Shifting politics of cultural translation, consumption, and the implied reader." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 48: 1 (March 2013): 27-39. Print.
- Rao, Shweta. "Thought for Food." *Muse India* 37. 2011. Web.
- Ray, Krishnendu. *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali American Households*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2004. Print.
- Roberts, Karen. *The Lament of the Dhobi Woman*. Colombo: Perera Hussein, 2010. Print.
- Roy, Parama. "Reading Communities and Culinary Communities: The Gastropoetics of the South Asian Diaspora." *Positions: East Asia Cultures critique* 10:2 (Fall 2002): 471-502. Print.
- Roy, S, Nilanjana, ed. *A Matter of Taste: The Penguin book of Indian writing on food*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2004. Print.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta, 1991. Print.
- . *Midnight's Children*. New York: Penguin, 1981. Print.
- Rustomji, Roshni. "From Shakuntala to Shakuntala: Strength Rather than Beauty." *Pacific Coast Philology* 10 (Apr 1975): 45-52. Print.
- Salgado, Minoli. "The New Cartographies of Re-Orientalism." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46:2 (2011): 199-218. Print.

- . "Writing Sri Lanka, Reading the Resistance: Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and A. Sivanandan's *When Memory Dies*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39: 1 (2004): 5-18. Print.
- . *Writing Sri Lanka: Literature, Resistance and the Politics of Place*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Sangari, Kumkum. "The Politics of the Possible." *Cultural Critique* 7. The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse II (Autumn 1987): 157-186. Print.
- Sangari, Kumkum, and Sudesh Vaid, eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989. Print.
- Sarvate, Sarita. "Spicing it up: The Mango Season by Amulya Malladi." *The Women's Review of Books* 20: 10-11 (Jul 2003): 36. Print.
- Sceats, Sarah. *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary women's fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. Print.
- Schlote, Christiane. "Interpreters of Transnationalism: South Asian American Women Writers." *Amerikastudien* 51: 3 (2006): 387-409. Print.
- Seneviratne, H.L. "Food Essence and the essence of experience." *The Eternal Food: Gastronomic Ideas and Experience of Hindus and Buddhists*. Ed. R.S.Khare. New York: State U of New York P, 1992. 179-200. Print.
- Shah, Shalini. "On Gender, Wives and 'Pativratās'." *Social Scientist* 40: No 5/6 (May-June 2012): 77- 90. Print.

- Shankar, Lavina Dhingra, and Rajini Srikanth, eds. *A Part Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998. Print.
- . "Introduction: Closing the Gap? South Asian Challenge Asian American Studies." *A Part yet Apart*. Ed. Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998. 1-24. Print.
- Shaw, Christopher, and Malcolm Chase, eds. *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1989. Print.
- Shubert, Adrian. "Women Warriors and National Heroes: Augustina de Aragón and Her Indian Sisters." *Journal of World History* 23: 2 (June 2012): 279- 313. Print.
- Shukla, Sandhya. "Locations for South Asian Diasporas." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (2001): 551-572. Print.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *A Paradise built in Hell: the Extraordinary Communities that arise in Disaster*. New York: Viking, 2009. Print.
- Song, Min Hyung. "Children of 1965: Allegory, Postmodernism, and Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake.'" *Twentieth Century Literature* 53:3. After Postmodernism: Form and History in Contemporary American Fiction (Fall 2007): 345-370. Print.
- Souter, Key, and Ira Raja. "Mothering Siblings : Diaspora, Desire and Identity in 'American Born Confused Desi'." *Narrative* 16: 1 (Jan 2008): 16-28. Print.
- Spacks, Patricia Mayer. *The Female Imagination*. New York: Avon, 1972. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" n.d. Web. 31 Mar. 2014.
<http://www.mcgill.ca/files/crclaw-discourse/Can_the_subaltern_speak.pdf>

- Srikanth, Rajini. *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America*. Philadelphia. Temple UP, 2004. Print.
- Stein, Mark. "Curry at work: Nibbling at the Jewels in the Crown." *Eating Culture: The Poetics and Politics of food*. Ed. Tobias Döring, Markus Heide and Susanne Mühleisen. Heidelberg: Winter, 2003. 133-149. Print.
- Storey, John. *An Introduction to Cultural Theory*. 2nd Edition. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1998. Print.
- . *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. 5th Edition. Rotherham: Pearson Education, 2009. Print.
- Sutherland, Sally J. "Sītā and Draupadī: Aggressive Behaviour and Female Role- Models in the Sanskrit Epics." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109: 1 (Jan- Mar 1989): 63- 79. Print.
- Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers form a Different shore: A History of Asian Americans*. Boston: Little, 1989. Print.
- Tambiah, S.J . *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the dismantling of democracy*. London: I.B.Tauris , 1986. Print.
- "The Reflections of America Series." *Modern History Press*. n.d. Web. 02 Apr. 2013.
<<http://www.modernhistorypress.com/reflections-of-america/>>
- Thieme, John, and Ira Raja, eds. *The Table is Laid: The Oxford Anthology of South Asian Food Writing*. New Delhi: OUP, 2007. Print.

- Thiruchandran, Selvy. *Stories from the Diaspora: Tamil Women, Writing*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa, 2006. Print.
- Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*. New York: OUP, 1986. Print.
- Vassanji, Moyez G . “Life at the Margins: In the Thick of Multiplicity.” *Between the Lines: South Asians and Postcoloniality*. Ed. Deepika Bahri and Mary Vasudeva. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996. 111-120. Print.
- Vertovec, Steven, and Robin Cohen, eds. *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice*. Oxford: OUP, 2002. Print.
- Võ, Linda Trinh, and Marian Sciachitano. “Introduction: Moving beyond ‘Exotics, Whores, and Nimble Fingers’: Asian American Women in a New Era of Globalization and Resistance.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 21: 1/2. Asian American Women. (2000): 1-19. Print.
- Vogt-William, Christine. “Smells, Skins, and Spices: Indian Spice Shops as Gendered Diasporic Spaces in the Novels of Indian Women Writers of the Diaspora.” *Shared Waters: Sounds in Postcolonial Literatures*. Ed. Stella Borg Barthet. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009. 151-165. Print
- Vromen, Suzanne. “The Ambiguity of Nostalgia.” *YIVO Annual* 21 (1993): 69-86. Print.
- Wachinger, Tobias A. “Spicy Pleasures: Postcolonial India’s Literary Celebrities and the Politics of Consumption.” *ARIEL* 34: 2-3 (2003): 71-94. Print.
- Wijesinha, Rajiva. *Declining Sri Lanka: Terrorism and Ethnic conflict: The Legacy of J.R.Jayawardene (1906-1996)*. New Delhi: Cambridge UP India, 2007. Print.

- Williams, Mukesh, and Rohit Wanchoo. *Representing India: Literature, Politics and Identities*. New Delhi: OUP, 2008. Print.
- Williams, Raymond Brady. "Asian Indian and Pakistani Religions in the United States." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 558. Americans and Religions in the Twenty-First Century (July 1998): 178 -195. Print.
- Women of South Asian Descent Collective (Organization). *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora*. 1st ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993. Print.
- Wong, Mitali P, and Zia Hasan. *The Fiction of South Asians in North America and the Caribbean ; A Critical study of English-Language works since 1950*. North Carolina: McFarland and Co, 2004. Print.
- Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. Print.
- Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia, and Jeffrey J. Santa Ana. "Gender and Sexuality in Asian American Literature." *Signs* 25:1 (Autumn, 1999): 171-226. Print.
- Xu, Wenying. "Reading Feminine Mysticism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*." *South Asian Review* 31:1 (2010): 186- 207. Print.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira. *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*. London: Sage, 2011. Print.
- Zare, Bonnie. "Evolving Masculinities in Recent Stories by South Asian American Women." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 42:3 (2007): 99-111. Print.