

Between History and Identity: Reading the Authentic in South Asian Diasporic Literature
and Community

by

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Dedication

To My Family (old and new)

Acknowledgements

One of the foundational pursuits of this dissertation has been to theorize how the act of reading, often considered a solitary pursuit, is in fact a communal and group-based activity. In completing the project, I have learned that the vexing and apparently solitary process of writing can be eased by interaction, feedback, and dialogue. And I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been accompanied by a number of thoughtful readers and fellow writers while completing this project. Firstly, I am enormously grateful to readers in the NetSAP-D.C. book club for welcoming me into the group (and often into their homes), for participating in my study, and for encouraging me to question my assumptions about reading and the role of the literary critic.

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Abstract

Combining textual analysis, literary reception history, and qualitative sociological research, this study of a contemporary South Asian American book club historicizes and analyzes the various taste-making, ideological effects that multiple literary publics have on one another. Even as it documents how South Asian American readers strategically approach South Asian diasporic literature that purportedly mirrors their own cultural and diasporic experiences, this dissertation is a critical examination of the politics of self-recognition in an immigrant community, which oscillate between self-Orientalization and refutations of ethnic authenticity. Book club participants use South Asian diasporic literature to challenge and assert essentialized notions of gender, class and sexuality for wide-ranging yet contradictory purposes: to mobilize positive and negative stereotypes stemming from the model minority myth, to understand their transnational social and political positions, and to construct notions of South Asian femininity and masculinity in the diaspora. However, in contrast with most ethnographies of reading that survey the uses of literature within a group or community and that presume the strict separation of academic critics from lay readers, the ethnographic, interpretive methodology that I employ compels a critical, creative *dialogue* between these readerships. Taking a cue from lay readers' praxis in which desire plays a paramount role, I study the analogously contradictory effects of readerly desire in literary academia that lead critics of South Asian diasporic literatures to reinscribe the gendered hegemonies of mainstream canons.

In their efforts to diversify the literary histories presented in the multicultural university classroom, critics of South Asian diasporic literatures reproduce structures of knowledge and disciplinary regimes wherein the “public,” historical sphere is male-dominated, while the “private,” identitarian realm is feminized. Employing an interdisciplinary methodology, I contextualize and historicize lay and academic critical readings of popular South Asian diasporic literature in order to examine the encounters between essentialized and constructed notions of identity and between representation and interpretation in both of these reading communities. In so doing, this dissertation considers simultaneously the instability of the representing and represented subject and the vitality of lived experience.

Chapter 1

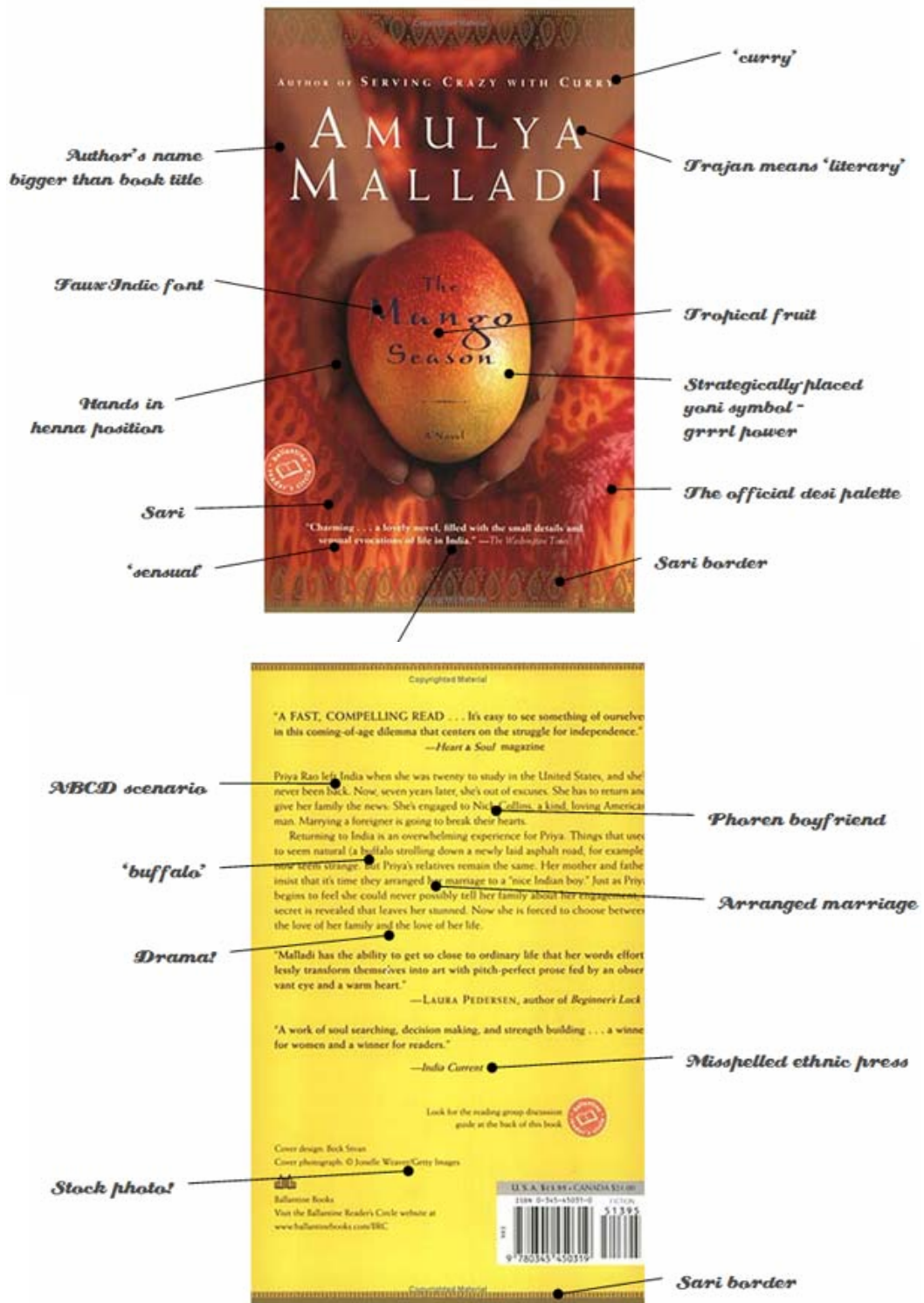
Introduction

Toward a Dialogic Reading Practice: Rethinking South Asian Diasporic Identity, the Model Minority Myth, and the Multicultural Canon

In January 2006, Manish Vij, a regular contributor to the popular South Asian American cultural interest blog, *sepiamutiny.org*, posted a witty, incisive, and well-received send-up of the commodification of South Asian diasporic novels in Western markets.¹ The infographic “Anatomy of a Genre” (see Figure 1, page 2), identifies a set of exotic and essentializing tropes such as Eastern sensuality, ethnic dress, Indian cuisine, arranged marriage, interracial romance, and second-generation cultural confusion that broadly comprise popular constructions of South Asian diasporic culture in the West. These tropes provide a set of cultural symbols so identifiable that they can be easily labeled. Published by a website with a quintessentially everyday, community-constructed and community-oriented readership, the internet blog, “Anatomy of a Genre,” parodies what Gérard Genette terms the paratexts (qtd. in Ween 90) of Amulya Malladi’s second novel, *The Mango Season*. And it presents a critique of the features that drive literary publication in the field of South Asian diasporic literature such as book covers, reviewership, and marketing strategies. The infographic thus powerfully alludes to the uses of ethnic literature in America and the manipulation of ethnic authorial personas in the service of discourses of diversity. In an article on ethnic literary commodification Lori Ween succinctly describes this phenomenon:

¹ Reprinted here with the author’s permission. <http://www.sepiamutiny.com/sepia/archives/002888.html>

Figure 1, Anatomy of a Genre



“The paratextual markers attached to novels offer an image of America to itself, taking into account the existing desires for national and racial identity and playing into the importance of the authenticizing power Americans grant the authors (and texts) of novels” (90). Eliciting nearly fifty comments from web users who unanimously concurred with "Anatomy of a Genre," this cyber-event reveals and exemplifies a community's self-consciousness about the powerful marketing initiatives and strategies of commodification employed in the service of selling Indian culture to Western consumers. The infographic serves as a communal objection, a South Asian community-based challenge to the global publishing industry that would seek to reduce the region's cultural diversity to an array of ethnic scenarios, hypersexualized representations, and the gustatory, “colorful” trappings of exotica. At the same time, the infographic not only signals the South Asian American community's frustration with what Ween suggests are Anglo-American desires for multiethnic informants, but also shows South Asians' powerful investment in the significance and consequences of images for and about South Asians even as they negotiate the terms of their own cultural citizenship in the U.S.

Posted on a public site of community readership and cultural critique, “Anatomy of a Genre” captures, both in its content and in the multiple comments that it generated, the shifting power structures that inflect the relationship among texts, readers, authors, and the publishing industry, or in other words what Janice Radway famously terms “the institutional matrix” (*Reading the Romance* 18). This moment of community authorship and readership provides an instructive visual epigraph for the broader concerns of the dissertation. Firstly, by indicting the fetishization of difference, authenticity, and the exoticised ethnic writer, “Anatomy of a Genre” suggests that sepiamutiny.com's readers

generate critical perspectives conversant with but not wholly reliant on critical trends in popular media and academic criticism on South Asian diasporic literatures. Secondly, these readers' investment in diverse and non-Orientalizing literary representations of South Asians in the U.S. (paradoxically signaled by their indignation at the limitations of these representations) stages the powerful yet undertheorized role of desire in acts of interpretation and reading. In other words, desires for representation, authenticity (or exoticism), and the native other are constructed and contested among different reading publics. Thus, the marketing of the authorial persona, the exigencies of the publishing industry, and lay and academic audience reception determine the reception and uses of multiethnic literatures in institutional settings and in everyday readers' lives.

In order to study the relationship among reading publics and issues of readerly desire, this project draws upon qualitative sociological methods in order to study a South Asian American book club, the Network of South Asian Professionals Book Club located in Washington D.C., (hereafter NetSAP) while also mobilizing methods of literary textual analysis, literary history, and reception study. The central aims of this interdisciplinary methodology are to interrogate, firstly, how South Asian readers residing in the U.S. construct a coalitional identity through the visibility that literary production affords. And secondly, these methods inspire a reconsideration of interpretive praxis within the field of South Asian diasporic literature, suggesting that the act of interpretation requires a dialogical negotiation between lay and academic readerships.² NetSAP readers use South

² As I discuss in detail in chapter 3, I offer a revision to the Bakhtinian concept of dialogic exchange. Borrowing from Caren Kaplan's critique of "heteroglossia" in *The Erotics of Talk*, I concur that discourse alone "cannot suffice as both the means *and* the outcomes of the transformational goals we seek" rather, it is only "by looking at the actual conversational practice, strategies, and social-political-discursive outcomes, not at abstract formulations of the dialogic alone" that we comprehend the effects of the meanings created through interactions between texts and readers (Kaplan 10). See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* Ed. Michael Holquist, Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist.

Asian diasporic literature for wide-ranging purposes: to engage positive and negative model minority stereotypes, to understand their transnational social and political positions, and to construct strategic notions of South Asian femininity and masculinity in the diaspora. Their reading praxis and its related identitarian effects vacillate among auto-essentializing assertions of ethnic (rather than racial) authenticity, the policing of “traditional” femininity and heteronormativity, and a homogenizing self-representation of upward class mobility. On the other hand, they often use this diasporic literature, and the space of the NetSAP book club to contest “authentic” notions of Indian identity, challenge stereotypical depictions of women’s sexuality, and critique the complacencies of their own middle and upper class status. In either case, the role of readerly desire is foremost in their interpretive practice. Taking a cue from these lay readers, I study the analogously contradictory effects of readerly desire in literary academia. I am particularly interested in studying readerly desires that, for example, lead critics of South Asian diasporic literatures to shore up the gendered hegemonies of mainstream canons, reproducing structures of knowledge and disciplinary regimes wherein the “public,” historical sphere is male-dominated, while the “private,” identitarian realm is female-oriented, in their efforts to diversify the literary histories presented in the multicultural university classroom. While most ethnographies of reading study the specific uses of literature within a group or community, “Between History and Identity” not only produces new knowledge about how South Asian American readers use a set of literature purportedly about their diasporic or cultural experiences in order to negotiate a bicultural

Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Trans. Vern W. McGee Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

identity, but also mobilizes that information to critique the blind spots of multicultural literary academia.³

In “Between History and Identity” I develop an ethnography of reading in order to study how the ostensible “objects” of literary ethnography respond to novelistic, fictional depictions of their communities, ethnic affiliations and cultural traditions, and I ask these readers to speak as subjects through an interdisciplinary textual and ethnographic study of their readership. It is my hope that, with this methodology, I achieve two goals: firstly, I address what Janice Radway identifies as the insularity of literary academia⁴ through an engagement with lay reading practice and a serious consideration of how NetSAP readers use South Asian diasporic literature. The second, and perhaps more salient intent of this project is to rewrite familiar multiculturalist scripts wherein institutionalized efforts toward diversity mask exclusions in the literary classroom and the fetishization of the mainstream canon effaces the various community-based and academic interventions to include minority voices. By studying South Asian readers’ responses to South Asian diasporic fiction, the project critically examines the politics of self-recognition—which vacillate between auto-Orientalization and refutations of ethnic authenticity—and

³ As I discuss later, the discourse of multiculturalism in U.S. universities authorizes the appropriation of ethnic texts in the service of diversity. As David Palumbo Liu explains, institutional exigencies for diversity not only run the risk of instating a tokenistic, pluralist logic in the multiethnic literary canons but also obscure the material realities that these texts convey all in the name of a “multicultural” agenda. See David Palumbo Liu’s “Introduction” to *The Ethnic Canon*.

⁴ See Radway, Janice A. *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, And Middle Class Desire*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. Also in “Research Universities, Periodical Publication, and the Circulations of Professional Expertise: On the Significance of Middlebrow Authority.” *Critical Inquiry*. 31: (Autumn 2004) 203-228, Radway warns us that, “unless humanities faculties and specialists learn to address a broad, general audience and to make a case for the knowledge they offer, they will be replaced by departments of communication and media studies that already offer specialized and technical knowledge of culture and knowledge production and transmission” (227).

redresses the white gaze of multicultural America, metonymically represented in the “liberal, multicultural classroom” where, as Gayatri Spivak acerbically contends:

On a given day we are reading a text from one national origin. The group in the classroom from that particular national origin in the general polity can identify with the richness of the texture of the “culture” in question[...] People from other national origins in the classroom (other, that is, than Anglo) relate sympathetically but superficially, in an aura of same difference. The Anglo relates benevolently to everything, “knowing about other cultures” in a relativist glow (7).

Spivak may overstate the case, but she aptly describes the hierarchical racial structures excused and established by discourses of multiculturalism that pervade American culture and unfold within the U.S. university, which as David Lloyd suggests, “continues to organize crucial social functions” (qtd. in Chuh 13). Spivak’s polemic keenly describes how institutionalized discourses of diversity paradoxically reinforce the neutrality of whiteness. The strange contradiction inherent to multiculturalist ideology is that our efforts and initiatives towards racial and ethnic diversification in the university classroom and other cultural publics risk reaffirming the dominance and “benevolence” of the white gaze. While I do not claim to offer a definitive resolution to the contradictions of multiculturalism (I’m not sure one is really possible), it is my belief that this interdisciplinary methodology productively sets experiences of identity into dialogue with critiques of identity politics, identification, and ethnic insularity.

Through a sustained analysis of the U.S.-based reception history of several prominent female writers of South Asian descent, such as Chitra Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy, and Jhumpa Lahiri, I argue that the act of reading can only be understood as a discursive, communal, dialogic and contradictory cultural practice. By employing an interdisciplinary ethno-textual interrogation of these popular writers, along with an

examination of several of the texts chosen by readers in the Washington-based NetSAP book club, I aim to disrupt what is perceived as a post-structuralist impasse between praxis and theory, between essentialized and constructed notions of identity, representation and interpretation, to proffer an interpretive methodology that considers simultaneously the instability of the representing and represented subject and the vitality of lived experience.

A Literary Public: Raising Cultural Awareness and Establishing Community in the NetSAP-DC Book Club

NetSAP book club is an active component of the cultural arm of a national, non-profit, community-based organization known nationally as the Network of Indian Professionals.⁵ The organization in DC has commensurate regional chapters based in New York, the Bay Area, and Chicago. Each chapter decides for itself whether it will identify as “Indian” using the nationally-based NetIP abbreviation, or if they will identify with the arguably more inclusive “South Asian” transnational formulation NetSAP. Each of these designations raises its own set of issues: this dilemma of nomenclature appears throughout analyses of South Asian and Indian diasporic cultural production or sociological studies, and this dissertation is in no way exempt from the set of issues that these terms encode. The term South Asian itself, much like any other pan-ethnic

⁵ The website states: “NetSAP DC is a non-profit organization dedicated to the overall achievement and advancement of South Asian professionals. NetSAP’s primary focus is to help South Asian professionals in the greater Washington DC area via: Professional Development, Cultural Awareness, Community Service, and Political Awareness. NetSAP is the Washington DC chapter of the national organization, the Network of Indian Professionals (NetIP). Over the years, NetIP has become a leading international organization for professionals – one that has been recognized by political, civic, and community leaders around the country. It has become the unequivocal voice for an emerging group of South Asians who are excelling in every aspect of society.”

formation, brings together disparate traditions, cultures, and histories of the region, uniting the nations of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Maldives into one regional designation⁶ (Leonard 1). The concept of South Asia reflects at best a reductive description of the region; while the term provides convenient shorthand for that part of the world, it collapses a wealth of diversity in politics, history, religion, language, and custom.⁷ As Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth point out, South Asians, regardless of whether they live in the region or abroad, often see themselves in terms of national, linguistic, religious, or regional terms rather than as a pan-ethnic group (2). "South Asian" as an ethnic category has taken on a particular relevance in the United States where immigrants from the various nations comprising the region use the term as a coalitional, politicized construct.⁸ Here, the term is increasingly popular for two main reasons: firstly, the category South Asian American situates the group in relation to (sometimes as a subset of) the more established pan-ethnic formulation, Asian American; and secondly, the term corrects for the perceived hegemony of India and Hinduism in the region, a corrective measure of pan-ethnic solidarity that has only become more crucial and fraught in the post-9/11 world.

⁶ There is some debate as to whether Afghanistan, Burma/Myanmar, and Tibet also are considered part of South Asia given their cultural ties to other countries in the region, as well as, in the case of Burma/Myanmar, their shared history as part of the British empire. Notably, the controversy around the renaming of Burma/Myanmar in 1989 not only involves the military junta in control of the nation but also evokes legacies of British colonialism.

⁷ See Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth, eds., *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998). 1-22.

⁸ Histories of South Asian immigration to the U.S., Great Britain, and Canada, not to mention other diasporic locations, are greatly varied, and thus inspired different types of racial or ethnic coalition. For example, immigrants to the U.S. and Canada from 1965 to the mid 1980s were generally skilled, professionals trained in information technology, engineering, medicine, and other science fields. It is more recently in these countries that immigration has become more economically diverse. South Asian migration to the U.K. in contrast, has a longer working class history. See Judith M. Brown, *Global South Asians: Introducing a Modern Diaspora*.

Preferences for using the category South Asian or Indian incorporate multilayered generational and class differences within the diasporic community: while South Asian is at times viewed with suspicion by the first generation of immigrants from the region, it has become a popular pan-ethnic, racial formulation with progressive members of the second and third generations. Additionally, as Srikanth points out, the term may prove more appealing to socio-economically disadvantaged South Asians seeking a minority coalition to counteract their ethnic and class marginalization in the United States (3).

With all of this in mind, my aim throughout the dissertation is to deploy the terms South Asian and Indian as accurately as possible while also attending to issues of inclusiveness. For this reason, I switch back and forth between South Asian and Indian as descriptors of book club participants and interview subjects, trying wherever possible and relevant to include specific information about their ethnic backgrounds.

Indeed, NetSAP readers represent the diversity of the subcontinental region, and while many are of Indian descent, book club participants have a wide range of ethnic, national, and diasporic affiliations. Readers who identified as Indian American, Pakistani American, Indo-Caribbean, Indo-African, Bangladeshi American, Punjabi American, and Bengali American were present at the meetings.⁹ Generally speaking, the book club meetings appeal mainly to people of South Asian descent, but are occasionally attended by people who are not South Asian; membership is very inclusive. And while every regional chapter has a book club associated with it, there are some that are more thriving than others. For example, the NetIP chapter in New York no longer has an active book club, mainly because of the abundance of smaller South Asian diasporic reading groups

⁹ While I never took an official poll of the ethnic or religious constituency of a book club meeting, readers would often reveal their national and diasporic affiliations during the course of conversation. See Appendix 2 for further detail.

and book clubs throughout the city. In Chicago and the Bay Area, however, there are thriving book clubs associated with the broader non-profit organization. The literature in the book club is self-selected; at the beginning of each year members vote on a range of works of fiction and non-fiction dealing in South Asian themes and topics. There is an even distribution of best-sellers in Western markets, but they also choose works that are more popular on the subcontinent, as well as more obscure diasporic literary fiction. While some of the selections, particularly those that are popular in the U.S., rehash the tropes of arranged marriage, exoticism, and second-generation assimilation, book selections frequently depart from these themes by representing a wider diversity of diasporic perspectives. For my research on the book club, I attended seven book club meetings and conducted nineteen interviews with NetSAP participants. In the book club meetings my role was an observer and participant. I did not guide the discussions in any direction, but I did announce that I was conducting a research project on how readers of South Asian descent use diasporic literature to negotiate their identitarian affiliations in the U.S. In interviews, however, I would often make my perspectives very clear to the readers, and in our conversations, which were never antagonistic; we would often debate our different opinions and discuss our divergent perspectives. Taking a cue from the readers in these meetings, I found that my reading practice would have to shift fluidly between objective and subjective modes of analysis and would have to allow space for conflicting interpretations to coexist.

The NetSAP-DC chapter provided a particularly compelling case study because of how central the book club's role has been in promoting the visibility of South Asians and South Asian diasporic culture in the D.C. metropolitan area. Each year, for example, they

organize the South Asian Literatures and Arts Festival in coordination with the Smithsonian Institution. Additionally, NetSAP-DC is unique in that they have had the same leader for ten years who catalogues online the books that the group reads each year, ensuring no repeats, and who serves as the book club's institutional memory. The book club plays a key role in accomplishing the broader organization's overt aims for the South Asian American community in DC, which the website lists as "professional development, cultural awareness, community service, and political awareness." Thus, NetSAP is unique among more traditional book clubs that tend to be private, domestic meetings among friends and acquaintances and that, as Elizabeth Long explains in her sociological study of white women's book club groups in the Houston area, "do not generally have a political or even a public mission" (72). In contrast to Long's observation, I contend that the NetSAP book club qualifies as a literary public, in the tradition of Michael Warner's definition of "the public" as a historical space in which strangers are united through participation in a cultural imaginary and self-organized discourse, a place in which the personal and the general, the private and public, put one another into crisis and seamlessly intermingle (Warner 11-12; 67-96). The group entails all of the complexities and contradictions of being forged as a public entity particularly because of its concomitant intervention into the realm of identity politics, which Warner notes affirms notions of private identity "through public politics... promising to heal divisions of the political world by anchoring them in the authentically personal realm and its solidarity" (26). Public and private is, as Warner points out, in many ways a functional if illusory division. NetSAP book club blurs these two spaces—meetings are often held in the private space of participants' homes but the discussion often contends with literary

politics and the public stakes of recognition and representation for the South Asian diasporic community—becoming in some ways a literal performance of the contradictions of identity politics mediated by a public discourse about subjectivity and personal affiliation.

Interrogating the Gendered Canon in South Asian Diasporic Literary History

Conceptually, I begin this project with the observation that South Asian diasporic literature in its various reception contexts exceeds the rubrics that academic literary critics have employed in their attempts to comprehend, canonize, and categorize this tradition. In *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar England and America*, Sandhya Shukla sums up this position, arguing that while “postcolonial scholars have theorized the trope of displacement,” the study of contemporary “experiences of migration” has been relegated to Asian American studies departments:

Postcolonial literature and Asian American studies have become marked by some polarities organized by “the international” and “the national,” including cosmopolitan versus immigrant, diaspora versus national community, and homeland affinity versus state citizenship. An emphasis on international cultural formations has occluded questions of new nationalities (American and British), while the focus on immigration and national integration downplays the persistently global character of Indian immigrant communities. (134-135)

Shukla identifies an implicit divergence in the burgeoning literary canon of the South Asian diaspora that divides historical narratives of partition, religious strife, and political exile from literature that deals in issues of identity, assimilation, and the immigrant experience. To further complicate the picture, in recent academic criticism, particularly and ironically by feminist scholars, this divide problematically gets mapped onto gender; critics often cast the public, British post-colonial, historical voice as male and the private, American immigrant, identity-oriented voice as female. In fact, Shukla alludes to

contours of this gendered divide when she states, “the first Indian authors to have U.S. literary celebrity have been female” (161). Ultimately, however, analyses of gender remain tangential to her concerns.

My interests in this project overlap with Shukla’s theorization of the relationship among South Asian (in her work, specifically Indian) diasporic identity, literature and the stakes of representation in new homelands. Along with other critics of the South Asian (literary) diaspora, such as Inderpal Grewal and Rajini Srikanth, Shukla addresses the fantasy of subcontinental origins that drives the reception and appropriation of South Asian diasporic texts in British and American contexts; this fantasy allows South Asian readers in America to claim longtime British resident, Salman Rushdie as part of their literary heritage, and it popularizes Jhumpa Lahiri’s narrative descriptions of immigration and South Asian American second generation experience as groundbreaking throughout the diasporic world. Although this literature, like any other, forms in relation to particular national contexts, NetSAP readers (along with academics and popular critics) often perceive writers of South Asian descent in the U.S. and U.K. as forming a transnational literary tradition. And yet in turn, quite ironically, in their efforts to establish a more transnational sense of South Asian diasporic literary history, these same readers often measure the value of the fiction according to markers of a nationally-entrenched Indian authenticity. In response, academic critics, such as Grewal and Srikanth, identify the need for interpretive strategies that would negotiate among competing national affiliations and multiple, often overlapping South Asian diasporas that construct and define the reception of this transnationally circulating literature.

Although many calls have been issued for a dynamic reading practice that mitigates the polarities and oppositions of South Asian diasporic literary culture, few critics have explored methodologies that would involve lay readers' critical perspectives in their efforts to interrogate the production of meaning in academic interpretive analysis.¹⁰ By triangulating the field of published criticism on South Asian diasporic writing, a South Asian American lay reading community (NetSAP), and South Asian diasporic literature as an object of study, I posit an interdisciplinary reading methodology that takes critical analysis in this field beyond the tacitly gendered binaries that have traditionally defined its interpretation.¹¹ A multi-vocal approach to reading South Asian diasporic literature offers a model of how we can, on the one hand, develop a transnational interpretive approach—by which I mean a methodology of reading that would crosscut national and diasporic models—and on the other, unearths the disciplinary regimes of gender that define work in South Asian diasporic cultural studies.

Specifically, a study of lay readership assists in the development of this transnational interpretive approach by providing an alternative discursive public to academic readership. In tandem, these reading publics expose one another's blind spots, hegemonies and aporias, and create a crucial, hitherto lacking, reciprocity in interpretive

¹⁰ See Srikanth, Rajini. *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America*. Asian American History and Culture. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004, and Grewal, Inderpal. *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005.

¹¹ I use the term “lay reader” throughout the project to denote readers who do not have professional literary critical training. The term’s clerical connotations, that is, the contrast it invokes between the laity and the clergy, are deliberately mobilized in this project. Both Janice Radway and Elizabeth Long have warned against the increasing gulf between literary academia and lay readers, noting that the professionalization of literary studies isolates academic literary discourse from the concerns of everyday readers and develops a set of arcane, esoteric terminology that rivals the technical terminology common to the social sciences. (Long 71) The contrast therefore between lay and academic readers underscores the critique of literary academia’s isolation from everyday reading praxis that I advance in this project.

fields of reception.¹² The lay readers in my study use South Asian diasporic literatures to negotiate various ethno-religious obligations, national origins, gendered expectations, regional affiliations, and histories of immigration. Unbound by institutional exigencies to define a canon or to create a syllabus, these readers develop strategies of reading that fulfill their global and local concerns. Gender, particularly the policing of femininity and women's sexuality, are key facets in how the South Asian American community asserts a public image of exoticised ethnic authenticity and in how we recognize ourselves and each other as conforming to these expectations. By paying attention to how NetSAP readers negotiate what Shukla terms a "dialectic of Indianness" or in other words, "how Indianness is experienced and created by those subjects constituted as Indian across time and space, and, on the other hand, how such an Indianness is received by a world perceived to be outside that" (135), I provide academic readers with a model of reading that addresses the complexity of the various national contexts and gendered hierarchies that discretely, covalently, and historically influence this diasporic community's formation.

. The fiction that NetSAP participants value most grants these readers insight into their parents' experiences of immigration, it opens up discussions of interracial dating and domestic expectations, and it creates a discursive community through the description of second-generation and immigrant narratives. Often these readings are aspirational; that is, the literature that the group discusses, such as Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and *The Interpreter of Maladies* or Chitra Divakaruni's novels and short stories, often evoke a

¹² Here, I invoke Michael Warner's definition of a public, as a "multicontextual space of circulation, organized not by a place or an institution but by the circulation of discourse" (119). Lay readership does not seem to comply with his definitions of a counterpublic for several reasons, the most salient of which is that lay readers do not appear to feel "an awareness of [their] subordinate status" (119).

particularly middle and upper class sensibility. The fraught act of identification that occurs between reader and text is explicit in lay reading practice and their desire for narratives that describe and construct the parameters of a bicultural identity in the U.S. allows NetSAP readers to recuperate—but not fully destabilize—the gendered hierarchies and static (national versus international) binaries that are a by-product of academic criticism. Additionally, readerly desire and identification enable NetSAP readers strategically to recuperate the more determinative elements of these South Asian American novels and short stories. In other words, on the one hand, much of this fiction arguably obscures class difference, reifies ethnicity, and generates a reductive East/West binary (in which the former symbolizes oppressive tradition and the latter progressive modernity) enacted through the objectification and ethnic stereotyping of the female characters. Yet on the other, the powerful pull of readerly identification recuperates these textual features, and NetSAP readers satisfy their desires for South Asian diasporic representation by performing strategic feminist interpretations of this body of literature. Lay readers mobilize their interpretive desires for identification in an effort to strategically read beyond and through ethnic, cultural and gendered stereotypes.

The relationship that I am interested in exploring throughout the dissertation negotiates the range of interpretive possibilities for any given text and how different groups of readers construct various interpretations to fulfill their readerly desires. However, I want to emphasize that this is not an unqualified celebration of identification or readerly desire in acts of interpretation. I take seriously Caren Kaplan's cautionary critique of identification, readerly desire, and recuperative reading praxis, when she explains that while the pleasures of reading are bound to forms of identificatory desire,

uncritical indulgence in the comforts of literary identification create a “space of safety, homogeneity, familiarity, and sameness, a community intent on identification and self-affirmation to the exclusion of difference, desire, and critique” which “can also be, in Adrienne Rich’s words, a ‘dangerous place’” (143). Critical distance is a powerful academic interpretive tool that ideally saves us from assuming that we are a text’s ideal reader and allows academic critics thereby to uncover what Kaplan terms the “social indictments” that multiethnic literatures may offer their readerships (121). While many if not all literary academic projects are informed by what anthropologist Virginia Domínguez calls a “politics of love,” I argue that a methodology that would consider seriously the role of readerly desire in academic and minority lay reading publics would expose the structural and social blind spots that exist in both.¹³ The “politics of love,” which incorporates desires for representation and recognition of multiethnic literature in the academy and form partly through multicultural institutional exigencies in the field of South Asian diasporic literatures, at times function to shore up the gendered hegemonies that these diversifying fields sought to critique in mainstream canons. Domínguez notes that this impetus “reproduces the institutionalized system of difference and value that it purports to challenge” (363). For example, when critics such as Gita Rajan, Shailja Sharma, and Graham Huggan characterize South Asian literary history by casting the public, historical voice as male and the private, identity-oriented voice as female they unintentionally burden female writers with the responsibility to represent issues of authenticity, exoticism, and cultural insularity in the lay and academic fields of reception. Similarly, interrogations of readerly desire in the NetSAP lay reading community

¹³ See Virginia Domínguez, “For a Politics of Love and Rescue,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 15:3, August 2000, p 361-393.

demonstrate that readers use South Asian diasporic literature to affirm their experiences of immigration and displacement, but these identificatory desires authorize essentialist attitudes about class, gender, and sexuality that circulate within the broader cultural community.

Methodological Foundations

My view concerning the paradoxical and dialogic nature of interpretation, in which the act of reading “marks both agency and a kind of subjection,” is based on Janice Radway’s foundational work on reception study.¹⁴ At the most basic level, Radway argues that the text’s meaning does not inhere within the literature itself but rather is constructed by the community of readers who respond to it. The concept is foundational to this project and has been deployed by influential scholars in myriad forms. For example, Stuart Hall’s theories of preferred or dominant readings instantiated by David Morley’s qualitative research on viewer response to the BBC news program, *Nationwide*, or John Fiske’s insistence on the power of resistant readings, a revision of Michel De Certeau’s theory of semiotic guerilla tactics, all confront readers’ and viewers’ agency in determining textual significance. There are, however, two features of Radway’s interventions in the study of reading as a cultural practice that are uniquely germane to this project. First, her focus on interpretation rather than the moment of enunciation or textual articulation distinctively captures the intractable encounter between ideological determinism in literature and resistant reading practices for social groups in which reading is an act of cultural self-definition. Invoking Althusser, Radway claims that

¹⁴ Jeffrey J. Williams, “The Culture of Reading: An Interview with Janice Radway,” *The Minnesota Review*. Spring 2006.

“social subjects are at once hailed successfully by dominant discourses and therefore dominated by them and yet manage to adapt them to their own other, multiple purposes and even to resist or contest them” (“Reception Study” 368). Secondly, Radway’s well-deserved influence in the field of reception study, founded on the unique feminist interdisciplinary methodology that she pioneered in *Reading the Romance*, provides not only a methodological revision to the study of reading practice but an epistemological one as well. Rather than developing an ethnography of reading that would take her own or her subjects’ self-representations as self-evident, transparent, or unmediated, Radway’s use of textual analysis and qualitative research establishes them as methods that can interrogate one another. Citing Angela McRobbie, she explains, “representations are interpretations. They can never be pure mirror images of some objective reality” (Radway, *Reading the Romance* 6). Throughout her work, Radway explains that rather than expecting interviewees and study subjects to present her with unmitigated self-knowledge, she constructs an ethnography of reading that would interrogate the “evidentiary status of literature” or how, in other words, literature reconstructs culture “to connect particular texts with the communities that produced and consumed them and...specify how the individuals involved actually constructed those texts as meaningful semiotic structures” (Radway, *Reading the Romance* 4). These two salient methodological innovations in Radway’s oeuvre—the contradictory nature of reading praxis and her skepticism regarding the possibilities for unmediated (self) representation—provide a crucial starting point for my methodology here.

Studies of reading across disciplines continue to generate new knowledges about the ideological, symbolic, contradictory, and transformative uses of literature in everyday

life, a field of inquiry that my project engages. However, the relationships *among* reading publics and what Stanley Fish famously if a bit vaguely called “interpretive communities” remains undertheorized.¹⁵ Radway, for example, argues that female romance readers use Harlequin novels as a form of therapy and self-nurturance fortifying them for the mundane, patriarchal expectations of marriage and child-rearing—a version of bibliotherapy that can be empowering but can ultimately disarm feminist impulses and reconstitute masculinist hegemony through sexual fantasy (Radway 85; 93; 213). Sociologist Elizabeth Long similarly studies white, middle-class women’s book clubs in the Houston area to “argue that what has traditionally been thought of as a passive and receptive activity is, in fact, integral to the constitution of both social identity and sociocultural order” (xvi). Radway and Long, while they attend to the paradoxical nature of reading as an act that is always simultaneously solitary and communal, empowering and stultifying, transformative and reifying, both study the uses of reading within a particular community or group of readers. This is not to say that they ignore or overlook the institutional and marketing practices that often motivate and drive reading praxis within their respective interpretive communities. Using their deep ethnographies of reading as a launching point, my study seeks to uncover further the dialogical nature of reading whereby the paradoxical tendencies in one interpretive community (such as the NetSAP book club) can illuminate the ideological contradictions in another (such as multicultural literary academia).

¹⁵ Fish, Stanley. *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980. See Janice Radway’s critique of interpretive communities in *Reading the Romance*, p. 8.

South Asian Diasporic Identity Formation, the Contradictions of Multicultural Ideology, and the Development of a Dialogic Reading Methodology

In terms of methodology, I want to emphasize here that I do not claim this project as a traditional ethnography or sociological study. While I do employ participant observation and in-depth interviewing to generate knowledge about how South Asian diasporic readers assimilate this body of fiction into their lives, asking what desires the literature fulfills for them, I employ an ethnographic reading practice that is both representative and interpretive. By asking participants to describe why they read South Asian diasporic literature and participate in the NetSAP book club or if they think that this literature affects South Asian diasporic identity formation, I did not expect that their answers would be unmediated, transparent, or self-evident.¹⁶ Rather, the empirical methods that I employ in this dissertation function as a research tool providing another layer of signification to the study of reading and readership in ethnic communities. The critical perspectives that I encounter and study in the NetSAP reading group as well as the body of published criticism on South Asian diasporic literature overwhelmingly indicate that in both lay and academic reading communities we are not always, if ever, the sole owners of our readerly desires.

Instead, our readerly desires are communally and discursively produced, shaped by the global culture industry, influenced by the publishing market, molded by the aspirational narratives of the model minority paradigm (which itself encodes particular gender and class implications), and forged by the institutional exigencies of the university classroom and the politics of canon formation. The interdisciplinary methodology that I have developed in this dissertation situates academic and lay sites of readership as foils of

¹⁶ See Appendices for a full list of interview questions.

one another to expose the factors that shape our desires and confound our good intentions. In this way, I have sought a methodological response to what Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln describe in their introduction to *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* as the “triple crises” confronting ethnographic authority in a post-structuralist, post-modern moment:

The ethnographer’s authority remains under assault today. A triple crises of representation, legitimation, and praxis confronts qualitative researchers in the human disciplines. Embedded in the discourses of post-structuralism and postmodernism these three crises are coded in multiple terms, variously called and associated with the *critical, interpretive, linguistic, feminist, and rhetorical* turns in social theory. These new turns make problematic two key assumptions of qualitative research. The first is that qualitative researchers can no longer directly capture lived experience. Such experience, it is argued, is created in the social text written by the researcher. This is the representational crises...The second assumption makes problematic the traditional criteria for evaluating and interpreting qualitative research. This is the legitimation crises. The first two crises shape the third, which asks, Is it possible to effect change in the world if society is only and always a text? (17)

Denzin and Lincoln characterize the shifts in how we perceive self-representation and the stability of the subject as crises of representation and legitimation. In their view, these “crises” potentially thwart ethnographic praxis by problematizing the transparency of the subject’s self-representation and making visible the ethnographer’s interpretive role in shaping the analysis of empirical data. Strikingly, the methodological “crises” that Denzin and Lincoln point to correspond to the theoretical dilemmas of identity politics in the academy: the precarious balance between recognizing that identity is a socially and historically constructed concept and acknowledging its very “real” effects on lived experience. The interdisciplinary methodology that I employ does not avoid these problems of subjectivity or representation but rather uses them to bridge the impasse between theory and practice, social construction, and lived experience. In other words,

by interrogating the role of identification and readerly desire in lay and academic reading communities, I implement an interdisciplinary methodology that balances the self-reported experiences of reading and their effects on identity formation with a study of the broader discursive and textual circumstances that influence readerly desires and help to shape the uses of literature in people's everyday lives.

Specifically, by attending to how a diasporic South Asian lay reading community responds to and uses literature that is purportedly "about" them and their experiences of displacement and immigration I introduce a nexus of analytical factors such as racialization, gender, ethnic alterity, and model minority critique into the study of reading.¹⁷ In the literary classroom, popular media, and even at times in literary criticism, multiethnic literatures tacitly become ethnographic tools granting readers insight into the experiences of a certain ethnic or racial group¹⁸ (Chuh 16; Lowe 86). This has created an intractable problem for literary academia. Scholars such as Kandice Chuh, David Palumbo-Liu, and Lisa Lowe have argued that in the service of multicultural liberal agendas in the U.S. academy, minoritized texts tokenistically appear on classroom syllabi obscuring the "important differences and contradictions within and among racial and ethnic minority groups according to the discourse of pluralism" and "masking the existence of exclusions by recuperating dissent, conflict, and otherness through the promise of inclusion" (Lowe 86). Furthermore, multicultural liberalism impacts

¹⁷ With the exception of Elizabeth McHenry's work on nineteenth-century African American reading groups, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*, studies of reading as a social activity in large part tend to examine these sites of lay readership as markedly white, middle-class, apolitical institutions. Scholars of book clubs and reading groups implicitly acknowledge the social effects of these communal sites of lay readership, but at the same time they overlook modern communities of readers who form book groups with an explicit public mission and social agenda.

¹⁸ I note, however, that Kandice Chuh, Lisa Lowe, and David Palumbo-Liu have offered foundational critiques, steeped in discourses of post-structuralism and post-colonial critique, of the tendency to read Asian American literature for its ethnographic effects.

structures of authority and hierarchies of canonical value in the academy, assigning minoritized literatures a perpetually subordinate and inferior position in literary academia. Reflecting on the relationship between Asian American studies and mainstream U.S. literary studies Chuh writes:

Minoritized literatures tend to be coded as “(multi)cultural.” Meanwhile, the “literary” is reserved for canonical writers and texts. This solution to the multicultural problem retrenches a divide between “high” (literary) and “low” (minority) culture, effectively racializing the idea of culture itself...[T]his kind of logic minoritizes (re-racializes and re-hierarchizes) even as it “celebrates diversity.” (16)

Critiques of identity politics and political correctness hold that identitarian coalitions offer easy yet inadequate manifestations of multicultural, liberal ideology and yield a productive skepticism about the uses of identity categories in the academy, noting that structures of inclusion can authorize modes of exclusion. Several interrelated questions remain for scholars of “minoritized” literatures: how, for example, do we recognize the indeterminacy of identity categories while acknowledging the very “real” influence of identitarian affiliations on how writers and readers describe their worlds? How do we resist ethnic pigeonholing in the academy while acknowledging students’ lived experience and desires to identify with literature in the multiethnic classroom? How do we incorporate the vital critiques of multiculturalism into our research and pedagogy while acknowledging the power and significance of discursive representations (and recognition) for ethnic communities in the United States?

The Limitations of Model Minority Discourse

Within the South Asian American community, the model minority myth and the discourses that it produces are among the most pervasive and insidious manifestations of liberal multiculturalist ideology. The image of Asian Americans as a model minority

relies on the myth that the United States is a color-blind, benevolent meritocracy rewarding the hard work, education, and class status that are supposedly characteristic of certain racial and immigrant groups. The myth emerged during the 1960s and was founded in the tense race politics of the civil rights era. In popular media Asian American groups, particularly Chinese and Japanese Americans, were cast as the successful, high-achieving, “good” minority and depicted as a supposed model for African Americans and Hispanic Americans. At the time of its conception and even today, the model minority myth poses a quandary for Asian American groups struggling to claim a coalitional identity in the U.S., and the myth raises the question of whether this recognition can be leveraged to improve the groups’ social and political standing.¹⁹ (Zia 46-47)

For South Asians in particular, the legacy of the model minority myth obscures the legislative history that permitted technically-skilled professionals in fields such as medicine, engineering, and scientific research to emigrate to the United States from various Asian countries, including India and Pakistan, to fulfill a demand for these professional skills in the United States. The 1965 Immigration Act, a watershed U.S. immigration law, reversed the half-century of legal discrimination against Asian immigration to the United States and marked the second major wave of South Asian immigration to the U.S.²⁰ (Maira 7; Bhatia 187; Purkayastha 1). In turn, the new visa

¹⁹ Notably, it was precisely at the time that this myth was developing that Asian Americans, inspired by African American civil rights politics, coined the coalitional term Asian American. See Helen Zia’s *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*, 2000.

²⁰ By most accounts there have been two major waves of South Asian immigration to the U.S., although some scholars believe that there is a third more recent wave ushered in by the parallel IT booms in India and Silicon Valley in the late 1980s and 1990s. Relaxed work visa laws during this period also allowed non-professional Indians to emigrate to urban centers. The first major wave of Indian immigration to the U.S. consisted mainly of farmers from Punjab and began in the mid-nineteenth century, ending with Asian exclusion laws passed in 1917 and 1924. While the first and third waves of immigration permitted South Asians without professional skills to emigrate, the second wave’s immigration, and the family reunification

provisions and corollary immigration legislation that the 1965 Immigration Act ushered in granted preferential treatment to the professional classes from South Asia (Maira 7; Bhatia 1). In this way, those laws continue to shape the socioeconomic opportunities of second and third generation South Asians in the U.S. Additionally, early South Asian immigrants to the U.S. were already fluent in English, as a result of their professional and educational training in a former British colony where English was widely taught to the middle and upper classes, easing their assimilation and facilitating upward class mobility in the U.S. (Maira 7; Bhatia 188). As sociologist Bandana Purkayastha explains, “[South Asians’] language proficiency, high human capital, non-ethnic residential location, and earnings from mainstream jobs appeared to confirm the openness of the United States society toward all groups, irrespective of their racial status, who worked hard to attain middle-class status” (1). Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and even currently, politicians, the mainstream media, and professional middle-class South Asians have seized upon the model minority myth, celebrating the upward mobility, above-average median income, work ethic, and educational achievements of South Asians in the U.S.²¹ (Bhatia 187).

But even the partial acceptance of this descriptor, the model minority, bears consequences both within the community and for multicultural American society. The model minority myth, and its various proponents, cast Asian Americans as a “solution” to the race “problem” in the U.S. Moreover, the myth reifies racial hierarchies by unfairly

laws that were then passed to encourage these immigrants to stay in the U.S., were more strictly contingent on their educational status and technical skills. For more information see Karen Isaksen Leonard’s, *The South Asian Americans*, 1997.

²¹ Former Republican senator Phil Gramm stated, “Indians as an ethnic group had the highest per-capita income and highest average education level in the U.S... the U.S. needs more hard working successful immigrants like Indians” (qtd in Bhatia 188). More recently, former President Bill Clinton has noted the success of Indian immigrants in the U.S. on various trips to India, and Bobby Jindal’s successful bid for governor of Louisiana has invoked several discussions on what it means to be a model South Asian minority in the U.S.

promoting Asian immigrants' allegedly superior work ethic and family values, and in doing so, effaces legislative histories, institutionalized racism, and social disenfranchisement of African American, Hispanic American, and Native American minorities. According to sociological and cultural studies on South Asians in the U.S. the valorization of the model minority myth not only creates a falsely homogenous image of South Asian upward mobility in the U.S., but it also prevents the South Asian American community from forming solidarities and coalitional relationships with other more politicized racial groups. As Susan Koshy explains, middle-class South Asians in the U.S. often use their class status to assert a specifically ethnic, rather than racialized identity. And for an immigrant group whose self-reported and documented experiences in the U.S. are marked by social inclusion and ethno-religious marginalization, economic affluence and poverty, the denial of what Koshy terms an "assigned" racial status can result in inter- and intra-racial antagonism, nostalgic idealism for an imaginary homeland, disempowering isolation in the U.S., and performances of ethnic authenticity (Bhatia 186-189; Koshy 306; Maira 8; Prashad 6-7; Purkayastha 1-3).

While the upkeep of a model minority image within the South Asian American community is quite obviously contingent on the projection of upward class mobility, the maintenance of traditional gender roles, particularly in the realm of cultural representation, is an equally significant if undertheorized factor in the perpetuation of the myth. As Shamita Das Dasgupta explains, the model minority myth's circulation in the general populace and within the South Asian community itself held particular ramifications for women, explaining that the "main casualty of our communities' efforts to reformulate homogenous "authenticity" through the exigencies of the myth have been

the women in the community, saddled as they are with the responsibility of perpetuating anachronistic tradition and negotiating a bicultural identity (5). Indeed, nowhere is the complex role of gender in shaping the community's public image more obvious than in popular South Asian American fiction, in particular by writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Divakaruni, and Bharati Mukherjee. As scholars of South Asian American and diasporic literatures have pointed out, these three writers are largely responsible for establishing a South Asian *American* literary tradition by setting their stories and fiction in familiar urban and suburban spaces in the U.S. and describing the experiences of first, second, and now third generation Indian immigrants.²²

To varying degrees, however, these writers attract audiences, both South Asian and non-South Asian, by rehashing a set of stereotypes, particularly around South Asian sexuality and femininity: oppressed yet exoticised women, controlling men, arranged marriage, Indian cuisine as a signifier of domesticity, and female feticide. It is, in fact, a foundational claim of this dissertation that these essentializing themes are produced and then reproduced in realist texts and thereby establish notions of South Asian ethnic authenticity in the U.S. through popular textual and cultural representation. I argue that this set of gendered tropes—which reifies the Orientalist binary of repressive Eastern tradition and progressive Western modernity—drives readerly identification and is used to legitimate or refute the text's authentic, “realistic” ethnic merit. The mode of realism, in particular, becomes pivotal to creating the effect of authenticity, inviting readerly identification, and universalizing the individual subject. As Patricia Chu explains, “the

²² See Srikanth, Rajini. *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America*. Asian American History and Culture. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004, especially Chapter 3, and Grewal, Inderpal. *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005.

classic realist text interpellates the reader by soliciting his or her identification with an imagined authority who speaks for the society...and transcends and subsumes individual difference” (14). And as it is a genre that is always as prescriptive as it is descriptive,²³ it fulfills the exigencies of the model minority myth and can serve as a heuristic generic mode to instruct its readers on dominant gendered and classed tropes.

The mode of literary production and reception that I am describing here borrows from David Palumbo-Liu’s definition of the effects of “model-minority discourse” in Asian American literature. Liu defines “model minority discourse” as a thematic pattern present in the more popular Asian American texts in which narrative structure is commonly configured as a “resolution” to the “problem” of racial, gendered, and ethnic alterity (395); I quote Liu’s explanation at length:

“Model minority discourse” is an ideological construct not coextensive with the texts themselves, but rather designating a mode of apprehending, decoding, recoding, and producing Asian American narratives. I am not accusing the authors of the novelistic texts I treat of consciously setting out to construct texts that prop up dominant ideologies. Rather, I want to point out that a particular formula of subject construction has evolved and has been naturalized as a central component of popular Asian American literature. It has come to serve both as a model for Asian American literary production (a convention of fiction *writing*), and as a literary object (the product of a particular convention of *reading*) in which the historical and political are displaced and/or repressed while a particular subjectivity emerges as the consequence of this narration of coming-into-health. (396)

Although Liu’s definition of “model minority discourse” is intended primarily to describe East Asian American literatures, it is a pattern that holds in South Asian American literature as well. The discourse naturalizes the de-historicized production and reception

²³ See June Howard, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

of these literatures and influences the politics of recognition within the South Asian American community. Specifically, “model minority discourse” in South Asian American and diasporic literatures figures the “narration of coming-to-health” or the resolution of the “ethnic subject’s psychic impasse” (397) through a set of gendered tropes. In particular, the trope of liberatory, interracial romance defines this literary tradition differently for female and male characters: while female characters must seek their assimilation and placement in the U.S. through a successful and fulfilling marital union, male characters resist or are denied the option to assimilate to the nation-state and their narratives are marked through patriarchal relationality and oedipal struggles (Chu 19; Gopinath 5). In keeping with Liu’s observations, the fulfillment of these tropes and the presence of the model minority discourse render these texts critically legible and identifiable for readers. The system of production, reception, encoding, and recoding that Liu describes maps onto a circularity in the consumption of ethnic texts. South Asian readers who use literature as a kind of research on their cultural negotiations in the U.S. may at least partially see these tropes as markers of an authentic ethnic subjectivity creating a blindness to their own privilege, which can at times translate to a willingness to conform to essentializing Orientalist tropes around class and gender. And yet, I want to emphasize that although the model minority discourse and its attendant stereotypes are both compelling and formative, lay readers use self-representational spaces like the NetSAP book club not only to define their own bicultural identities, but also to critique the complacencies of the South Asian American middle class and to challenge the hegemony of essentializing narrative structures and frames. Reading, thus, can only be comprehended as a contradictory, communally, and discursively constructed act.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter two of the dissertation, “Necessary Omissions: Reading Reception and the Production of Authenticity in Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*” situates and historicizes the politics of ethnic literary reception and circulation that will inform subsequent chapters. In this chapter, I observe that the reception history of Kamala Markandaya’s first, and most critically-acclaimed social realist novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* exemplifies and foreshadows a process of generic fixing for the South Asian diasporic female writer whereby she is expected to “authentically” represent India to a Western audience within the prescripts of one of several so-called marginalized literary categories, such as Commonwealth, post-colonial, or ethnic. I begin by analyzing popular journalists’ reactions to Markandaya’s death in 2004, and the ways in which they eulogize her passing as reflective of changes in generic expectations in the body of Indian diasporic literature. Time and again, these journalists emphasize Markandaya’s diminishing literary presence and attribute it to the persistent realism of her writing at a time when magical realists such as Salman Rushdie supposedly have pushed beyond such mimetic genres. I argue, however, that the generic hair-splitting about realism that pervades popular and academic criticism on Markandaya’s work embeds an imperative for the Indian female writer both past and present to be “authentically” and exotically ethnic. By calibrating the authenticity of Markandaya’s representations according to gendered criteria, and conflating the writer’s life with her literary production, popular and academic critics overlook interpretations of the novel that would admit a study of its colonial, capitalist, and feminist critiques. In contrast to published criticism, NetSAP readers interpreted the novel as a critique of the complacencies of contemporary Indian

diasporic fiction and an indictment of the gender and class biases in this literature. While their identificatory interpretations run the risk of defusing the novel's social realist critiques and historical particularities, the way in which they use the novel to cast a critical eye on contemporary diasporic fiction instructively challenges and reproduces the limitations of its academic reception.

Chapter three, "Beyond the Binaries of South Asian Diasporic Literature: Theorizing the Relationship between Literary Academia and the Lay Reading Public in Indu Sundaresan's *The Feast of Roses* and Lavanya Sankaran's *The Red Carpet*" focuses on an analysis of NetSAP book club meetings to investigate how readers use South Asian diasporic literature as a kind of research on the complexities of their own global and local subject positions. Engagement with this literary community not only illuminates the complex interaction between literature and coalitional identity formation in the U.S. but also reveals how South Asian diasporic literature is used within the communities that it purports to represent. In other words, in their everyday lay reading practice, NetSAP readers revalue the emerging South Asian diasporic canon through the dynamic and often contradictory interpretations they produce, thereby offering academic readers a critical perspective on a reading practice that negotiates the either/or models that have shaped this literary and cultural field. In these meetings, NetSAP readers shift their positionalities in relation to the representations that circulate about South Asian diasporic culture in order to negotiate between the lived experience of a bicultural South Asian American identity and the competing national context (India, the U.S., and the U.K.) that has historically influenced this diasporic community's formation. In their readings for the book club, I found that readers use the literature and the organization as a site where they

claim cultural citizenship by alternately insisting on measures of authentic Indian identity, often specifically in terms of class, gender and sexuality, while challenging stable, totalizing narratives about South Asian American assimilation in this site of community readership.

Chapters four and five, “Dialogic Reading Practice and the Problem of Placement: Rethinking the Discourse of Choice Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and Chitra Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices*” and “Identification, Readerly Desire, and Feminist Recuperation in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*” study how gender influences and constructs readerly response to South Asian diasporic literature in lay and academic interpretive communities. In these chapters, I trace how the strikingly analogous reception in both lay and academic reading publics of three popular female writers of South Asian descent, Arundhati Roy, Chitra Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri, position female writers as the arbiters of Indian cultural tradition.²⁴ Furthermore, I contend that a complex politics of representation and correction work paradoxically in the lay reading public of the NetSAP-DC book club, inspiring readings that correct literary and cultural exclusions but in doing so often reify notions of authentic, consumable, and exotic ethnic alterity. These investments produce unevenly applied and unfair expectations that determine South Asian diasporic female writers’ reception in both scholarship and lay reception. The result is a set of unfortunately gendered readings of these authors’ work that limit the narrative scope of what tropes and themes qualify as ethnically authentic in the interpretive field. In contrast to the historically contextualized reception of male writers in the tradition, the burdens of identitarian representation applied to female writers abstract their literature from its historical situations. Additionally, the tacit

²⁴ The switch here from South Asian to Indian is in the service of specificity.

function of gender in forming South Asian diasporic literary history produces a circularity in reading practice wherein female writers and their texts are produced as authentic voices if they fulfill certain readerly expectations.²⁵ These narratives then, by taking on the sheen of authenticity, effectively produce the readerly desire for a limited range of ethnically “authentic” tropes.

In chapter four, I examine the reception of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Chitra Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and *Arranged Marriage* (1996) as foils to investigate how lay and academic readers both participate in the production of decontextualized and gendered interpretations and also work to produce recuperative feminist readings—which notably often occur simultaneously. I begin by examining the fraught reception of Roy’s *The God of Small Things* in lay and academic reading publics. While Roy is an indisputably popular writer of the South Asian diaspora, her popularity could be more aptly described as a kind of notoriety. Roy’s troubled reception, particularly in contrast to Lahiri’s, exemplifies the problems of placement that can arise when female writers do not conform to the literary expectations of academic and lay readers. Next, I trace the recuperative feminist interpretations of Chitra Divakaruni to examine the specifically situated nature of readership. In this section I am interested in studying how academic and lay readers mobilize commensurate recuperative strategies in their interpretive practice. I examine how readers in these interpretive communities revalue exoticising and culturally limiting moments in Divakaruni’s fiction and how, similar to academic critics, lay readers employ tactics of literary interpretation that challenge and reify gendered markers of ethnic authenticity.

²⁵ Rajini Srikanth, *The World Next Door: South Asian Americans and the Idea of America*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 195.

In the final chapter, I offer an analysis of the academic and lay reception of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. Specifically, the chapter investigates what desires Lahiri fulfills and what expectations she meets in various fields of reception. That is, although in their own interpretive practice NetSAP readers produce gendered values correlative to those commonly espoused by academic and popular critics, they also emphasize the therapeutic value of literatures that inspire identification. Both lay and academic readers produce recuperative readings that at once free Lahiri's work, particularly *The Namesake*, from its more Orientalist and patriarchal implications but that also essentialize South Asian American identity and reify the hegemony of Western notions of progress, cultural arrival, assimilation and immigrant success.

Conclusion

Before concluding, I feel compelled to address the issue of desire in my own interpretive practice; and similar to many of the NetSAP readers whom I interviewed, I center that issue on Lahiri's *The Namesake* because it evoked a particularly strong set of desires for me. Firstly, I felt strongly that the novel was unique in its overall description of South Asian acculturation in the U.S. and unparalleled in its presentation of how generational difference shapes South Asian experiences of immigration and assimilation. But on a more personal level, I felt a profound attachment to the novel, as if many of the feelings of exclusion, displacement, guilt, and confusion that I had experienced after my family immigrated to the United States from New Delhi in the early 1980s had been represented. Very much in keeping with NetSAP readers' reactions to the text, I felt that it provided some form of retroactive "bibliotherapy" and a sense of shared experience

that I had previously not encountered. In this sense, the experience of reading the novel aligns with the cultural phenomena that Sunaina Marr Maira describes in *Desis in the House*: “The degradations and exclusions of the school playground, where Indian American children learn that their cultural citizenship is in question, cannot be divorced from the intense need for an ethnic community” (148). In response, Maira argues, second-generation South Asian Americans use certain cultural artifacts and practices (for example, *bhangra* music) to create subcultures of belonging that extend into adulthood; for many of the South Asian American readers in the NetSAP book club, as well as for myself, the organization’s cultural events and *The Namesake* fulfilled these needs. By the time I spoke with NetSAP readers, I realized that my opinions on *The Namesake* had developed from when I first read it alone in 2004, and that the only way I could understand the novel was to look at it with split vision: one part of me, the “academic” side, wanted to maintain critical distance, to contextualize the narrative’s tropes in terms of the broader field of South Asian diasporic literary history, while another part of me still felt a strong personal connection to Lahiri’s descriptions of the South Asian American experience. When I finally began speaking to NetSAP readers I felt that I had to underplay my own connection to the novel so that I could obtain an objective, critical focus on its shortcomings, feminist failings, and “Indo-chic” ethos. For this reason, whenever *The Namesake* or *Interpreter of Maladies* came up in conversation, I felt obligated to challenge interviewees’ identification with the text so that they would not detect my own powerful connection to the novel, and therefore would take more seriously my objections to some of its representations. Only through the process of speaking with these readers and confronting the challenges they presented to my readings did I learn

that the distinction between my academic and personal responses was a false one. And perhaps most importantly, my adherence to this untenable divide—between academic objectivity and personal desire—perpetuated the false dichotomies I wanted to interrogate: the constitutive rather than oppositional taste-making influences that lay and academic reading publics have on each other. More simply put, through the work that I have done in completing this dissertation, I have learned that academic readers are always influenced by readerly desire, and often lay readers perform strategic and complex acts of criticism in their everyday uses of literature. I cannot purport to name the exact desires that I bring to my readings of these novels or to the conceptualization of this project—one of my foundational claims is after all, that we are not the sole owners of our own readerly or academic desires, and that they are not always self-evident to us. But I can say that my interest in this project, and my broader interest in interrogating the act of reading stems, as I am sure it does for the readers and scholars I discuss, from a politics of love, recognition, and correction.

In the chapters that follow, I construct a dialogue between academic and lay readers, and implicitly incorporate the process of self-recognition to trace and revise the role of the critic. It is my hope that what unfolds therein offers not only an interrogation but also an expansion of the idea of the critic to include lay interpretive perspectives. It is my belief that this more expansive perception of critical intervention illuminates how literary and discursive representations are affected by the historical circumstances in which they are produced. But more importantly, this multivocal, dialogic approach to interpretation reveals how literary discourse itself—in particular, in sites of lay readership

such as the NetSAP reading community—can have material effects by establishing notions of truth and authenticity in the social realm.

Chapter 2

Necessary Omissions: Authenticity and Reading Reception in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*

A few summers ago, while visiting family on the East coast, I sat down to flip through a stack of accumulated copies of *India Abroad*—a newspaper published in New York and geared towards South Asian immigrants in the United States. Midway through the June 4, 2004 issue I was struck by a full page black and white photograph of a woman who looked vaguely familiar. Underneath the photo the caption read, “In quiet light, Kamala Markandaya 1924-2004.” In this memorial essay, journalist Arthur Pais casts Markandaya’s life as a slow rise to literary celebrity and subsequent decline into obsolescence—an unfortunate trajectory that a surprising number of her obituaries chronicle.²⁶ He even goes so far as to conjecture about possible reasons for her fading literary career, citing as one possibility the dissolution of the John Day publishing company, a firm that had supposedly nurtured and promoted Markandaya’s early work. Suggesting a more complex reason for her decline, Pais attributes Markandaya’s waning popularity to the gradual shift in the marketability of “realistic” novels about India. In Pais’s account, when “realistic” representations of “exotic” lands faded in popularity, to be replaced shortly thereafter by the magical realist boom of the 1970’s, writers like Salman Rushdie led the vanguard of post-colonial literature. In this climate, Pais suggests, “the publishing world seemed to have no room for the likes of Markandaya.”

²⁶ See “In Quiet Light, Kamala Markandaya 1924-2004,” *India Abroad*, June 4, 2004.

Pais and other journalists explain Markandaya's diminishing popularity as a result of the international boom in magical realist fiction in the mid 1970s that usurped the "wonderful and life-affirming stories" of literary "pioneers like Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan, G.V. Desani, and Mulk Raj Anand." But nevertheless, he asserts the particular importance of realist fiction within South Asian diasporic culture, asserting that, "writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Indira Ganesan and academics like Uma Parameswaran will hail Markandaya as a pioneer who wrote realistically about India, especially in the 1950s when many Americans were still thinking of India as a country of snake charmers and elephant boys as seen in films starring Sabu." Pais points to a strange contradiction in Markandaya's literary reception: her success in revising exoticist images of India and replacing these images with "realistic" and authentic representations both assures her place in South Asian diasporic literary history and cements her decline as a popular writer.

These observations, advanced in a site of popular media, introduce two structuring interests of this chapter: first, the article demonstrates the interactivity of reception by uniting literary academics, South Asian diasporic writers, popular media review, and the preferences of the general reader into a retrospective account of Kamala Markandaya's literary career. Secondly, in his attempt to account for Markandaya's impact on the general and academic reader within this literary tradition, Pais emphasizes the centrality of representations of "truth," and "reality" in this fiction. As I will discuss later in the chapter, while the veracity of Markandaya's work has been measured partially through its adherence to the conventions of literary social realism, what is truly at stake in

Pais's article is not so much the generic category of realism as the discursive representations of reality itself.

In this chapter, I argue that Markandaya's critical reception history exemplifies and foreshadows a process of disciplinary fixing for the South Asian diasporic female writer whereby she is expected to "authentically" represent India to a Western audience within the prescripts of one of several so-called marginalized literary categories, such as Commonwealth, post-colonial, or ethnic. Whereas Pais and other popular journalists attribute Markandaya's waning popularity to changes in generic expectations for Indian literature,²⁷ I contend that rather than realism falling out of favor as a genre in the field of South Asian diasporic writing, how a particularly "Indian" reality gets represented is truly at issue in criticism on Markandaya's work. Put simply, these journalists attribute Markandaya's diminishing literary presence to the persistent realism of her writing at a time when magical realists such as Salman Rushdie supposedly have pushed beyond such mimetic genres. But the generic hair-splitting about realism that pervades popular and academic criticism as well as lay readerly reception on Markandaya's work, particularly on her first and most acclaimed novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), encodes and obscures imperatives to be ethnically authentic—essentially, to represent an imaginary, monolithic truth about India to Western audiences.

²⁷ See for example the June 15, 2004 issue of *The Independent*: "One might have hoped for more but, with the publication in 1981 of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, fashions were changing in Indian writing. Markandaya was magical, she was a realist, but she was not a magic realist and, after those three last novels published in Britain by Chatto and Windus, she was then marooned without a publisher, at less than 60." In the May 29, 2004 issue of *The Hindu*: "Later in her career, she [Markandaya] struggled to find a publisher as a cluster of new writers, including Amitav Ghosh and Salman Rushdie, emerged in the 1980s and redefined Indian literature, pushing it toward magical realism that captivated the American audience. Referring to Mr. Rushdie's 1981 novel, Mr. Larson [an English professor at American University] said, 'Once *Midnight's Children* got out there, the more traditional realistic novel wasn't popular anymore.'"

Specifically, the value that modern popular media places on Markandaya's "realistic" sensibility provides a springboard for this chapter from which to examine the historically-situated and gendered notions of ethnic Indian authenticity that continue to determine the reception of South Asian diasporic female writers. As June Howard asserts, the "claim to represent reality accurately entails not only a descriptive but a prescriptive power" (Form and History 12). The function of realist representation as both a descriptor of and corrective to lived experience applies equally to how concepts of authenticity function in multicultural literary academia. That is, in the various reception contexts for multiethnic literatures, the stakes of representation, or in other words, the accuracy, truthfulness, and reality of literary descriptions, are acutely felt and guarded regardless of how historically contingent and protean these values are. In his insightful study of the relationship between U.S. regionalist fiction and the production of interest in "authentic" ethnic literatures Jeff Karem notes that authenticity over the course of the twentieth century in U.S. literary history has been a "persistent" and "unstable" ideal (4). Karem rightly points out that deeming a work authentic or more precisely, inauthentic, provides grounds for strategic and problematic exclusions:

Paradigms of authenticity in publishing and criticism are failed ideals in themselves, conceptually unstable and dangerously reductive. Despite the valuable literary access they grant, demands for authenticity all too often confine marginal authors and their texts to narrowly representative positions, circumscribing both what they are able to produce and to publish and how their works are received. Criticism grounded in a tacit or explicit privileging of authenticity all too often reifies essentialist paradigms of identity and literary production. (15)

Thus, desires for authenticity in literary representation create a double-bind for writers of color in the U.S., which in turn determines their popular and critical success. As Karem explains, these writers are both expected to be cultural representatives and ethnic

informants, to produce the effect of a genuine, true, actual, and authoritative core of knowledge in order to educate the reader and guide her understandings of the marginalized subject. At the same time, they must domesticate the unfamiliar, exotic, authentic subject into a familiar, representative, yet universal character.

This double-bind not only surfaces in Markandaya's obituaries, but it accompanied her work from its inception and debut. As with notable contemporary South Asian female writers such as Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri, with each reissuing and book review on Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, a short biography that serves a peculiarly authenticating function accompanies the unlikely narration of her rise to success. As the story goes, born in India, Markandaya eventually settled in England where she spent most of her adult life. Yet, with the publication of her critically acclaimed and popular novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, she became an international literary presence. *Nectar* garnered praise and success in the U.S., Canada, and England, was reviewed in several major publications, and established Markandaya as one of the most transnationally celebrated writers of Indian origin at the time. Arguably, however, the novel was most celebrated and esteemed in the United States. Here, *Nectar* was a dual selection for the Book of the Month Club in 1955 earning Markandaya a \$100,000 prize and was also a book selection by the American Library Association in the same year.

Nectar tells the story of an Indian peasant woman named Rukmani and the trials that she faces once she is married and raising a family of her own.²⁸ The novel confronts

²⁸ *Nectar in a Sieve* is narrated in the first person through the character and voice of the main protagonist, Rukmani. The narrative begins retrospectively, with Rukmani reflecting on the events that have forced her to return to her village as a widow. She begins by describing her wedding to a tenant farmer, Nathan, at the age of twelve—a “poor match” for Rukmani, the daughter of the village headman. The day after her wedding, she and Nathan return to his village where he resumes his life as a farmer and Rukmani learns and takes on the domestic duties expected of her. In this early period of their married life, Rukmani and

several social and political issues through this domestic narrative, such as the effects of colonialism, industrialization of rural communities, and poverty. Around the time that *Nectar* was published, a mysterious rumor circulated along with it, the source of which I have not been able to trace, but the effects of which still linger on in subsequent readings of the novel. According to the story, Markandaya was said to have spent six years, from

Nathan are happy: she is expecting their first child, the land yields rice and Rukmani plants a garden that produces enough vegetables for her to sell at the market. All is well until one day, when tending to her garden, Rukmani discovers a cobra in her pumpkin patch which Nathan cuts to pieces with his scythe and buries. Later on, we learn that cobras are sacred, making this killing a bad omen. The baby is born a healthy girl whom they name Irawaddy (or Ira) but Rukmani continues to be haunted by the cobra incident. Six years pass, and Rukmani has not had another child—a misfortune that she attributes to the cobra. At this point, she meets Dr. Kennington, an Englishman who tends to the people of various villages in this unnamed region. Dr. Kenny, as Rukmani calls him, helps her to have another child by administering mysterious fertility treatments that result in the births of six sons after Irawaddy. Again, there is a short period of peace in the narrative until a tannery is established in the village, which signals a stark rupture in the text. From this point on, Rukmani and her family face constant struggle. The tannery workers turn the village into a town. A flood hits the village ruining crops and making food and other basic necessities unaffordable for the farmers. Ira has to be married off, only to return five years later because she was unable to bear children. Meanwhile, two of Rukmani's oldest sons, Arjun and Thambi, go to work at the tannery. After a labor strike fails, they eventually leave the tannery and move to Ceylon to work on the tea plantations. At around the same time, Rukmani's third oldest son, Murugan, stops working the land and leaves the village to take work as a servant. Raja, the fourth oldest, is killed by the guards at the tannery when he is found stealing leather, and Selvam, the youngest and brightest, stays to work the land with his father. At the start of a prolonged drought, Rukmani bears her last child, Kuti. Ira, who has been completely despondent since her husband's abandonment, begins to care for Kuti as her own child. When Kuti falls sick from starvation, Ira begins to prostitute herself in order to feed the family. While Ira's income from prostitution helps the family to some degree, particularly, Rukmani, Nathan refuses to eat any of the food bought with her earnings. The baby, Kuti, eventually dies.

As a subplot to the narrative, the family is also plagued throughout by a woman named Kunthi. Once the most beautiful and desired woman the village, Kunthi turns to prostitution during the famine. When her looks fail to get her any customers, she begins to extort rice from Rukmani and Nathan, telling Rukmani that she'll convince Nathan of an ongoing love affair between her and Kenny, while telling Nathan that she'll expose his youthful infidelities with her. Nathan and Rukmani finally tell each other what Kunthi has been doing to them, and in this way banish her from their lives.

As the narrative progresses, Ira becomes pregnant from an unknown customer and bears an albino child. The tannery purchases the land surrounding the village, including the piece that Nathan rents, and he and Rukmani are left without any means to support themselves. So as not to be a burden to Ira who is struggling to support her child, and Selvam, who is now working for Kenny, aiding him in fundraising efforts to build a hospital in the village, Nathan and Rukmani decide to leave the village and go in search of Murugan, their third oldest son. Upon arriving in the city, they are robbed of all of their belongings, and find out that Murugan has abandoned his wife and child. With no belongings, Rukmani and Nathan are unable to get back to their village. Soon they meet Puli, a young boy who suffers from leprosy and helps them to find food, shelter and employment in the city. The three of them begin work at a quarry where hard labor eventually leads to Nathan's death. Rukmani and Puli eventually find their way back to the village where Ira and Selvam take them in and care for them.

1941 to 1947, researching the topic of her novel by living in an Indian village. This rumor was perpetuated most notably in the popular press by Orville Prescott of *The New York Times* in his complimentary review of the novel. As he says:

She was educated at the University of Madras and now lives in a London suburb with her English husband. Her intimate knowledge of peasant life was acquired by strenuous investigation for six years, between 1941 and 1947 with the express intention of gathering material for a book. She has made extremely good use of that material in “Nectar in a Sieve.”²⁹

Prescott prefaces the claim that Markandaya conducted field research for her novel with the information that she is a highly-educated Indian woman who left her native land to settle abroad and is now married to an English man. He begins his review by suggesting that the novel’s value is ethnographic, and not literary. Prescott constructs her status as the ideal native informant: she is an educated female writer of Indian origin who has done her research and can put it to proper use in writing a novel. Two weeks later, Prescott received a response from Markandaya which he published in his column, “Kamala Markandaya, author of *Nectar in a Sieve*, writes from London that I exaggerated in describing the background of her novel”:

While the book is based on my actual experiences of Indian village life, this experience was gained casually, over a number of years, and I did not at any time undertake a strenuous investigation of rural conditions with a view to writing a book...I cannot claim for “Nectar” the searching standards of a documentary; but it is authentic and it is firmly based on actuality, and, as books often are, it is concerned with the those things which have roused one or interested one, or which have made the deepest impression on the mind.³⁰

Markandaya takes this opportunity to reject Prescott’s positioning of her novel as an ethnographic study and reclaims *Nectar* as an artistic work, albeit one that is founded in lived experience. In the second half of her response, she denies that the novel can be held

²⁹ Orville Prescott, *New York Times*, May 16, 1955

³⁰ Orville Prescott, *New York Times*, May 30, 1955

up to the “standards of documentary” but does affirm that it is “authentic” and “based on actuality.” Markandaya indicates that there is an important difference among documentary, authenticity and actuality and she invokes that difference to establish herself as a novelist rather than ethnographer. Markandaya’s use of the terms “authentic” and “based in actuality” as descriptors for *Nectar* defy its relegation to ethnography yet retain the complicated idea that what she is representing is indeed truthful if not objective. Her assertion of *Nectar*’s authenticity is, in fact, a direct challenge to the mandate that novels about marginalized subjects can and should present unmediated access to their lives and localities. Rather her invocation of the term “authentic” reserves imaginative license as a means by which to emotionally affect her readers.

This concern with authenticity continues to permeate popular and academic scholarship on *Nectar* and emerges not only in the criticism of the novel’s content, which I examine in the next section of the chapter, but also in the changing literary-historical categories under which her work has been classified.³¹ During the three decades that Markandaya was actively writing and publishing, her novels were relegated to the field of Commonwealth literature, a field that has come under increasing scrutiny in large part because of the truth-telling, authenticity imperative that the term—and many others like it—invokes.³² Salman Rushdie provides a foundational critique of the term in his influential essay “Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist” (1992).

³¹ Rochelle Almeida, one of the major South Asian Canadian critics of Markandaya’s work cites this paratextual story as evidence of Markandaya’s authentic narration: “She lived for an extended period of time in an Indian village...This possibly explains the authenticity of Markandaya’s characters in the same novel, *Rukmani and Nathan*” (43). In contrast to Markandaya’s assertion that her novel is authentic, but not “documentary,” Almeida explains that Markandaya’s study of the Indian village led to the creation of authentic characters.

³² Uma Parameswaran explains:

Authenticity is the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism. It demands that sources, forms, style, language and symbol all derive from a supposedly homogenous and unbroken tradition. Or else. What is revealing is that the term, so much in use inside the little world of 'Commonwealth literature,' and always as a term of praise, would seem ridiculous outside this world. Imagine a novel being eulogized for being 'authentically English,' or 'authentically German.' It would seem absurd. Yet such absurdities persist in the ghetto. (67)

In this short passage, Rushdie makes three compelling observations about the mechanisms of authenticity that sum up the problems with employing terms such as Commonwealth literature to describe literature that, like Markandaya's, is categorized under some sign of marginality. First, he explains that authenticity is a term most often reserved for narratives that deal in ethnicity or some form of "otherness." Secondly, he argues that rendering an "authentic" portrayal relies on aesthetic markers that dehistoricize cultural and national traditions. And finally, he observes that the "authentic" takes on particular values in certain literary categories. In other words, when scholars and reviewers invoke the term "authentic" to describe a text, they are fixing that text in a national tradition and generic space. Paradoxically, this fixing removes that text from its historical, national or local particularity into a place of global relevance. Similarly, in another essay in *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie complains that upon winning the Booker he was frustrated by the expectations that this exposure brought with it from his reading audience. He found that readers "were judging the book not as a

In the 1960s, Kamala Markandaya's novels were familiar to everyone who made any claim to be in the field of Commonwealth Literature, as the area was then called. Today, with the flood of fine writing produced by writers in India and elsewhere in the field of Postcolonial literatures, her novels have become a part of the past. It is time to revisit the early classics... When we first studied them, we placed them against earlier works and noted how far Indo-English literature had come from the imitative form and language of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Today, we have to see them in two different ways—as socio-literature that articulately and authentically record life as lived during a significant and fascinating period of India's modern history, and as the beginnings of what is now known as Diaspora literature. (15)

novel, but as some sort of inadequate reference book or encyclopedia,” a “guide-book, which it was never meant to be” (Rushdie 25). It is of course ironic that Salman Rushdie, who offers one of the most articulate and succinct critiques of the authenticity imperatives of Commonwealth literatures (and by extension other related “marginalized” literatures), ever since winning the Booker Prize for *Midnight’s Children* in 1981, increasingly has become a literary figure whose work provides a scale by which to measure authenticity in other postcolonial, commonwealth, and diasporic South Asian literatures.

Up to now, inadequate attention has been paid to how imperatives for ethnic authenticity circulate in the literary production and circulation of modern female writers of South Asian descent. Given the burgeoning canon of South Asian diasporic writing, particularly by critically acclaimed writers such as Chitra Banerji Divakaruni, Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri, this omission seems not only to excuse but perhaps also to authorize popular and scholarly reading practices that evacuate historical and cultural context from this body of literature, thereby rendering the diversity of Indian diasporic experience into a set of repeated and limiting narratives. By examining readings of Markandaya’s work, I suggest that her omission from the South Asian transnational literary canon may be indicative of persistent reading and interpretive practices whereby the literary production of female writers within this tradition is valuable only inasmuch as these texts adhere to the simplifying imperatives of authenticity. Ultimately, it is clear that whether Markandaya’s work is assigned to the category of Commonwealth, diasporic, post-colonial, South Asian or Indian American literatures, all of these names indicate the circuit of Markandaya’s literary transnational itinerary but none of them

troubles the notion that at core, the third world nation, in this case India, can be rendered as a stable object of study under the rubric of a literary field. This is not to imply that in the andocentric South Asian diasporic canon all imperatives of authenticity have been dismantled. But when Rushdie resisted this categorical fixing, he was pushing against a particularly national, rather than gendered, construction that would seek to make him a post-colonial spokesperson and the “new voice of India.”

The popular and critical reception of *Nectar in a Sieve* over time make Markandaya’s work a rich case study through which to examine the changing discursive and highly gendered representations of India in the West. The transnational history of criticism on *Nectar in a Sieve*, whether lauding its achievement or bemoaning its failure, foregrounds the novel’s truth claims and the authenticity effects of its representations as the main criteria for literary value. In the formation of this pattern of reception, history is obscured and the richly gendered critique of capitalist intrusion, colonial legacy, and modes of exoticisation that Markandaya presents in the novel are left unacknowledged. Shadowed by the popular criticism that circulated around the time of *Nectar’s* publication, recent academic criticism on the text has focused on three repeated and corresponding topics: its status as a realist text, particularly in the vein of social realism, the use of standard English idiom, and the accusation that Markandaya panders to an English-speaking literary market through her inclusion of ethnographic detail throughout the novel. These apparent indicators of *Nectar’s* authenticity are not necessarily gendered in and of themselves. In fact, abstracted from particular popular and scholarly readings of the novel, they are general categories that are often used to measure a text’s adherence to an ideal of authenticity. But as I argue below, these three critical veins at times subtly,

and at others, quite overtly, obscure readings of *Nectar* that might otherwise reveal the depth of its political critique and social commentary.

I conclude the chapter with a discussion of NetSAP readers' responses to the novel during a book club meeting in February 2007. Lay readerly response to *Nectar* echoed academic and popular critical concern with the novel's ethnic and gendered authenticity. Readers explicitly communicated their reservations about the novel's use of standard English and its realism. But at the same time, NetSAP readers highly valued *Nectar* for the depth of its social and class critique and its arguably progressive representations of gendered and colonialist hierarchies. Their admiration for the novel's social interventions exposes a level of ethnic nostalgia and class privilege. And yet, their ostensibly self-critical interpretations of the novel's social perspectives demonstrate that if the act of reading does not necessarily, as Markandaya wished, have the power to improve, in its more critical and dialogic modes it certainly retains the potential to transform.

The Failure of Authenticity: Reading the “Literature of Concern” through Gender in Genre, Language, and Ethnography

The shifting meanings of “authenticity,” first invoked by Markandaya herself in response to a contemporary popular media review, obscure more historically grounded and culturally contextualized readings. Although directed to different audiences and written 50 years apart, both the popular and academic response to *Nectar* that I trace in this section waver between claiming the novel as a “true” and “realistic” example of Indian village life, or denouncing it as a false and misinformed portrayal. In either case, critics who either commend the text's authenticity or denounce its failure to conjure a

truly authentic narrative value the novel for the degree to which it presents an essentialist, monolithic representation of India. Such essentialist critical stances embed gendered reading practices that imagine the Indian female author, Markandaya, performing dual roles: a spokesperson for the exotic and impoverished East, and a social worker who will garner global sympathy for the nation.

A survey of popular and academic criticism reveals that Markandaya alternately accepts and rejects this role of author-as-social-worker. At times she actively mobilizes this positioning to heighten social awareness and at other times she emphasizes her role as a novelist whose work is a fictional, aesthetic production removed from questions of identity and politics in an effort to establish a counter-canon of literature invested in political and social change. In an interview with Rochelle Almeida, for example, Markandaya underplays the “literary” qualities of her writing by asserting that her intended audience is the lay reader rather than the literary professional or academic critic:

I don't think of my writing as literature. It is you, academics, who label it with lofty-sounding names. I only see my books as a good, easy read, the kind of light novel the lay person would enjoy picking up and reading. I certainly don't write for the literary pundit or for the critics. Therefore, I am least concerned about what the critics have to say concerning the flaws in my novels, since I don't claim to write for them. Hence, I cannot rise to the high standards they demand from the novels they read and I do not try to. (Almeida 94)

Markandaya was undoubtedly aware that her work, particularly *Nectar*, invited critical attention from both popular and scholarly reviewers, in addition to its popularity with lay readers at the time of its publication. The defensive stance that she takes here on the reception of her work, particularly by literary professionals, could be interpreted as an attempt to exert agency over the critical field that was rapidly burgeoning around her novels. Markandaya's ostensible disinterest in academic and popular review demonstrate

an acute foresight into how the critical field creates South Asian female writers as discursive sites, determining what the available register of interpretations is for a given text.

As her obituaries indicate, for example, one repeated and particularly intractable debate in critical interpretations of *Nectar* involves whether Markandaya's use of social realism measures up to the great "Indo-Anglian" writing contemporary with her publications.³³ The ongoing critical discussion on Markandaya's use of genre obliquely encodes issues of gender and representation for the South Asian female writer. That is, her inclusion in the predominantly masculine Indo-Anglian canon is policed based on her adherence to literary historical generic conventions. Furthermore, the reception of Markandaya's work at the time of its publication similarly exposes the development of a gendered politics of representation for the South Asian diasporic writer. When Markandaya publishes *Nectar*, less than ten years after Indian independence in 1947, the stakes of Indian national representation were high. As Bhabani Bhattacharya explains in an article in *The Novel of India* (1964), "Indian writing in English has been a decisive factor in redressing the balance of false presentation by foreign storytellers who, with their limited possibilities of true experience, have seen only the surface of our way of life, failing to reach deeper into our spirit" (Bakhitiyar 44-45). Bhattacharya places the burden of representation on all Indian writers whose work circulates globally and evokes notions of ethnic authenticity in affirming that it takes Indian writers to describe a true Indian experience. But as A.V. Krishna Rao asserts, "women in modern India have not only

³³ The "great" Indo-Anglian authors are repeatedly identified to be Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and G.V. Desani. See for example, Bhatnagar, Anil Kumar. "Kamala Markandaya: A Thematic Study."

shared the exciting but dangerous burdens of the struggle for independence, but have also articulated the national impulse and the consciousness of cultural change in the realm of letters,” thus suggesting that the politics of representation for South Asian diasporic writers have been forged through the intersection of nation and gender.

The broader debate on *Nectar*'s social realism occludes the status of the “real” in the novel, undermining the plausibility not only of its representations of the South Asian female protagonist but also promoting sexist conflation of Markandaya with her writing. In a review contemporary with *Nectar*'s publication, John Frederick Muehl writes:

I would not call it a well-planned novel. It is a powerful book, but the power is in the content, in the story that it tells of an Indian family from marriage, through child-birth, to poverty and death. You read it because it answers so many real questions: What is the day-to-day life of the villager like? How does a village woman really think of herself? What goes through the minds of people who are starving? Miss Markandaya manages to answer all of these questions, haltingly at times, and lacking some of the graces, but with a respect for her characters and a belief in her story that more than make up for her literary lapses.³⁴

Muehl, along with other popular reviewers of the time, “excuse” Markandaya’s “simplistic” prose style because of the wealth of authentic material that her text offers the Western reader. He carefully notes that her success is in the content rather than the form of her writing. Markandaya provides an insider perspective (although she is a well-educated Brahmin woman) on the harsh realities of the Third World and for this he can forgive her crude rendering. This conflation between Markandaya and her literary representations is clearly repeated throughout reviews on *Nectar* published in the mid-1950s. But perhaps more surprisingly, versions of this conflation and a fascination with

³⁴ *Saturday Review*, May 14, 1955

Markandaya's authentic representations abound throughout modern recuperations of Markandaya's literary oeuvre.

There are three main stylistic conventions that critics repeatedly analyze in deciding whether *Nectar* is or is not a properly social realist text: the believability of the narrator and protagonist, the use of standard English idiom, and the veracity of ethnographic detail in the novel. Summing up critical reaction to *Nectar*'s social realism Uma Parameswaran explains a critical link between generic categories and expectations of authenticity: "The extent of social realism in Markandaya's novels has been the focus of much criticism. Non-Indians generally, assume authenticity because Markandaya's detailed descriptions of everyday life, and this is a wrong attitude. *Nectar*, especially, has come under fire for lack of social realism among Indians-in-India critics, and this too is a wrong attitude" (66). Parameswaran keenly points out that in either group the desires for authenticity and realism underlie the debate. Critics belonging to the latter group, such as Shiv Kumar, Shyamala Narayan, and Balachandra Rajan, believe that it is the responsibility of Markandaya, as a social realist writer, to perform a kind of social work or education in her novels. And while Markandaya was herself invested in the social utility and function of literature, critics who debate the success of her social realism assume that Markandaya can and should attempt to speak the unmediated voice of the Indian peasant woman.

According to these critics, Markandaya's work is a failed social realist project not because it breaks with the conventions of the genre, but rather because she does not properly perform her role as social worker—a convention that the genre is held to in its gendered, feminized incarnations. In P. Shiv Kumar's "The Mask that Does Not Hide: A

Perspective on *Nectar in a Sieve*" (1984) he contrasts Markandaya's work to Emile Zola, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser, concluding that her attempts at social realism fall far short of these writers' attempts (Parameswaran 66). Shiv Kumar argues that in making Rukmani the narrator and main protagonist, Markandaya's book cannot be anything but unrealistic:

Reality in *Nectar* springs solely from Rukmani's intelligence and sensibility. But her set of givens constantly negate the intelligence she radiates in the novel. The perception of reality and the responses to it in this novel are without doubt misplaced in the protagonist-narrator, Rukmani... Kamala Markandaya has imposed severe limitations on herself by making a peasant woman the narrator of the *Nectar* (92).

In Shiv Kumar's assessment, *Nectar* is a failed realist project because it is implausible that Rukmani, a peasant woman from an Indian village, would have the kind of sensibility, as he says "the reflexes of an intellectual," that she does (qtd. in Parameswaran 66). Chauvinism aside, what is truly problematic about this statement, and his brief article as a whole, is that it blithely ignores analysis of the elements of the text in the vein of social realism and focuses instead on discrediting the reliability of the impoverished, female narrator. If Rukmani is a realist protagonist, then she should be believable, authoritative, "authentic," which for him apparently means illiterate, simple-minded, and with an unsophisticated inner life. That is, Shiv Kumar has pre-existing notions of what the inner life would be of a character such as Rukmani into which Markandaya's rendering does not fit. *Nectar* is the story of a peasant woman's experience. But in creating what Shiv Kumar deems to be an "unbelievable" voice for Rukmani, Markandaya undermines her own social realism and instead presents the voice of a middle class, urban female intellectual. Thus, this kind of critical stance implies that

Markandaya's status as an Indian female authorizes and endows her with unmediated access to the experiences of a rural peasant woman.

Contemporary and recent reaction to Markandaya's work that center on the veracity of its social realism resonate with the problematic politics of global feminism that, as Chandra Mohanty argues, "discursively colonize[s] the material and historical heterogeneity of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular 'third world woman'—an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse" ("Under Western Eyes," 53). The devaluation of Markandaya's work because of its non-conformity with the conventions of realism demonstrates the historically constructed expectation that the third world female subject's lived experience can be represented as "authentic" only if it already fits within the preconceived notions of what that experience would be. Markandaya's disregard for social realist convention, exemplified through the agency with which she endows Rukmani, as well as her use of the first person voice throughout the novel,³⁵ disrupt the "signature of Western humanist discourse" by refusing the fiction of unmediated access to the reading public.

In more recent criticism on *Nectar*, issues of authenticity, realism, and representation focus on Markandaya's prose style and her uneasy relationship to Indian

³⁵ See *Commonweal* LX11, No. 20, August 19, 1955. The critical conflation between Markandaya and the narrator, Rukmani, could be explained partially by the narrative's first-person focalization—a feature of the novel that breaks with the realist convention of free indirect discourse. The effects of this first person perspective did not escape the attention of popular reviewer William Dunlea in his 1955 review of *Nectar*:

By assuming the impersonal "I" (that of Rukmani in retrospect), and its intimate objectivity, she does manage to make the Indian peasant's attitude patterns more vital to us without sacrificing their remoteness...The good peasant mother reads and writes but differs in no other discernable fashion from other good but inarticulate peasant mothers, save that she is "writing" this book. It is too complaisant, if never ingratiating "I" that precludes any direct association on the reader's part, a stream of consciousness missing psychological depth.³⁵

English. Rochelle Almeida, for example, one of the most vitriolic critics of Markandaya's work, criticizes her lack of stylistic control:

When one reads Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* one never gets the feeling that the writer is airing his knowledge [...] to impress the overseas reader or that he degenerates into the role of a local tourist guide by punctuating his story with snatches of local folklore. It is this basic control over form, grasped so well by Raja Rao, that makes the 'Indianness' in his writing integrate naturally with narration...If Raja Rao can do this so successfully, one wonders why writers like Markandaya could not do so as well (79).

Almeida's critique evokes gendered clichés about masculinist control and feminine disorder reinforced through her comparison of Raja Rao and Markandaya. Conversely, Parameswaran is impressed with Markandaya's aesthetic sensitivity:

Markandaya's prose style is well synchronized with each protagonist's sensibility. It is interesting to note the evolution of her prose style. Her earlier novels are written in simple and effective language. Unlike Mulk Raj Anand's which courses down tempestuously, or Raja Rao's which meanders tortuously as it punctuates the anguish of the soul, Markandaya's language flows, even and beautiful, like Ganga in the plains. (36)

Parameswaran contrasts the "flow" of Markandaya's language with the harshness of Anand's and Rao's. Both the critique and the acclaim are gendered. In the former, Markandaya cannot control her aesthetic enterprise as well as one of the great male writers in the same tradition. And in the latter, her prose is valued for its "flow" and sensitivity. In both instances, Markandaya's use of Western literary idiom becomes a question of authentic narration—either it is not Indian enough or it has achieved the essence of Indian representation. Both Almeida's and Parameswaran's critiques intersect in their valuations of a particularly gendered and ethnic authenticity.

In the same vein, contemporary and recent criticism on the novel interprets Markandaya's disinterest in using a hybrid form of Indian English to be symptomatic of her desire for a Western audience—this charge in particular is probably the one that

underlies much of the negative criticism surrounding her work.³⁶ Almeida, for example, devotes an entire chapter to a discussion of this particular failing in Markandaya's oeuvre, specifically as it pertains to her early work. Critiques of Markandaya's linguistic style and use of standard English idiom often cite the title of the novel which takes its name from a Coleridge poem: "Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve, /And hope without an object cannot live." This literary gesture along with repeated imagery of pastoral, idyllic village life—as when Rukmani plants her garden "with each tender seedling that unfurled its small green leaf to my eager gaze, my excitement would rise and mount: winged, wondrous"—suggests nineteenth-century English romanticism rather than an authentically Indian literary tradition such as the epic to be the inspiration behind the narrative style (*Nectar* 13). As Fawzia Afzal-Khan explains it, however, Markandaya's turn to English romanticism can also be interpreted as a move of colonial resistance: "However, it is important to note that Markandaya, despite her use of a foreign (Western) literary idiom and mode to convey indigenous reality, succeeds... (as do our other writers) in using a foreign, colonial mode as a liberating strategy for herself and her people in fiction" (103). In a similarly recuperative move, Uma Parameswaran offers a defense of Markandaya's use of standard English: "In an historical context, she has used standard English as a national, synthesizing medium. One might react adversely to the fact that her novels do not mention any specific geographic location or any identifiable linguistic group. But closer consideration would show that this is a literary device to transcend regional barriers" (45). Parameswaran, somewhat prematurely, ends her analysis of the situation at this point. But her reading does suggest that

³⁶ Rochelle Almeida, K.S. Narayana Rao, M.G. Krishnamurthi, C. Vimala Rao and Madhusudan Prasad represent a few of these critical voices.

Markandaya's erasure of regional difference and use of standard English throughout the novel might result from or gesture to a period in Indian history, shortly after the partition, through which a consolidated nation was emerging from a country that had been, up until that historical moment, characterized by regional difference.

As with many of the repeated criticisms that she faced, Markandaya did not maintain silence on the issue, but rather characteristically tried to address how the reception of her literature often influenced her writerly decisions:

I must admit that I am in two minds about this. Sometimes, I am a bit of a purist, and feel that Indian words should not be employed merely to give a little local colour. Indeed, last year I went so far as to broadcast this view on the BBC. This year I am not so sure. I am writing a romantic novel, and it seems less forced to use Indian words than their English equivalents—words like Raj Kumari, chaprassi, maidan, and so on. (cited in Almeida: Markandaya, "One Pair of Eyes" 23-24)

When Markandaya was writing *Nectar in a Sieve*, a confluence of social and historical factors might have combined to make her use of standard English seem the less exploitative and exoticising choice. Markandaya's main resistance to using standard English in *Nectar* was to avoid being tokenistic in her use of Indian words. While critics value or devalue her work for the degree to which it is an authentic narration in which India's "pre-modern" history is nurtured and idealized, Markandaya's own vision of her writing expresses a complicated and prescient understanding of the features that would exoticise her text in its transnational circulation.

Regardless of Markandaya's explanations of her authorial choices, and her clearly anti-essentialist stance on commodifying "local color" to help market her novels, critics take particular offense to her inclusion of ethnographic detail in *Nectar*. They claim that inclusion of this material provides evidence that Markandaya was seeking a Western

audience for her work.³⁷ For example, in 1969 Krishnamurthi, writing in the *Humanist Review*, quotes a passage from *Nectar* in which Rukmani describes a detail about traditional marital custom: “it is not meet for a woman to address her husband except as ‘husband’” (Nectar 10). Krishnamurthi asserts that no “Indian reader needs this information” and neither does the “sophisticated non-Indian reader” (437). Once again, Almeida articulates and synthesizes the history of criticism on the subject:

She [Markandaya] could not refrain from plying her readers with extraneous information that did not add to the artistic wholeness of the work. Rather, these details slacken the pace of the narrative, interrupt the continuity of thought and plot, act as an irritant on the nerves of the Indian (and, I dare say, non-Indian reader) and make them impatient. Although she denies catering exclusively to the demands of her Western readers, Markandaya panders directly to them. The documentary details in her novels offer repeated evidence to support this charge. This constant authorial intrusion through which Markandaya ceases to be a literary artist and becomes a cultural anthropologist is unfortunate, since her work is, in other respects, quite remarkable. (81)

Generally speaking, critics who take issue with Markandaya’s ethnographic explanations, such as K.S. Narayana Rao, Rochelle Almeida, and M.G. Krishnamurthi, are not only upset that these textual “intrusions” indicate the novelist’s desire to attract a non-Indian readership, but are also offended by her misrepresentation of gendered rituals, customs, and traditions. The terms of their critique thereby reinstate the problematics of gendered, ethnic concepts of authenticity. In particular, Almeida is frustrated by Markandaya’s description of Deepvali, (often called Diwali): “*Deepvali*, the Festival of Lights, approached. It is a festival mainly for children, but of course everyone who can takes part” (Nectar 76). She objects to the description, stating that “All Indian readers...are familiar with *Deepvali*...Besides the documentary detail she provides is also slightly

³⁷ Rochelle Almeida, K.S. Narayana Rao, M.G. Krishnamurthi, C. Vimala Rao and Madhusudan Prasad represent a few of these critical voices.

inaccurate, for *Diwali* is not necessarily a festival mainly enjoyed by children. In India, it has the greatest significance for tradesmen and businessmen” (74). Almeida corrects Markandaya’s ethnographic gloss for her reader (thereby participating in the same system of ethnographic intrusion which she criticizes) and in doing so makes it seem, as Parameswaran points out, that celebrations of this Hindu festival are regionally uniform. The critique itself gestures towards a kind of authentic Hindu, Indian national tradition. Similarly, in their essays in *Indian Women Novelists*, both Shymala Venketeswaran (now Narayan) and Ramesh Srivastava criticize Markandaya for inaccuracies in her descriptions of weddings, dowry exchange, domestic duty and child rearing. And even Parameswaran, who comes to Markandaya’s defense, bases her critique on an expectation of domestic knowledge and realistic description. In one lengthy passage she questions Markandaya’s knowledge of what pantry items Rukmani might have really stored, and when she would have begun preparing for her daughter’s wedding:

Of Rukmani’s storing away of “rice and dhal and ghee, jars of oil, betel leaf, areca nuts, chewing tobacco and copra” for Ira’s wedding, Venketeswaran says, “would they not have gone bad?” I, reading the same text, had reacted with some admiration for the careful choice of the list, and rued that she had erred in one item, “betel leaf”; did she mean betel nut, I wondered, or perhaps the leaves that were often sewed together to form a circular dinner plate? Except for betel leaf, everything in the list can be stored for months, and indeed is; it is not unreasonable to think that one would start on wedding preparations a few months ahead of the wedding; most arranged marriages (in those days especially) take place within a year of the beginning of the search (71).

Both Venketeswaran’s and Parameswaran’s responses call into question Markandaya’s knowledge of the domestic, female sphere. While their detailed attention to these domestic elements again illustrates the highly-guarded stakes of representation, critical fixation on Markandaya’s authentic narration initiates a conflation that persists in South

Asian diasporic literature between author and text. In their attempts to correct the literary representation of the rural peasant woman, these critics instantiate a parallel authenticating discourse whereby the Indian female writer is expected to present her readership with unmediated, authentic, and verifiable details on the life of the native other.

The history of *Nectar*'s academic and popular critical reception culminates in the work of Uma Parameswaran and Rochelle Almeida, both of whom are literary scholars and creative writers. Interestingly, their monographs on Markandaya's work represent opposite ends of the range of criticism on her writing, and yet they are published by the same Indian press, Rawat publications, and in the same year, 2000. While Parameswaran defends Markandaya's social vision and poetic style, Almeida is a more skeptical reader who feels that Markandaya squanders her literary potential by catering to the Western literary market. While they are both cognizant of *Nectar*'s fraught literary reception in academic criticism and popular review, neither critic theorizes how readerly desires for authentic ethnic representations position the South Asian female diasporic writer as cultural spokesperson. And as I have argued in this section, their analyses, while often keen and insightful, are also complicit in constructing and perpetuating authenticity imperatives that they ostensibly aim to dismantle.

Given that Almeida and Parameswaran are so polarized in their critical opinions, it is particularly striking that both use different means to finally concur that the ultimate failing of Markandaya's novel is its failure to offer a "truthful" account of Indian culture and to inspire a new generation of readers with its humanistic vision. Their criticism reveals more about their own predilections and readerly desires than it does about the

novel. Almeida, for example, quotes Mulk Raj Anand to elucidate this point. In an essay entitled “Why I Write” Anand states that “truth alone should matter to a writer...this truth should become imaginative truth, without losing sincerity.” He goes on to say, “one should always adventure through new areas of life and always try to see...the inner core of reality, or at least attempt to probe the depths of human consciousness” (95). Almeida chastises, “If Kamala Markandaya had practiced this credo, she would have found no need to spice up her novels with Indian exotica.” Almeida persists in the assertion that Markandaya could have captured what she calls “Indianness” and “injected” it into her novels without adding “superficial ethnic and regional peculiarities” (96), never pausing to question the concept of “Indianness” itself. Almeida’s assessment of Markandaya’s failings are a strange return to essentialism in which Markandaya’s inability to portray the “real” India is her literary undoing. She does not take issue with the inclusion of Indian exotica only because it is potentially essentializing; rather, she takes issue with Markandaya’s failure to mobilize these exotic elements in her narratives about “Indianness.” Parameswaran, on the other hand, expresses disappointment that her students’ readings of Markandaya have become politicized by post-colonial discourse. Writing about *Nectar* Parameswaran says:

This brings me to my experience of teaching the novel to my freshman students...They cannot read the words of the text because they start out on the wrong foot. For example, the idea of arranged marriages is so alien, indeed repugnant, to them, so symptomatic of cultural tyranny, that all their reading of most Indo-English fiction is coloured by their preconceptions. Add to this all the postcolonial theoretical constructs they are fed, and what I get is a reading that polarizes at every point, sees only industrialization and imperialism at work and overlooks the affirmation of the indomitability of the human spirit. (64)

Parameswaran regrets that her students approach the novel with greater attention to its social and post-colonial critiques than a more humanistic appreciation of its representations of survival. Interestingly, both post-colonial critical discourse and humanistic approaches to literary analysis are invested in versions of the truth; although the former approach politicizes categories of class, gender, race and sexuality, the latter relies on stable, unifying constructions of humanity. While it is somewhat refreshing that Parameswaran makes explicit her humanistic investments in teaching ethnic literatures, a practice that I believe persists in many literature classrooms, albeit in a tacit and often undertheorized manner, her negative reaction to students' politicized readings demonstrates a narrow focus on "human bonds" as a foundation for analysis. (65)

The constructions of truth that both critics are seeking in *Nectar* have precedent, as I will discuss in the concluding section of this chapter, in Markandaya's own interpretive investments. But in both Almeida and Parameswaran's conclusions the truth and authenticity that they desire from *Nectar* emblemize a problematically gendered and essentializing reading practice that, as I argue elsewhere in this dissertation, persists in contemporary academic and popular reception of South Asian diasporic literatures by women. For example, neither critic looks to the intrusion of the tannery on the outskirts of the village to think through the elements of social realism in the text. Rather they calibrate Markandaya's status as a social realist according to the authenticity of her language and the ethnographic details she includes. Neither critic turns to the power dynamic between Dr. Kenny and Rukmani as a commentary on the gendered mechanisms of colonialism nor do they attend to Rukmani's struggle to control her body or her labor as a way to unpack Markandaya's feminist perspective. Instead they look at the stylistics

of her language to read gender in the text. In perpetuating these unidimensional readings of Markandaya's work, critics evacuate texts such as *Nectar* of any political, social, and gender commentary. Their criticism that South Asian diasporic fiction panders to the market for literary tourism stops short of examining the factors that would make ethnic authenticity a desirable element of "marginalized" literatures. And to some degree, these readings ultimately authorize and obscure the pervasive authenticity imperative in literary fields that purport to present the "other" to a Western market. Narratives such as *Nectar*, which are undoubtedly political in content, become narratives of domesticity read for their depictions of marriage, romance, and family bonds. As I discuss throughout this dissertation, reading these texts for the narratives of domesticity that feature in much South Asian diasporic writing by female authors obscures deeper interrogations into the patterns of global migration, class structures, and immigration history that these stories embed.

Examining Kamala Markandaya's "Literature of Concern" through Lay Readerly Response to the *Nectar in a Sieve*

In August 1973, Markandaya attended a seminar in Socio-literature at the East-West Center for Cultural Exchange in Honolulu where she delivered a paper titled "On Images."³⁸ The paper is often cited in criticism of Markandaya's work because it is the first and only instance in which she articulates her belief in literature's power to effect social change, through what she names the "literature of concern." In the paper, Markandaya discusses images that have contributed to and sustained the projects of colonial oppression and imperialism. These images cast the "non-white" as "heathen...as a worshipper of false gods" and the "white man" as a man "of superior intellect and

³⁸ The only available record of the paper appeared in Dorothy Blair Shimer's essay "Sociological Imagery in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya."

attainment” (Shimer 358). In response to this history of Orientalist stereotypes, Markandaya calls for “a clean-out of the entire clutter of distorted and distorting imagery with which we have lumbered ourselves” and concludes by asserting that such a “clean-out and confessional... will come most fruitfully...from the literature of concern” (Shimer 358). During the question and answer session recorded by Shimer, an unnamed Australian author says, “The images just represent the tip of the iceberg. They express something larger and more important underneath. To change the images would be good, but what underlies them needs the basic change.” To this Markandaya replies, “I’m saying thought itself can be changed by literature.” (360) On the one hand, Markandaya’s “literature of concern” could be a strategy to remove herself from easy identification with the conventions of pre-existing generic categories—a move that would make sense given the amount of criticism debating her status as a social realist. On the other hand, she situates herself within the discourse of social realism by invoking literature as a socially and politically mobilizing tool. Of course, by asserting that literature affects and changes the material circumstances of people’s lived experience, Markandaya plays upon gender biases whereby the South Asian female writer represents lived experience in order to change it—the concept of author-as-social-worker. But more importantly, she rewrites the conventions and trappings of official genres such as social realism, thereby rejecting their imbrication in certain national, historical, and gendered histories, and creates her own transhistorical, transnational generic category.

In this concluding section of the chapter, I explore the limits and possibilities of Markandaya’s belief in the “literature of concern” by studying her reception within the NetSAP lay reading community. It is a foundational concept of this dissertation, in

keeping with Markandaya's beliefs, that literature affects society, particularly through the formation of cultural affiliations and disaffiliations. According to Janice Radway, "Less the exclusive possession of a highly educated few, the book is more frequently produced as an engine of emotional transport for the many, as a means to intense and sometimes transformative pleasure, and as a way to participate in a common cultural ritual of the moment" (*A Feeling* 357). But as Radway goes on to explain, while these expressive, inclusive, and challenging aspects of reading can offer insight, comfort, and pleasure, these "common cultural rituals" at the same time obscure their own "ideological determinants" (Radway 357). Accordingly, while there is cause to celebrate literature's transformative capacities, the interaction between literature and society itself must be interrogated through a dialogic critical mode to study the kinds of transformations, deformations, and complacencies that literature can authorize within its various interpretive communities.

Here, I initiate this mode of dialogic critique by situating NetSAP readers' response to *Nectar* during a book club meeting in February 2007 in relation to the novel's critical reception history. Readers responded favorably to the novel. In keeping with the academic and popular critical history, lay readers objected to Markandaya's linguistic choices, but more generally estimated the novel's value in terms of its realism, concluding, in contrast to most published criticism, that its depiction of peasant life was nuanced, authentic, and worthy. But NetSAP readers also added a unique perspective to the critical reception of Markandaya's novel through an identificatory mode of reading: several readers at the meeting commented on how the novel made them reflect on their own privilege and offered a "refreshing" alternative to the identity-oriented narratives

that they felt pervade South Asian diasporic literature. That is, lay readers asserted that the novel offered an inspirational, realist counter-narrative to the repetitive tropes of South Asian diasporic literature. But their responses to the relationship between male and female characters and to depictions of poverty demonstrate the possibilities and limitations of an empathetic reading praxis. For while these instructive, identificatory modes of reading encourage readers to be self-critical, they can also shore up group-based complacencies and blunt the social critique offered by the text.

In contrast to previous meetings that I attended, the NetSAP book club meeting on *Nectar in a Sieve* was perhaps most consciously affected by my research and attendance. While all the other novels and short story collections that we read prior to this meeting were chosen before I had started attending, *Nectar* was a novel that I had nominated at the start of the year to be considered during the yearly voting process.³⁹ I was surprised to find out that book club members had voted to read the novel and had chosen it as one of the first selections of the year. In general, reading selections tend to be more contemporary and thus the main reason I was interested in reading *Nectar* with the book club was to gauge readers' interest in an older work of South Asian diasporic fiction. At nine people, attendance was relatively high for the meeting, which was held in the D.C. penthouse apartment of a young Indian American woman, Niha, who had not previously attended any NetSAP events or book club meetings. The *Nectar* meeting was the last book club I had planned to attend as a researcher and participant, and by that time I had become something of a regular in the book club meetings. Participants were aware that I was writing a dissertation on South Asian diasporic literature, but prior to the meeting did not know that I was writing a chapter of my dissertation on Kamala Markandaya. At the

³⁹ See introduction for further detail on the process of book selection for the book club.

book club meeting, I felt some compulsion to “confess” my already developed interest in Markandaya’s work because—in contrast to all previous meetings I had attended—this was the only time in which I had studied the book selection as a scholar. As I had anticipated, once I had explained my academic interest in the novel, participants in the group asked me to talk about Markandaya’s life and reception history, periodically calling on me to give more about details of the novel’s reception at the time of publication and if it was popular in India as well. But as I had seen in other book club meetings, NetSAP participants create the book club as an alternative site of canon formation; their critical interpretations may be in dialogue with more “official” literary resources but academic perspectives and popular review are never privileged in the group’s discussion.

At the same time, NetSAP readers produced interpretations of the novel that were strikingly analogous to the readings produced by academic critics and general media reviewers. Namely, readers felt that the novel’s main disappointment was in its stilted use of Indian English and that this one flaw undermined its primary value, the depth of its authenticity. Readers generally described the novel as “very authentic, simple but not in a simplistic way,” as “more real” than other South Asian diasporic fiction and deemed it a “classic” that is “still very resonant today” (*Nectar Book Club Transcript* 58; 42; 30). They did, however object first to Rukmani’s use of standard English, deeming it inauthentic, as Niha said: “with the little bit of education she’s had, she wouldn’t be speaking so formally even in her own language” (*Nectar Book Club Transcript* 52). Secondly, they found Markandaya’s incorporation of Indian words to be awkward and inconsistent. Vikram, Kavita’s brother, who was also a regular and vocal NetSAP

participant, summarized this point: “The reason I asked about the English language is[...] because I found an inconsistency. Sometimes there’ll be regional words like, *jupka*. She’ll put it in the text with no italics, just in the sentence. But then to say ‘old granny’ [instead of the Hindi words *naani* or *daadi*] just didn’t seem consistent” (*Nectar Book Club Transcript* 52-53). These objections resonate strongly with Almeida, Krishnamurthy, and Srivastava’s critical focus on the use of Hindi words in the novel and their collective opinion that Rukmani’s prose was alternately exoticising and inauthentic.

And just as these academic readers see Markandaya’s linguistic failures yoked to the authenticity imperatives that they expect her to fulfill, lay readers’ disappointment with this element of the novel is similarly founded in their desires for an authentic, socially realistic narrative of peasant life. As Kavita, a regular NetSAP participant whom I had originally met when she hosted a book club meeting on *The Red Carpet* by Lavanya Sankaran in September 2006, explained, “I kind of appreciate it more as an ethnographic study actually...I really took it as a social study, not so much a beautiful piece of literature” (*Nectar Book Club Transcript* 59). Readers emphasized that they appreciated the novel more for its truth than its beauty, and very much in keeping with Markandaya’s concept of the “literature of concern” felt that the narrative’s true aim was to effect change rather than to provide a pleasurable reading experience. As Vikram summarized, “It [the novel] did appeal to me for the same reason that some documentaries appeal to me, because it’s—it’s an abstraction of your reality into someone else’s—she’s not trying to make the story relevant to the reader. She wants to affect something. She wants to affect the reader” (*Nectar Book Club Transcript* 58). In contrast to academic critical perspectives, wherein desires for truth and the authentic rendering of peasant experience

inhere often tacitly and ambivalently in published interpretation, NetSAP readers explicitly state their readerly expectations for inspiration through representations of reality.

Additionally, in academic readings of the novel, issues of affect, form, and linguistic style are strongly, if not primarily, inflected with gender bias. For NetSAP readers, desires for authenticity and “reality” are tethered not only to questions of sexuality and gender but also to class privilege. In both academic and lay reading publics, the fetishization of authenticity results from the highly-guarded stakes of representation and a sincere desire to define the politics of (self-)recognition for the South Asian diasporic community. Lay readers commended the novel for the “social depth” that it gave to the “peasant class [that is otherwise] often stereotyped as very simplistic” (*Nectar* Book Club Transcript 54). And thematically, they felt that one of the novel’s great strengths was in its complex depiction of the relationship between Rukmani and her husband Nathan. Aisha, another regular participant who was leading the book club discussion in the absence of the usual moderator, vented, “I am thinking of the positive way that Markandaya portrayed [Rukmani’s] husband which is so different—I was sick and tired of reading South Asian books where the women are suffering and their husbands are horrible and all men suck” (10). Aisha expresses frustration with the repeated images of South Asian female oppression and South Asian male brutality popularized in contemporary South Asian fiction. She echoes the frustrations of several readers at the meeting who perceived *Nectar* as a respite from narrative themes such as gendered oppression and bicultural identity crises that currently pervade the literature. But at the same time, her reading privileges Nathan’s progressive attitudes toward his

wife Rukmani, and elides the more sexist and cruel facets of his character, for example, his adulterous affair with a prostitute who torments Rukmani throughout the novel. In a similar example, Niha explains, “It was refreshing to me that I didn’t have to spend hours and days with some existential crisis about identity[...] That’s my life anyway, so it was refreshing...to read something that was to me...not nostalgic” (6). Another young female participant in the meeting added, “On your word identity—there are so many books that are nowadays about the self, or the woman, or whoever, trying to find their identity between the Western world and the Indian world, and this main character is grounded” (7). Readers admit fatigue at seeing the same themes surface throughout South Asian diasporic literature, and it is evident in these frustrated responses that they appreciate *Nectar* not solely for what it offers as a narrative but perhaps more so as a foil that exposes the shortcomings of current literature. Their readings accordingly ignore the novel’s ambivalent depictions of the relationship between Rukmani and Nathan, in favor of more comparative and identificatory interpretations.

In fact, this comparative mode of reading is even more explicit when readers discuss the novel’s depictions of poverty and the hardships of rural village life. Priya, a regular participant in the NetSAP book club summarized this stance, “It was a very different perspective.[...] We’re not used to reading books about people going through so much struggle. Like we were saying, months or years or whatever to travel and knowing you’re never going to see your kids again” (13-14). Or as Aisha explained:

The poorer class of people [in India] they are just happy with what they have and they realize that other people are worse—in a worse condition. So that’s something. It’s a very tragic book [...] but at the same time it’s kind of nice to know that there’s no complaining about it and there’s no villain. They just deal with it as they go, so it is tragic, but when I finished the book, I was like, it’s not

that negative at the end because it makes you realize that somebody's life is much worse. [Laughter] (10-11)

Aisha's tone particularly toward the end of the statement, was self-consciously humorous and ironic. She expressed a genuine admiration for the characters in the novel and their perseverance, relating the depiction of poverty to her experiences witnessing the poor in the streets of urban India. As she explained again, later on in the conversation, what she found most instructive about the novel was that it countered materialistic trends in current South Asian diasporic fiction, and in that way reminds the reader of her own material privilege: "I found it very refreshing. I kept thinking of the book *The Namesake*. I have no idea why, and I was just thinking, 'Oh Gogol's problem was that he didn't like his name and look at her [Rukmani's] problems. And it was so refreshing because the books that we're reading nowadays are so materialistic'" (34). Niha added to this claim: "You want to get drawn into the story [of *Nectar*], but *The Namesake* is about being and feeling that you are Gogol. This was—there's very little identification. It's just you feel for the characters" (43). Niha's assertion that *Nectar* doesn't inspire reader's identification requires some qualification.

While NetSAP readers' general approach to *Nectar* was more empathic than strictly identificatory, meaning they "feel for the characters" but do not think that Rukmani's experiences map onto their own, they do use the novel to gain insight into representations of South Asian cultural identity and to pick and choose their affiliations. Thus their readings incorporate a complex politics of recognition and identification. Aisha's disaffiliation with Jhumpa Lahiri's widely-read novel *The Namesake*, countered her previous admiration in other book club meetings for Lahiri's work. In this way, *Nectar* offered Aisha a new critical perspective on the class-based complacencies of a

current, popular South Asian diasporic novel. But at the same time, the comparative and empathetic mode of reading apparent in these celebrations of *Nectar's* class critique elide the specific historical circumstances that the novel describes—the critique of intrusive foreign capitalist investment on rural villages in India. And perhaps even more saliently it illustrates that identificatory modes of reading, or in other words, the interpretive strategies we employ when we read to learn about ourselves, expose the potential and perils of readerly identification.

On the one hand, we may gain critical perspectives from literature that prompt us to more carefully examine the pleasures of reading, and to use one text to interrogate the shortcomings and ideological investments of another. But on the other hand, these identificatory reading practices may encourage insularity, subject the novel's social critique to our readerly desires, and thereby neglect the opportunity to critically examine the ideological determinants that permeate longings for cultural community and the recognition of the ethnic subject. Caren Kaplan describes the quandary of studying discursive processes of identification and community-based desires for recognition in the twenty-first century:

What place is there in what has become, for many, a postidentitarian, postidentificatory feminism for an enterprise tacitly founded on both identity and identification? How might we rethink the need for recognition—which suffuses both the private and the public spheres—in ways that do not also presuppose identification? How might we use our various fables to destabilize rather than restabilize our various and multiple identities but, at the same time, widen the possibilities for an expanding discursive community? (26)

In the chapters that follow, these questions guide my interrogation of identificatory reading praxis, the workings of gender, readerly desire, and the politics of recognition, in

the formation of official and unofficial critical accounts of South Asian diasporic literary history.

Chapter 3

Beyond the Binaries of South Asian Diasporic Literature: Literary Academia and the Lay Reading Public in Indu Sundaresan's *The Feast of Roses* and Lavanya Sankaran's *The Red Carpet*

In November 2006, at the very preliminary stages of my field research, I conducted a two-hour phone interview with Sri, the NetSAP book club's leader, mainly to collect some general information on the group. During our conversation, I inquired about the book club's formation and intent, the general demographic details of the participants, the way that reading selections are organized, and the usual format that the meetings take. Sri has been instrumental in maintaining the group's presence in the metro-D.C. South Asian community over the past ten years, by not only encouraging members' participation, but also through her efforts to extend the group's reach through cultural events such as the South Asian Literary Arts Festival (SALTAF), organized yearly in coordination with the Smithsonian.⁴⁰ Our conversation confirmed that although there are several regional chapters of NetSAP, each with its own book club, NetSAP-DC functions as a unique reading public and offers insight into the relationships among

⁴⁰ For more information of the NetSAP-DC book club, see introduction. The book club was founded in 1998, and is comprised mainly of readers of South Asian descent although participation is in no way restricted. At most meetings there are a mix of second-generation South Asian Americans as well as South Asian immigrants. The book club participants choose the texts that they will read at the beginning of each New Year by a voting process monitored by the book club administrator. Archives of past reading lists are available online beginning in 1998 and there is a rule that books can never be repeated. The club meets once a month, and while not all the books on past archive lists are written by authors of South Asian descent, they all deal in themes that concern the region. Its mission, as the website states, is to "share, learn and discuss our south Asian heritage by reading books about South Asia or with south Asian themes."

literature, community self-representation, and coalitional identity formation because of the prominence of the book club as a facet of the organization's cultural arm.

When Sri and I spoke, I had not yet attended any of the group meetings. Once we had discussed the details of the group's organization, however, I was curious to learn more about its preferences and so I asked Sri if there were any noticeable patterns characterizing the kinds of literature that NetSAP participants favored. Specifically, I inquired if there had been any meetings in which all the participants unanimously enjoyed the reading selection. She replied that to her knowledge, there had only been one meeting where the consensus on the book was of unanimous approval: Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies*. Reflecting on the meeting, Sri explained that the book's popularity was probably due in part to how "well-written" it was, and after further consideration added that the group's consensus could also be attributed to the range and relevancy of topics that the collection of short stories presented. In her words, she felt that South Asian readers, particularly South Asian American readers, could identify with the collection's themes of bi-cultural identity, generational and cultural gaps, interracial romantic plots, and the tensions of raising a family in the United States with South Asian cultural traditions and mores.

Intrigued by this answer, I then asked her if there had been any books that all book club participants had the reverse reaction to—that is, a book that they unanimously disliked. In response she related an anecdote that literally put NetSAP book club readers into dialogue with literary professionals.⁴¹ In October 2000 the group read *Meatless Days* by Sara Suleri and across the board they did not like Suleri's memoir. Shalini explained

⁴¹ I use the term "literary professional" here to create a more inclusive category that incorporates academic scholars as well as professional fiction and non-fiction writers. The term is not to be confused with the meaning of professional in the NetSAP acronym.

that Suleri's language was opaque and difficult to follow, and that readers did not relate to its thematic content. The very same year that *Meatless Days* was on the NetSAP reading list the organization began to sponsor SALTAF.⁴² One of SALTAF's primary goals is to put South Asian writers, artists, filmmakers and cultural critics in direct contact and dialogue with their audience by organizing panel sessions around cultural topics and then opening up the discussions to question and answer sessions. At one such panel consisting mainly of South Asian writers, an audience member who was also a NetSAP book club participant asked the panel to reveal their favorite example of South Asian diasporic literature. Almost all the panel members answered—much to the confusion and dismay of NetSAP book club participants—Sara Suleri's *Meatless Days*.

At the most basic level, this anecdote exposes a gap between the readerly preferences of literary professionals and the general, or lay reader. According to Sri, the NetSAP readers who were present at the panel offered no further explanation for the difference in opinion, but were struck by the stark contrast between their unfavorable response to Suleri's book and the panelists' admiration. Of course, there are several possible reasons indicated in the NetSAP book club meeting on *Meatless Days* that could account for the divergent preferences of these two reading publics. First, according to NetSAP readers, the language that Suleri employs throughout the memoir is geared toward a more academic audience. Given the style of writing, its general level of exposure and its publisher, one can assume that the book has found its way onto more upper-level undergraduate and graduate syllabi than it has onto book club reading lists.

⁴² As the website states, "SALTAF™ began in 2000 as a medium for discussion of the South Asian Diaspora. This discussion has since grown into a yearly celebration of South Asian creative talent. The festival has established itself as one of the premiere showcases for South Asian themed literary works and theater arts appreciation nationwide." <http://www.netsap.org/saltaf2005/aboutus.htm>

And while the memoir has been circulated and marketed as trade literature, Suleri a professor of English literature, published *Meatless Days* with University of Chicago's academic press. Secondly, in contrast to Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of stories written in an accessible, realist prose style, which focuses on themes of interracial romance and bicultural identity that are generally popular with the NetSAP book club, *Meatless Days* is a non-fictional, autobiographical account of post-colonial Pakistani history and its effects on individual lives. Its concerns are overtly political and historical and Suleri renders her personal experiences to contribute to a transnational feminist critique of Pakistan's fraught independence and modern postcolonial history. In the book club meeting NetSAP readers found the memoir's thematic and linguistic style to be equally impenetrable and alienating.

The contradictory reactions to Suleri's memoir at the SALTAF conference present an instructive and emblematic moment in which the interpretive modes and tastes of two distinct (but at times overlapping) reading publics, the panel of literary professionals and the lay reading community of NetSAP readers, intersect to reveal different sets of readerly expectations and preferences. Moreover, the anecdote implicitly contrasts Suleri and Lahiri, positioning an academic strangely at odds with a popular literary celebrity. This contrast powerfully suggests that professional or academic and lay readerly desires affect not only the production but also the reception of literature by differently influencing what accounts of ethnic subjectivity are deemed "truthful" and authentic in these reading publics. More specifically, NetSAP readers' distaste for Suleri and preference for Lahiri indicate that particular themes and identitarian representations are more legible within that lay interpretive community, potentially to the exclusion of a

more diverse conception of South Asian diasporic identity. And while it also exposes a certain amount of insularity in professional literary circles, the situation perhaps more saliently reveals that in the professional reading community there is a similarly authenticating, yet more tacit set of interpretive expectations for depictions of the ethnic subject.⁴³ These expectations, I argue, are shaped by the institutional exigencies of multicultural literary academia. Ultimately, the difference in opinion between the NetSAP lay readers and literary professionals in this anecdote signals a shared investment in particular (yet divergent) representations of South Asian diasporic ethnicity. In this chapter, I study how these ostensible interpretive divides between reading publics can be usefully exploited to expose and correct for each other's limitations.

The apparent distinction between lay and professional readerly preferences, for immigrant narratives or postcolonial critiques respectively, evident in this anecdote echoes strikingly in academic assessments of South Asian diasporic literary history and provides a framing structure for the broader concerns of this chapter. That is, as I discuss in the introduction to the dissertation, most recent academic conversations concerned with South Asian diasporic literature render it comprehensible through an 'either/or' framework, essentially casting the literature as *either* part of a broad post-colonial paradigm that subsumes empire studies, subaltern studies or area studies, *or* grouping it with a multicultural ethnic or cultural studies model. Rajini Srikanth provides what she calls a "crude" but nonetheless helpful summary of this impasse:

Postcolonial studies requires an understanding of the *global* forces of neocolonialism and global capitalism that affect any single nation's economic,

⁴³ Although there is a mode of reading that might see similarities between the two texts in terms of their depictions of intergenerational relationships, displacement, gender stereotypes within the community, and personal accounts of immigration experience, in this encounter between two reading publics the differences were more evident than the similarities.

political, and social reality. Ethnic studies, while acknowledging the importance of understanding the forces at place beyond U.S. borders, is based on the idea that what is ultimately important is the reality within the nation state: the condition of people of color, the resources denied them, the opportunities withheld. (42)

Srikanth goes on to condemn the limitations of this divide, noting that it might serve a functional purpose by delineating two discrete areas of study, but that it ultimately excuses a limited understanding of global politics and domestic policy in studies of South Asian diasporic culture. This recourse to binary models, particularly in South Asian diasporic literatures, derives from the difficulty of forming a cohesive literary tradition in a field that draws upon diverse national, regional, linguistic and disciplinary affiliations. In response to this dilemma, scholars in the broader field of South Asian diasporic literary and cultural production often respond to this overwhelming diversity by using one particular paradigmatic approach, bifurcated along the lines of, on the one hand, global models such as diaspora, postcoloniality, or imperial studies, or on the other hand, more nation-based approaches such as area studies, ethnic studies, or subaltern studies.

And yet, the opposition between global and national analytics that shape the field of academic study inadequately describes the complexity of South Asian diasporic literature and culture. Kamala Visweswaran eloquently sums this up when she asks, “Are we ‘Midnight’s Children,’ post-colonial and second-generation: born that some might speak, and others to read and write; that some be deaf or dumb, and others blind?” (*Our Feet Walk* 303). As Visweswaran suggests, these binaries are not merely of academic interest but rather engender and express the limitations that characterize South Asian diasporic cultural definitions. She draws upon Salman Rushdie’s influence in defining both the academic field of South Asian diasporic literature and its corresponding social

formations by evoking the term “Midnight’s Children” from Rushdie’s novel about post-partition India. Her clever play on Rushdie’s ubiquitous formulation of modern Indian identity frames the predicament of the post-partition generations (particularly for those who have emigrated from the region) in terms of a split identity, conflicted between the post-colonial or second-generation divide.

Visweswaran’s parallel between the divisive paradigms that characterize South Asian diasporic cultural production and the categorical dilemma of the South Asian communities living and working outside of the region sets up three key issues that provide a starting point for this chapter: first of all, Visweswaran’s question confronts the particularities of the South Asian American “category crisis.”⁴⁴ According to her, the group’s identity crisis is founded in the conflict between its second-generation and post-colonial positionings, which she later argues can detrimentally produce a limited and incomplete cultural self-knowledge. Second, Visweswaran’s question underscores the importance of literature to the community’s identitarian self-definition. And related to all of this, Visweswaran implies that literary paradigms such as the postcolonial/second-generation divide often shape the terms of coalitional identity formation. Visweswaran’s invocation of Rushdie naturalizes the relationship between South Asian diasporic literature and its social effects, and her appeal to academic paradigms developed in the literature, cultural studies, and social science departments of universities underscore the mutual influence between academic categories and social formation.

⁴⁴ Susan Koshy’s “Category Crisis: South Asian Americans and Questions of Race and Ethnicity” traces the history of racial formation of South Asians in the U.S. and identifies the shifting racial and ethnic categories that the group either “asserted” for itself or was legally “assigned” while trying to establish U.S. citizenship. As she explains, “The identity of South Asians in the United States has proved to be problematic, both for the self-identification of the group and for the identifying institutions and popular perceptions of the host society” (285).

Despite numerous critiques of these binaristic models, they persist precisely because the debate between the two approaches encodes and obscures other, more stubborn complexities of institutionalized racial formation. More specifically, this constant rejection and reinstatement of binaries powerfully stages how perceptions of ethnic authenticity, essentialism, and model minority myths retain an unresolved, ambivalent and often tacit presence in academia as well as the communities it studies.⁴⁵ In other words, scholars of ethnic studies claim that South Asian Americans and South Asian immigrants who work in these fields in humanities departments in the U.S. often align their work and themselves with postcolonial paradigms, thus “turning away from important work that is required within the U.S. body politic to ensure economic and social justice” (Srikanth 42). Lavina Dhingra Shankar asks:

Are certain fields (such as postcolonial theory) associated with more academic prestige than others (such as Asian American/ethnic studies)? What does it mean for South Asians to maintain positions of privilege and authority in postcolonial criticism in North America? What do they stand to gain or lose by engaging with Asian American studies? How might their entrance into the discipline of Asian American studies alter South Asians’ visibility within Asian America? (53-54)

The scholarly debate, in turn, parallels Susan Koshy’s assessment that South Asian American identity is defined by “two competing constructions.” Koshy argues that the first view held mainly by middle-class immigrants “stresses ethnicity and class and denies or mitigates the historical salience of race for South Asians in the United States” (285). The second view, popular among scholars, students and activists, advocates that

⁴⁵ In raising the question of where South Asians are located within the academy and where they locate themselves, I do not mean to essentialize South Asian identity to imply that there should be an imperative to teach what you “are,” but echoing Shankar, I believe that we need to acknowledge how “such speculations and assumptions” quite regularly inform “decisions about who should teach what in the contemporary academy” (55). Similar “speculations and assumptions” reinforce and produce problematic narratives of ethnic authenticity within and outside of the South Asian American community.

“South Asian Americans politicize their identity” (285) and states that South Asian American reluctance to assert a racial identity in the U.S., by foregrounding ethnicity and class, is a strategy of political avoidance leaves “no avenue for identifying and mobilizing around problems of race when these do occur” (311). Koshy’s “competing constructions” do not attend to how differing yet equally persistent notions of an authentic South Asian identity can drive South Asian American racial formation in both of these constructions. And while her insights are both groundbreaking and informative, they obscure the interrelation of ethnic authenticity and class privilege among diverse cultural sites within the group.⁴⁶ In lay and academic readership, questions of politicization, racial formation, ethnicity and class privilege are not concerns restricted to either camp but rather are issues that are similarly debated in both overlapping sites.

In this chapter, I study how difference is multiply fetishized within lay and academic reading communities. The ethnic stereotypes and authenticating tropes of identity that circulate both within South Asian American cultural communities, and more implicitly in the corresponding academic sites of study produce a disempowering and essentializing cultural insularity. In order to destabilize desires for cultural and ethnic authenticity, we must first identify the institutional and assimilative exigencies that produce them and second ascertain the tropes of authenticity that South Asians living in the diaspora use to recognize both themselves and one another. In this effort, I extrapolate from Bell Hooks’ oft-quoted assertion that for marginalized communities, “recognizing

⁴⁶ Critics of Asian American literature have questioned whether this resistance to scholarship on South Asian racialized identity in the U.S. encourages depoliticized community formations.⁴⁶ Kandice Chuh and David Palumbo-Liu concur that postcolonial paradigms have offered an “analytic critique of the borders of Asian American studies in such a way as to identify how Asian Americanist discourse might resist transformation into a depoliticized instrument of hegemonic nationalist pedagogy” (Chuh 14). Whereas in Asian American studies postcolonial critique counters the hegemony of the nation-state as a dominant analytic paradigm, for South Asian American and diasporic studies postcolonial critique arguably *is* the dominant, unchallenged paradigm.

ourselves” is an imperative step to claiming our right to a subjectivity that is not dependent on “colonizing responses to determine our legitimacy” (Hooks 22).⁴⁷

Furthermore, I argue that the commodification of the ethnic subject in literature results from multiculturalist discourses, at work in popular media, the academy, and lay reading communities, that essentially produce ethnic alterity as both informative and authentic.

Deepika Bahri explains the pitfalls of this multiculturalist ethos:

Minoritized subjects are encouraged to represent themselves and their communities, in art, literature, and so on; their productions are to be accepted and disseminated, usually by “multiculturals” and primarily through educational institutions, in a spirit of learning, tolerance, and respect. The problem is that such subjects are to speak *as minorities*; they are to *represent* in individual voices their communities and the victimization suffered by them; and their texts are to be used, often solo, to “inform” students (156).

Thus the circulation of multiculturalist discourse produces desires for ethnic authenticity in both lay and academic cultural sites, first, by raising the stakes of cultural representation within the community: literary depictions of the ethnic subject are not only descriptive but also representative. And secondly, as Bahri notes, the exigencies of multiculturalism in literary academia similarly construct concepts of ethnic authenticity, and notions of the “true” ethnic subject. And while scholars have tried to counteract the effects of multiculturalist discourse in literary studies through the revision of cosmopolitan rubrics and multiethnic canon formation—without thorough consideration of the factors that drive authenticity imperatives within lay and academic reading

⁴⁷ Here, Hooks is talking particularly about the formation of a radical black subjectivity resistant to the “oppressive other” (22). While the politics of recognition are vastly different for African Americans and South Asian Americans, I contend that both racial formations have been subject to multiple marginalizations and “colonial responses.”

communities—these efforts palimpsestically instate one category of marginalization for another.

By studying a community-based organization, NetSAP, I investigate how the stakes of representation and authenticity drive the politics of recognition for a South Asian American community of readers. Moreover, I contend that academic and lay readerships often paradoxically underwrite concepts of ethnic authenticity in their efforts to recuperate representations of South Asian females in the diaspora and to make a place for them in the multiethnic literary canon. In this chapter I focus mainly on my participant observation of book club meetings, primarily because in those situations my role was more collaborative and passive than it was during interviews with NetSAP readers in which I would often guide the conversations directly. I focus here on the book club as a particular site of *community* readership in which NetSAP readers would debate issues concerning identity formation. In these meetings, NetSAP readers shift their positionalities in relation to the representations that circulate about South Asian diasporic culture in order to negotiate the lived experience of a bicultural South Asian American identity and the competing national context (India, the U.S., and the U.K.) that has historically influenced this diasporic community's formation. NetSAP readers use the organization as a site where they claim cultural citizenship by alternately insisting on markers of authentic Indian identity, often concerning class and gender, while challenging stable, totalizing narratives about South Asian American assimilation. My aim in this chapter, and the dissertation as a whole, is to gain insight into how we might mobilize skepticism around categories of “real” experience by putting notions of identity as lived experience into dialogue with critiques of identity politics.

Indu Sundaresan's *The Feast of Roses*: Rethinking Gender, Cosmopolitanism, and Nation

In May 2006, on a rainy, humid evening typical of late spring in Washington D.C., I attended my first NetSAP meeting in the downtown neighborhood of Adams Morgan. According to the usual policies of the NetSAP book club and what I would later learn to be the group's general preference, the meeting was held at the home of one of the book club members rather than in a restaurant or café. There were seven women present including myself, all of South Asian descent, and all recent college graduates and young professionals working in the metropolitan D.C. area. Aside from two regular participants, all of the other attendees were new to the meetings, including the hostess Anu who informed us upon arrival that she had asked her husband to go out to dinner with her in-laws and their newborn to ensure no interruptions during the meeting. Everyone was slightly uncomfortable making small talk and eager to begin the discussion about the novel, which we did the moment that the NetSAP group leader, Sri, arrived. Having little formal training in qualitative research methods, I was very anxious about beginning this particular component of my dissertation study. I was not sure how I would be viewed by the group once I had explained to them that my goal was both to analyze the book club meetings and participate in them. I was worried that after I explained my project, the participants would consider it a navel-gazing "ABCD" academic enterprise, or that they would be evaluating me, expecting me to perform my aspiring status as a literature professor by offering concise, insightful readings of the novel.⁴⁸ I had been so anxious

⁴⁸ The term "ABCD" is mildly derogatory term for second-generation South Asian Americans used most specifically to describe our alleged bicultural identity crisis. The acronym stands for "American-born confused desi" and there is an extended version that uses the entire alphabet as an acronym, continuing for example with the phrase "Emigrated From Gujarat." Desi, as I discuss in the introduction, is a commonly

about drawing attention to myself in the group that I didn't even bring my digital recorder along expecting at this point to take notes after the book club meetings rather than record them.

Undoubtedly, much of my discomfort was a result of inexperience but my anxiety also reveals the fraught position of the “native ethnographer” producing academic knowledge about a group or community of which they are a part (Maira 24). Sunaina Marr Maira's sociological study on desi or Indian youth culture in New York, *Desis in the House*, describes this predicament and the “researcher reflexivity” required of a scholar who identifies with the group that he or she studies⁴⁹: “I love bhangra remix and dance and grew up close to many of the youth involved in the study, but I also want to note that this project was driven not simply by a politics of love but by a sense of frustration with the social exclusions practiced in the name of love for community or country, and with the epistemological and methodological boundaries guarded by disciplinary nationalisms” (24). Although Maira explains the modes of critical analysis that such work demands in terms of her particular interests in desi youth and music culture, her observations resonate with any interdisciplinary project that aims to mitigate what anthropologist Virginia Domínguez terms a “politics of love” with one of critical interpretation⁵⁰ (qtd. in Maira 24). Within this established site of community-based readership, my academic interest in South Asian diasporic literature created a reciprocal relationship of critique and accountability. I was, after all, analyzing how NetSAP readers

used term to describe South Asians who have emigrated from the subcontinent, deriving from the Sanskrit word *desh*, or homeland.

⁴⁹ As Maira defines the term desi, it is a marker of the post-1965 immigrant and second-generation population. As she says, “They have crossed national boundaries to identify collectively as “desi,” a colloquial term for someone “native” to South Asia and one that has taken hold among many second-generation youth in the diaspora of India, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, or even Indo-Caribbean, descent. (2)

⁵⁰ See introduction for details on Domínguez's concept of the “politics of love.”

use South Asian diasporic literature individually in their daily lives as well as communally within the broader aims of the non-profit organization. But in becoming a participant in the book club, my own South Asian heritage and hyphenated identity both could and would have to enter into the conversation in more explicit ways than it had when I was teaching or participating in a graduate seminar.⁵¹

In my participation in these book club meetings, I found that my readings would have to shift more fluidly between objective and subjective modes of reading, producing messy, sometimes contradictory interpretations. I would have to allow my own readings, formed as they are by my multiple professional and personal affiliations, to develop as sociologist, Elizabeth Long suggests “in dialogue” with the group’s own critical perspectives. In Long’s study on women’s book clubs in the Houston area, she argues that reader-centered models attend to the act of interpretation as serving a dynamic social and cultural function:

When groups of women get together to discuss books, they are often searching for intellectual companionship they cannot find in other areas of their lives. They may be extending their knowledge of literature or of literary interpretation [...] Most interestingly, as they read and talk, they are supporting each other in a collective working-out of their relationship to the contemporary historical moment and the particular conditions that characterize it. This activity is quite literally productive in that it enables women not merely to reflect on identities that they already have but also to bring new aspects of subjectivity into being[...]They are in the process of remaking themselves in dialogue with others and with literary texts. (22)

⁵¹ This is not to say that the university is a closed system, shut-off from identitarian affiliations, subjective reading modes, and the exigencies of authenticity. On the contrary, my entry into NetSAP raised questions about the overlap between academic and lay reading practice, particularly in the field of multiethnic literatures. The distinction between academic and lay reading publics is in many senses a division that does not divide, for any academic reader is simultaneously a lay reader depending obviously on what they are reading and whether or not they are engaging in professionalized interpretations.

In keeping with Long's description of the book club as a space of cultural work and production, NetSAP readers use these meetings as an interactive site of collaboration and contestation in which the diversity of background, professional affiliations, regional identity, immigrant history and gender shape the parameters of the discussion. My participation in the group contributed to its already dialogic style: group members were debating issues of identity, sexuality, and history in relation to the texts, themselves, and each other. And while the interpretive stance that I brought to meetings was clearly influenced by my scholarly background in South Asian diasporic literary history, my reading praxis (particularly the motivations behind it) had much in common with the critical mode of discussion.

In the remainder of this section, I examine how the confluence of feminist interpretations produced by the *Feast of Roses* NetSAP book club suggests a range of tenable yet ambivalent attitudes regarding class and gender for South Asians living in the U.S. In particular, I study the internal, group based politics of authenticity and investigate how this communal-based reading praxis might provide a critical perspective on literary academia. During the *Feast of Roses* meeting, several moments of tension and disagreement arose around issues of women's representation in the novel. The diversity of feminist readings generated in this meeting illustrates the multiplicity of perspectives that a given text can generate and in turn reflects how the politics of location ideologically shapes attitudes towards class and gender in the community. I situate NetSAP readers' critical responses in dialogue with feminist critics of South Asian diasporic literature, who aim to create a space for South Asian female writers within the diasporic canon. Specifically, NetSAP readers' critical perspectives illuminate the blind

spots in scholarly interpretation through similarity rather than difference. Analogously to book club participants, scholars such as Shailja Sharma and Gita Rajan, in their recuperation of the rubrics of cosmopolitanism elide the politics of location, obscuring the particularities of class status and gender in shaping ethnic identity for South Asians at home and abroad. Increased attention to lay reading praxis in this community thereby revises the limited perspectives of literary academia and indicates avenues for more complex feminist interpretive strategies in the broader field of discourse.

During this first meeting, I found that NetSAP participants incorporated me into the group more as a regular participant than an authoritative researcher by actively challenging the limitations of my feminist reading practice with their own recuperative feminist readings. The novel under discussion, Indu Sundaresan's *The Feast of Roses* (2003) is a sprawling work of historical fiction and a sequel to her first book, *The Twentieth Wife* (2002), which was much-beloved by the book club when they read it a year earlier. The novel imagines Mughal history through the romance of Emperor Jahangir and Empress Nur Jahan (Nur Jahan before being given this title) and builds on the historical rumor that Nur Jahan was said to have run the Mughal Empire during Jahangir's reign. The plot follows Nur Jahan's rise to power as she becomes Jahangir's twentieth and last wife. She gains control over imperial policy because of her husband's deep and somewhat blind love for her, challenging her predecessor the dowager empress (Ruqayya Sultan Begam) and other members of the court who interfere with her plans to attain power. According to regular book club format, the meeting began with a plot summary to refresh everyone's memory or to fill in gaps for those who haven't finished. Then, by a show of hands, Sri, the group leader, asked who did and did not like the book.

I was somewhat conflicted in casting my lot: I had guiltily enjoyed reading the book as a kind of salacious romance but was also aware that it reproduced many of the clichés of South Asian female sexuality and exoticism. I decided to go with my more “enlightened,” academic self and was the only one to raise my hand to say I did not like it. Grounded in my knowledge of feminist theory and the exoticist tropes that promote transnational circulation of South Asian diasporic literature, I launched into a critique of the novel, leading with my gravest objection: namely, that Sundaresan’s portrayal of Nur Jahan is an ill-informed, regressive fantasy of feminist empowerment. In my reading of the novel, Nur Jahan’s agency and power stem only from the sexual control that she exerts over her husband. According to Sundaresan, the novel is recuperative of historical female oppression, and she aims to write Nur Jahan as a prototypical feminist figure, a ruthless individual who as the book cover so sensationally describes, will sacrifice “her father, brother, stepson” and “even her daughter, to get what she wants.” In order to support my diatribe, I cited an interview appended to the novel as part of a guide for book clubs. In the interview Sundaresan reflects on the recuperative angle she presents, explaining that “while the male principal ruled their lives, they also had to learn, with the diplomacy and tact befitting the greatest monarch, how to survive in a harem environment, where every woman was in competition for the same thing—the ability not to just attract the man’s attention, but to eventually keep it for the rest of their lives.” Sundaresan argues that, although women could attain power only to the degree that it was bestowed upon them by male authorities, they were able to leverage their sexuality to exert some control over their lives.

Although I had presented this passage hoping to convince the NetSAP readers of Sundaresan's skewed feminist politics, her misguided valorization of female sexuality as the only proviso of agency under historical structures of oppression and confinement, book club members' readings of the novel were very much in keeping with the author's feminist recuperation of Mughal history. The first was from Aisha, a regular book club participant and one of the more vocal members of the group.⁵² Aisha explained that as a child she would pore through her parent's history books on Mughal history; she was enamored by the romance among emperors and empresses, but failed to find anything compelling or thorough written about Nur Jahan or Mumtaz. She told the group that as a child she felt that, "All the voices in that history belonged to men" (*The Feast of Roses: Participation Observation Notes*). As a young, single, career-oriented woman from a relatively traditional Muslim-Indian family, Aisha explained that currently she seeks out narratives with powerful, independent South Asian female protagonists, but can rarely find them in the novels written on contemporary South Asian American immigrants. This novel acted as a corrective to those early desires for women's perspectives in official histories as well as a fulfillment of her adult longings for literary representations of empowered South Asian females. In my response to her, I argued that Nur Jahan only leverages power in terms of her role as wife and mother. In this way, the novel participates in the construction of a South Asian literary tradition that popularizes Orientalist narratives and reinforces the colonialist myth that the exotic, South Asian female is either mother-figure or sexual object.

In a somewhat different recuperative reading, Sri agreed that Nur Jahan relies on her sexuality and status as a mother to manipulate the emperor, but that during this

⁵² As indicated in the introduction, I have changed readers' names to protect their privacy.

historical period on the subcontinent, women did not have any other options for asserting agency in their own lives. She added proudly that Indian culture has always been and continues to be characteristically alluring and that instead of perceiving this sensuality as negative we should focus on its potential to empower Indian women. Similarly, Bindiya, a young, recent college graduate who had moved to the city for her job, built on Sri's observations stating that Nur Jahan's position as a sexual object/mother figure in the novel represents "the ongoing plight of the third world woman in the West" (*The Feast of Roses: Participation Observation Notes*).

Underpinning all our interpretations was the desire for accurate feminist literary representation and the related assumption that literature both describes and affects "reality." My reading of the novel maintained that Nur Jahan is explicitly styled as a composite of colonialist binaries—she attains independence, agency and political control by leveraging either her sexuality or motherhood to achieve political aspirations. Similar to other readers in the group, my criticism of the novel, and indeed much of the academic criticism published on this literary tradition, is based in a corrective desire for positive representations of South Asian women in literature. All of these instances of readership assume a correlation between cultural depictions and social effect. Of course, academic critics are not supposed to read in these kinds of information-seeking modes susceptible as they are to simplistic identity politics. But although I initially felt both troubled by and alienated from these women's responses, our readings all engaged a "politics of correction" (Maira 24).

Even though it is easy enough to distinguish my recuperative feminist interpretations from those of the NetSAP readers, the similarities are more revealing than

the differences. In academic fields that have been historically rooted in issues of representation, such as ethnic studies and women's studies, the general consensus is that visibility is an inadequate solution to marginalization. Chandra Talpade Mohanty famously argues:

In spite of the fact that the growing demand among publishers for culturally diverse life (hi)stories indicates recognition of plural realities and experiences as well as a diversifications of inherited Eurocentric canons, often this demand takes the form of the search for more "exotic" and "different" stories in which individual women write as truth-tellers, authenticate "their own oppression" [...] The mere proliferation of third world women's texts, in the West at least, owes as much to the relations of the marketplace as to the conviction to "testify" or "bear witness." Thus, the existence of third world women's narratives in itself is not evidence of decentering hegemonic histories and subjectivities. It is the way in which they are read, understood, and located institutionally which is of paramount importance. (34)

Although Mohanty is specifically referring to third world women's autobiography in this passage, her points have broader application in the study of fictional and non-fictional literatures by women of color. Here, Mohanty challenges academic literary critics to think beyond the triumphs of representation by examining the way these literatures are used in the general and academic field of reception. As evidenced in this first meeting, and reinforced throughout my interactions with the group, NetSAP readers valorized the visibility afforded by the popularity of South Asian diasporic literatures, and they tended to recuperate the images that these representations project. In fact, the book club itself is quite explicitly involved in promoting cultural awareness in the D.C. area through arts festivals and social events. While I am not arguing that Mohanty's call to think beyond the institutionalized, yet tokenistic, visibility of marginalized literatures is weakened by NetSAP readers' de facto appreciation of representation, I question how academic readers

can achieve this kind of panoramic critical view of institutional and lay reading praxis when we ourselves are incorporated into the system of production and reception. Both NetSAP readers and I (standing in for an academic perspective) are invested in recuperative readings of these determinative texts, even though the nature of these recuperations varies. I contend that both academic critics and lay readers have more to gain in our understandings of multiethnic literatures by questioning what motivations underlie diverse reading practices than if we assume that the motivated core of our reading praxis to remain self-evident. In other words, critics need to revisit Mohanty's concerns and broaden the field of reception to think about how this literature is dynamically situated both institutionally and in lay sites of readership. Through this discursive reciprocation we can examine what the veneer of academic objectivity obscures in our interpretive practice and interrogate multicultural literary academic productions of authenticity.

To put it another way, lay and academic reading practice are equally if differentially motivated by a diverse set of exigencies. Lay readers are often more in touch with the subjective factors that shape their literary responses, while academic readers, because of institutional demands to retain critical distance, produce motivated readings that operate under a tacit sheen of objectivity. While my scholarly interests in multiethnic canon formation and the formations of literary history influence my interpretation of any South Asian diasporic novel, NetSAP readers' interpretive practice is not produced for a professional literary audience or for the university classroom. For any given text, there is a range of interpretive possibilities contingent both on who is

doing the reading and for whom the reading is produced.⁵³ Sociologist Elizabeth Long explains:

Academics tend to repress consideration of a variety of reading practices because of our assumptions that everyone reads (or ought to) as we do professionally[...]Recognizing the importance of the collective processes that determine the availability of books, privilege some styles of reading while dismissing others, and either legitimate or devalue certain books inevitably brings into view both the commercial underside of literature and the scholar's position of authority within the world of reading. (11)

Unless we are able to engage with the discourses circulating in a variety of literary publics in order to equally investigate and acknowledge the ideological motivations upon which our readings in literary academia are often founded, we may remain locked into repetitive disciplinary binaries and limited conceptions of ethnic authenticity that more broadly in case of South Asian diasporic literatures, cluster around issues of nation, class and gender.

A particular moment of tension that emerged among readers in the *Feast of Roses* book club meeting exemplifies just how the complexities embedded in lay readers' interactions can inspire a productive critique of academic critical models. In the middle of the meeting, Meena, a former journalist and freelance writer who was the only attendee born and raised in India, arrived at the apartment. We had more or less finished discussing the issue of Nur Jahan's representation in the novel, and, prompted largely by Bindiya's comment regarding the third world women in the West, had moved onto conjectural comparisons between quality of life for women (mostly family) we knew living on the subcontinent and South Asian women living abroad. The conversation had not gone too far when Meena interjected and declared the whole conversation moot

⁵³ The demands of the literary marketplace are of course also at play here. For a more detailed analysis of this issue see the Introduction.

because she believed that currently in India women are subject not only to fewer forms of oppression than they once were, but also that they were more “liberated” than women in the U.S. She called on her experience as a former journalist, saying, “I worked in a village in Rajasthan where women were free, they were allowed to divorce their husbands whenever they wanted to” (*The Feast of Roses: Participation Observation Notes*). Anu, the hostess, vehemently retorted that she had spent time in villages in India doing development work and that this was certainly not the case in her experience. At this point, the conversation turned back to the novel, specifically to the previous discussion of the power dynamic between Jahangir and Nur Jahan. The issue at hand was whether, as a proxy for her husband, Nur Jahan could have wielded any agency or power in her own right, solely as an empress. As soon as the topic came up, Meena quickly interjected, “Well, there’s not much difference between Nur Jahan and Sonia Gandhi.” The entire room bristled at this declaration and collectively challenged Meena. Aisha immediately retorted saying, “There is a difference—400 years!” The general consensus was very much in this vein: participants argued that Sonia Gandhi’s attachment to a well-known political family was not “realistically” comparable with Nur Jahan’s rise to power in Mughal times because of women’s increased agency, which they argued has been globally demonstrated in modern Indian politics. Specifically, Anu argued that while Nur Jahan had no other option than to use her position as a mother and her sexual power over her husband for political gain, Sonia Gandhi’s rise to power in India had been merit-based. Aside from being an entirely decontextualized comparison, one that is difficult to truly flesh out given the incommensurability of the Mughal-era politics with modern Hindu-inflected nationalism, Meena’s comment challenged notions of historical progress

towards gender equality. Clearly, readers in the group admired Sonia Gandhi as a political leader who cemented her position of authority independently of her husband's family name and political history. But more importantly, on another level the comparison challenged readers' notions of feminist progress. That is to say, to explore similarities between Nur Jahan and Sonia Gandhi would be to question the model of a developmental feminist politics, a model that itself embeds issues of class, social mobility, and first/third world divides.

In tandem with the previous disagreement over women's oppression in rural India, the debate about Sonia Gandhi's autonomy and Meena's controversial comparison between her and Nur Jahan exposes a class-based ambivalence in terms of how the second-generation readers in the group comprehend historical models of feminist development. As I would learn from later meetings, Meena appreciated a more polemical style of discussing literature and would often make very strong and absolute statements in order to incite a heated conversation. At this point in the conversation, she had already broken with group etiquette by arriving midway through the meeting, requesting to borrow clothes from the hostess to replace her own that had gotten wet in the rain, frequently interrupting, and asking Anu to make her tea (which would take her away from the discussion). It's important to note that while some of these elements break with the conventions of the group meetings, many arguably are quite in keeping with the protocols of Indian hospitality in which being a good guest means doing away with formalities, and being a good host means honoring the guest's every request. And while I am not arguing that Meena's behavior is solely culturally determined, in a broader sense some of the discomfort between her participatory style in the group and her specific

polemic stance might be attributed to a culturally-inflected mode of feminism. Specifically, second-generation readers' responses to Meena's comments suggest a certain amount of cosmopolitan complacency in their position: a position that sees through the lens of their privileged relocation, that social justice, equality, and development are determined by class/caste standing.

Strikingly, the ambivalent feminist attitudes that arose in the *Feast of Roses* book club meeting have precedent in South Asian diasporic recuperations of the term cosmopolitanism—a term that manifests selective, privileged connections to the subcontinent.⁵⁴ In evoking the concept of “cosmopolitanism,” my aim is to raise a productive tangle of issues around elitism, class, and gender in the South Asian American community. Ultimately, our recuperations of the term (and others like it, i.e. global and diasporic) are constantly vexed, because while the underlying concept of cosmopolitanism seeks to critique the hegemony of national affiliation, class elitism and notions of authenticity or hybridity⁵⁵, one could argue that the term in fact disguises and blunts the power differentials it seeks to expose⁵⁶ (Brennan 41). For example, in Shailja Sharma and Gita Rajan's *New Cosmopolitans: South Asians in the U.S.*, one of their main aims is to redefine the term, “Our argument posits the new cosmopolitan subject as precisely not being grounded in a nation-state or in a class (intellectual or working class).

⁵⁴ In *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*, editors Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj write that “Certain paradigms determined the relationship between First and Third World women within feminist discourse: in particular, the ‘saving brown women from brown men’ model, the ‘victims of culture’ model, and the ‘feminist by exposure to the West’ model. In all of these paradigms, the asymmetry of power between First and Third World women was maintained and never questioned.” (7)

⁵⁵ See Timothy Brennan's polemical work, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (1997). Brennan powerfully identifies the elitism inherent in claiming a cosmopolitan position, arguing that the term signals an elision of class consciousness, and instead indicates the promotion of an exotic, marketable, depoliticized postcolonial ethos in literary and cultural production (41). Brennan's critique of cosmopolitanism has inspired multiple responses and reconsiderations of the term

⁵⁶ In Inderpal Grewal's *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* she offers a notable exception to more facile recuperations of cosmopolitanism, and successfully redresses the shortcomings of the term by situating it in a specific discourse of global subjectivity and displacement.

She instead occupies a range of fluid subject positions, which can be trans-class, trans-local with competing value systems” (2). The project offers a complex recuperation of this controversial term by situating it within the context of South Asian class formation in the U.S. and therein unwittingly exposes its own limitations. Rajan and Sharma convincingly argue that increased political awareness and cross-class affiliation in the South Asian American community are evidenced in collaborative sites of activism:

Interestingly, however, by occupying some of the same spaces as their upper class compatriots in this variegated *America* during religious celebrations in places of worship, or on college campuses during ethnicity week, or on the streets of major metropolises such as New York City during India Day parade, or even Gay Pride Parade, or in the most horrific example of women’s abuse shelters, class distinctions get elided as their cosmopolitan cultural sensibilities or communitarian responsibilities come to the forefront. (19)

Granted, these sites of community activism provide a space in which the South Asian American, or in their terminology, the “new cosmopolitan,” can rethink her classed affiliations in regard to other South Asians who have immigrated to the U.S. But participation in these emergent cultural and activist spaces does not necessarily encourage individuals in the community to reflect on how their classed, immigrant position situates them in terms of South Asians who live and work in South Asia and whose day-to-day realities are often affected by U.S. foreign policy and cultural attitudes.

Rajan and Sharma’s attempt to recuperate the term by rooting it in the national formation, “America” only partially challenges its elitist implications and ultimately obscures issues around transnational structures of affiliation for South Asians living in the U.S. Furthermore, by emphasizing the dominance of South Asian American “cosmopolitan sensibilities” and ethnic (rather than racial) affiliations, Rajan and Sharma

obfuscate the workings of class within the community. Vijay Prashad and Susan Koshy's foundational work on South Asian American culture in the U.S. argues that race, as it is inexorably bound to class, is the issue that distinguishes the political concerns of South Asian immigrants (who have been born, raised and educated in countries such as India, Pakistan or Bangladesh) from second-generation South Asian Americans. As Kamala Visweswaran summarizes, "Race is perhaps the most crucial juncture distinguishing South Asian post-colonial from second generation subjectivities" (306). Thus, Rajan and Sharma's recuperation of the concept of cosmopolitanism underwrites the production of ethnic authenticity in academia by masking the effects of class and racialization.

The precise contradiction inherent in recuperations of the term "cosmopolitanism," namely, between the good intentions of these recuperative attitudes and the complex transnational structures of power that these intentions can obscure, arose similarly in *The Feast of Roses* book club meeting. Some readers' outrage at the suggestion that poor women in rural villages are not structurally oppressed and the concomitant assertion (presented through the example of Sonia Gandhi) that upper class status ensures equality and mobility, reveal the limitations (founded in Eurocentric traditions of feminism) of a telos of feminist progress. Mohanty has perhaps most famously parsed the relationship between first and third world feminist positions when she argues that global forms of feminism "discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing composite, singular, 'third world woman'—an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse" (53). The First World-Third World power dynamics that inhere in

this site of South Asian American identity formation and the complexity of this positioning may signal new ways of reading and interpreting these texts.

As illustrated in this meeting, for example, national affiliations not only shape the class and racial formation for South Asians residing in the U.S., but also determine affinities with particular modes of feminist ideology. Sociologist Bandana Purkayastha argues, glossing Monish Das Gupta, that, “The new ‘Indian’ ethnic identity for second generation females in the United States has to be understood, not simply with reference to their positions as non-white females within the United States, but by the pressures to be ‘Indian’ and “American” in specific ways [...] The link between culture and ethnicity is as complex within groups as it is between groups” (14). Readers’ self-presentation in the group can be inconsistent and contradictory, and I do not mean to suggest that we take their reactions to the *Feast of Roses* or any other text at face value. Rather in pausing over this moment of tension in the group my aim is to explore how their lay reading practice offers insight into rethinking the issues that have defined South Asian American racial formation in the U.S. and provides a potential external critique of literary and cultural academic discourse.

Literary Representation and Social Effect: Ideology, Interpretation, and the Canon

In NetSAP book club meetings the correlation between literature and its perceived social effects largely governs the terms of the conversation. The topics that arise in these meetings reveal broader trends and issues at stake in South Asian American group identity formation; as we see in *The Feast of Roses* book club meeting for example, readers’ reaction to the Sonia Gandhi/Nur Jahan comparison exposes how national affiliations influence their feminist attitudes. In turn, I argue that by studying these group

dynamics, academic readers of South Asian diasporic literature and culture may recognize the repetitive analytic paradigms that we produce in our own criticism—in this example, specifically we find that our preoccupations with placement in the scholarly record obscures the workings of race, class, and gendered nationalism producing commensurate concepts of ethnic authenticity in lay and academic readerships. Up to now, academic critics seeking to expose the limiting, repetitive ideologies in multiethnic literary representation effect this change primarily through canon revision. This approach is productive and yields illuminating insights: firstly, into revisions of Eurocentric interpretive approaches to meet the particularities of ethnic literatures; and secondly, into challenging markers of ethnic authenticity in these multiethnic literary canons. But if our revisions of the canon are produced within and for academic institutions, do they run the risk of reinstating one set of the limited ideologies that they aim to trouble with yet another? In this section, I explore the potential and limits of academic interpretive strategies that seek to revise the multiethnic canon. My aim is to think more fully about how we can realize the “heterogeneity” that inheres in South Asian American literature by using lay reading praxis to critique academic interpretive blind spots. Because, as I argue, the ideological purchase of a text is so dependent on the meanings extracted from it by a particular community of readers, revisions to the canon only go so far in undermining the stronghold of the authenticity imperative in multicultural literary academia. Instead, we need to attend to how this literature is used by the communities of readers that it purports to represent, and study how textual production shapes patterns of representation and recognition.

The connection between literature and social representation that lay readers debate in book club meetings has precedent in academic criticism. At the simplest level, scholars challenge canons that form around repetitive tropes and markers of ethnic authenticity by engaging with texts that either counter these themes and/or aesthetically challenge Eurocentric, expressive norms. One such example of this is apparent in one of the first, full monographs on South Asian American literature, *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America*. In a chapter on gender and sexuality, Rajini Srikanth eloquently makes a case that this critical praxis is a necessary corrective to crude assumptions not only about South Asian American literature but correlatively to South Asian women and men living in the West:

[T]he general Western view of South Asian gender and sexuality is overdetermined by Orientalist perceptions of women in non-Western cultures as occupying rigidly and prescriptively constructed lives with little opportunity for the exercise of individual desires. The related assumption is that everything to be known about South Asian sexuality is already visible, and that what one reads, hears, or sees is to be taken literally. Repressed women, domineering men, female feticide, loveless marriages, crude and unsophisticated sexual desire: the litany is fairly predictable[...] [I] seek to focus on those South Asian American texts that muddy the apparent transparency of representations of gender and sexuality—that make turbid the lens through which we read these matters of hetero- and homoerotic desire. (98)

I quote from this passage at length because it illustrates a connection that is sharply felt between representations of South Asians in the West and the overall perception of the diasporic community. Ironically, Srikanth's corrective approach is emblematic of the circularity that revisions of the canon produce. That is to say, often when critics identify tropes that have become either invisible or transparent markers of an ethnic community the countering impulse is to bring texts that challenge these emerging assumptions to the fore in published work and the university classroom.

While there is much to be said for diversifying the range of texts that constitute the rather hermetic traditions of ethnic literary canons, these revisionary strategies beg the question of whether we are in fact just instituting one canon in place of another. David Palumbo-Liu argues that canon formation in U.S. academic is a reflection of “the ideological apparatuses that distribute power and resources unevenly among the different constituencies of a multicultural society” (2). He keenly asserts that ethnic texts are co-opted by mainstream pedagogical discourses to instate a notion of humanistic expression that undermines the texts’ political and social critiques, not to mention obscure the material realities that these texts convey, all in the name of a “multicultural” agenda (2). Instead of challenging the underlying assumptions that often produce a problematic institutionalization of ethnic literary histories particularly in terms of the exoticising exigencies of the literary marketplace and liberal policies of multiculturalism in the university classroom, ostensible revisions, corrections and reinterpretations of these canons arguably perform a palimpsestic function that maintain the structural status quo; new assumptions of ethnicity are codified to replace outmoded ones.

Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts* is perhaps one of the most foundational articulations of the problematics of canon production in multiethnic, specifically Asian American literary histories, and it provides a framework for rethinking the dominant paradigms that pervade the field of interpretation. Lowe critiques the “Eurocentric” and “professionalizing” imperatives of canon formation as they function particularly within Asian American literary histories. But because of the heterogeneity of Asian American texts and their producers, the literature itself reveals a critique of the construction of literary canons in the U.S. by resisting “the regulating ideas of cultural identity or

integration” (43). Lowe’s work taps into a history of Asian American criticism, most notably sparked by Elaine Kim, to focus on the literatures’ circulation, production, and reception rather than exclusively on hegemonic, Eurocentric notions of formal, aesthetic merit. By performing alternative interpretations of what Lowe deems the “core” texts of Asian American literary studies, such as Carlos Bulosan’s *America is in the Heart*, she convincingly advances the argument that using European paradigms to read Asian American literary texts will always produce incomplete interpretations that subordinate the complexity of the literature to the regulatory, “reconciliatory” and “universalizing functions of canonization” (45). She performs a reading of the novel as an ethnic bildungsroman, for example, to demonstrate the interpretations that Eurocentric models close off for this text, asserting that the application of this nineteenth-century European genre to a foundational novel for Asian American studies not only formally subjugates Asian American culture itself as a lesser expression or analogue of Western formal aesthetic, but it also casts the literature as an act of mimicry that fixes the racial alterity of the subject’s self-representation. In this way, Eurocentric models eclipse the potential interpretations that can emerge from a more culturally situated reading that would expose how the novel does “not comply with the notion of a unified aesthetic form and how the concepts of development, synthesis, and identity are themselves challenged in the text” (Lowe 45).

To summarize, Lowe provides two concepts that are vital to this project: first, the idea that the most salient characteristic of Asian American literature is its heterogeneity, and second, the insistence that culturally astute readings of the literature will address the means and contexts by which it is produced; as she says, “the literature expresses

heterogeneity not merely in the constituency it is construed to ‘represent’ but also in the manners through which it puts into relief the material conditions of production” (44). By reading texts that are now, ironically, foundational (or canonical) within the field of Asian American studies, in large part due to Lisa Lowe’s work on them, such as Bulosan’s novel, Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981), or Theresa Hak Kyung’s *Dictee* (1982), Lowe argues for a particularly Asian American inflected reading practice that attends to the social and material historical contexts of production in addition to formal concerns. In this way, interpretive practice itself functions to structurally resist the limitations imposed by the exigencies of literary professionalization and canon formation.

Lowe’s critique of the limitations of canonical formation takes on particular nuance in the subfield of South Asian diasporic literature. My project extends Lowe’s work to consider how literary academe influences the processes of canon formation for the general reading public, but even more importantly, I investigate how lay readers communally form their own alternative literary canons around coalitional identities in sites such as the NetSAP reading group. These revisionary approaches to multiethnic literary academia reinterpret the canon from within, using its own institutional conventions to undermine the repetitive, authenticating tropes of the multicultural, liberal agenda. In this chapter I suggest an alternate approach to re-examining these canons through active engagement with the interpretive practice of a lay reading public. Exploring an alternate South Asian diasporic literary tradition, one that is community-based and defined, offers us a way to think about how discursive productions of authenticity are confirmed and challenged within these ethnic communities and in literary academia.

Lavanya Sankaran's *The Red Carpet: Defining Cultural Authenticity through Class, Sexuality and Gender*

Many of these issues around transnational affiliation, ethnic authenticity, class privilege and gender played out in the September 14, 2006 NetSAP book club meeting on Lavanya Sankaran's collection of short stories, *The Red Carpet: Bangalore Stories*. Although most meetings never exceeded 8 participants, this meeting drew a crowd of 26 members. The meeting was held in Rockville, Maryland and was hosted by two regular, well-known book club participants, Kavita and her brother Vikram, which may in part explain this meeting's popularity. Of course the short story collection itself had great appeal as well, the premise of which is a popular and under-discussed subject in South Asian diasporic literature. The collection consists of 8 short stories that center on the rapid economic growth in south Indian cities, such as Bangalore and Hyderabad, brought on by the influx of business process outsourcing, better known as the "call center" or BPO boom. The stories imagine the effects of economic globalization on the urban inhabitants of Bangalore; a city that has recently undergone considerable growth and development initiated by the waxing and waning information technology industry that took hold in the 70s and 80s, which in very recent history has been superseded by the controversial yet highly profitable call center industry.⁵⁷ Against the background of this economic development, Sankaran's stories are populated with characters from a range of

⁵⁷ The call center industry is controversial for several reasons. First, the outsourcing industry has been a controversial and defining issue in the 21st century economic relationship between India and the United States. Second, as Rajini Srikanth explains, the call center phenomenon starkly illustrates the economic and cultural hegemony of the U.S. in the global market. Call center workers are asked to take on American personas, go through training to adopt an "American" accent, they are asked to take on an American name, and familiarize themselves with American popular culture. Arundhati Roy has deemed this training "cultural abasement" (Srikanth 32). And finally, call centers have incited controversy in India as young men and women are asked to work around the clock together in a culture where this conflicts with the sense of decorum and propriety.

class and caste backgrounds, with varying access to mobility and with diverse affiliations to the city of Bangalore. Mainly, however, the stories stage a fascinating connection between India and the U.S., mainly through the economic underpinnings of several characters' ambivalence about settling in either country while also attending to the lingering effects of British colonial influence. In this way, the stories also draw upon the more pervasive tropes present in South Asian diasporic literature, such as the clash between modernity and tradition as it maps onto Western versus Eastern affiliations. But the volume also imagines refreshing insights into the economic effects of the BPO industry for the inhabitants of cities like Bangalore and renders class and caste a visible element in determining relationships among individuals.⁵⁸ The collection actively links the literary and economic realms among various global and local contexts.

In this section I will study *The Red Carpet* Book Club meeting in order to examine how insider notions of cultural authenticity open up questions about the limitations and possibilities of interpretive practice both within this South Asian American community and in the broader field of literary academia. Issues regarding the relationship between the South Asian immigrant experience and cultural assimilation of second generation South Asian Americans, the already determined field of reception for South Asian diasporic texts, auto-essentializing perspectives on class, gender and sexuality arose in messy and inconsistent ways throughout the meeting. Readers use the stories in *The Red Carpet* dynamically and communally to reach consensus on what it means to be South Asian American. Their desire to fix a sense of community identity

⁵⁸ As Rajini Srikanth explains, "The discursive realm is continuously informed by the economic and material. Given this reality, a literature as global in its reach as South Asian American writing can only be enriched by an understanding of the economic and political practices that link South Asia with the United States" (89).

ironically occurs through the discursive movement among different generational, national and gendered positionalities. In this way NetSAP readers' interpretive praxis first offers resolutions for issues facing South Asian diasporic community formation in the U.S.; and second, illuminates the difficulties of rallying around transnational constructions of identity that contain a vast heterogeneity of affiliation and experience.

NetSAP readers' shifting positionalities model a way to read beyond disciplinary binaries such as post-colonial/ethnic studies paradigms, while simultaneously revealing how class privilege and normative sexuality police notions of ethnic authenticity within the diasporic community. R. Radhakrishnan explains the fraught issue of negotiating authenticity in the South Asian diasporic community, "Do I know in some abstract, ontologically, transhistorical way what "being Indian" is all about? [...] For that matter, why can't I be "Indian" without having to be "authentically Indian"? In the diasporan context in the United States, ethnicity is often forced to take on the discourse of authenticity just to protect and maintain its space and history" (210).⁵⁹ His critique offers vital insight into why NetSAP readers might debate the terms of ethnic authenticity in these meetings and reveals how the stakes of establishing an "authentic" Indian identity might be rooted in desires for cultural citizenship, belonging and cultural tradition. It would be a gross oversimplification of their interpretive practice to suggest that NetSAP readers carelessly buy into auto-essentializing confirmations of ethnic authenticity; but their reading praxis does shuffle between what Susan Koshy terms the assertion and

⁵⁹ The issue of diaspora has a well-established history of evoking the problems of authenticity and essentialism. As Brent Hayes Edwards suggests, the problem with transnational formulations and diasporic constructions of identity is that they can reinstate even more entrenched monolithic notions of cultural identity under the auspices of troubling these categories, and produce "articulations of diaspora that collapse the term into versions of nationalism or racial essentialism" (54).

assignment of ethnic identity.⁶⁰ The theoretical contributions of Michel De Certeau's "tactics of resistance" or Stuart Hall's "negotiated reading model" attend to readers' agency in responding to mass media texts, and their emphasis on the way that signification develops through the relation between reader and text is instructive. But equally important to how NetSAP readers use this body of literature is the idea, elucidated most often by Janice Radway throughout her work, that certain communal reading practices signal both ideological resistance and subjection, in this case to modes of assimilation.

For example, during the meeting, Kamal, the hostess of the book club meeting and an active NetSAP participant, explicitly objected to Indian writing in English that she felt pandered to the desires of Western audiences. Her objection sparked a brief debate in the group among a cluster of vocal participants regarding authors of Indian descent who publish in English:

Kamal: I, I have a problem with writers who are just writing for--you get the sense that they're just doing this because they're writing for the western audience, and they want to--or they're doing this whole Orientalism thing where they're trying to sort of market India and like, oh, how Indian this experience is...I get really--

Vinod: Well, this book is doing just that.

Raj: Well, yeah, but, they're writing in English.

Monali: [Interjection] You have a point!

Kamal: Well, not, not now, not anymore I think. It used to be true once, but now I think there are so many native speakers that we're considering English a native language almost now.

Raj: Yeah, English is different in India though.

Afrah: Yeah, it is, but when you--it doesn't mean that you're describing for a western audience. (Red Carpet Book Club Meeting Transcription 24-25)

⁶⁰ As Koshy states, "In rethinking the question of South Asian American identity, I focus, instead, on the tension between assignment and assertion that sociologists suggest shapes racial identity, the negotiation between the identity categories immigrants bring with them and those to which they are assigned (285).

In this interaction, readers contest the production of Orientalist knowledge about India in literary circulation. The conversation, however, maps onto the debates regarding the widespread use of English by writers of Indian descent, the most famous example of which is Rushdie's polemical introduction to *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing, 1947-1997*.⁶¹ Notably, the discussion quite succinctly summarizes the terms of the debate, with some readers objecting to narratives that rehearse the more common Orientalizing tropes, and others answering that marketing Indian literature to the West will remain inevitable as long as it is published in English.⁶² The last word on the topic before the subject changes (again quite in keeping with the conclusions of literary figures and academics) contends that if English has become an official language in India, one that has been inflected and shaped into a unique Indo-English or *angrezi basha*⁶³ dialect then it can be used purposefully by Indian writers who are not necessarily pandering to already determined Western predilections for exotica. I pause over this moment to emphasize the unique awareness around issues of circulation and reception that the NetSAP interpretive community brings to their reading practice. As Inderpal Grewal explains in her insightful investigation of sites of Indian diasporic cultural production, South Asian diasporic literature transnationally circulates knowledges about India which in turn are used by the dominant classes to define a sense of their aesthetic and political value "These texts were

⁶¹ In *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing, 1947-1997*, edited by Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West, Rushdie asserts that the writing produced in the post-independence period in India, "is not only a stronger and more important body of work than what has been produced in the 16 'official languages'" but also represents "the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books" (qtd. in Huggan 63).

⁶² For a detailed summary of this debate, see Graham Huggan's *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, page 63 in which he discusses Rushdie's oft-quoted claim that the anthology represents "a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 'official languages' of India" and represents "the most valuable contribution Indian has yet made to the world of books" (quoted in Huggan 63 Rushdie and West 1997 x). In the same volume, Rushdie asserts that "English has become an Indian language" (quoted in Huggan 63). Critics such as Ania Loomba and Kannada novelist, U.R. Ananthamurthy have vociferously objected to Rushdie's cosmopolitan hubris and valorization of English as opposed to native Indian languages in the Western literary marketplace.

⁶³ See Sunil Bhatia's *American Karma: Race, Culture, and Identity and the Indian Diaspora* (2007).

both products and producers of these knowledges, and their transnational publication and readership as well as their use of English enabled the circulation of a range of knowledges about India and its diasporas.” (41). Building on Grewal’s assertion that literature is both product and producer of discursive knowledge about India in the West, NetSAP readers exemplify that literary production has been key to defining the cultural, class-bound parameters *within* the South Asian diaspora and has been instrumental to molding community self-definition and projection.

Sites of communal interpretation in published and unpublished form are constantly interactive. They are both tacitly and overtly involved in each other’s formation as illustrated first, in the awareness that NetSAP readers bring to this site of communal readership from their formal and informal knowledges about South Asian diasporic culture; and second, in the relationship between the literature and the stakes of representation in the diasporic community. As one young man, Raj, who was particularly active in this discussion demonstrates, NetSAP readers attend these meetings with a clearly developed sense of the tropes that define the field of South Asian diasporic literature and the critical field:

There were a lot of good ideas. There were a lot of good premises or—one of the big themes that runs through every story is the clash of what’s new and what’s old[...]and how there are these quote, unquote “modern” or “western” mores that people are observing, and at the same time people have a lot of desire to do what’s traditional. And there’s a lot pressure to do what’s traditional, but a lot of the stories just don’t seem that interesting [...] But it’s the right story to tell. (NetSAP Book Club, Red Carpet, 9.14.06, 3)

Raj explicitly cites the publishing demands placed on South Asian writers, and the powerful pressures of conformity as explanations for the repetition of certain narrative themes. As he implies, however, Sankaran has managed to tell the “right” story but in the

“wrong” way. Clearly, Raj’s view, which is corroborated not only by the debate about English language representation and Orientalism but also by the nods and affirmations of the group when he made this statement, suggests that NetSAP readers approach this literature with opinions on what narratives should be told and how they should be communicated.

A primary aim of this dissertation is to trace the diverse ways in which South Asian diasporic writing circulates in a highly-reflexive field of reception. That is, both academic readers who study this literary tradition and lay readers, particularly those of South Asian descent, often are not only cognizant of the literature’s global popularity but are also attuned to the circumstances of its production and circulation. A review of *The Red Carpet* published in a popular Indian-based newspaper, *The Hindu*, collates the issues surrounding the collection’s publication. While readers in the book club were not explicitly aware of the review, many of the concerns underlying the discussion arise in this site of published assessment. According to the reviewer, S. Bagashree, the collection was released in 15 countries simultaneously following a bidding war among international publishing houses based mainly in the U.S. Although he was impressed with the collection’s international circulation and appeal, Bagashree writes ambivalently about the short stories’ merit, stating that at best the collection presents a view of the changing “physical and psychological contours” of Bangalore that is both “nuanced and sensitive in the better stories.” But in the next sentence, he rhetorically asks, “why does [the description of the city] tend to be laboured in others, as if the writer is trying to drive home the point about a changing city and changing people in a dogged, self-conscious way, rendering the characters and situations flat in the process? As it happens in even the

title story? In fact, the book cover itself seems to spell out the agenda a little too literally for comfort!”⁶⁴ In the article, the reviewer quotes Sankaran’s response; she denies that her stories communicate a particular agenda, outside of their appreciation of the changing urban landscape of Bangalore, “I wanted the stories to be true to my experience of contemporary urban Bangalore. Interestingly, when the publishers read them in America, the same thing appealed to them as well!” Sankaran emphasizes the publishers’ appreciation of the “literary quality of her writing,” and the glimpse that she provides into an “India that they have not seen captured.” In the interview that Bagashree excerpts throughout the review, Sankaran emphasizes her creative freedom in writing the stories for the collection—as he somewhat wryly paraphrases: “Neither Lane nor her publisher put her under pressure to write for a western audience either. Yes, she did make a few stylistic allowances such as incorporating a long description of a salwar kameez where she found ‘no creative problems’. But they were also gracious enough to let her *chumma* and *one-tharah* be without qualifiers.” Clearly, Sankaran is responding throughout the interview to the reviewer’s skepticism and his tongue-in-cheek assessment that the short stories simplify Bangalore’s development as an IT center in terms of the clash between “Western” forces of modernization and “Eastern” adherence to traditional values, exemplified starkly in his opinion of the clichéd book cover. Sankaran’s responses in the review are defensive as when she reiterates her commitment to the collection’s success in India and abroad by stating that she was particularly pleased to “find that it's already on number five in the bestsellers' list in India.” Bagashree’s ambiguous tone and perspective

⁶⁴ Excerpted from *The Hindu Online* <http://www.hindu.com/mp/2005/05/09/stories/2005050901540100.htm>, September 5, 2005 “Sankaran’s Success Story.”

throughout the ostensibly complimentary review illuminate anxieties around the fraught mobility of the Indian diasporic writer. In other words, the interaction between Sankaran and the reviewer raises a prominent set of issues in the field of South Asian diasporic writing by interrogating the appeal of the repetitive and stereotypical narratives that garner acclaim and popularity in the West, acknowledging the publishing imperatives imposed on South Asian writers whose work circulates in global literary markets, and revealing concerns about the South Asian diasporic writer's commitment to a politics of location and accessibility. I pause over this site of popular reviewership not only to emphasize how South Asian diasporic literature is produced in an already determined discursive field of reception, but also to emphasize that reading publics are not discrete but rather overlapping entities.

Throughout the meeting NetSAP readers calibrated the success of Sankaran's short story collection mainly in terms of its authentic or realist effects with some attention to the narratives' formal qualities. That is to say, stories that the group deems a "realistic," "accurate" or "truthful" representation become the stories that are "well-written" or told in the "right way." In response to Raj's opinion that the collection fell short of its promise, readers debated the failures and successes in the collection, with some saying that "she did a pretty good job of being authentic about both the Western and Eastern characters" (3), that they "could identify" (5); they could "see a lot of truth in the characters" (4); and they are "representative of somebody real who's out there" (5). At the same time, readers also asserted that Sankaran's failures in the collection were due largely to a lack of character development. As one reader said, affirming Raj's comment, "The characters were sometimes interesting, sometimes borderline caricatures, but the

stories themselves, I think [...] were not as nuanced, or, or, they were very stereotypical I think” (3); another reader stated that “some of it was very cliché” and yet a third argued that “halfway through the book, I realized these were all stereotypes” (7). The hostess, Kamal, framed the discussion in terms of differences between South Asians born and raised in the U.S. and those who immigrated more recently:

The thing that’s surprised me about that though is usually I find that people who have grown up here and are writing never really get the eastern characters quite right or they’ll have somebody who is Brahmin making rogan josh which is not impossible, but it’s probably kind of unlikely. Or eastern characters will be writing about someone that they call ABCD and they’ll get that character completely wrong and probably it’s a message to people who’ve grown up here, but I don’t--I didn’t get that from her at first. I thought they were pretty real. (5)

Readers in the group, particularly those who were raised in the U.S. debated Sankaran’s accuracy in capturing the “ABCD” identity of a fairly heavy handed character in a short story entitled, “Alphabet Soup.”⁶⁵ Readers debated the valid use of the epithet, ABCD, which is often used as a derogatory descriptor of the supposed cultural confusion that second generation South Asian Americans experience around issues of cultural allegiance and tradition. The main ABCD character, Priya, was an exaggerated portrayal according to group participants:

R1: “It was just like every little nuance of an ABCD, you can possibly throw into this one character, she does.

R2: But you know what though? If that’s different than--someone calling that character ABCD is different than someone calling someone like you or me ABCD you know?

R3: True.

R4: Exactly.

⁶⁵ In the short story, the main character named Priya is a young woman who has recently graduated from college. Priya comes from very affluent family but has adopted the rhetoric of institutionalized multiculturalism, which is signaled to the reader when she stridently informs her father that, “Assimilation is a betrayal of your skin” and identifies herself as a “person of color.” Upon graduating from an elite college, Priya finds herself at a loss for what to do with her life (105). Her father challenges her to travel to India in an effort to ground some of her beliefs regarding cultural difference and racial discrimination in the U.S.

R2: Which is I think something that some Eastern people do, and that is not really correct, but the character that she described as ABCD is someone who truly maybe is ABCD though. Rather than someone who really is perhaps in the middle or in tune with his or her culture or cultures or something like that.

In this interaction, NetSAP readers distinguish between the “real” ABCDs and their own more resolved bicultural position. Interestingly, this moment reveals (in uncanny and definitely unwitting parallel to the short story itself) the anxiety that South Asian Americans feel about how they are perceived by more recent immigrants and South Asians in general who have a stronger connection to the “homeland.” The powerful desire to retain an authentic and untroubled “South Asianness” as a part of the bicultural identity that South Asian Americans establish in the U.S. exposes readers’ concerns that their identity is marked by confusion.

NetSAP readers’ shifts between valuing the text for its authentic (ethnographic) or literary (aesthetic) merit echoes in unresolved academic assessments of multiethnic texts whereby poststructuralist discourse vexes the relationship between ethnographic value and literariness. As Kandice Chuh explains the quandary, the field of Asian American Studies has traditionally been politicized in its relationship to community work, cultural awareness, and social activism, “an emphasis that derives from its rootedness in the socio-political movements of the 1960s and 1970s” (5). Therefore, cultural production by artists and writers of Asian heritage has often been comprehended both within and outside of these communities as having a particular social or activist function. Within Asian American Studies, then, “it is arguably politically suspect to claim or adopt a relation to poststructuralism” because it is founded in Eurocentric philosophical traditions and because it potentially impedes “immediate political intervention” around issues of

identity in particular “by means of its destabilization of subjectivity itself” (5). Chuh’s sophisticated critique, in a similar vein as Lisa Lowe’s, calls for a rethinking of subjectivity in Asian American studies using rubrics that emerge from within the literature itself. In this way, Asian American literature poses a theoretical challenge to the facile conceptions of diversity that emerge with the institutionalization of ethnicity and multiculturalist programs in universities:

Recognition of the subject as epistemological object cautions against failing endlessly to put into question both “Asian American” as the subject/object of Asian Americanist discourse and of U.S. nationalist ideology, and Asian American studies as the subject/object of dominant paradigms of the U.S. university. Otherwise, Asian American studies can too easily fall into working within a framework, with attendant problematic assumptions of essential identities, homologous to that through which U.S. nationalism has created and excluded “others.” Subjectlessness, as a conceptual tool, points to the need to manufacture “Asian American” situationally. (Chuh 10)

Academic critics of Asian American literature such as Kandice Chuh, Lisa Lowe, and Vijay Prashad have convincingly argued the essentialist pitfalls and short-sightedness of clinging too closely to identitarian affiliations, but the category of the “real” persists in lay reading practice. In the example of the debate about the ABCD phenomenon, claims to “realism” expose South Asian Americans’ uncertainty about our subject position both in the U.S. and in our relationship to the subcontinent as mediated often through family ties and other sites of intracultural and generational contact.

One story from Sankaran’s *The Red Carpet*, “Two, Four, Six, Eight,” encapsulates the key issues that determine the formation of South Asian American coalitional identities in terms of class, sexuality, gender and the lingering effects of colonialism. The story, written as a childhood recollection, tells of the manipulative, troubled relationship between a young middle class girl and her impoverished *ayah* (or

nanny). The young woman, known mainly in the story as “Missy,” narrates her experiences growing up in urban Bangalore and attending a strict convent school where the curriculum includes “mathematics, English, geography, history, science, Hindi, a choice of Sanskrit, OR French, OR Kannada, singing, painting, How to Be English, and How to Be Good” (Sankaran 50). The narrative seamlessly integrates Missy’s experiences with the forms of discipline she encounters at school under the watchful eye of school disciplinarian, Mrs. Rafter, and at home, under the care of her sexually-abusive *ayah*, Mary. Indeed the story begins with the adult Missy hearing, almost simultaneously, the news that both of these women had recently passed away. Parallels between the two women exceed their policing of Missy’s behavior; they are marked as doubles by their status as cultural outsiders to the norms of Missy’s middle class upbringing. Mrs. Rafter, who we learn is an Anglo-Indian teacher in charge of home economics and deportment, takes on the stereotypical markers of the Anglo-Indian subculture through her persistent but failed English affectations. Mary, similarly is a caricature of her caste, and is depicted as greedy, controlling and untrustworthy. At home and at school Mary lives under the strict scrutiny of both of these women as she tries to make sense of the contradictions of her colonial education that teaches her to believe in Jesus, to respect Mahatma Gandhi, fantasize about tea with the Queen of England, call the Sepoy Mutiny the First War of Independence, and eat with a fork rather than her fingers. Missy rebels against these strictures in two main ways: first, by forming a club with her three best school friends in which the primary activity for members is to make up sexually explicit stories with their favorite characters from Enid Blyton’s “Famous Five” series; and second, by committing minor acts of disobedience at home such as stealing five rupee notes and sneaking peeks

at restricted, “racy” Harold Robbins’ books to aid the club’s imaginative exercises. In both settings, home and school, the modes of discipline that Missy faces control her sexuality. When, for example, in the story’s climax, Mrs. Rafter intercepts a note that Missy is about to receive from one of her best friends requesting that she prepare a story about “naked boys” to tell later that day during the scheduled club meeting, Mrs. Rafter promptly breaks a ruler on her hands and calls her family. When she arrives home, Mary, who has been sexually abusing Missy in order to discipline her or to quiet her when she misbehaves, informs her parents that Missy has been hiding Harold Robbins books under her bed and using them to masturbate in the bathroom. The story ends with Missy threatening Mary’s life, thus regaining her independence at home. And at school she finds success as an athlete and top student ultimately winning Mrs. Rafter’s approval and admiration.

In my reading of the story, the use of sexual control in both the system of convent education and the middle-class Indian household signals the wide-ranging effects of colonial occupation beyond official institutions into the domestic sphere. The narrative keenly makes visible issues of class, sexuality, and the aftermath of colonial occupation in India by subtly interweaving these themes and demonstrating their inextricability. Notably, NetSAP readers took up the issue of sexuality in the story in far greater detail than that of class. However, their silence on the latter topic is nonetheless telling. On the most basic level, the club is constructed around a professional network and so for the most part is homogenous in terms of class and caste background. Everyone in the room, for example, had an *ayah* as a child or they were familiar with the Indian nanny system through trips to visit relatives there. Readers’ silence around the class narrative suggests a

certain complacency in commonality but also maps onto the complexities of South Asian American racial formation in the U.S. whereby class and ethnicity are asserted in order to avoid reckonings with race (Koshy 287). While class never explicitly surfaces in the discussion it strongly inflects the conversation and gestures towards the imbrications of class and sexuality as determinative factors in shaping the *asserted* racial position of South Asians in the U.S. For example when we had just started the conversation on this story, Afrah, a female reader born and raised in India who emigrated to the U.S. after time spent in the U.K., identified with the portrayal of the convent school education and related it to her own experiences at a boarding school in Calcutta. In particular she and other members of the group who had grown up in India remembered reading Enid Blyton and other English writers popular with the middle class, as she told the group: “that is absolutely my experience” (10). This inspired a fair amount of teasing and laughter among group participants as they remembered the sexually explicit stories that the girls told each other about Enid Blyton’s *Famous Five Series*, prompting Afrah jokingly to qualify her statement, saying “Well, not exactly like my experiences” (10).

This humorous exchange raises questions about how the invisible norms of both class and sexuality presupposed by group members are shaped by a complex negotiation between their experiences in the U.S. and their varying mediated relationship to India.⁶⁶ My aim here is to point to three main issues that this subtle shift to humor indicates because the diversity and tension around readers’ cultural, national and racial affiliations inheres often in these subtleties and silences. First of all, this humorous exchange signals that within the group there is a tacit relationship between norms of sexuality and class

⁶⁶ I switch from using the term South Asia to India here for the sake of specificity. In this group meeting all vocal members of the group identified themselves specifically as Indian.

that emerge from South Asian and American cultural mores. Afrah retracted her statement after the group teased her about its potential sexual implications while the class or educational background remained unremarked. Second, group members' identification with elements of the short story demonstrates how South Asian diasporic literature taps into the experiences of a particular kind of privileged, cosmopolitan, classed readership. That is to say, readers' responses to the literature illuminate the various national influences, India, the U.S. and the U.K. to name a few, that determine readers' "asserted" and "assigned" positioning in the U.S. Readers are often familiar with postcolonial, urban Indian settings as well as the intricacies of the immigrant experience in the U.S. through their education, family, and life experience. And finally, Afrah's identification with the experience of reading Enid Blyton connects South Asian American racial identity to its postcolonial histories. Notably, in Sunil Bhatia's study on the social psychology of South Asian American middle-class suburban culture he discusses a moment when he and his co-interviewer stumble on the topic of British authors who are popular in Indian families while they are conducting an interview. The co-interviewee, Anjali, a young woman of Indian origin, relates to the older interviewee, Abishek, her experience of having read Enid Blyton's *Famous Five Series* among other popular British literature (102). She exclaims to Abishek, "We have a history now!" (102). Evidenced both in this example and in the NetSAP readers' familiarity with Enid Blyton and Harold Robbins, the experience of reading the same set of British literature indicates a shared postcolonial past as well as similar class and often caste origins. These connections to the "homeland" in turn shape South Asian American experience in the U.S. As Bhatia explains:

For many generations of professional Indians, 'America' or 'American culture' was experienced through the postcolonial hybridity of urban

Indianness and leftover colonial Englishness. The generation of Indians who immigrated to the United States after 1965 had the right formula for success in their new homeland. Their English education and close connection to postcolonial culture, their great appreciations of learning, the prestige of IIT and other Indian universities, and their families' professional networks ensured their positions as professionals in the workplace (103).

The study of lay reading praxis, in this way, demonstrates the shifting positionalities that South Asian Americans negotiate and exposes how fallacies such as the model minority myth powerfully form between the “assignment” and “assertion” paradigm that characterize the pressures of racialization in the U.S. Susan Koshy explains the elusive complexity of studying the formation of South Asian American racial identity, formed as it is between overlapping, sometimes competing national and cultural affiliations:

“Prevailing constructions of South Asian American racial identity tend to simplify the complex hierarchies of color, class, and caste immigrants bring with them from their homeland by collapsing it with the historical patterns of race in the host country” (287).

In particular, readers' silence on the issue of class demonstrates the class commonality of the group, but furthermore suggests that class and caste hierarchies with their accompanying privileges and assumptions migrate across national contexts.

In contrast to the silence created around class issues in the narrative, the representation of sexual abuse in “Two, Four, Six, Eight” sparked a heated and lengthy debate; readers either objected to the ambiguity of this element of the story or appreciated the potentially de-stigmatizing effects of its presence in the narrative. NetSAP readers' simultaneous discomfort and fascination with the topic reveals a complex ambiguity in safeguarding traditional gender roles and heteronormative sexuality within the South Asian diasporic community. Scholars across social science and humanities disciplines have

studied the role of women in South Asian diasporic culture as the repositories of religious tradition, nationalist ideology, and ethnic pride. In a succinct yet exhaustive summary of this scholarly discourse, Sunaina Maira summarizes the connections between South Asian and South Asian American ideologies of femininity and tradition:

The moralization of ethnic identity conveyed in rankings of pure/authentic and impure/hybrid identity is also inextricably intertwined with the sexualization of ethnicity. An analysis of the feminization of tradition, or indeed of the nation, opens up the question of what is at stake in the gendering of authenticity. Feminist critiques of the workings of nationalism and cultural reproduction point out that women are often viewed as the vessels of tradition in various immigrant and nonimmigrant communities [...] They point out that the boundaries of the ethnic group are often defined through female sexuality and the sexual behavior of women is often used as a litmus test for their own ethnic authenticity and sometimes that of their children. (179)

The tension around the topic of sexual abuse in the short story substantiates, at least in part, the notion that sexuality and gender powerfully encode notions of cultural authenticity (Maira 13).

Readers expressed frustration about the ambiguity of the sexual abuse in the narrative, irritation at its potentially sensationalistic inclusion, and skepticism that it was even legitimately an instance of sexual abuse, raising questions as to what meanings the sexuality in the story takes on in the site of interpretation. Less than ten minutes into the official start of the meeting, a young woman of Indian descent, Shalika, born and partly raised in India before moving to the U.K and then the U.S., objected to the portrayal of the *ayah*, Mary, arguing that she was caricatured as a stock villain⁶⁷: “The *ayah* could have been a bit more complicated, but she was portrayed as evil and manipulative and I

⁶⁷ Because this particular group was so large it was difficult to match names to voices on the audio recording of the meeting and transcript. Wherever possible I have identified NetSAP readers and include details about their identity that may have bearing on their comments or that provide a thicker description of the meeting.

don't know, I don't think people are as unidimensional as that--" (Red Carpet 1-2). Raj immediately interjected by asserting that the sexual abuse in the narrative made Mary's character somewhat ambiguous, "But that was a weird story. If I'm remembering the story right, the girl is not all together unhappy with what the *ayah* does" (2). Raj's comment in turn incited an irate and frustrated response from female readers in the room. Monali, a young physician who expressed a lot of interest in this particular element of the narrative as the conversation progressed, asked him, "Are you serious?" (2), while the hostess, Kamal, followed up by asking, "But how could she know what it [sexual abuse] was?"(2). Conjecturally, I assume that these readers felt that Raj's comment implicitly blamed the victim for "enjoying" the *ayah's* sexual manipulation, or at the very least, suggested that the protagonist, Missy, was complicit in the abuse. In an effort to defuse the conversation, Sri, the group leader intervened:

I know what you're trying to say is that there is another layer there that's not really--there's unresolved questions because it is--how, how it's written is one way, and how the *ayah* is portrayed is another way, and probably the actuality is very clear-cut how we all see it, but how she wrote it as sensations or things like that makes you believe that maybe she was proud of it. So that one [short story] was probably the one that had the most layers and kind of maybe not closed (2).

Sri's efforts to mediate the dispute not only reveal the general discomfort that the topic created, but also underscore the difficulty group members experienced with the narrative's ambiguous depiction of the experience of sexual abuse. Methods of critical discourse analysis mark a distinction between the interpretation that a group may hold of a particular textual moment and the more covert dispositions that the interpretation may embed: "[textual culture] analysis is capable of illuminating common disjunctions between what is expressly 'reported' and other, more covertly revealed dispositions,

which, in turn, may provide us with insights into the complexities of the reading process” (Benwell 151). While the group ostensibly concurred that the description of sexual violation was purposefully ambiguous, this did little to assuage more vocal members at the meeting who continued to resist this narrative element. As Monali described it, the presence of sexual abuse confounded her:

I don't know. It was hard to discern if she's a sexually abused child who now is masturbating, and, I don't think she really has any idea of what that is, and sure I think that's an interesting idea. You could've just taken masturbation alone in a strict sense or—[Group Laughter] I feel like you should--should you take masturbation alone as a theme? Like, is this girl, is she marriage-suitable or whatever? But to throw in the sexual abuse part, I don't know. I didn't, I didn't really care for it. I think the whole power play with the *ayah* and the child alone, that was interesting though. (10-11)

Monali questions the entire premise of sexual abuse in the narrative, echoing the group's earlier skepticism and confusion around the topic. She does not specifically question the author's description of sexual abuse; rather, she objects to what she sees as the gratuitous inclusion of sexual abuse in the narrative—it could, as she says, have been a story focused more on the discovery of sexuality. She reasons that the story would have been more credible if the author had linked themes of sexuality to the trope of marriage, even though she acknowledges, sarcastically, that these tropes are thematic clichés in South Asian diasporic writing. In part, Monali indicates that her discomfort with the sexual abuse narrative stems in part from its unfamiliarity in this body of literature. But as she also explained, the story unfairly rewrites the power dynamics of abuse, making a woman responsible for abusing a child when, in fact, folk knowledge on the subject holds that this is not representative of the power dynamics in Indian households between male children and their caretakers: “I guess one of the things is that there is a lot of sexual

abuse in those situations, but I mean, but it's usually in a different context, like the other way around" (10). Monali implies that there is an unfair and sexist sensationalizing quality to the depiction of a same-sex female instance of sexual abuse.

Similarly, the hostess's brother, Vikram, who had been an active and lively member of the discussion, was skeptical that the narrative even described a legitimate instance of abuse at all: "I didn't like that story at all, and it was, it was because--all of a sudden you drop in--you drop that in, then you drop something else in, and it's like you're just you're adding pieces. I don't think it's a, a sexual abuse [story] really--it's there, but it's--it doesn't run throughout the story, and you've only got 20 pages, so" (11). Vikram's critique takes a partially aesthetic approach. He concurs with Monali's reservations, stating that the element of sexual abuse made the story seem disjointed and random. Counter to the general consensus, he contests the impact of sexual abuse in the story by arguing first that it is not a definitive element because it is not present as a theme throughout the narrative, and second, that the limitations on length in the short story genre itself preclude engagement with a topic as grave as sexual abuse.

Among NetSAP readers' skeptical responses to the representation and presence of sexual abuse in the narrative, one reader's unique perspective on the depiction of abuse indicated the value of an interpretive approach that attends to the multivalent meanings and functions of the literature for the South Asian American community. This reader, a young South Asian American woman, Lalita, was a certified social worker and therapist in the D.C. greater metropolitan area. I would later interview her at the safe house for victims of domestic abuse where she was employed. Lalita's reading of the short story

and the collection in general valued the awareness-raising inclusion of taboo subjects such as sexual abuse:

I really liked that part because I work with a lot of the sexually abused and they're survivors. I liked it a lot that that was part of a very short story book and I think the way they described the girl's experience was very typical. I liked that it was in there because it is so common for children to experience and it is something that nobody wants to talk about or likes to talk about. Because it's [...] not in a lot of just novels and--but yeah, definitely, the way she experienced that. In a way, it was so normalized for her that that was just a common experience, and the way for like a whole year I think they said, she didn't think of it as abnormal. That was just her, her experience. It was a normal experience and she began to enjoy it because it--the sensations and--not really enjoy it, but it was just a normal part of her, her life, and that was just her childhood. (11)

The contrast between Lalita's appreciation of the short story collection for tackling themes of mental illness and abuse with NetSAP readers' general skepticism reveals a complex ambivalence in the stakes of representation. NetSAP readers who objected to the narrative of sexual abuse were invested in reading more accurate depictions of sexual behavior that did not sensationalize or incorrectly characterize the power dynamics in the story as an instance of sexual abuse. Similarly, Lalita's powerful contribution to the group also reflects the desire for a more inclusive concept of South Asian experience through literary representation.

While Lalita does not specifically address the particular stigmas attached to domestic violence and sexual abuse within the South Asian American community during the book club meeting, we did discuss the topic in greater detail during our interview. Earlier in the conversation we had been discussing the problems and values of narratives that depict South Asian women as victims of abuse. I quote here at length to capture some of the complexity of Lalita's considered and erudite response:

Tamara: But I guess [if] so many of the people I'm talking to say that they do identify with the literature. What happens when so much of the literature is telling Indian women that they're--their primary story is one of a kind of victimization and--or that their primary roles to negotiate are mother--the mother/daughter/wife? So if that identification is really what a lot of people are coming to, to the literature with, then does that become a problem?

Lalita: But I think it can help people, like mainstream culture, build more awareness. And that was one of the points that I was trying to say in the group. I don't know if I articulated myself very well. I didn't know anyone in the group. So I was kind of nervous. But one thing about the last book we read, *The Red Carpet*, one thing that I think is good--and I can see your point in saying always talking about women being victimized can be kind of a step backwards. At the same time I think--maybe it's just me, maybe I'm just drawn to it more because this is--because it is such like a normal part of my life to hear about women's victimization, to hear about abuse and to hear about mental health problems. And I do--and for me it is such a normal part of people's lives. It's such an important--such a main part of people's lives. [...] So I'm more drawn to reading about victimized women and maybe how they have overcome, and how they can live past this. But in the book they talked about sexual abuse. And that's not something that people talk about that often 'cause it's very stigmatized. And so I think that I liked that it was in that book, kind of like a mainstream book, that any layperson would pick that up and read about it. [...] De-stigmatizing and educating people is such a huge part and creating awareness is such a huge part of what we do and what I do. I enjoy reading about it 'cause I feel like someone else is doing the same job that I'm doing. Do you know what I mean? [...] So having a fiction novel that addresses something like that is so important I think, so South Asian women--we see come here and they have no clue. And they are the ones that are more--so much more likely to--any Asian woman that comes here is so much more likely to go back—(Interview, Lalita, 26-27)

Lalita's response offers insight into the politics of the group. She describes the discomfort she felt offering a somewhat dissenting opinion in the NetSAP reading group, suggesting that the term "reading community" is a functional rather than accurate descriptor, for while the members share ethnic backgrounds, many have never met before and may never meet again. Secondly, she reminds us of how difficult it can be to speak up even in (if not particularly in) spaces that are supposed to be shared sites of coalitional identity

formation. My question to Lalita was largely influenced by the critiques developed by feminist cultural studies and literary scholars, such as Chandra Mohanty, Caren Kaplan, and Inderpal Grewal, who have argued that the global marketing machinations of third world women's texts position these women as "perennial victims," and thereby "denies their potential to be emancipatory subjects" (Volpp 1205 quoted in Srikanth p 100). However, Lalita suggests ways to both incorporate and build upon these feminist perspectives in academic interpretive practice by thinking about how the literature functions within different reading communities and publics. That is to say, Lalita's consideration of these narratives as potentially limiting does not undermine her insistence that representations of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and mental health illness hold particularly vital purchase within a community in which these topics can be stigmatized and repressed. For South Asians who have relocated to the U.S., silence on these topics can be particularly damaging for women who may be physically or culturally isolated from familial networks of support.

Conclusion

In the book club meetings, NetSAP readers' interpretive practice exposes their investment in developing a particularly second-generation sense of cultural authenticity founded largely in middle-class values and encoded in certain representations of sexuality and gender. Scholars such as Vijay Prashad, Sunaina Maira, Kumkum Sangari and Annaya Bhattacharjee have argued that heteronormative, "traditional" constructions of womanhood and sexuality within South Asia and the diaspora have been used to underwrite nationalist, classed, religious and ethnic based formations of power. As Maira explains, South Asian American women, as the repositories of tradition, are often cast as

“cultural carriers” responsible for the ideologically laden production of tradition, authenticity, and cultural value—a system that implicates them in reproducing these norms:

What is important to note is that while second-generation women may be confined and judged by these standards of ethnically pure femininity, they themselves participate in this scrutiny and in the evaluation of other women[...] It is particularly difficult for women to reject this framework of gendered cultural authenticity altogether in a context where women belong to an immigrant community that symbolically asserts its ethnic distinctiveness, for such a rejection means renouncing claims to ethnic belonging according to the prevailing definitions. (183)

For second generation readers, the assertion of a symbolic ethnicity is often founded in legitimate desires for cultural citizenship and acceptance which, as I indicate in this chapter and discuss more thoroughly in the next, are desires partly staged in the cultural field through interpretive debates that limit the meaning of what it means to be an “authentic” South Asian woman.⁶⁸ At the same time, South Asian diasporic literature is a diverse and diversely marketed field, and both the literature and the discourses surrounding it exist in a determined but flexible field of reception. That is to say, while the interpretive discourse around South Asian diasporic literature often rehearses similar concepts and tussles with the quandaries of self-reflexive critique, the literature itself projects varied meanings in the interpretive community. As we see in *Red Carpet* book club meeting, for example, literature can have an awareness-raising function in the field of reception. Of course this is not to say that the process of raising awareness offers a panacea to the difficulties of interpretive practice in South Asian diasporic literature, for

⁶⁸ Bandana Purkayastha explains that “symbolic ethnicity” is a facet of the assimilation model. As she explains, “The symbolic ethnicity model is grounded in ideas about the pluralistic nature of contemporary American society and ‘new’ ways of ‘doing ethnicity.’ Drawing on ideas of scholars like Cohen (1977) and Greeley (1971), who have suggested that ethnic identification may not completely decline with prolonged integration into the mainstream, this model points to ways in which changes in the context may facilitate the inclusion of diverse groups into the American mainstream” (6).

these kinds of readings often evoke fatiguing discourses of victimhood. Rajini Srikanth takes up just this point when she describes the conflict she experiences in reading an article about South Asian victims of the September 11, 2001 attacks. The article's author presents an uncomplicated description of the plight of Indian widows in the U.S., generalizing that they face oppressive and uncertain fates if they return to South Asia. (Srikanth 130) At the same time, blindly protecting or perpetuating images of success, upward mobility, and unproblematic gender roles risks instating a false and disempowering sense of auto-essentialist, chauvinistic, and nationalistic hubris in the diasporic community. By negotiating between these two extremes in the dynamic space of a reading group, however, lay readers demonstrate the meanings that emerge when we begin to think not only about what meanings these literatures project but also how they are used in the community they purport to describe. Attention to this complex interpretive praxis can signal ways to move beyond these limiting paradigms in academic literary critique, and to think in more complex ways about how South Asian diasporic literature in its field of reception both produces and challenges narratives of ethnic authenticity.

In the communal interpretive site of the book club, NetSAP readers use literature to define an aspirational sense of cultural citizenship by debating what is and isn't a "realistic" representation of South Asian diasporic culture. They antagonistically engage positive and negative stereotypes about the model minority myth, use upward class mobility to assert a specifically ethnic rather than racialized collective identity, and debate the value of maintaining traditional South Asian gender roles through notions of heteronormative sexuality. But at the same time, their readings freely shift among their diverse subjective affiliations and are at once informed by local, American, identity-

based regional politics as well as transnational, post-colonial, histories of immigration and diaspora. As Janice Radway incisively points out, engagement with the field of reception values the process of signification and the meaning produced in the interaction between text and reader.⁶⁹ This does not mean, however, that studies of reception deny the relevance of the field of production. This chapter explores the slipperiness between moments of enunciation and the construction of subjectivity. It questions how NetSAP readers, who are highly self-reflexive and aware of the peculiarities around the exoticization of South Asian culture in the west, at once participate in the production of monolithic, “authentic” markers of South Asian American identity *and* produce readings that can challenge the limitations that we academics struggle to overcome.

⁶⁹ As Radway explains, “I want to emphasize here that in objecting to the privileging of speech or writing as production I do not mean to imply that those who control cultural production and the culture industries are ineffective or that they do not have the power to endow others with representations that subsequently structure their understanding of themselves and their culture. But I do want to suggest that our conflation of cultural production with the moment of enunciation alone and our coordinate assumption that that moment is always necessarily primary and determining may originate at least in part from our own situation within the apparatuses of cultural production and with our perception of our own power and our self-interest in legitimating it” (1988, 362).

Chapter 4

The Problem of Placement and the Discourse of Choice in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Chitra Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

On a bright Sunday morning in July 2006, I sat down in a crowded suburban coffee shop in Northern Virginia to interview a young Indian American woman named Priya. As with several of my interviewees, I had met Priya through her active participation in the NetSAP book club and through those meetings we had gotten to know one another as friendly acquaintances. Our interview was very conversational and because she related her own experiences so thoroughly to the literature we were discussing, I found that I was more inclined to listen to how she approached reading rather than challenge her opinions—a more collaborative, passive approach to interviewing than I had taken with several of my other interviewees. Priya felt a powerful identification with literature written by female South Asian diasporic authors, and explained that her preference was very conscious. Early on in the interview, she explained to me that after her marriage ended, she took solace in reading novels by female writers of South Asian descent, specifically to help her make sense of the specific cultural and romantic struggles that she faced as a young Indian American woman:

I think whether you get [an] arranged [marriage] or whether you marry somebody that you fall in love with, you still face a lot of the same struggles, especially with family[...]. And a lot of the stories that I read explored that, that whole conflict. I think again for me, somebody with my own personal experience—that [marriage] didn't go very well for me, like sometimes I like reading [about] it. It makes me feel like it is, like you know, research. You know? You learn something. (Priya 14)

Throughout the interview, Priya described feeling torn between familial expectations about whom she should marry, career pressures, and the difficulties of reconciling her Indian heritage with American mores. Strikingly, Priya likens her leisure reading of South Asian American literature to a kind of research about her identity—an identity that she does not see as solely circumscribed by her ethnic affiliations but more so inflected by familial obligation and cultural traditions. Priya’s reading praxis enters into what Caren Kaplan has called the “conversational paradigm” which “has held *particularly* strong purchase in feminist criticism, where the act of interpretation is often conceived as an ‘intimate conversation’ between ‘the woman reader and the woman writer,’ a ‘dialogic’ collaboration, an ‘empathic’ imperative” (12). As Priya affirms, identification with writing by South Asian diasporic female writers becomes a source of knowledge and self-understanding—a fulfillment of the readerly desire to be as Peter Brooks describes, “heard, recognized, [and] listened to” in narrative (qtd. in Kaplan 12). This instance of conversational and dialogic reading practice relies very much on a transformative encounter between the reader and the text. But it is the particular nature of the transformation that gives me pause in Priya’s statement. That is, while the therapeutic comforts of a dialogic, identificatory reading practice are clear, the limitations it potentially produces in what narratives South Asian women use to define and understand themselves remain buried in Priya’s statement. Specifically, my question is what exactly are we learning about ourselves when we read literature that both critiques and validates tropes of exotic romance delimited by an inscrutable, fatalistic Indian cultural tradition,?

In this chapter, I study and amend prevailing concepts of a dialogic reading praxis by extending the relationship between text and reader to include a critical third party. As

Kaplan explains, the Bakhtinian concept of the dialogic valorizes the presence of “heteroglossia,” multivocality, and conflicting discourses as if the identification or mapping out of these multiple interpretive voices itself can prove liberatory, subversive and emancipatory⁷⁰ (11). In her assessment, discourse alone “cannot suffice as both the means *and* the outcomes of the transformational goals we seek.” Rather, it is only “by looking at the actual conversational practice, strategies, and social-political-discursive outcomes, not at abstract formulations of the dialogic alone” that we comprehend the effects of the meanings created through interactions between texts and readers (10). In line with these efforts to investigate the “concrete instances of dialogic exchange” (11), I argue for a triangulatory reading praxis in which the lay reader, academic critic and text inform one another relationally. A central aim of my revision to the concept of dialogic reading—inspired largely by what I learned from my conversations with NetSAP readers such as Priya—is to reconsider the idea of the critic as one who is not only trained as a literary, academic professional but also as one who provides an alternate and meaningful critical perspective on the uses of literature and its potential for social transformation.

Building on the argument of the previous chapter, this chapter examines how the critical persistence of the ethnic/postcolonial divide in South Asian diasporic literature—whereby the literature that constitutes this tradition is aligned with one or the other category rather than viewed as moving between the two—influences gender politics in the field. Critics associate the ethnic, American tradition with female writers of South Asian descent and the postcolonial, global versions with their male counterparts. There is

⁷⁰ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* Ed. Michael Holquist, Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Trans. Vern W. McGee Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

an implicit divide in this literary canon that separates historical narratives of partition, religious strife, and displacement from literature that deals in issues of identity, assimilation and the immigrant experience. This divide problematically maps onto gender—critics often cast the “serious,” historical, postcolonial voice as male and the “familiar,” identity-oriented, ethnic studies voice as female. In academic criticism, this gendered binary legitimizes limited, decontextualized readings of literature written by South Asian female writers and abstracts their work from the historical, social and cultural contexts that influence its production.⁷¹ The movement of this literary history between paradigms such as ethnic and postcolonial, female and male, is not value-neutral, but rather encodes reductive, static gender hierarchies that are reproduced broadly in the field of academic and lay reception—indicating that history and the field of public discourse remain often tacitly gendered.

In order to examine how gender influences and constructs readerly response to South Asian diasporic literature in various interpretive communities, I trace how the strikingly analogous reception—in both lay and academic reading publics—of two popular female writers of South Asian descent, Arundhati Roy and Chitra Divakaruni, position female writers as the arbiters of Indian cultural tradition.⁷² I claim that the work of female writers of South Asian descent is often valorized, in both academic and lay reading publics, when it is perceived as rewriting tropes of traditional Indian womanhood, casting their main characters’ “development” within what Inderpal Grewal calls the hegemonic Western “discourse of choice” (Grewal 65). Grewal explains that

⁷¹ Patricia Chu takes up the issue of how historical restrictions on Asian women’s immigration to the U.S. results in the gendering of Asian American literature and cultural representation. See *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America*, p. 4.

⁷² The switch here from South Asian to Indian is in the service of specificity.

these tropes of choice (for example, when a character chooses a love marriage as opposed to an arranged marriage) are often figured in South Asian diasporic fiction as the “movement from ‘tradition’ to ‘modernity’”:

Choice...was not only the act through which freedom could be understood as central to the subject of modern American as well as liberal feminism, but also an important aspect of neoliberal consumer culture’s imbrication within the liberalism of democratic “choice” figured as “freedom.” The particular freedom of America thus became the ability to have choices denied to those in “traditional” societies and “cultures.” (65)

Grewal makes a crucial point, key to the broader arguments of this chapter: when tropes of choice (figured often through a female character’s development or progress) are present in this literature, they not only ideologically reinforce discourses of modernity as the unique purview of Western culture but they also implicate the “consumer,” in this case the cosmopolitan reader, into the limited ideologies of these narratives whereby restrictive “Eastern tradition” must be cast off to attain Western freedoms.

As a gateway into the analysis of Roy and Divakaruni’s work, a quick look at the literary reception of Bharati Mukherjee’s classic South Asian diasporic novel, *Jasmine* (1989), instructively frames issues of readerly reception and interpretive controversy. Arguably, no other novel’s reception has been as instrumental in establishing and staging the effects of these discourses of choice in South Asian diasporic literature as *Jasmine*.⁷³

⁷³ *Jasmine* follows the story of a young, impoverished Indian woman whose arranged marriage to a Sikh in her home village ends when he is killed in a bombing. Newly widowed, Jasmine flees her village, setting off on a journey to the United States. On her first night in Florida as an illegal immigrant, after a perilous and demeaning journey, Jasmine is raped by the captain of the ship in which she traveled. In retaliation she murders him. On the next stage of her journey, she is taken in by a woman who helps ease her adjustment to American culture and aids her in finding work. Soon she gets a job in New York as a nanny to a wealthy couple and in the course of her time there starts having an affair with her male employer, Taylor. Realizing she must move on, she leaves for a small town in Iowa, where she meets a wealthy man named Bud, who is then shot and becomes paralyzed shortly after she moves in with him. They adopt a young Vietnamese boy, Du, and at Bud’s request Jasmine agrees to undergo artificial insemination to have a baby with him.

Although Mukherjee's work seldom came up in conversation with NetSAP readers, and thus can only occupy an introductory function in this chapter, her novels and short stories still retain enormous cachet in high school classrooms and on college syllabi. I am interested in her continued presence in academic settings and relative dormancy in the NetSAP reading group, not only because of the disjunction in reading relevancies and preferences that this discrepancy suggests, but also because of the intractable controversy generated by *Jasmine* in the field of academic reception. Much ink has been spilt in efforts both to critique and recuperate the novel. Literary critics such as Inderpal Grewal, Rajini Srikanth, Deepika Bahri, Debjani Banerjee, Samir Dayal and Lavina Shankar, have denounced the novel for perpetuating stereotypical and simplistic myths of American freedom and Indian oppression, reproducing Orientalist fantasies of Asian women's sexuality, "trivializing...the complexities of the postcolonial condition," and dehistoricizing factors of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and nationality that inflect Indian immigration to the West⁷⁴ (Grewal, *Transnational* 226; Srikanth 186; Banerjee qtd. in Chu 129). Additionally, critical discourse on the novel often questions its plausibility, quality, and Mukherjee's position as a well-educated, affluent Brahmin Bengali writer to "speak" for the subaltern subject (Chu 128).

At the same time, there is a feminist counter-trend that recuperates the novel: first, for not imposing "ready-made solutions to the problems facing immigrant Asian

Toward the end of her pregnancy she gets back in touch with Taylor, and leaves Bud to move out west with him. In all of these spaces and incarnations, Jasmine changes her name from Jase to Jane and back to Jasmine.

⁷⁴ See also, Gurleen Grewal, "Born Again American The Immigrant Consciousness in *Jasmine*." *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Emmanuel Nelson, 181-196. New York: Garland, 1993. Debjani Banerjee. "In the Presence of History: The Representation of Past and Present India in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction." *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Emmanuel Nelson, 161-179. New York: Garland, 1993.

women,” second, for critiquing “gendered and glorified notions of immigration,” and third, for contributing a South Asian American voice to the field of Asian American studies (Tripathi 179; Shukla 164; Shankar and Srikanth, A Part 10). Inderpal Grewal sums up the debate:

These critiques [of *Jasmine*] were important not simply because they examined the politics of a particular writer, but also because they revealed how postcolonial cosmopolitanisms’ circulating discourses produced a variety of contexts for reading Mukherjee’s works. Thus if there were readers who saw the protagonist, Jasmine, as modern in opposition to the “oppressed third world woman,” there were others who saw the novel as problematic in its support of American nationalism. (74)

Grewal argues that postcolonial critiques of *Jasmine* omit consideration of the “transnational practices” by which Mukherjee becomes a writer about “Indian immigrant experience in North America” (74). Grewal’s broader commitment to the concept of the transnational as a “third space” of negotiation beyond the binary of postcolonial or ethnic studies aligns with the foundational concerns of this dissertation. Grewal’s observations here summarize the contradictory discursive field produced around *Jasmine* as a result of both its controversial depictions of the South Asian female other as well as the disciplinary politics that define the field of South Asian diasporic literature. Accordingly, *Jasmine* provides the foundational case study of how the politics of representation and disciplinarity define meaning for South Asian diasporic literature.

More immediately, however, *Jasmine*’s reception introduces a crucial concept for this chapter: namely that literary interpretation is always a multivocal, often contradictory, and always communally-constructed act. This is not to say that interpretation is relative but rather that for any given text there is a register of interpretive possibilities that we can only begin to identify and assess through a dynamic

consideration of literature within its various reception contexts. Furthermore, a reception history of *Jasmine* instructively demonstrates the limits and possibilities of recuperative academic interpretations, and it suggests ways to build upon methods of literary historical analysis. For example, one of the more convincing modes of counter-critique of the novel includes formal or generic recuperative arguments, perhaps most eloquently summarized by Patricia Chu: “By providing a clear, yet clearly untenable version of than American romance plot, *Jasmine* teaches readers to recognize and view with suspicion the ideological work that such myths [of American success] do” (131). Chu makes an interesting move in this argument by evoking the reader’s response to Jasmine’s self-critiquing formal qualities. But her assertions also raise a productive tangle of issues: do *all* readers of *Jasmine*, in fact, respond similarly to the ideological implications of a failed romance plot or myths of American success? And in what ways are these responses manifested? I am not trying to advance a particular claim about the difference between lay and academic readerly practice, but rather to make visible the naturalized gap between the interpretive concerns, relevancies and preferences of distinct but overlapping reading communities. Although in the field of multiethnic literatures, academics tend to teach the socio-ethnographic qualities of literature and emphasize its social impact, we tend to ignore how our claims regarding ideology and form, for example, are materialized for lay readers. As Elizabeth Long explains, “despite literary critics’ often genuine desire to link literature to its social and political concerns,” academic literary criticism has become increasingly isolated from everyday readership due to the exigencies of professionalization (74). Thus, I see Chu’s statement and the interrelated interpretive controversy around *Jasmine* as opening an opportunity to seriously consider how

academic claims are analogously and productively constructed, revised, or debunked in the field of lay criticism.

Another more implicit component of my argument, also evident in the example of Mukherjee's reception, is that female South Asian diasporic authors function as discursive fields in this literary tradition. Their reception is not only a product of their work but rather involves and constructs a complex politics of representation, correction and desire. I refer here to anthropologist Virginia R. Domínguez's concept of the "politics of love" that subsumes the categories of representation, correction and desire, and tacitly motivates recuperative academic projects. The desire to correct exclusions in the academy, "to 'diversify,' [...] to create room for different 'voices' in the written scholarly record, [...] and to 'open up' our scholarly education and educational institutions" (363) drives the politics of correction, recognition, and representation in the academy. But as Domínguez keenly points out, these good intentions are all too often superficial and, however well-meaning "reproduce the institutionalized system of difference and value" that they originally seek to challenge (363). I contend that the politics of representation and correction work analogously in the lay reading public of the NetSAP-D.C. book club, inspiring dialogic readings that seek to correct literary and cultural exclusions but in doing so often reify notions of authentic, consumable, and exotic ethnic alterity. These investments produce unevenly applied and unfair expectations that determine South Asian diasporic female writers' reception in both scholarship and lay reception. The result is a set of gendered readings of their work that limit the narrative scope of what tropes and themes qualify as ethnically authentic in the interpretive field. In contrast to the historically contextualized reception of male writers

in the tradition, the burdens of identitarian representation applied to female writers abstract their literature from its historical situations. Additionally, the tacit function of gender in forming South Asian diasporic literary history produces a circular reading practice wherein female writers and their texts are produced as authentic voices if they fulfill certain readerly expectations.⁷⁵ These narratives then, by taking on the sheen of authenticity, effectively produce the readerly desire for a limited range of ethnically “authentic” tropes.

In this chapter, I use a dialogic reading practice to study the reception of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Chitra Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and *Arranged Marriage* (1996) as foils to investigate how lay and academic readers both participate in the production of decontextualized and reductively gendered interpretations and also—often simultaneously—produce recuperative feminist readings. In the first section, I look at the fraught and messy reception of Roy’s *The God of Small Things* in lay and academic reading publics. While Roy is an indisputably popular writer of the South Asian diaspora, her popularity could be more aptly described as a kind of notoriety. Roy’s uneven reception, when contrasted with Jhumpa Lahiri’s more seamless positioning in scholarship and lay readership, instructively exemplifies the problems of placement that can arise when female writers do not conform to the literary expectations of academic and lay readers. The chapter then looks at recuperative feminist interpretations of notable South Asian American writer Chitra Divakaruni to outline the specifically situated nature of readership. In this section I am specifically interested in how academic and lay readers mobilize commensurate recuperative strategies in their

⁷⁵ Rajini Srikanth, *The World Next Door: South Asian Americans and the Idea of America*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 195.

interpretive practice. I examine how readers in these interpretive communities revalue exoticising and culturally limiting moments in Divakaruni's fiction and offer similar alternative tactics of literary interpretation while potentially reifying gendered markers of ethnic authenticity.

Arundhati Roy and the Problem of Placement

In this section, I study the chapter's guiding premise that gender inflects both academic and lay interpretations of South Asian diasporic literature. Triangulating the lay and academic reception of Arundhati Roy with Salman Rushdie and Jhumpa Lahiri suggests that discursive constructions of gender in South Asian diasporic literary history at least partially shape readerly expectation and desire. The troubled reception of Roy's *The God of Small Things*⁷⁶, in particular, implies that conformity to certain literary tropes

⁷⁶ *The God of Small Things* is narrated as the childhood recollection of Estha and Rahel, twins raised in the small town of Ayemenem in Kerala. The narrative shifts between 1969, when the twins are 7 years old and 1993, when they are reunited at the age of 31. The novel tells the story of the Syrian Christian, Kochamma family beginning with Pappachi, or grandfather (whose name is Shri Benaan John Ipe), formerly an imperial entomologist whose life work, the discovery of a new species of moth is eventually attribute do someone else. Pappachi and Shoshamma Ipe or, as she is more commonly referred to in the novel, Mammachi, (grandmother) have two children, Ammu and Chacko. Under the façade of husband and provider, Pappachi is cruelly abusive and regularly beats Mammachi until the day that Chacko, a Rhodes scholar at home from Oxford, challenges his father and protects his mother. In passive retaliation, Pappachi vows never to speak to Mammachi again and demands that Ammu leave her studies at college to return home to Ayemenem. Ammu, disappointed at having to return to the small town, convinces her parents to let her move to Calcutta and stay with relatives there. While living in Calcutta she meets and marries Rahel and Estha's father, the manager of a tea estate, (who she soon discovers is an alcoholic). She gives birth to the twins and eventually returns to live in Ayemenem with Mammachi and Chacko. When she returns she finds that living with her mother and brother is Pappachi's sister, Baby Kochamma who has her own storied past of unrequited love for an Irish priest, Father Mulligan; a failed romance that results in making Baby Kochamma embittered and difficult. Meanwhile, Ammu has fallen in love with Velutha, a paravan or untouchable, who works at the family's failing pickle business, *Paradise Pickles and Preserves*. Their intercaste love affair is eventually discovered, and through a series of events, results in Velutha's death. The day before Velutha dies, at the plot's climax, the two children run away with their half-English cousin, Sophie Mol, who is visiting with her mother/Chacko's ex-wife, Margaret, from Oxford. While attempting to reach an abandoned house across the river, Sophie drowns and her body is not discovered until morning. At this point, Baby Kochamma enraged at the affair between Velutha and Ammu tells the police that Velutha is responsible for Sophie's death. Although the police are weary of inciting a riot because of Velutha's communist affiliations, they beat him to death. Ammu is forced to leave the house; she sends Estha to live with his father. Rahel moves to the U.S. as an adult, marries an American man, divorces him, and returns to Ayemenem where she is reunited with Estha.

affects the reception of female writers in this tradition. By contrast, and as I discuss in greater detail in the following chapter, Lahiri is revered for the voice that she gives to the general readers' experiences as ethnic subjects; it is a powerful politics of love that incorporates the inadequacies and inspirations of representation, recognition and correction for the South Asian American community and at the same time risks essentializing our ethnic identity to a register of repeated, authenticating tropes.

NetSAP readers' responses to Rushdie's work have precedent in academic criticism; in both sites of readership, Rushdie's novels are particularly valued for their topical "seriousness," which is measured through his complicated historical representations and dense, impenetrable prose. Early in the process of interviewing, a young South Asian American man of Bengali descent, Sunil, who had just that summer graduated from college, explained that Rushdie's novel gave him a uniquely creative perspective on historical events that more factual accounts would not cover: "I could read history as it is presented on Wikipedia. Similarly, there is something lost that you get by reading Rushdie's *Shame* which is based on [that history]. You can't read Rushdie and think this is exactly what's factual, what happened, [it's] based on the truth but not necessarily conforming to it" (Sunil 3). Rushdie's novels, in particular Sunil refers to *Shame* and *Midnight's Children*, offered him insight into a history that other more objective or non-fictional representations lack. Another young interviewee born and raised in the United States but of Pakistani descent, Nishi, explained to me that Rushdie's work had been banned in their household by her conservative Islamic parents, but that she felt compelled to read him precisely because of this controversial presence he has in more conservative South Asian Islamic communities. Not wanting to disobey or offend

her parents, she decided not to bring *The Satanic Verses* (1988) into the house and instead opted to see a theatrical production of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) to familiarize herself with Rushdie's work:

I don't want to upset them [her parents], but the sad thing is that they've never read *The Satanic Verses*, but it's something that conjured so many sad feelings, strong feelings that I never really wanted to trust that. [...] I thought let me start out with something I know won't cause controversy, to get a flavor for his style of writing. [...] And then funny enough there was like a play, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, a short play he had written right after *Satanic Verses* was made and it was about freedom of speech and so I went and saw that at a small theater. [...] I think that was when I was like an author was suppressed by one billion people let's say and what did that mean for his writing and intellectual thought? [...] How his freedom to write was suppressed and that sort of led me to read more. (Nishi 4-5)

Originally, Nishi's interest in Rushdie's work emerged from her parents' disapproval of *The Satanic Verses*, a novel famously condemned for blasphemy in 1989 by the Ayatollah Khomeini who issued a *fatwa* after its publication. But as she explains it, her desire to learn more about Rushdie's fiction, its historical resonances and political implications, was only bolstered by the controversy surrounding it.

While NetSAP readers often provided compelling and well-reasoned explanations for their interest in the historical facets of Rushdie's work, it was even more common in book club meetings and interviews for these readers to accord vehement respect to Rushdie in terms of the prestige and difficulty of his work. Readers calibrated Rushdie's overall cachet in the literary world through aesthetic comparison: by describing his work as "kaleidoscopic," "phantasmagorical" (Ajay 2); deeming it superlative, in one case better than Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) in its use of "allegory" and "symbolism" and narrative structure (*The Inheritance of Loss* Book Club 6); and finally, by predicting his future literary success, as Sunil did: "Rushdie is probably going to win the Nobel prize in literature, Naipaul did, Tagore did" (Sunil 6). Readers asserted that

they were proud to have made it through his dense prose: “it’s super-rewarding[...] he never forgets anything and all the threads get tied at the end[...] it rewards careful reading” (Sunil 16); “*Midnight’s Children* took me forever to read[...] it was very long drawn and very difficult to get through” (Padma 7); “I literally had to concentrate so much and I had to read little by little, week by week to get through it” (Pooja 21)—to cite just a few examples. But most surprisingly, throughout the process of conducting my research, time and again NetSAP readers would hyperbolically assert their love for Rushdie over all other writers of South Asian descent. For example, one reader exclaimed during an interview, “Well Rushdie, he’s the king” (Raj 2), or a set of readers described *Midnight’s Children* as “epic,” “classic,” and then ultimately, as “better than the Bible” (*The Inheritance of Loss* Book Club 20). While readers’ interests in the historical components of Rushdie’s narratives inspired considered responses, these more extreme complimentary reactions to Rushdie’s fiction suggest that NetSAP readers value his work for its cultural cachet.

Evident in NetSAP readers’ hyperbolic response to Rushdie’s fiction is an explicitly stated desire for complexity, density and inaccessibility that takes on gendered valences in the field of literary interpretation. NetSAP readers’ assertion of Rushdie’s superiority not only indicates that they are interested in the specific historical interventions of his work, but also instantiates a more ambiguous set of readerly desires that are present in all general and academic acts of interpretation, whether or not they are apparent in the interaction between the text and the reader: for example the desire for cultural capital, the desire to comprehend canonical literary value, and the desire to read

the “right” texts in the “right” way.⁷⁷ As Caren Kaplan succinctly puts it, “All readings are stories of readerly desire” (45). NetSAP readers’ love for Rushdie’s work raises questions about what measures calibrate the value of literature for the lay reader, and in turn inspire us to ask how these measures are defined but unacknowledged in academic criticism. While academic readers are trained into performing critical distance, lay readers explicitly frame their reading practice in terms of their various and sometimes competing desires. A methodology of reading that takes the role of desire into account, using this kind of engagement with lay reading publics as a model, can potentially provide a rubric for scholarly interpretation that would put us more directly in touch with our own interpretive desires and biases.

Clearly, the role of desire in acts of interpretation is not self-evident or straightforward; rather it is shaped by myriad and often oblique personal, social, cultural and historical factors. For example, readers’ stated interest in Rushdie not only obscures the unspoken reasons that structure their preferences, such as the institutionalization of literature, but it also belies the well-articulated and comprehensive interest that they expressed in other authors, mainly Jhumpa Lahiri. In the same interview in which Sunil spoke of Rushdie’s overriding superiority, we spent the bulk of the conversation discussing his strong identification with Lahiri’s work, specifically, *The Namesake*. Yet, midway through the conversation, he declared, “Jhumpa Lahiri is a good writer but you can’t compare [her with] Salman Rushdie” (Sunil 15) and then shortly thereafter we continued to discuss her depiction of Bengali-American family life. Sunil’s observation reoccurs in several interviews and book club meetings often after prolonged discussions

⁷⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1984).

of how influential, “authentic,” and cathartic the experience of reading Lahiri’s novel and short stories had been for these readers (a topic I will discuss in the final chapter). While readers revere Rushdie’s oeuvre, they seem more engaged and conversant with Lahiri’s. I argue that the discrepancy between their stated and implied interests signals the specific effects of gender on the lay readers’ ostensible preferences.

To clarify, I do not mean to suggest that gender bias is limited only to published sites of review and criticism, but rather that it emerges dynamically and relationally in several reading publics through what Janice Radway has termed the “institutional matrix,” or in other words the relationship between the reader, text, audience, and exigencies of the literary marketplace (Radway 20). Because gender plays a relatively tacit yet decisive role in determining how writers of South Asian descent are comprehended within the broad field of reception, creating dialogue among reading publics offers a way to interrogate the motivations and desires that fuel these biases in interpretive practice. In Rushdie’s case, he tends to be read as the gold standard of Indian writing by managing to both transcend and capitalize on his ethnicity by writing about Indian national history and politics. In contrast, similar to other female writers of South Asian descent whose work popularly circulates in the U.S., Lahiri’s topical concern with second-generation identity is at once valued in lay and academic criticism for its “authenticity.” At the same time her work is decontextualized through critical interpretations that neglect her fiction’s representations of a particular historical moment in second generation experience and fail to consider the situated readings that her fiction inspires in diverse interpretive communities.

The institutional exigency to stake out territory for South Asian diasporic authors within the multicultural “ethnic canon” leads scholars to position Lahiri within literary historical frameworks that reproduce the gender biases of the so-called mainstream canon. In the recently published collection of essays, *New Cosmopolitans: South Asians in the U.S.* Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma write, “One does not need specific knowledge of history, or geography, or civilizations to understand Lahiri’s narrative world” (156). In contrast, they assert that writers such as Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, and Amitav Ghosh require knowledge of the history of empire and colonialism: “Ghosh and Naipaul’s narrative worlds do require some sense of history, particularly the coupled history of empire and colony and the subsequent emergence of a postcolonial reality in fiction. Naipaul’s fiction in particular remains grounded upon the old kind of cosmopolitan readership base that was firmed up by Rushdie” (156). The broader aim of their project is to define two different forms of cosmopolitanism and anoint female writers of South Asian descent as the newer, globally conscious, mobile strain. They argue that writers such as Lahiri, Divakaruni and Roy comprise “a publishing trend called women of color” while insisting on the historical and geographical particularities of the male writers’ publishing contexts. Against the male writers’ difficulty and seriousness Rajan and Sharma praise Lahiri’s accessibility, which enables the popular reader to identify with her fiction’s familiar characters and situations that appear as “the routine subjects of media news stories” (156). While seeking to critique the formation of the Western canon, academic critics of South Asian diasporic literature like Rajan and Sharma unconsciously reinstate its gender problematics by casting the historical,

postcolonial, difficult voice as male and the identity-oriented, ethnic, accessible voice as female.

In this way, narratives written by female authors of South Asian descent bear the burdens of exotic representation. Diasporic fiction that focuses on modern Indian history, empire, and the colonial experience presumably encourages historical investment and political engagement with the experiences of South Asian immigrant groups. In contrast, academic critics such as Inderpal Grewal and Graham Huggan scrutinize identity-oriented, second-generation narratives of immigration for representations of ethnic authenticity and exoticised sexuality that allegedly pander to Western popular audiences. Here, Rajan and Sharma's desire to construct a feminist canon of new cosmopolitans leads them to replicate the regressive gender politics that they intend to critique. As David Palumbo-Liu explains, the exigencies of multicultural curricula in university classrooms often lead scholars to reproduce the limitations of dominant canons in their efforts to create cohesive ethnic canons:

The formation of an ethnic literary canon has begun as a central part of this institutionalization of multiculturalism that parallels the modes of inserting ethnicity into the general curriculum—certain “texts” deemed worth of representing the “ethnic experience” are set forth, yet the critical and pedagogical discourses that convey these texts into the classroom and present them to students and readers in general may very well mimic and reproduce the ideological underpinnings of the dominant canon, adding “material” to it after a necessary hermeneutic operation elides contradiction and smoothes over the rough grain of history and politics, that is, those very things that have constructed the “ethnic” in the United States. (2)

Literary critical analyses of South Asian diasporic texts enact precisely the ideological reproduction of the dominant canon's shortcomings through the kind of strange circularity that Palumbo-Liu describes: a circularity in which the irony of the ethnic

canon is that while it intends to provide a counter-narrative to the dominant canon, it actually reinforces hegemonic complacencies. As we see in the case of Rajan and Sharma, their well-meaning intentions to carve out a space for South Asian female writers within the burgeoning literary formation firstly eclipses readings that might see the historical and social implications of their work: the narratives of immigration, assimilation, displacement and class that inhere in these narrative worlds. Secondly, by naming writers such as Lahiri, Divakaruni and Roy the unprecedented pioneers of a new literary formation, Rajan and Sharma cast female authors of South Asian descent within a gendered quandary of developmental progress, whereby these writers are expected to take up familiar narratives and deal with universal concerns, while also fulfilling lay *and* academic readerly desires for ethnic difference.

Rajan and Sharma are certainly not alone in struggling with the difficulties of forming a cohesive South Asian diasporic literary history. In fact, while their intentions and desires remain relatively transparent, gender biases in other sites of literary criticism, even if they are more overt, are often consequently more difficult to track. As I will discuss later, although Lahiri's fiction employs determinative representations of gender bias, there is a strange ambivalence in her readership that recuperates the gender biases in her work and complicates academic readings of her fiction. In contrast, Roy and her first and only novel, *The God of Small Things*, have been the subject of curiously severe (yet arguably interrelated) lay, popular media, and academic criticism. In Roy's circumstance, however, recuperative feminist readings serve to compound rather than alleviate the gendered expectations to which her work is subject.

NetSAP readers were extremely ambivalent about Roy's work, particularly her first and only novel, and many of their critiques are echoed in published criticism. In interviews with NetSAP readers, Roy generated unprecedented anxiety. In contrast to their responses to Lahiri, Divakaruni, Vikram Seth or Rushdie, NetSAP readers found Roy's work un-relatable, difficult to read, too solicitous to Western audiences, or, too female. As Sunil explained when we were discussing *The God of Small Things*, "I thought that girls would like it a lot more than guys would like it. It was very...intensely emotional...it requires the reader to invest in it in order to get into it. It was very well written but it was just too much" (15). Sunil genders his own reception of the novel in terms of both content and style—like many readers he has a concept of what types of literature appeal differently to men and women according to style and subject matter. Similarly, during a book club meeting, another young male reader, Raj, insisted that Rushdie's popularity enabled Roy's success: "There was clearly a relationship between *The God of Small Things* and Salman Rushdie. That Arundhati Roy says she never read a Salman Rushdie novel, okay, but I bet her publisher did. And they know that the audience did and I think that Rushdie enables certain kinds of stories to be published" (*The Royal Ghosts* Book Club Meeting 35). These NetSAP readers' insistence on gendered reading preferences and Rushdie's influence, if not on Roy's work per se, than on her reception, iterates an explicit act of canon-formation on the part of non-academic readers. NetSAP readers' responses are shaped by published forms of criticism, but at the same time their ambivalence about Roy exposes the tacit modes of South Asian diasporic canon formation wherein gender hierarchies prevail. As we see here, readers in this study were extremely aware of the ways in which South Asian culture is marketed and manipulated

in the diaspora but the relationship between gender and cultural commodification remains undertheorized in lay, popular, and academic critical arenas.

NetSAP readers' relative disinterest in Roy could of course be accounted for in part by her turn away from literature, but notably their dismissal of Roy's novel has a direct correlation in popular reviews that malign her lyrical style for both its excess and its inadequate similarity to Rushdie's aesthetic. While it's important to acknowledge that there is abundant praise for Roy's innovative use of English in *The God of Small Things*, the critiques, which outnumber the compliments, tend to fall into two main camps, with some reviewers complaining that her writing is ungrammatical and clumsy: "Her novel like most such debuts, is a mixture of outstanding promise and wonky style. Roy badly needs a good editor to sieve the gold from the chaff."⁷⁸ And others point out that it is excessive, "forcing every minute detail to symbolize something bigger" with symbolism that "is a trifle overdone" and a "prose style that is rather off-putting at first, coy and overwrought."⁷⁹ In both cases her work is often unfavorably compared to Rushdie's linguistic stylings, for while he is able to pull off verbal games, postmodernist literary tricks, and excessively laden, descriptive language, Roy, his "flawed child" is not. In this way, Roy's undisciplined and uncontrolled use of language is positioned in a gendered hierarchy whereby she can only (badly) mimic Rushdie's writing.

Academic and popular reading publics have cast both Rushdie and Roy as the West's exotic literary informants but this process of exoticization is not uniform for the two writers. That is to say, Rushdie's positioning as a universalized, masculine subject is

⁷⁸ Amanda Craig, *The God of Small Things*, "New Statesman", London, England, v 26, 49, 27 June 1997.

⁷⁹ See Sybil S. Steinbery, *Publisher's Weekly*, New York 3 March 1997, Vol. 244, Iss. 9, 62. Sally Lodge, *Publisher's Weekly*, New York: 13 Jan. 1997, Iss. 2, 47. Leah Hager Cohen, *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 Nov. 1997, Boston, 11.

what enables the paternalistic language of genealogy to emerge in reviews of Roy's work. Rushdie may be vulnerable, as Aijaz Ahmad puts it, to the plight of the Third World writer in which "the whole of the 'Third World' ...singularized into an oppositionality, [is] idealized as the site... of alterity and authenticity" (33). Yet upon the publication of her first novel, Roy's persistent comparison with Rushdie demonstrates that she, and by extension other female writers in this tradition, hold a subordinate position within the South Asian diasporic canon which can only be authorized and legitimated by the legacy of established South Asian diasporic male writers.⁸⁰ In a 1997 book review for *The New Republic*, the famously acerbic critic James Wood stated that, "Arundhati Roy's good and flawed *The God of Small Things*, which is a perfect child of Rushdie's, offer[s] a picture of what Indian writing looks like today." Although the novel was published and reviewed 10 years ago, Wood's statement about Roy's novel reflects a range of issues affecting the canonization, marketing, and circulation of South Asian diasporic literature. While seeming to compliment Roy, Wood subordinates her work to Rushdie's, casting her as his inferior literary descendent, but one who nonetheless will take up the mantle of ethnic Indian informant to the West.⁸¹ Certainly, Wood is not the first or the only critic in either popular or academic criticism to infantilize Roy, particularly in relation to Rushdie, or to claim her work as the new voice of India. In fact, upon and even prior to its publication, *The God of Small Things* sparked several critical debates regarding the rise

⁸⁰ Roy's turn to writing political essays might provide an interesting, although completely conjectural, space in which to explore the limits that she might have felt imposed upon her with the enormous success of *The God of Small Things*. She disapproves of the name "writer-activist" stating that "I've been wondering why it should be that the person who wrote *The God of Small Things* is called a writer, and the person who wrote the political essays is called an activist? True, *The God of Small Things* is a work of fiction, but it's no less political than any of my essays." (Power Politics: 10-11)

⁸¹Wood evokes the paternalistic trope of "Midnight's Grandchildren," a phrase coined to denote contemporary writers of Indian descent who supposedly have benefited from Salman Rushdie's literary ascendancy in the field of post-colonial writing.

of the post-colonial literary celebrity and the status of ethnic and linguistic authenticity in modern Indian diasporic writing.⁸² Roy became both the new poster child and alternatively the punching bag of Indian diasporic literature. In several popular and even academic essays, the novel's content was conflated with the autobiographical details of her life, and reviewers constantly emphasized her physical beauty, managing at once to explain and dismiss the success of her novel partly because of it.⁸³ As Jan McGirk summed up these two themes in her review for London-based *Sunday Times*, "With her mass of untamed curls and smoldering dark eyes Arundhati Roy could be the model for one of her romantic heroines."⁸⁴

Academic analyses of the novel compound popular interpretations that while promoting her novel produce Roy herself as an object of desire. In his work on the status of the post-colonial literary celebrity, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margin*, Graham Huggan argues that writers such as Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, and Arundhati Roy mobilize a kind of "strategic exoticism designed to trap the unwary reader into complicity with the Orientalisms of which the novel so hauntingly relates" (77). While Huggan questions the tendency in popular review and academic criticism to conflate ethnic writers with their texts, in the case of Rushdie, he frames this conflation as one that poses a challenge to neo-Orientalist hankerings for exotic representations of the East: "Saleem/Rushdie ironically constructs the metropolitan reader as a voyeuristic consumer" (72). Meanwhile, three pages later his analysis reveals an ambivalence about how *The God of Small Things* "anticipated and participated in the global processes of its

⁸² See Tom Hiney, *The Spectator*, London, 5 July 1997 and Jordana Hart *Ms.* Arlington, Nov/Dec 1997, Vol. 8, 87

⁸³ Jason Cowley, "Goddess of Small Things," *The Times* 18 Oct. 1997.

⁸⁴ Jan McGirk, "Indian Literary Star Faces Caste Sex Trial." *The Times*. 29 June 1997

own commercial production” (76). Granted, Huggan states that “Roy, like Rushdie (and to a lesser extent Seth), is highly skilled at self-promotion, and at the media-friendly manufacturing of exotic (‘Oriental’) romance” (77) thereby indicting, to some degree all three authors, for their facility with strategic exoticism. With Rushdie and Seth, however, Huggan suggests that this skill ultimately turns exoticism and Orientalism on its head, posing a challenge to Western readers who believe they are getting encapsulated versions of an authentic India. Conversely, his treatment of Roy suggests that no such agency is at work: rather, her self-fashioning ultimately serves commercial interest, describing Roy as “incorrigibly photogenic” and claiming that she “has clearly worked hard on her image” (77). As Julie Mullaney explains, “Huggan unfairly singles out Roy in crudely gendered terms as the singular ‘author’ of her own image. By contrast to his treatment of Vikram Seth and Salman Rushdie, he overlooks the fact that Roy’s image is both created and sustained by Western readership (which he is a part of) and an image-hungry media rather than by Roy herself” (59). Presumably, Huggan’s desire to critique the neo-Orientalist imperatives at work in the publication, marketing, and reception of ethnic texts leads him to overlook gender as a determining factor in shaping Roy’s critical reception. To date, the most thorough analyses of gender in Roy’s literary reception have focused mainly on her relation to early South Asian female writer Sarojini Naidu, a Bengali poet who published in the 1890s in a style imitative of the British Romantic poets (she wanted to be the “Keats for India” and was received with curiosity in England).⁸⁵ Elleke Boehmer and Melissa M. Purdue both draw parallels between Naidu’s

⁸⁵ See Elleke Boehmer’s “East is East and South is South: The Cases of Sarojini Naidu and Arundhati Roy,” *Women: A Cultural Review* Vol. 11, No. ½, 2000 and Melissa M. Purdue, “From Sarojini Naidu’s Curved and Eloquent Little Mouth to Arundhati Roy’s Mass of Untamed Curls and Smoldering Dark Eyes,” *Atenea*, Vol. 23, Issue 2, 2003.

reception at the end of the 19th century and Roy's in the present day. In comparing Roy to Naidu, their treatments of gender in Roy's reception grapple with questions of how the "West continues to read the East" through the figure and literary production of an ethnic female writer (Boehmer 66). These readings are valuable in their exposure of persistently regressive and neo-Orientalist tendencies when it comes to Western readings of the exotic, female "other" and the conflation of South Asian female writers and their work. Boehmer incisively asks, "Do western critics [...] risk deploying native women, as before, to signify that which is most exotic, intriguing and strange about once-colonized cultures? Does the gendered primitive remain [...] the bearer of the West's exotic interests and subversive desires?" (67). As Boehmer points out, there is a long history in academic and popular criticism that, unaware of its own critical investments, portrays South Asian female writers as the repositories and purveyors of ethnic authenticity and sexualized exoticism in the West. Ultimately, Huggan's conclusions about Roy's work do not seem to merely indicate oversight; rather, as Boehmer indicates, he participates in a scholarly critical history that abstracts female writers of South Asian descent from the content of their work and denies the overlapping modes of desire that determine how these texts and writers are received within different literary publics.

Huggan buys into the view that, for many literary critics in the academy and general media, the marketing and reception of *The God of Small Things* was perceived as an "object lesson in commodity fetishism," and yet he fails to see the complexity of how readerly desire functions through gender to make both Roy and her work an object of consumption (76). Specifically, South Asian female writers in the U.S. are assessed in terms of their ability to fulfill certain desires: the desire for authentic narrative tropes

such as arranged marriage, descriptions of cuisine, the fraught encounter between East and West; the desire for beautiful South Asian female cultural representatives who embody the allure and exoticism of the region itself; and finally, the desire for generic conformity, which in other words is the longing for representations of desire in the form of realist, romantic narratives often depicting interracial romance. Roy's novel and reception partially fulfill these desires, enabling critics both to condemn her for pandering to Western audiences, and also to interpret the novel's reversion to these familiar tropes as an inadequate attempt at "meta-exoticism" that would "[lay] bare the grounds of its own material production" (Dalrymple 1997; Mongia 1997; Chisholm 1997 qtd. in Huggan 76-77).

In a more recuperative mode of reading, critics such as Rajan and Sharma, motivated by the institutional exigencies for placement and canon formation, which in turn is tied to the politics of representation and correction, cast Roy's fiction as part of a wider trend in "new cosmopolitanism" to present narratives that are familiar and recognizable to the global consumer. Unfortunately in doing so, they hastily totalize Roy and Lahiri's reception claiming that the two authors are similarly valued for their "mass appeal" and the familiarity of their narratives in "the contemporary phase of globalization":

Writers such as Roy and Lahiri are actors on the public culture stage, and their appeal lies in combining a new kind of narrative texture with a mass appeal factor. Their stories of migration, of identities in flux, subjects facing crisis situations and trauma, represent a contemporary phase in globalization. Their fictional worlds are shot through with moments and incidents that are made recognizable because of the ways in which mass media provides easy access to different and diverse cultures as consumable and discardable, and as transitory experiences of readers' desires that can move beyond ethnic, class, and gender differences. (156)

Rajan and Sharma attribute Roy and Lahiri's popularity to the familiarity of their topics, which allows them at once to transcend alterity while also confirming readerly desire for the ethnically authentic. Oddly enough though, while in their own assessment Lahiri fits neatly under the rubrics they construct for the "new cosmopolitan" writer, Roy confounds their analysis. They explain that while *The God of Small Things* may have won the Booker prize, it failed to engage lay readers:

Readers were not persuaded, because they complained of having to stumble over difficult Indian words, which distracted them from getting the meaning. In other words, even when readers understood that it would be a racial/ethnic encounter, they wanted the text to be transparent, and were unprepared to work through the rough terrain of cultural translation (153).

They go on anecdotally to relate that they found these problems of difference were ameliorated when the book came out on tape and was read by someone with a "slightly accented" but "well-modulated voice"—a feature they claim helped make the book so popular here. Rajan and Sharma paradoxically posit that Roy's success is based on the familiarity of her narrative topics yet, they also claim that readers had so much trouble understanding the novel that the "racial/ethnic encounter" with the text could only be resolved through an audio version of the novel that would mediate difference. I pause over this messy, contradictory moment in scholarship on Roy's work to emphasize that even when critics aim to recuperate her work and to give it a place of importance in the South Asian diasporic canon, the overdetermined discursive field of Roy's reception—the quandaries of difference, exoticism, authenticity, and literary tourism that the novel produces—confounds their efforts. Additionally, in their effort to produce a "new" cosmopolitan canon, Rajan and Sharma ignore the differences in Roy and Lahiri's literary projects, highlighting instead the commonalities in how they fulfill readerly

desires. But as I have mentioned, there have been some clear differences in the types of readerly responses that these two writers inspire, differences that are contingent on their successful or incomplete fulfillment of the gendered expectations South Asian female writers are expected to meet. While both Lahiri and her work are legible to the academic and popular tastemakers, Roy redefines narrative expectations and rewrites many of the tropes of domesticity that prevail in the work of female South Asian American writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Divakaruni: namely, arranged marriage, the romance of bi-ethnic encounter, and the consumption of Indian culture through the body of the Indian female.⁸⁶

The construction of the South Asian diasporic canon has been marked by a circularity of desire whereby narratives that deal in familiar themes around gender are popularized and granted the sheen of authenticity, creating a market demand for similar narratives. Roy's troubled and uneven reception in lay readership, literary academia, and popular review suggests that if the fiction produced by South Asian female writers does not conform to tropes of second-generation identity, arranged marriage, and the romance of interracial union, then popular and academic discourse around the text will reflect the difficulty of situating it in the wider literary tradition. This problem of placement produces unevenly gendered, sometimes sexist readings of the author and the text. And as I have tried to lay out in the preceding paragraphs, this problem of placement functions in particularly severe ways for a writer like Roy, leading critics like Wood and Huggan to situate Roy's work in terms of paternalist hierarchies or prompting others like Sharma

⁸⁶ In brief, Rahel's failed marriage in the United States and her eventual return to her familial home in Kerala rewrites familiar narratives of both immigration to the U.S and nostalgic return and rethinks tropes of assimilation achieved primarily through marriage or heterosexual union.

and Rajan to sacrifice the specific contributions of Roy's work in an effort to create a feminist canon for South Asian diasporic literature.

In contrast to Lahiri, Roy occupies a difficult position in the Indian diasporic literary tradition. I take her reception in popular and academic reviews as a cautionary tale of sorts about the effects that sexist and biased published review can have on lay readership. Even though Roy's work retains cache in the university classroom and in academic tracts on South Asian diasporic literature, the critical reception that *The God of Small Things* generated remains a troubling site of academic and popular readership. In spite—or perhaps because—the novel defies what I argue are the exoticising publishing exigencies placed on female writers of South Asian descent in the U.S., the text was buried under the paratext. In other words, the novel's unique contribution to South Asian diasporic literature is often obscured by an obsession with and fetishization of the figure of the South Asian female writer. Academic attempts to create a canon of South Asian diasporic literature do not always recognize how the fetish of authenticity, gendered publishing imperatives and the strategies of the literary marketplace can determine the text's reception, and by extension, the "text" itself.

The Possibilities and Limits of Recuperative Feminist Readings: The Case of Chitra Divakaruni's Fiction

While Roy's work stands as a case study for the limitations that motivated reading practice can produce, particularly when those motivations (however well-meaning) are not transparent, Chitra Divakaruni's literary reception presents both the possibilities and the pitfalls of the recuperative feminist readings that frequently circulate in South Asian diasporic critical reception. Feminist scholars such as Inderpal Grewal and Rajini Srikanth argue that this literature is characterized by a repetitive, limiting motif that

valorizes assimilative adjustment from Indian tradition to U.S. modernity. In their recently published monographs on South Asian diasporic cultural production and literature, Srikanth and Grewal argue that increased attention to the transnational circulation of South Asian American fiction reveals that literary depictions of the immigrant experience reinforce hegemonic attitudes about the progressive West by perpetuating a culturally essentialist, nostalgic vision of the Indian nation (see Grewal 65 and Srikanth 131). The opposition between tradition and modernity in this tradition structures academic debates on Divakaruni's two most popular works, *Arranged Marriages* and *Mistress of Spices*, and it is enacted through the circulation of a set of exoticising, authenticating tropes. Most critics agree that Divakaruni's work not only reproduces but perhaps partially establishes many of the repetitive tropes that circulate in South Asian American fiction—namely, representations of arranged marriage, repressed women, oppressive men, Indian cuisine, exoticised sexuality, and mysticism are a few of the signifiers of consumable ethnic difference that are mobilized to market South Asian American women's fiction as authentic to Western reading audiences. (See Grewal 74-79 and Srikanth 130-134)

Academic readings of Divakaruni's fiction debate the specific ideological effects of these tropes on the coalitional identity formation of the South Asian American community and the politics of representation in the U.S. Such debates have precedent in the broader field of Asian American studies. For example, in her foundational work on Asian American literature, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong argues that in contrast to literary critics whose work and subject matter have been institutionally protected and canonized, critics of

Asian American literature, and by extension all marginalized literatures, are often in dialogue with the communities they represent: “Asian American critics have to establish their professional domain; through doing so, and through disseminating the products of their efforts, they play a role in building their community” (9). According to Wong, the complicated relationship among the academic scholar, the cultures that we are invested in analyzing, and corresponding sites of community formation requires increased accountability to the ideological valences that motivate reading praxis. Interpretation in this case is a dialogic act in which texts determine their readership just as much as readership enables the marketing, circulation, and success of certain types of narratives. Rajini Srikanth summarizes this circularity:

Judging from the spate of articles in the mainstream media on arranged marriages, there was a danger that this would become the expected theme for South Asian American writers. Another possible theme, in the words of Samir Dayal, is that of “picturesque poverty” set in South Asia. Of course, I don’t mean to suggest that South Asian American authors will end up writing to meet the expectations of the publishing industry or will create self-Orientalizing images; what I am pointing to is the limitations that South Asian Americans may place upon themselves as readers and potential writers in terms of the narratives that they envision for their communities. (195)

Srikanth emphasizes how powerful readers are in shaping the literary field and warns of the limitations that we can impose upon ourselves through a limited interpretive praxis. Divakaruni’s fiction exemplifies Srikanth’s observations, inspiring a diverse register of interpretive possibilities that at times recuperate the more “self-Orientalizing” tropes of the narrative and at other times, often simultaneously with the recuperative interpretations, critique these essentialist elements. In the following section, I look at how lay and academic readers work to recuperate these intractable representations of sexuality and gender in Divakaruni’s fiction. My aim is to consider the benefits of recuperative

readings but also to ascertain more clearly their limited value whereby our readerly desires for feminist victories may too easily excuse the critical shortcomings of a text.

Two of the most well-developed and extended academic critiques of *The Mistress of Spices* present opposing perspectives on how narrative representations of the clash between modernity and tradition in the novel powerfully inform multiculturalist agendas in U.S. academic institutions. The details of the plot provide a sense of some of the more ostensibly authenticating moments in the novel. The novel follows the story of Tilo, a young woman mystically disguised as an old crone, who takes up residence in Oakland, California. Under the ruse that she is an Indian immigrant with a local spice shop, Tilo is part of secret coven of “spice mistresses” who are trained in the magical arts of using these powerful masalas to aid the Indian immigrant community in Oakland with the various hardships that they face in the United States. Divakaruni invokes features of Hindu mysticism throughout the narrative, metonymically linking the spices to Hindu beliefs in cycles of creation, preservation, and destruction. In effect, the spices take on destructive and constructive qualities depending on how they are wielded. The spices are used to unite lovers, mend a family rift that occurs when a young woman wants to marry outside of the South Asian community, aid a young Indian boy who is the subject of racist attacks at school, and encourage another young woman to leave her abusive husband. Tilo transforms into a spice mistress through a rite of initiation in which she passes through fire and as Grewal points out, becomes in this moment, “a sati come to life” (75). The invocation of sati in the novel articulates a “complex prehistory of knowledges about India and Indian women” (Mani 28). As Mani explains, in India, debates on the practice of sati are often imbricated with the colonial period, missionary

projects, and imperial legacies, while in the “West” sati offers a metaphor for women’s brutalized oppression in the Third World (Mani 28-30). Tilo’s willingly entered sati arguably evokes a problematic resistance to colonial legislation outlawing sati; attempts to revise the metaphor of oppressive, patriarchal subjugation by recasting sati as a rite of initiation, a redefined feminist act of empowerment and vocational fulfillment, runs the risk of legitimating chauvinistic, Hindu tradition. The narrative climaxes when Tilo falls in love with a young Native American man, Raven, who frequents the store, and to whom she is initially attracted because of his racial ambiguity. The spice mistresses are sworn to celibacy however, so in order to be with this man she has to choose between her “traditional” fate to remain a celibate spice mistress (represented through fictitious Indian mythology) and the man she loves (representative of Western modernity). Interestingly, the choice between tradition and modernity signified as it often is through “romantic” (rather than arranged) love is complicated by the fact that Raven is Native American, a racial category that often connotes, as “Indianness” often does as well, exoticised, ancient wisdom, rather than modernity. The narrative requires a complex interpretive practice that can both identify and work to reconcile the limitations that it presents with the elements of critique that challenge stock multiculturalist themes.

Both Inderpal Grewal and Gita Rajan are invested in feminist readings of Divakaruni’s work, but their different approaches construct and describe the complex interpretive field around women’s writing, seek to critique exoticism, and recuperate Orientalist markers of gendered difference as a mechanism of empowerment. In a nuanced reading of the novel that encompasses the complexities of its exoticism, Grewal argues that, “the cosmopolitan feminist discourse of the migrant’s movement from

tradition to modernity remains the structuring mechanism[...] [The novel] is clearly about consumption and the means by which difference could be consumed through an exotic aesthetic” (75). Grewal articulates a position that at once acknowledges the limitations of this “cosmopolitan feminist discourse” and the power of the familiar gendered discourse of Eastern tradition and Western modernity, enacted here through Tilo’s adaptation to American multiculturalism, to render difference legible to Western readerships. Grewal ultimately asserts that *The Mistress of Spices* validates the position of the exotic Asian woman in the context of a “liberal idea of America” and in this way reinforces a feminist discourse in which modernity is achieved through a hegemonic, Western “discourse of choice” that can be achieved only through tropes of mobility and travel (metaphorical or literal) from East to West (65).

In contrast, Gita Rajan offers a more unequivocally recuperative reading of the novel. While she admits that the narrative employs Orientalist elements, (218) she argues that,

Tilo’s intervention [in various Indian immigrant lives] emphasizes the activism of women of color as they pledge their help to each other. Divakaruni interlaces an emerging modernity with minority traditions to reshape life’s conditions into a free-flowing, rippling, equitable, present reality [...] Divakaruni gestures towards feminist solidarity by moving Tilo away from the established epistemological apparatus that contrasts tradition pejoratively with modernity. (228)

For Rajan, modernity and tradition are productively mediated in the novel by Tilo’s adaptability and fluidity, her essential ability to impact the world around her ethically (234). The contrast in Grewal and Rajan’s readings of the novel is nowhere as apparent as it is in their interpretations of what the spices signify as the central exotic trope of the narrative. Whereas Rajan argues that Divakaruni invokes this theme of mystical spices to

recast the “arch metaphor of colonial expansion through the spice trade” and challenge the associated Orientalisms of the colonial spice route by creating Tilo as a “postnational spice mistress”(221), Grewal asserts that the novel “represses the violence of the modern history of spices by enabling them to appear magically in the United States” and that while they are not necessarily the “signs of violence that they have been in the history of the West” that they do indeed signify “female knowledge that is exotic to the West” (76). Both critics are invested in interrogating the gendered inflections and multiculturalist interventions of South Asian diasporic literary histories. Rajan’s reading recuperates *The Mistress of Spices* by claiming that it is ethically instructive (and by extension can be used to show us a responsible way to relate to our own communities), while for Grewal, the novel participates in the wider phenomenon of multicultural feminism (and therefore acts discursively to limit perceptions of South Asian women’s agency and autonomy). Simply put, their interpretive praxis ultimately is driven by a desire to comprehend the situated social effects of this literary tradition in a range of interpretive communities.

Grewal and Rajan’s overlapping, arguably competing, scholarly readings firstly demonstrate the unstable, messy nature of interpretive practice, even in what I believe is arguably still its most sacred sphere of professionalization, academia. Increased attention to the competing, often contradictory interpretations that we produce in academia, however, proves that interpretation can only be comprehended as dialogical act in all sites of academic and lay readership. The broader implication of this is that the texts we analyze are already determined by the “social location” and “cultural competencies” of our situated site of readership (Radway 1991, 8). This is not a new point; it has been articulated in various forms by Janice Radway, Stuart Hall, and Stanley Fish, to name just

a few.⁸⁷ Yet, what remains undertheorized in the field of reception theory is how attention to this circularity in the interpretive process is particularly vital for scholars of multiethnic or marginalized literatures, precisely because of the discursive power of these literary traditions in determining the politics of recognition and correction for the communities that we ostensibly represent. For better or for worse, in South Asian American reading communities literature becomes a social site in which we debate the terms of our cultural citizenship and contest what images, characteristics, and traditions should be portrayed as representative of our cultural heritage.⁸⁸ Interpretation in this literary field, whether or not it is explicitly acknowledged in academic criticism, always occurs as a dynamic, disputed, and dialogic process. When scholars and lay readers debate the feminist meanings of a given text, they are both creating a discursive field and participating in one that is already formed; as Radway eloquently describes, “Social subjects[...] are spoken by discourse even as they speak through multiple discourses themselves” (*Cultural Studies* 364). Grewal and Rajan’s interpretations of *The Mistress of Spices* demonstrate that while there are discursively determined “patterns” and “regularities” to the kinds of interpretations that a given text may inspire (Radway 1991, 8), interpretive praxis even in academic spheres is not only shaped by the complexity inherent to the text but perhaps even more so by the motivations and predilections of the reader.

NetSAP readers, for example, use Divakaruni’s work and by extension South Asian American literature for diverse purposes. In interviews, book club participants

⁸⁷ For summary on Hall see John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, London: Unwin Hyman Ltd, 1989. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980.

⁸⁸ See sepjamutiny.org for an example of this sort of community blogging.

explained that they use South Asian American women's fiction, in particular, to normalize their cultural experiences in the U.S., aid them in developing strategies to cope with various domestic and familial pressures, encourage the disclosure of domestic abuse, instruct them in etiquette relating to inter- and intra- racial marriage and dating, and finally, to bolster a sense of community identity and social awareness. These readings of South Asian diasporic literature participate in the long history of what Caren Kaplan defines as recuperative feminist readings: "this history of the politics of recuperation—the sense, common to much feminist thinking of the seventies and early eighties, that the most important work of feminist scholarship lay in reclamation and recovery to be achieved by identifying with lost and silenced women" (24). Although, as Kaplan explains, recuperative feminist praxis had its heyday in the second wave of feminist criticism, I have found that it remains a persistent reading strategy for lay and academic readers of South Asian diasporic literature in their efforts to reclaim Orientalist, exoticising tropes of South Asian female sexuality. Recuperative feminist reading relies largely on the fraught logic of feminist identification which as Kaplan reminds us can produce readings that are insightful, therapeutic, and transformative, but if left unchecked can also serve to obscure the text's critical thrust or to justify its limitations.

For NetSAP readers, the politics of recuperation often occurred in tandem with concerns about the politics of representation. For example, Padma, a young Indian American woman whom I interviewed at her apartment in Northern Virginia, valued Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* for challenging repetitive depictions of South Asian women as passive and meek:

I think *The Mistress of Spices* was interesting. [...] It was interesting to see a woman written that way. [...] And it was a nice little intro to South Asian magical

realism. You know, like she's this young girl who has these powers and become kind of like this, you know, goddess in her village. But, I thought the character of the woman was interesting. She was not passive, which I really liked. I'm really tired of these passive women characters, they piss me off. (Padma 21)

Padma was not a regular participant in the NetSAP book club and told me before we started the interview that she actually preferred the social events organized by other parts of the organization. She was a particularly well-read interviewee, and like many NetSAP readers was well-versed in the South Asian literary critical tradition, as is evident in her assessment of *The Mistress of Spices* as a good introduction to magical realism. When I went into this interview, it was as a very skeptical reader of Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*, but Padma challenged me with her reading of Tilo as a powerful female figure, a character (in keeping with Rajan's analysis) that turns tropes of exotic South Asian female sexuality on their head. When I responded by saying, "Yeah, you know, you're right. Listening to you talk about it—especially given the way that women seem to be written in South Asian literature as unidimensional, [Tilo] strangely enough was sort of breaking out of the mold" (Padma 22), Padma replied, "But I think women in general are written in one dimension. Not just in South Asian literature" (22). Padma's astute observations as well as her challenge to my readings of female narratives particularly as they are inflected by race instantiate the ambiguities of the politics of representation.

On the one hand, she offers a reading that casts Tilo as a more identifiable, independent, powerful South Asian female character, even if her own identification is partially thwarted by the novel's magical realist form. On the other hand, her refusal throughout the interview to see the trope of passivity in fiction by South Asian female writers as influenced by a long legacy of cultural chauvinism and ethnic stereotyping also signals the limits of identification and the politics of representation in South Asian

American communities. That is to say, the assertion that women's oppression is not particularized through racial formation participates in a history of racial denial for South Asians in the U.S. In particular, class plays a crucial role in perpetuating the repudiation of a racial identity in favor of an ethnic affiliation. Sunil Bhatia, a social psychologist who studies the cultures and communities of the Indian diaspora explains that in the U.S. class, specifically the model minority myth and femininity work in tandem to preserve notions of "pure" cultural and ethnic origins:

Many diverse groups of Indian immigrants (battered women's societies, gays and lesbians, taxi drivers) are often not included as part of the image of "Indian culture" that community members want to brandish to the American society. Several scholars studying issues related to diasporic identity note that South Asian women are often the victims of the community's attempt to present itself as a spiritual, traditional, and homogenous group with ancient cultural roots (38; see also Prashad 124).

As Bhatia, and several other prominent social scientists have noted, South Asian women often are saddled with the primary responsibility of propagating myths of authentic, monolithic tradition, with the result that they face a set of multivalent impediments to cultural adaptation and acceptance in the U.S. (see Das Dasgupta 5). Like Padma, I also desire empowered representations of South Asian women (and women in general) in the literature that I read, but to deny that race inflects the weaknesses of how various female characters are portrayed leaves intact assumptions about South Asian women as metonyms for authentic Indian culture and tradition.

The recuperative interpretive strategies Padma employs to read Divakaruni's work have precedent in academic criticism on South Asian American writing, and they are no less ambiguous for their presence in published criticism. That is, the desire for redemptive feminist narratives prompts academic critics to perform similarly strategic

interpretations on novels and short stories that they otherwise might identify as stereotypical, exoticist, and sexist. In *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America*, Rajini Srikanth analyzes her own difficult encounter with representations of South Asian women as meek and oppressed victims of their own cultural heritage in two of Chitra Divakaruni's short stories from a collection called *Arranged Marriages*. Strikingly, Srikanth's analysis of these stories considers the interpretive possibilities that these texts inspire and foreclose. The first story, "The Ultrasound," focuses on the practice of female feticide in India. The narrative begins with two cousins, Arundhati and Anjali, finding out they are pregnant. Both women have had arranged marriages, but Arundhati, nicknamed Runu, lives in a small town in India with her conservative in-laws, while, Anjali lives in the U.S. with her relatively progressive husband who encourages her to get a degree in education. Runu's in-laws and husband pressure her into having an amniocentesis, and when they find out that she is having a girl they demand that she abort the fetus. Anjali, on the other hand, who is also anxious that she might be having a girl (mainly because of the expectations of her in-laws), finds out that she is having a boy. The story ends with Anjali planning to help Runu move to the U.S. and raise her daughter there. Srikanth uses Amitava Kumar's reading of this short story to make sense of her own "beleaguered fatigue" at contending repeatedly with popular representations of "oppressed women in the developing world, of megalomaniac patriarchal figures, of medieval codes of sexuality and justice" (128). Kumar, a well-known and polemical critic of South Asian diasporic culture, skewers Divakaruni's short story for the erasures that it authorizes. While he acknowledges the injustice and disturbing prevalence of female feticide in South Asia, Kumar denounces the story's

facile explanations of cultural difference, its implication that feminism is an American invention, and “the repression of the complicity between oppressive, dominant forces in India with the U.S.” (Kumar 190). Srikanth uses Kumar’s irate interpretation of “The Ultrasound” to parse her investment in both literary and media representations of South Asian women’s cultural oppression which she sees as both necessary and potentially demeaning or stereotypical. As she explains, “I want, like Zora Neale Hurston, to believe that we don’t have to write always for the man or against the man or in explanation to the man, even as I understand that it’s naïve to believe that South Asian American authors write only for their own communities” (128). In making this statement, Srikanth gestures toward the relationship between the South Asian diasporic writer and various communities of readers, the meaning created through the encounter of an unstable text, and the myriad interpretations that it inspires. Her desire for responsible feminist interpretations of South Asian diasporic literature, even when this desire excuses essentialist tropes, leads Srikanth to rethink her interpretive strategies in an effort to “read through/into the indignities” of this fiction (127).

Srikanth mobilizes a strategic, feminist interpretive practice that at once validates Kumar’s frustrations with Divakaruni’s work, but also presents a recuperative approach through her analysis of a story published in the same collection, titled “Clothes.” In the story, the protagonist, Sumita, a recent immigrant to the United States, loses her husband in a violent shooting at a 7-11 convenience store while he is working the midnight shift. The newly widowed woman decides that she will remain in the U.S. rather than submit to the indignities of widowhood in India. In the story, Sumita explains:

That’s when I know I cannot go back. I don’t know yet how I’ll manage, here in this new, dangerous land. I only know I must. Because all over India, at this very

moment, widows in white saris are bowing their veiled heads, serving tea to in-laws. Doves with cut-off wings [...] In the mirror a woman holds my gaze, her eyes apprehensive yet steady. She wears a blouse and skirt the color of almonds. (Divakaruni 33)

Sumita's assimilation to the U.S. is enacted through her rejection of traditional Indian dress in favor of Western style clothes. In the wake of her husband's tragic death, her preference for a blouse and skirt instead of a sari symbolizes her character's ostensible development from an oppressed Indian woman to an independent American subject. Similar to the issues that Kumar points out in "The Ultrasound," the narrative repeats inaccurate East-West dichotomies, particularly the image of America as an unquestioned site of rebirth. Srikanth argues, however, for a reading that would refute these critical perspectives and emphasizes that the story is unique in its exploration of a working-class South Asian immigrant experience, thereby reinventing these despairing and facile tropes. As she says about the protagonist's decision to remain in the U.S., "The most obvious analysis of the wife's desire to remain the United States is to see it as her choosing the freedom afforded by the West. A less obvious treatment of the decision would be to focus on the violence that drastically alters her life[...] Violence has now created possibilities by destroying what was familiar to her—marriage and dependency" (131). Srikanth does not mean to suggest that every act of violence embeds an opportunity for freedom, but that "women frequently react to violence in unexpected ways, by refusing to succumb to total despair" (131). Reconfiguring interpretive practice in this way is a fraught process. Critics and lay readers engage a politics of reading that would free the text from its own problematic identity politics, reductive Orientalist binaries, and anti-feminist narratives. In doing so, as illustrated here in the case of

Srikanth's reading of Sumita's decision to stay in the U.S., we arguably redeem and reify East-West dichotomies, myths of American exceptionalism, racialized and gendered stereotypes that we initially seek to critique.

In their efforts to recuperate these narratives, lay readers and academic critics demonstrate that "real-world" effects of literary traditions such as South Asian diasporic literatures are rooted in the diversity of discourses that the literature produces. In other words, their feminist recuperations of Divakaruni's stories illustrate a shared desire in reading communities to reinterpret the gender biases that define this literary field and to complicate popular cultural representations of South Asian women. Critical attempts to recuperate what Gayatri Spivak has termed the "weak moments" (Spivak 251) of a text, the neo-Orientalist tropes, sexist elements, complicities with petty nationalism and ethno-religious prejudice, are of course understandable given the social consequences of literary representation for lay and academic readers: the development of a recognizable South Asian American literary tradition signifies arrival and cultural citizenship for the community. But just as Spivak recognizes the need for a "new politics of reading" that would exploit these "weak moments" and enable productive critiques of identity politics, authenticity imperatives, gender biases, neo-Orientalist tropes, and heteronormative sexuality to emerge from them, she cautions against readings that would easily validate textual weaknesses or erasures. Spivak argues for a politics of reading that does "not excuse, [is] not to accuse, establish critical intimacy, use (or ab-use) the seeming weak moments for scrupulous ends" (251).⁸⁹ The recuperative feminist readings of Divakaruni's fiction proffered by lay and academic readers alike evidence the range of

⁸⁹ Also quoted in Kumar p. 193. My use of the quotation differs from his which is why I am citing it from the original.

interpretive possibilities available to us when we rehabilitate problematic, stereotypical, neo-Orientalist tropes. At the same time, these recuperative readings demonstrate that our desires for redemptive narratives of female agency and individualism may produce blind spots in our interpretive praxis whereby we legitimize sexist and exoticist tropes in order to fulfill our readerly desires for feminist victories.

Conclusion

Roy and Divakaruni's troubled, often contradictory, and sometimes recuperated reception in lay and academic reading publics indicates how guarded the stakes of representation are for the South Asian diasporic community, particularly for South Asian female writers and the characters they create. Academic condemnations and recuperations of both Roy and Divakaruni's fiction expose the gendered biases at work in the creation of a South Asian diasporic canon wherein female authors are either accused of manipulating their public image to pander to Western audiences, cast as the fortunate literary inheritors of the male canon, or excused for their concerns with tropes of marriage and domesticity. Many of these same attitudes toward Roy and Divakaruni are reflected in lay critical discourse, and NetSAP readers' reactions to this literature mirror near-sighted academic assessments of gendered literary value. In the examples I explore in this chapter, academic and lay reception of Roy and Divakaruni's work strongly parallel one another. In the next and final chapter, I examine academic and lay constructions of gender in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* in an effort to trace how the powerful desire for identification, ethnic authenticity, and gendered recuperation seeks to liberate Lahiri's novel from its more Orientalist and essentializing effects.

Chapter 5

Identification, Readerly Desire, and Feminist Recuperation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

For the past ten years, launched in part by the fervent international publicity of India's 50th anniversary celebration of independence from British rule, academic and popular media critics in the U.S. persistently use the language of progress to define the trajectory of South Asian diasporic literature. According to these critics, young, popular writers of South Asian descent publishing mainly in the West herald "a new era" and "season of discovery" for Indian literature in English regardless of their established popular and critical presence.⁹⁰ Portraying this fiction as a "new" global influence ensures its exoticization as both an alien and familiar literary tradition while also calibrating the field's success in terms of Eurocentric notions of progress and development. In the realm of South Asian diasporic fiction published in the U.S., no one author can currently lay as much claim to the imprimatur of renewal and reinvention as Jhumpa Lahiri. Lahiri has been championed in the international critical arena as the quintessential "new cosmopolitan," purveyor of an "ethno-global vision," interpreter of "immigrant angst," and creator of a "different type of expatriate writing" whose work goes "beyond labels such as 'ethnic' or 'diasporic'" (Rajan and Sharma 156; Katrak 5; Jha 115; Dhubey 26; Ganpathy Dore 58). In each of these cases, critics commend Lahiri for her revisions to common representations of "traditional" Indian culture that they identify

⁹⁰ Mervin Rothstein, "India: The Fiction Issue," *The New Yorker*, 1997; Mervin Rothstein, "The Post-Rushdie Generation," *The New York Times*, 3 July 2000.

in South Asian diasporic narratives. In this way, comparisons between Lahiri and her literary predecessors, such as Bharati Mukherjee and Salman Rushdie, most effectively cement her status as a new, progressive, and innovative South Asian writer.⁹¹

In Lahiri's case, the narrative of lineage is bifurcated: on one hand, critics generally believe that her work both builds on but ultimately supersedes the particularly South Asian *American* tradition established by Mukherjee; on the other hand, she is seen as a successful descendent of the Rushdie-centric, global South Asian literary diaspora, or in other words, one of his "Midnight's Grandchildren"⁹² (Jha 115; Katrak 5).⁹³ The phrase "Midnight's Grandchildren" denotes writers of mainly Indian descent who take a realist (as opposed to magical realist) turn in their fiction. In a troubling expression of colonial paternalism, critics often identify Rushdie's grandchildren as specifically female writers; the list includes best-selling, critically-acclaimed writers such as Kiran Desai, Chitra Divakaruni and, of course, Jhumpa Lahiri.⁹⁴ Consequently, the divided narrative of generational descent, as exemplified in Lahiri's critical reception, masks gender bias throughout the criticism on South Asian diasporic literature. That is, within this literary tradition, the matrilineal, nation-based variety epitomized by Mukherjee's work requires refinement if not usurpation, while the patrilineal, transnational literary strain represented in almost all cases by Salman Rushdie serves to sanction success and innovation.

⁹¹ As in many Asian American literary traditions, notions of an explicit literary historical lineage prevail in academic criticism. This is most apparent in the Japanese American generational nomenclature of *issei* and *nissei*. See Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982) 128-137.

⁹² The telos of generational descent in contemporary South Asian American literature not only echoes in how the literature is critically comprehended as a product of the first-generation, second-generation and now third generation, but is also reproduced in its thematic concerns. That is, the particularly American strain of the tradition is often identified as dealing in representations of the post-1965 immigrants, or the first generation, and their children, the second generation.

⁹³ Aditya Sinha, "The Malady of Naming," *Hindustan Times*, 28 Sept. 2003.

⁹⁴ Mervin Rothstein, "The Post-Rushdie Generation," *The New York Times*, 3 July 2000.

This chapter studies the complexity of gendered interpretation in South Asian diasporic literature in both academic and lay sites of readership. I argue that in the past ten years, no other writer of South Asian descent has borne the burden of spokesperson status in the United States as much as Jhumpa Lahiri. For the South Asian American community, Lahiri is more than a writer—she has become both the public face and voice of the second generation. Significantly, her critical and popular success contributes to the conflation of Lahiri with her work, a conflation that is a common enough pitfall for successful writers of all ethnicities, but as I argue encourages particularly limited interpretations of her fiction within this literary tradition.⁹⁵ For example, Lahiri’s dominance in the South Asian *American* strain of this literature participates in the circularities and ambivalences of “pluralist multiculturalism,” which Elaine Kim defines:

Multiculturalism levels the important differences and contradictions within and among racial and ethnic minority groups according to the discourse of pluralism, which asserts that American culture is a democratic terrain to which every variety of constituency has equal access and in which all are represented, while simultaneously masking the existence of exclusions by recuperating dissent, conflict, and otherness through the promise of inclusion” (86).

Lahiri’s ethnicity and gender tokenistically position her as a South Asian cultural representative, however unwilling she may be to take on such a role. She is cast as the dominant literary voice of the South Asian American community by eliding a diverse range of South Asian experiences and dissenting perspectives. In this chapter, I investigate what desires Lahiri fulfills and what expectations she meets in academic and lay fields of reception. That is to say, although in their own interpretive practice NetSAP

⁹⁵ In May 2008, Jhumpa Lahiri’s new short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, was published. The debate as to whether Lahiri’s work panders to a cosmopolitan, elite readership rages on and Lahiri characteristically resists being pigeonholed as an ethnic writer. See Boris Kachka, “The Confidence Artist” *New York Magazine*, 27 May 2008.

readers produce gendered values correlative to those commonly espoused by academic and popular critics, they also emphasize the therapeutic value of literatures that inspire identification. Both lay and academic readers produce recuperative readings that at once free Lahiri's work, particularly, *The Namesake*, from its more Orientalist, patriarchal implications but that also essentialize South Asian American identity and reify the hegemony of Western notions of progress, cultural arrival, assimilation and immigrant success.

Many of the complex discursive issues that inform Arundhati Roy and Chitra Divakaruni's reception in the U.S., such as readerly desire, literary identification, recuperative feminist reading, the exigencies of the literary marketplace, and multiethnic canon formation coalesce in readings of Jhumpa Lahiri's popular novel-turned-movie *The Namesake*. Curiously, academic criticism on this novel, which holds such an important place in popular criticism and for the South Asian American reader, remains relatively undeveloped.⁹⁶ Whatever the reasons for the paucity of academic assessments on *The Namesake*, Lahiri is arguably one of the most celebrated writers in the popular review on South Asian American literature as well as one of the most widely assigned in the university classroom. *Interpreter of Maladies*, for example, was a critically-acclaimed best-seller that earned Lahiri the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. In 2001, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that *Interpreter* was the number one book taught on college campuses.⁹⁷ So far, the main source of criticism about Lahiri comes from the popular

⁹⁶ For example, one relevant scholarly article is on both *The Namesake* and *Interpreter of Maladies*: Robin Field, "Writing the Second Generation: Negotiating Cultural Borderlands in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*", *South Asian Review*, Vol. XXV, No. 2, 2004. See also, Tejinder Kaur, "Cultural Dilemmas and Displacement of Immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*," *The Journal of Indian Writing in English*, Judith Caesar, "Gogol's Namesake: Identity and Relationships in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*," *Atenea*, Vol. XXVII, No.1, June 2007.

⁹⁷ *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Feb. 2, 2001 Vol. 47, Iss. 21 p. A9

media, and again most reviews of her work, on both the short story collection, and *The Namesake*,⁹⁸ are extremely positive. Out of 22 major reviews published in 2003 and 2004 on *The Namesake*, 19 of them were highly complimentary, with reviewers praising Lahiri for having “never once played the exotic,” for creating “an intimate, closely observed family portrait,” and for imagining “a multinational, multicultural world without

⁹⁸ Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* tells the story of the Ganguli family with particular focus on the eldest son of the family, Gogol. The story begins with Ashoke and Ashima’s arrival in Cambridge, Massachusetts where Ashoke has been living, attending MIT, and working on his PhD in engineering. He returns to India to find a wife, and a marriage is arranged between Ashoke and Ashima quite promptly after their first meeting. They move back to the United States where Ashima in particular has trouble adjusting to her new environment because of the isolation that she feels in being separated from her entire immediate and extended family. The story begins right before she is about to deliver her first child, a son. When the baby is born, both Ashima and Ashoke do not know what to name him, and we find out that they are waiting for a letter from Ashima’s grandmother that will contain one name for a boy and one name for a girl. In keeping with family tradition, they wait for the letter that never arrives. But upon leaving the hospital, they are told to choose a name for the baby to put on the birth certificate, and Ashoke, who has a particular love of Nikolai Gogol’s work, decides that for the time being they can use the name Gogol. As the narrator tells us, every Bengali child has a public and a private name, and Gogol could serve as the at-home nickname until they have found a suitable public one.

Years pass, and Ashoke and Ashima have another child, Sonia. When they enroll Gogol in kindergarten they decide it is time to give him his new, public identity and write Nikhil on the enrollment forms. Gogol stubbornly refuses to answer to any other name and so his teacher decides to override his parents’ decision and instead tells him to continue answering to Gogol. Gogol grows older, eventually gets accepted to Yale, and decides that he does not want to be known anymore by this strange name, and so decides to legally change his name to Nikhil, proceeding to reinvent himself while away at college. We learn eventually that in this decision to reject his namesake, Gogol hurts his father who had developed such an affinity for the writer because he was reading “The Overcoat” many years ago in India while on a train to visit his dying grandfather. When the train derailed, Ashoke was almost killed and would have never been found if he hadn’t waved a few pages of the short story in his hand to catch the attention of the rescue workers. And so the story reminds him of the journey he has made to the United States and the second chance that he was granted by surviving the accident.

At Yale Gogol begins dating. First he strikes up a relationship with a white woman named Ruth whom he dates for two years and keeps a secret from his parents. After graduating, he enrolls in an architectural graduate program at Columbia and begins working at a firm. Through a colleague he meets Maxine, a wealthy woman who lives with her parents in a luxurious brownstone. Maxine and Gogol (now reinvented as Nikhil) begin an intense relationship and Gogol practically moves into Maxine’s house with her. He spends more time with his family than his own and begins to avoid his parents. Soon after Ashoke dies and Gogol has to reckon with his future and past and realizes that he can’t relate to Maxine, the two stop communicating and end the relationship. Some time after this Gogol begins a relationship with a Bengali woman, Moushumi, who was a childhood friend. His mother prompts Gogol to call her because she also lives in New York, studying for a PhD in French literature at NYU. Moushumi has recently ended a relationship with a white American man to whom she was engaged, calling off the wedding weeks before it was set to happen. Gogol and Moushumi meet and quickly fall in love, eventually getting married. The marriage soon dissolves as they both become dissatisfied with each other and various insecurities enter the relationship culminating in Moushumi’s affair with another man. The novel ends with Gogol’s divorce from Moushumi and his return to his parents’ house in Massachusetts. Ashima has decided to spend half the year in Calcutta and half the year in the States and is throwing a going-away party for herself. Gogol, disappointed by his failed marriage, but reassured of his identity, finds the copy of Nikolai Gogol’s short stories that his father gave him for his birthday and begins to read them.

borders.”⁹⁹ The remaining three (in *Publisher’s Weekly*, *Kirkus Reviews* and *Commentary*) only lamented that the novel, when taken on its own terms, would be “hailed as a promising debut” but didn’t measure up to the “high bar set by her previous work,” namely *Interpreter*.¹⁰⁰ It’s not only in popular criticism and university classrooms that Lahiri’s work garners praise and attention. In almost every single one of the interviews that I conducted, and in all the book club meetings I attended, *The Namesake* or, less frequently, *Interpreter*, came up spontaneously at least once, even though none of the book club sessions or the interview questions that I asked were specifically on her work. In part, Lahiri’s second-generation status in the U.S. in addition to the content of her narratives position her in these discussions as a representative South Asian American writer, and a touchstone of South Asian American authenticity. As Sri, leader of the NetSAP-DC book club and its institutional memory (she has been the chair for the past 10 years), explained in several book club meetings, *Interpreter of Maladies* was one of the few books that all members who attended the December 1999 book club meeting on the collection unanimously enjoyed. Sri explained that Lahiri’s popularity is based on the accuracy of her representations: “Her voice is America. Her stories are very true” (*The Red Carpet Book Club* 37). Sri invokes a truth claim to emphasize that Lahiri’s writing successfully mirrors her experiences and writes South Asians into U.S. cultural citizenship. This sentiment was echoed by the majority of readers in my study who emphasized that they felt a strong sense of identification with the novel’s protagonist,

⁹⁹ See “Out of the Overcoat” by Stephen Metcalf, *New York Times Book Review*; Sept. 28, 2003, p.11; “From Calcutta to Suburbia: A Family’s Perplexing Journey” by Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*, Sept. 2, 2003, E:1; and “The Namesake” by Ramlal Agrawal, *World Literature Today*. Sep-Dec 2004 Vol. 78, Iss, ¾, p. 94.

¹⁰⁰ See, “The Namesake,” *Publisher’s Weekly*. New York: July 7, 2003. 250: 27, p. 48.

Gogol, regardless of their own gender; as Sunil, a young Bengali American man put it, “I related to it on so many levels. I thought it was really me or something” (5).¹⁰¹

Before moving on to my central concern of this chapter, a brief digression to consider the role of literary realism is called for. NetSAP readers’ evocation of truth and reality in their reading experience suggests that their strongly-felt identification with *The Namesake* operates, at least partially, through the conventions of literary realism. While a sustained genre critique is not the primary focus of this chapter, it does inform and undergird claims that I advance later on, particularly related to the pervasive romantic plots in the narrative. I pause here on the issue of realism also to mark future avenues for research that would further incorporate literary historical analysis in studies of readership and deepen the interdisciplinary methodology initiated by this dissertation. As prominent Asian Americanist scholars Lisa Lowe and Patricia Chu have explained, realism holds particular purchase for (South) Asian American literatures not only because it solicits identification, creates an authenticity effect, and holds the promise of describing material reality, but also ironically because of its inadequacies in portraying and containing the Asian American experience. In other words, Lowe and Chu identify Asian American revisions to traditional notions of realism founded in the formal devices of the novel. While canonical versions of the Anglo-American realist novel foreground the fulfillment of individual destiny and the moral education of the protagonist, often culminating in a marriage “to signify the individual’s reconciliation with the social order (Chu 18), the Asian American bildungsroman reflects the ongoing displacement of Asian Americans in the U.S. (Liu 397; Lowe 101). *The Namesake* instructively enacts this Asian American

¹⁰¹ Out of the 18 interviews that I conducted, Jhumpa Lahiri was a topic of conversation in 14 of them. Of those 14, 10 readers strongly identified with Lahiri’s work.

revision to the genre of realism by exposing, in the male protagonist's thwarted attempts to become the well-married and assimilated hero, what Chu identifies as its ideological limits for minorities in the U.S. (Chu 97). Invoking Lisa Lowe's Althusserian critique, Chu claims that in Asian American realist narratives, marriage and romance plots remain incomplete because representations of successful marital unions traditionally denote the "successful interpellation of the subject into the nation-state" (Chu 19). Thus, Chu views the occurrence of failed marriage plots as indicators of the thwarted desire for assimilation.

In stark contrast, in lay and academic interpretations of *The Namesake*, I find that readers understand Gogol's inability to successfully "settle down" with the right marriage partner not as a failure of assimilation, but rather as a manifestation of his successful interpellation to American cultural mores. Specifically, lay readers see the failure of romance plots in the novel as an indicator of South Asian male and female subjects' progress toward Western freedoms. Thus, the novel's conformity to what Chu identifies as a necessary failure of realist romantic tropes for Asian American narratives is complicated by the modes of identification that its realism inspires in the field of interpretation.

In other words, the irresolvable "outsider" status of the Asian American subject in Asian American realist novels, as identified by Chu and Lowe, does not fully align with lay and academic readings of *The Namesake*. This incongruity suggests either that these tropes work differently in South Asian American literature, or, more importantly for my interests, indicates that realist conventions are interpreted in sites of academic and lay interpretation to reflect the concepts of truth that readers desire and with which they are

already familiar. In either case, whether unfulfilled realist romantic tropes signify the protagonist's failed interpellation or his successful developmental progress as an American cultural citizen, the incongruity between genre critics' conclusions and lay responses to realist conventions inspires the need for a deeper study of how generic conventions shape meaning for readers. And while realist tropes inform certain claims that I advance later in this chapter, I offer these observations to inspire future exploration: how do complex discourses of multiculturalism formally function to confound modes of representation and correction in literature? An in-depth analysis of the conventions of realism would not only take us deeper into how lay readers in particular experience literature, but would also give us a broader view of how South Asian diasporic literary history forms in reaction to generic tradition.

The Role of Identification in *The Namesake*

The sense of identification that the novel inspires among NetSAP readers through its literary realism signals that it has become a powerful discursive locus of coalitional identity formation for the South Asian American community. And although reading is often imagined as a solitary act, NetSAP participants' readings of this novel in particular became an act of communal affiliation and identity formation. As one young Bengali-American reader succinctly put it, "I think [the novel] gives us a unifying force. Like we're all South Asians, we've all read *The Namesake*" (Sunil 8). Sunil explains that the novel provides a sort of common ground and creates a narrative of shared experience for South Asians in the United States. Notably, and surprisingly, Lahiri contrasts reading as a solitary activity in comparison to viewing the film adaptation, which she sees as the first opportunity for the narrative to become a shared experience for its various audiences:

“Books are earthbound entities, ordinary physical objects we hold in our hands and read when we have time. [...] Movies also occupy a much more public place than novels do. They are publicly created, publicly consumed” (Lahiri *The Namesake A Portrait* 8). Clearly, Lahiri may be overemphasizing her own sentiments here in an effort to promote the movie’s release, but I pause over the contradictions between her observations and NetSAP readers’ assertions that the novel created a sense of community affiliation and granted insight on their second-generation struggles in order to emphasize that novels, and this one in particular, have been quite powerfully “publicly created” and “publicly consumed.” My aim in this chapter will be to trace the specific uses to which this novel has been put, to examine what it represents for different reading publics, and to think about how the interpretations produced in overlapping sites of readership can inform and enhance one another.

On the one hand, through the complex and fraught act of identification, *The Namesake* grants lay readers of South Asian descent insight into their parents’ experiences of immigration, it opens up discussions of interracial dating and domestic expectations, and it creates a discursive community through the description of a second-generation experience. On the other hand, the novel achieves all of this by generating a reductive East/West binary enacted through the objectification and ethnic stereotyping of the female characters, and by obscuring class difference through the reification of ethnicity. The powerful pull of lay readerly identification defies these objections, and NetSAP readers satisfy their desire to identify with the text by performing strategic feminist interpretations of the novel. NetSAP readers’ strategic, recuperative feminist readings are produced analogously in academic critical assessments of Lahiri’s earlier

work, *The Interpreter of Maladies*, in which assimilative adjustment to U.S. mores of individuality and tropes of choice represent the successful incorporation of the foreign or immigrant subject into U.S. cultural citizenship.¹⁰² On one level, recuperative feminist readings incorporate the complexities of the “politics of love” and are produced either by lay readers’ desires for identification or in academia as a desire for correction or representation.¹⁰³ Recuperative readings can be therapeutic and empowering and / or model a reading praxis that would reevaluate gendered inequities in the multiethnic canon. At the same time, however, recuperative reading strategies and the powerful pull of identification can also reinforce essentialist, neo-Orientalist narratives about South Asian American identity whereby we limit our own concepts of what qualifies as an authentic representation of South Asian American culture through the novels that we endorse and popularize.

Because it is such a powerful discursive site of ethnic identification, NetSAP readers were resistant to critiques of gender and class in *The Namesake* and offered readings of the novel that would recuperate what Gayatri Spivak terms the “weak moments” of a text—or in other words, its normative presentation of gender, class, ethnic authenticity and sexuality.¹⁰⁴ During interviews when *The Namesake* arose as a topic of conversation, I would inform readers that, in my interpretation, the novel presented limiting, determinative representations of women and objectified the three main female

¹⁰² See Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational Americas*, p. 65, “The particular freedom of America thus became the ability to have choices denied to those in “traditional” societies and “cultures.” (65) Also, see Chapter 3, page 5 for a more detailed description of how discourses of choice figure into the liberal, democratic concept of America as a land of liberation and freedom.

¹⁰³ See Dominguez, p. 363. Also, see chapter 3 page 9-10 for an explanation of the paradoxical nature of the “politics of love,” representation and correction.

¹⁰⁴ See Chapter 3, page 43 for an elaboration of this term. Also see, Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

characters—Maxine, Gogol’s white girlfriend and failed love interest; Moushumi, his Bengali-American wife; and Ashima, his mother—as ciphers of consumption, victims of brown male oppression, or repositories of tradition. My reading of the novel involves three related concerns. Firstly, as a novel that centers on the prodigal ethnic son’s uneasy, negotiated return to cultural heritage, *The Namesake* evokes what Gayatri Gopinath argues are the “patriarchal and heteronormative tropes of the term ‘diaspora’” (5). As Gopinath asserts, women are often displaced as agentive subjects in narratives of diaspora: “all too often diasporas are narrativized through the bonds of relationality through men,” jettisoning female diasporic experiences. She goes on to argue that, “the centrality of this [male-male or father-son] narrative as the primary trope in imagining diaspora invariably displaces and elides female diasporic subjects” (5). Secondly, the novel positions female characters as foils to Gogol’s development, contributing to rigid notions identified by sociologists and cultural critics across several disciplines of what constitutes “authentic” South Asian female diasporic subjectivities. And finally, although class is a structuring theme in the novel, class difference among characters are consistently subsumed under tropes of ethnic alterity. Similarly, the economic exigencies of immigration are obfuscated by Gogol and Ashoke’s quests for self-realization and individuality. Accordingly, the novel uncritically depicts South Asian aspirations for upward class mobility, celebrating an unexamined Indo-chic ethos,¹⁰⁵ and encouraging collusion with the model minority myth.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ The term “Indo-chic” became a pop cultural term in the 1990s to describe the wave of neo-Orientalist interest in consuming various cultural artifacts of the East such as, *bindis*, *saris*, yoga, and Eastern mysticism. The term is also self-Orientalizing and can describe an affluent, South Asian consumer aesthetic. Strikingly, Mira Nair gives us a glimpse into the ethos that the term encompasses in her description of Jhumpa Lahiri’s narrative world: “Jhumpa’s New York is not the immigrant communities of Little India or Jackson Heights but the New York of lofts, Ivy League bonding, art galleries, political

While readers both acknowledged and at times shared many of the concerns that I presented to them in our conversations, identification with the novel generally overrode these objections. NetSAP readers were powerfully attached to *The Namesake's* poignant representations of their second generation experience including the effects of ethnic difference and similarity in romantic relationships, the comfort of shared experience, and a longing to connect to their parents' histories of immigration. These sorts of motivated, recuperative reading practices can of course be therapeutic, empowering, and fulfilling for the reader, providing what Kenneth Burke describes as "equipment for living" (quoted in Long 131). Long understands this concept as "urging consideration of literature less as a platonic ideal than as something that is pressed into service for a task beyond itself, a tool employed in the construction of human lives" (131). But at the same time, recuperative interpretive practice can also authorize insularity in the community where we deem certain texts authentic only if they are identifiable and fulfill specific readerly desires. Attending to the specific ways in which desire influences all acts of interpretation redeems the act of identification in recuperative acts of reading from its more self-involved interpretive outcomes. As Caren Kaplan puts it:

marches, book openings, country weekends in Maine with WASPy friends, a deeply cosmopolitan place with its own images and manners" (Nair 15). Also see Huggan, p. 67.

¹⁰⁶ More information on the complexities of the model minority myth as it pertains to the South Asian American community is available in the Introduction and Chapter 2. In brief, as Shamita Das Dasgupta explains it,

During the 1970s, the idea of the model minority myth was created by the U.S. media as an argument against including South Asians in social welfare programs. They propagated the myth that South Asians were exempt from social problems such as unemployment, poverty, racism, delinquency, and familial conflict. This myth not only biased the general populace but was also internalized by the communities themselves. Thus, in addition to their own efforts to mask intra-community diversity, South Asians became obsessed with living the model minority stereotype. (5)

The consequences of the model minority myth are twofold: firstly, South Asian aspirations to live the myth signal their complicit participation in anti-black racism" (Prashad x-xi) and secondly, middle class South Asians use class position to assert ethnicity over race, making it harder to form political solidarities.

Foregrounding desire as a part of the recuperative process mitigates against some of the more solipsistic, self-celebratory dangers of the recuperative paradigm. Insofar as the critic recuperating a woman's text identifies its heroine or its author *as herself*, she rescues not another woman, but an aspect of her own being [...]. None of these emendations solves the limits of the recuperative paradigm. On the contrary, foregrounding desire may be an effective way to keep these limits clearly in view (45).

NetSAP readers' identification with *The Namesake* and the recuperative readings that they produce of it may not resolve the limited representations that the narrative projects. Their recuperative readings of the novel do, however, provide a perspective on how South Asian Americans use the literary tradition that purportedly represents them, and makes recognizable the limitations and possibilities of a recuperative reading praxis.

Consumption, Repression, and Tradition: Exploring South Asian Diasporic Female Subjectivities and Tropes of Choice

The dominance of masculinist diasporic subjectivities, the authenticity imperatives placed on South Asian female characters, and the supplanting of class difference for clichés of irresolvable ethnic incompatibility are interrelated and overlapping narrative themes that define Gogol's relationship with the major female characters in the novel. For example, Lahiri draws a deeply ambivalent if somewhat critical portrait of Maxine Ratliff, Gogol's first major interracial romantic involvement, by both cataloguing and lingering over her materialistic lifestyle. Maxine is an affluent white American woman, a New Yorker by birth and privileged in every sense imaginable. In the novel she functions as a representative of Western high culture and cosmopolitan sophistication. From the moment he meets her parents at the house she has grown up in and where she still lives, the narrator suggests an insurmountable difference in their class and ethnicity: "He is stunned by the house, a Greek Revival, admiring it for

several minutes like a tourist before opening the gate” (130). Gogol is a foreigner, a tourist in Maxine’s world. Her affluence and ethnic privilege are alien to him, a visitor without permanent residence but who hopes to learn about the culture that Maxine represents and perhaps emulate it in his own way. Scenes with Maxine are catalogues of consumption, both literal and metaphorical, and Gogol’s inculcation into this world depends on his adaptation to Maxine’s consumerism:

He goes shopping with her on Madison Avenue stores they must be buzzed into, for cashmere cardigans and outrageously expensive English colognes which Maxine buys without deliberation or guilt[...] He learns to love the food she and her parents eat, the polenta and risotto, the bouillabaisse and osso buco, the meat baked in parchment paper. He comes to expect the weight of their flatware in his hands, and to keep the cloth napkin, still partially folded, on his lap. He learns that one does not grate Parmesan cheese over pasta dishes containing seafood. He learns not to put wooden spoons in the dishwasher, as he had mistakenly done one evening when he was helping to clean up. (136)

Detailed lists of what Maxine instructs Gogol to eat, drink, and buy abound in the novel, providing implicit commentary on the difference between their material upbringings and class status. In this way Maxine becomes a kind of cultural usher, teaching Gogol how to affect the high-brow tastes that would enable him to realize the cultural capital of his ivy-league education.

While the reasons for the dissolution of Gogol and Maxine’s relationship waver between irreconcilable gaps in class and ethnic background, ultimately the class critique inherent in Lahiri’s portrayal of Maxine is proffered and then withdrawn, trumped by their ethnic differences. Gogol ruminates over the Ratliff’s’ affluence and easy privilege comparing his experience vacationing with them at their lake house with the childhood family trips that he and his family took to visit other Bengali families:

The Ratliffs own the moon that floats over the lake, and the sun and the clouds... Yet he cannot picture his family occupying a house like this, playing board games on rainy afternoons... They would have felt lonely in this setting, remarking that they were the only Indians... He feels no nostalgia for the vacations he's spent with his family, and he realizes now that they weren't vacations at all... They had stayed in motels, slept whole families to a single room, swum in pools that could be seen from the road. (155)

In contrast to the Ratliffs' leisurely style of vacationing, the vacations that Gogol took with his parents and the Bengali friends were determined by their sense of work, thrift, and cultural isolation. Gogol's longing for Maxine's lifestyle suggests here that immigration and class are imbricated in complex ways. Gogol's family's economic success in the United States does not guarantee their complete assimilation. Unfortunately, this productive and rich tension around class privilege and ethnic assimilation is ultimately resolved in a predictable lamentation of cultural incompatibility. When Gogol's father dies, he feels an obligation to return to his familial heritage and cultural traditions. The narrator describes:

[Maxine] had not understood being excluded from the family's plans to travel to Calcutta that summer to see their relatives and scatter Ashoke's ashes in the Ganges. Quickly they begin to argue about this and other things, Maxine going as far one day as to admit that she felt jealous of his mother and sister, an accusation that struck Gogol as so absurd that he had no energy to argue anymore. And so, a few months after his father's death, he stepped out of Maxine's life for good. (188)

Ethnic and cultural differences overshadow the incomplete class critique that the novel initiates and then revokes. Gogol and Maxine break up because she is unable to understand his relationship to his family and his newly forged cultural obligations to his dead father. Ashoke's death and Gogol's return to his cultural heritage, in turn, evokes what Gopinath identifies as the enactment of the diasporic, patrilineal narrative narrativized through male-male, father-son bonds (5). *The Namesake* provides a

particularly stark example of this as the patriarchal relationship is forged through a complete elision of the female characters (5). Maxine's presence in the narrative and the attendant complexity around issues of class and immigration that she symbolizes are eclipsed by ethnic alterity—once an object of desire for Gogol she becomes an object against which Gogol can define what he is not. Additionally, when Gogol's sister Sonia returns home to help their grieving mother, her sacrifices become a footnote to Gogol's heroic return to the family.

For NetSAP readers, Gogol and Maxine's relationship not only provided a serious consideration of the difficulties of interracial romance, but in many of their readings interracial romance symbolized a desire to successfully negotiate their own complicated and diverse cultural affiliations. Two women, Lalita and Nishi, both second-generation South Asian American recent college graduates, explained to me that they enjoyed reading South Asian diasporic literature because it was instructive in terms of interracial dating. For Lalita, *The Namesake* reflected the discomfort that she and her white boyfriend negotiate with her parents:

And [with Gogol's] American girlfriend, Maxine, that he's about to bring home. And he's telling her, 'When you come to my house, there's no handholding. There's no touching. Don't sit too close to me. Don't say this.' And my boyfriend and I [that's] the same thing that I tell him. I'm like, "Don't hug me. Don't hug me. Don't even try to kiss me. Don't hold my hand ever. (21)

Lalita uses the description of interracial dating in the novel to humorously bridge the cultural and ethnic divide with her boyfriend. For Nishi, South Asian diasporic literature reinforces her sense that she feels more comfortable dating within the Pakistani American community:

[The more I read] South Asian literature, the more I really wouldn't want to marry someone who didn't share some of those experiences, like going to Pakistan, like

the richness of the culture, or the cultural values. So I guess my values are [shaped by] South Asian lit. Not to say I don't want to be adventurous, or want to meet other types of people, but I love the history that I have and I want to see it in other people that I know. (10)

Nishi's sense that the literature both reflects and shapes her moral values were also reflected in her poignant description of how *The Namesake* was "touching in a way" for how it portrayed the longing to "connect with your parents' history" but how that can often be an alienating experience when "your reality at school or in college is changing" and "when you have white friends, it shapes what you're like and who you are and what you're attracted to" (9). For many readers the complexities of interracial dating encode the broader difficulties of negotiating a bi-cultural identity and the strong desire to respect their family's wishes while also fitting in.

As Meera, a recent Indian-American transplant to the D.C. area explained in response to my apprehensions about how their relationship was depicted, Gogol's longing for Maxine can also be read as a powerful longing for placement:

Tamara: *The Namesake*, well here is one of the reasons why I didn't like it, and I'd be curious to hear what you think about it. But the way the women are portrayed, I think that strangely Lahiri writes them in kind of a misogynistic way. Because first there is the white American woman, who Gogol leaves—and she seems kind of flighty in ways, she seems kind of like a pretty flat character, kind of objectified as well, because all the women just seem to be props almost for Gogol.

Meera: But I think of it almost as a reflection of Gogol's choices, aside from his mother, you know, the women he went after. The American girl he was dating in New York was like, I felt was like the epitome of what he wanted. It was everything that he wasn't, you know, total upper class, very cultured, like, cultured very worldly, in a European sense. Very open with her parents, she had a great relationship with her parents, it is, something he didn't have. I saw it more like him just going after what he didn't have and what he wasn't, because that is what he thought he wanted to be and he thought he could become that by being with her. (13)

Meera offers a powerful recuperative reading of the women in the novel and refutes my claims that they were described as objects by asserting their influence and agency over Gogol. In this way, Gogol's choices become a matter of unfulfilled but legitimate aspirations for upward mobility and cultural acceptance, even though as she acknowledges these desires are enacted through the female characters.

The lay readers' interpretations of *The Namesake* confirm and challenge my critique of both how Gogol and Maxine's relationship obscures the workings of class in the novel and, in its dissolution, affirms the hegemony of patrilineal diasporic narratives. Lahiri's rendering of the ethnic narrative participates in a history of denying the effects of class in South Asian American narratives. The reification of ethnicity supersedes material circumstances and historical location throughout the novel, and in particular quite saliently in one of the major plot details that drives the narrative. Gogol's father Ashoke decides to leave India for America after he is almost fatally wounded in a train derailment. During his recuperation he is inspired to see the world (defined in the novel as "England and America"). Ashoke decides to move to the United States to pursue his PhD spurred on by this near-tragedy rather than any of the reasons that actually did influence Indian immigration to the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s, such as desire for economic mobility, varied career options, responsibilities to family back home, or escape from religious or political persecution. Lahiri's novel thereby constructs and is constructed by a strategic relationship to ethnicity in the South Asian American middle class; the assertion of ethnic identity in the symbolic realm serves as a class strategy that enables the group to avoid being "incorporated into the U.S. racial system" and to develop a common denominator of pan-ethnic identity to challenge racialization

(Purkayastha 10).¹⁰⁷ NetSAP readers offer ways to use the novel that free the interracial romantic narrative from its more determinative elements, but at the same time their desire for instruction on how to negotiate the bi-ethnic romantic encounter and their affirmation of the desire for placement and belonging leave many of these problematic elements intact.

NetSAP readers and academic critics interpret Gogol's failed relationship with Moushumi, the Bengali-American woman whom he marries, as a representation of romantic choice and ethnic development for South Asian Americans. Lay readers in particular found the relationship to be instructive in its failure, offering a rewriting of the trope of arranged marriage and refusing easy resolution through intra-racial romance. Similarly, academic assessments of how romance functions in Lahiri's novel and short story collection hold that Gogol and Moushumi's relationship is figured as a revision to the fable of ethnic romance because it demonstrates that cultural similarity does not resolve in easy romantic relationships (Field 173, Rajan, *Ethical Responsibility* 139, Ganpathy Dore 62, Williams 70). These readings overlook two salient weaknesses in the depiction of Gogol and Moushumi's romance: first, the trope of failed marriage is not uniquely represented or revised in *The Namesake*, but rather repeats a familiar paradigm in Asian American narratives whereby the unsuccessful marriage plot symbolizes the protagonists' thwarted assimilation and cultural placement. As Patricia Chu explains, "Asian American protagonists generally can't appear as well-married heroes because marriage would signify their successful integration into the nation, a full assimilation that

¹⁰⁷ The same observation has been made by Susan Koshy in "Category Crisis: South Asian Americans and Questions of Race and Ethnicity", *Diaspora* 7:3 (1998), 311; and Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

has not yet occurred either in fact or in the symbolic realm of mainstream culture” (19). Second, the developmental narrative of choice that lay and academic readers find attractive and compelling in Gogol and Moushumi’s relationship invokes problematic paradigms of Eastern oppression and Western choice (Grewal 65). That is, Gogol and Moushumi’s decision to end the relationship is figured as a progressive choice: a refusal of Eastern fatalism and an assertion of Western individuality. In turn, Moushumi’s rejection of Gogol is viewed as a move toward autonomy and independence, but because her narrative arc is defined by a choice between brown or white men (the former representing oppression and the latter rescue from that oppression) the novel reinscribes reductive and gendered neo-Orientalist paradigms. Lay readerly desires for revisions of the arranged marriage trope produce creative readings that productively mobilize the text’s more determinative features and inspire interrogation into the readerly desires that drive analogous academic recuperative readings.

From the start, Gogol and Moushumi’s relationship is founded on a shared desire to remedy their cultural displacement by being together. They initially agree to meet at Ashima’s request, thus invoking the trope of the arranged marriage. Similar to Gogol, just a few months before they meet, Moushumi has ended an engagement with a white American man due in large part to cultural differences. Gogol and Moushumi function as cultural correctives for one another, remedying not only their heartbreak, but also the feelings of ethnic alienation that their forays into interracial romance produced. In fact, the initial basis for their attraction is described through their shared background and heritage:

They talk endlessly about how they know and do not know each other. In a way there is little to explain. There had been the same parties to attend when they were

growing up[...]He can imagine her life, even after she and her family moved away to New Jersey.[...] There had been the same frequent trips to Calcutta, being plucked out of their American lives for months at a time. They talk about how they are both routinely assumed to be Greek, Egyptian, Mexican—even in this misrendering they are joined. (211-212)

They are united both by their common culture and shared experiences, but also through the second generation dilemma of how their ethnicity is misperceived in the United States. For example, on one of their first dates together, the narrator describes a strange moment. They visit an Italian restaurant where the waiter asks if they are brother and sister. Gogol is “at once insulted and oddly aroused. In a way he realizes, it’s true—they share the same coloring, the straight eyebrows, the long slender bodies, the high cheekbones and dark hair” (203). They both seem somewhat pleased by the mistake and excuse its potential narrow-mindedness because it reminds them once more of their common ground. This moment ostensibly offers a critique of insular desi communities in the United States by foreshadowing the false sense of security, based in shared background that unites Gogol and Moushumi. When they do get married, the wedding is portrayed as an expectation that they fulfill, but of which they are not entirely a part: “He is aware that together he and Moushumi are fulfilling a collective, deep-seated desire—because they’re both Bengali, everyone can let his hair down a bit” (224). Their courtship, marriage, and newlywed life fulfill a sense of cultural obligation to their parents, extended family and the wider Bengali community. The underlying implication here is that their union satisfies the older generations because it will assure the continuation, through marriage and procreation, of Indian tradition and heritage in the United States.

Both NetSAP readers and academic critics interpret Gogol and Moushumi's doomed marriage as a powerful second-generation critique of this nostalgic desire in South Asian American communities. As Padma, the young female reader who objected to repetitive portrayals of passive female characters explained, "We're still in that generation where we are dealing with the whole arranged marriage thing and [the] difficulty of finding people who understand the whole East-West mix, and you know, I think maybe that was part of *The Namesake*['s appeal], that maybe people really connected with that" (17). Earlier in the interview Padma explained that while she "loved Jhumpa Lahiri" she preferred *The Interpreter of Maladies* to *The Namesake*. Yet, she reasoned that *The Namesake* was more popular among South Asians in the U.S. because it offers a window into their experiences of trying to find a marriage partner. Similarly, in the popular monthly online web magazine and daily blog, *bookslut.com*, published concurrent to the novel's release in 2004, feature editor Roohi Choudhry solicits four of her friends' reactions to *The Namesake*. One of the respondents, Saira Khokhar, a woman of Pakistani heritage explains:¹⁰⁸

[Growing up] I often felt the need to choose a dominant culture, but now I feel as if I can choose certain aspects of both mainstream culture and Pakistani culture based on my personal feelings and a particular situation. Thus, I have made my own culture. This doesn't work when it comes to relationships. If I am with a white man, I often feel that he doesn't understand such a big part of my life. Or, that I am betraying my parents' culture. Or worse, that the man is with me only because he has a fetish for South Asian women. When I am with a Pakistani man, I feel that he expects me to be purely South Asian. These issues clearly ring in *The Namesake*. (*bookslut.com*)

¹⁰⁸ Choudhry interviewed four friends via email and compiled their responses for this article. Three of the women, Suparna Banarjee-Emanuel, Pooja Makhijani, and Auditi Chakravarty are or were English teachers. The third, Saira Khokhar is a medical doctor. See July 2004 edition, http://www.bookslut.com/features/2004_07_002800.php

Both Padma and Saira raise interesting points about the difficult relationship that many second-generation youth experience around the topic of arranged marriage, and they appeal to a particular generational positioning that further confounds easy resolution to issues of dating, marriage, and sexuality. Priya, the young female reader with whom I had an extended conversation about literature and romantic instruction, explained that the novel staged the dilemma of tradition versus individuality through tropes of romance: “The struggle between marrying somebody your parents want you to, versus the one you love, or trying to find somebody and that struggle, [that’s what] *The Namesake* did, and I lived that for a while. I feel like I can totally like relate to those things” (14). Priya strongly identified with many novels’ depictions of failed or doomed romances, because as she explained, they helped her make sense of her own recent divorce.

In Priya’s interpretation—echoed not only by Padma but by academic critics such as Robin Field and Gita Rajan—the dissolution of Gogol and Moushumi’s relationship as well as the various romantic decisions that both characters make throughout the narrative are assertions of their individuality and signal a newfound American subjectivity, replete with the freedom to make messy decisions about romantic preferences and sexual infidelity. Robin Field sums up this position in one of the few scholarly articles on the novel: “In *The Namesake*, marriage is a complicated manipulation between the traditional expectations of immigrant parents and the desires of the second generation [...] Lahiri [...] underscores how cultural similarities do not necessarily lead to personal compatibility, as this marriage crumbles by the end of the novel” (Field 173). Field describes Lahiri’s “most significant contribution to contemporary American literature” in the way that she captures the “delicate balance between cultural prerogatives and

personal agency” (168). Similarly critics such as Noelle Brada-Williams, Gita Rajan, and Laura Anh Williams locate Lahiri’s innovations (mainly in *The Interpreter of Maladies*) in how she presents a range of cultural prerogatives for her characters: namely, her ability to make her characters contend with “subtle, ethical dilemmas” and how she prompts readers “into pondering her characters’ choices” (Rajan “Ethical Responsibility” 127).

Lahiri’s representations of choice, valued by lay and academic readers alike, are ironically figured through Moushumi’s decision to end the marriage, a cryptic move that presumably represents her assertion of agency but is undercut by the details of her narrative development. Initial descriptions of Gogol and Moushumi’s courtship are fairly evenhanded: they are both depicted as flawed and insecure characters. Gogol expects her to fulfill certain desires specifically because they would require her submission to him. When they first get married the narrator tells us “Moushumi has kept her last name[...]. Though he hasn’t admitted this to her, he’d hoped, the day they’d filled out the application for their marriage license, that she might consider otherwise, as a tribute to his father if nothing else” (227). For rather chauvinistic reasons, Gogol is disappointed that he cannot continue the patrilineal name through marriage. We also see that he harbors petty jealousies towards her when they take a trip to Paris together, a city that Moushumi has made her second home: “He admires her, even resents her a little, for having moved to another country and made a separate life. He realizes that this is what their parents had done in America. What he, in all likelihood, will never do” (233). As the narrative progresses, however, Lahiri’s evenhandedness seems to dissipate and Moushumi’s character becomes increasingly incomprehensible. We begin to see her as sharing many of the same characteristics as Maxine, namely a penchant for materialism.

In the company of her well-heeled friends, Moushumi reveals an insecure, competitive streak: “Gogol has recently begun to notice that she is gloomy in the aftermath [of spending time with these friends], as if seeing them serves only to remind her that their own lives will never match up” (238). And it is while spending time with them that she betrays Gogol by publicly discussing his name change. Although the narrator always refers to him as Gogol, we are told that he has officially changed his name to Nikhil and this is what everyone around him calls him. At a dinner party one evening Moushumi publicly announces that Gogol has changed his name, again displaying a kind of insensitivity that borders on cruelty: “He’d told her of the accident, and then he’d told her about the night his father had told him, in the driveway at Pemberton Road. He’d confessed to her that he still felt guilty at times for changing his name, more so now that his father was dead. And she’d assured him that it was understandable...But now it’s become a joke to her.” (244) At this point in the narrative it has become obvious that the marriage is unraveling. Moushumi’s character becomes increasingly callous and the narrator perceptibly focuses on Gogol’s attempts to understand Moushumi’s withdrawal from him.

Moushumi’s narrative arc, as we saw with the two NetSAP readers’ interpretations and academic readings of the novel, has been interpreted as a rejection of her role as the “traditional” Indian woman. Her inability and unwillingness to conform to the expectations of the Bengali community causes the dissolution of the marriage but is an assertion of her own agentive choice and autonomy. However, because Moushumi’s motives and desires are not fully explored in the narrative, her rejection of marriage fails to offer a forceful critique of domesticity. Her affair becomes an empty act of rebellion in

which she simply does not want to conform to the familial or cultural expectations that don't seem to be imposed on her in the first place. In a rare moment of insight into her motivations we are told, "And yet the familiarity that had once drawn her to him has begun to keep her at bay. Though she knows it's not his fault, she can't help but associate him, at times, with a sense of resignation, with the very life she had resisted, had struggled so mightily to leave behind. He was not who she saw herself ending up with, he had never been that person." (250). Gogol was her alternative to Graham, the white American man who had left her weeks before they were to be married. In essence Gogol rescued her, "obliterated her former disgrace" (249). Graham's presence is a shadow in the narrative constantly making Gogol insecure in his relationship to Moushumi. Although Graham's race per se is never explicitly what causes Gogol's insecurity, it is a factor in his appeal to Moushumi, primarily because it ensures her some kind of cultural rebellion. Marrying someone white would have never completely fulfilled the desires or expectations of relatives and enabled her to act outside of cultural norms. When Moushumi wants to escape her marriage from Gogol, she has an affair with another white man, Dimitri.

Whiteness therefore becomes an unmarked and uncomplicated signifier of freedom of choice and escape from tradition. It is not only whiteness, but a whiteness that is universalized through the gender of the male subject. Ultimately, Moushumi's choice to reject Gogol, portrayed as a desperate act to escape the confines of stifling Indian tradition, actually reinstates Orientalist East/West binaries and gendered and racialized hierarchies, that as Gayatri Spivak explains determine the familiar narrative structure whereby the white man will rescue the brown woman from the stultifying and rigid

expectations of the brown man. Readerly desire, in both academic and lay reading communities, for a revision to the trope of arranged marriage, which Gogol and Moushumi's failed romance quite arguably offers, encodes thwarted desires for South Asian assimilation in the U.S. As Maira explains:

Mainstream media preoccupations with arranged marriages in the South Asian American community [...] [fit] all too neatly with Orientalized understandings of Asian cultures that sacrifice personal freedom to inexplicable but ancient traditions and collectivist control, unlike the individualist liberty of the rational, enlightened West (Said 1978). The trope of arranged marriage, however, seems to be a lens particularly reserved for South Asian Americans, perhaps because it provides the counterpoint to the image of a hypersexualized land of Kama Sutra. Public discussions of dating and marriage among second-generation Indian Americans, and their underlying erotic fantasies, are thus fraught with the politics of not only gender and sexuality but also nation, generation and race. (153)

Romantic relationships in *The Namesake*, particularly the failed marriage, present a powerful critique of South Asian cultural insularity; as Maira explains issues of inter and intra-racial romance in the South Asian American community mask politics of displacement and desires for belonging. Indeed one female reader, Pooja, explained that representations of romantic relationships in the novel helped her to revise her own attitudes toward dating only Indian men:

I was definitely able to identify with it in terms of the stuff that I was going through relationship-wise and what my attitude towards dating Indian men [is] and why I date them, and then reading that book and realizing that some of the reasons why I want to date [within] my own culture are not true anymore these days. That book really was a huge eye opener to me realizing that you know you can date an Indian or South Asian or whoever that grew up here, we're all pretty much growing up with the American values these days, so it really doesn't mean anything at the end of the day, 'cause if you're marrying someone who grew up here you're pretty much marrying someone who's not probably growing up with those values. (5-6).

Pooja asserts a kind of cultural integrity, a system of values that she once thought essential to Indian identity. By reading *The Namesake*, she became aware that this seemingly impervious value system may have become affected by what she perceives as the competing, more “dissolute” American value system in which divorce is acceptable. Her response to the novel demonstrates this tendency to essentialize identity along national and racial lines by creating a divide between South Asian and American culture. In this sense, Pooja’s observation may here seem to reinforce the repetitive tropes that characterize representations of South Asian American subjectivity. Her comment also reveals how *The Namesake* on one level reified what she thinks of as the difference between Indian and American cultures and in some ways challenged her notions of what those categories might signify.

In other words, the recuperative readings offered by lay and academic readers of the novel challenge valorizations of cultural authenticity when they are symbolized through tropes of intra-racial romance. But at the same time, these readings don’t address how the failure of the “well-married hero plot” (Chu 19) creates what Maira, glossing Homi Bhabha, identifies as “new structures of authority” for the second generation. Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” offers a critique and redefinition of hybridity stating that “This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom” (Bhabha 1990, 211 qtd. in Maira 87). Maira applies this concept to define a relationship between second generation South Asian Americans and their cultural practices, “the practices and rhetoric of cultural reinventions in the second generation suggest, however, that the positions emerging from this ‘third space’ are not

utopian or liberatory and do, in fact, create ‘new structures of authority’” (Maira 87). Lay and academic recuperative readings of the failed romance plot as an assertion of South Asian female autonomy and innovative rendering of ethnic prerogatives enacts a new structure of authority through the act of literary identification that reifies whiteness as a marker of development, choice, freedom and liberatory narratives.

While the depiction of Ashima, Gogol’s mother, is built from many of the same determinative elements as other women in the novel, Ashima also presents one of the more complicated cases of how lay readerly desire can offer productive critique of academic literary assessments. On the surface, the constant narrative association between Ashima and descriptions of Indian cuisine conflate her with (literal) consumption; she becomes a symbol of abject immigrant motherhood; and her development is figured as progress from stifling Eastern tradition to progressive Western modernity. Nevertheless, lay readers’ empathetic interpretations of her experiences challenge the narrative’s projection of patriarchal hegemony. Furthermore, Ashima’s symbolic redemption offers a way to refigure what Gayatri Gopinath critiques as the dominance of male-male relations in narratives of diasporic subjectivity and self-realization.

Descriptions of ethnic cuisine, cooking, and eating circumscribe Ashima’s appearances in *The Namesake*. As many scholars and literary critics have pointed out, it is a common trope in South Asian diasporic literature to tether descriptions of food to particularly classed and gendered identities within the rubric of national affiliation.¹⁰⁹ In this way, ethnic Indian cuisine metaphorizes Indian culture through a language of consumption, creating a set of culinary metaphors that mirror the consumption of ethnic

¹⁰⁹ For more information on how this trope functions in the field of Asian American studies see Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1993.

texts in the literary marketplace. As Parama Roy explains the pattern of what she terms the “gastropoetics” of South Asian diasporic literature, “Food and cooking have become, in several texts, the favored optic (or more properly, trope) to filter questions of national-diasporic filiation and affiliation and their economies of taste and consumption” (471). From the very start of the novel, Ashima’s association with Indian cuisine marks her as the keeper of cultural tradition and national purity in the domestic space of the household and America. In fact, the novel opens with Ashima alone in the kitchen of the apartment she shares with her husband, Ashoke, in Cambridge, approximating *chaat*, an Indian snack, with “Rice Krispies and Planters Peanuts” to feed her pregnancy cravings. In this way, food provides a connection to the homeland of India, and a way to temper her displacement in the United States. In an article on foodways in Jhumpa Lahiri’s short stories, Laura Anh Williams proffers an argument that traces this more recuperative reading of food metaphors in Lahiri’s fiction. It is an argument that quite seamlessly maps onto *The Namesake*: “The women in these stories, wives of academics, all utilize foodways to construct their own unique racialized subjectivity and to engender agency” (70). Yet, at the same time that these food metaphors encode Ashima’s cultural adjustment, they operate through stereotypes of South Asian female subjectivity, whereby the South Asian woman becomes the authentic bearer of Indian national purity and unchanging ethnic tradition. As the “traditional” wife, Ashima reproduces India in the home through her culinary skills:

Eight thousand miles away in Cambridge, she has come to know him. In the evenings she cooks for him, hoping to please him with the unrationed, remarkably unblemished sugar, flour, rice and salt she had written to her mother about in her very first letter home. By now she has learned that her husband likes his food on the salty side, that his favorite thing about lamb curry is the potatoes, and that he likes to finish his dinner with a small final helping of rice and dal. (10)

On the one hand, Ashima not only maintains connections to her family back home through descriptions of the pristine food available in the U.S. but food also provides a way to deepen the intimacy in her marriage and to learn more about her husband Ashoke. And on the other hand, it is in this way that the food metaphor fortifies limited characterizations of South Asian female subjectivity, casting Ashima as several clichés: the obedient daughter, the diligent wife, and the forbearing, abject mother (Chu 19, Prashad 105).

The drama of pregnancy and the language of (re)birth pervade characterizations of Ashima and Ashoke's immigration experience in particularly gendered ways. Ashoke's reinvention in America is a redemptive experience, his narrative arc is defined by rebirth in America after his near death experience in India: "He was born twice in India, and then a third time in America. Three lives by thirty" (21). But for Ashima the trope of abject motherhood and insular cultural reproduction define her experience of assimilation:

For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what once had been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding. Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect. (50)

By equating pregnancy with the alienation of immigration, the narrator describes a gendered spectacle of what it means to be a foreigner. The "pity and respect" that it invokes is likened to a perpetual pregnancy, implying that the condition of being foreign is one that should have a transformative resolution but does not. This metaphorical rendering of difference as a state of pregnant longing and expectation suggests that the

transition from immigration to assimilation is at once an insular, private, and internal process as well as one that carries with it a teleological resolution or healing. In fact, it is literally motherhood that enables her adjustment to American self-sufficiency and independence: “She begins to pride herself on doing it alone, in devising a routine. Like Ashoke, busy with his teaching and research and dissertations seven days a week, she, too, now has something to occupy her fully, to demand her utmost devotion, her last ounce of strength. Before Gogol’s birth, her days had followed no visible pattern” (34-35). Although Ashima, as mother and wife, represents familiar, arguably stereotypical, modes of “traditional” South Asian femininity, the metaphor of pregnancy to characterize her adaptation to living in the U.S., complicates and reinforces the limited trope of the long-suffering Asian mother.

The developmental telos enacted throughout the novel whereby India stands as a repository of static, Eastern tradition while the U.S. symbolizes the choice and independence of Western modernity is perhaps the strongest thematic commonality among the characters of Ashima, Maxine, and Moushumi. As the narrator tells us, when Ashima leaves India for the United States, her family, all but her grandmother that is, are fearful she will change: “Unlike her parents, and her other relatives, her grandmother had not admonished Ashima not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair or forget her family the moment she landed in Boston. Her grandmother had not been fearful of such signs of betrayal; she was the only person to predict, rightly, that Ashima would never change” (37). Ashima’s virtue is grounded in her ability to stay true to some static and traditional notion of Bengali-Indian culture regardless of the temptations to acculturate to American ways of life through acts of consumption. By the end of the novel, however,

Ashima eschews the more staid elements of Indian cultural tradition. She has no trouble adjusting to Gogol and Moushumi's divorce, and is in fact proud of them for not settling for an unhappy married life: "But fortunately they have not considered it their duty to stay married, as the Bengalis of Ashoke and Ashima's generation do. They are not willing to accept, to adjust, to settle for something less than their ideal of happiness. That pressure has given way, in the case of the subsequent generation, to American common sense" (276). Ashima participates in the "progress" of the second-generation acclimating to the values of American individuality. Her development is figured as a more multicultural identity, and an adaptation to the privileges of that "third space" adopting the "rhetoric of cultural reinvention" that creates "new structures of authority"; in this case this authority is constituted by a complacent and gendered East/West binary of developmental progress from tradition to modernity.

Lay interpretations of Ashima's character development do not challenge the more determinative and ambiguous narrative elements that define her throughout the narrative—namely, the tropes of consumption, domesticity, and Western modernity—but their desire for Ashima's story to be told defies the patrilineal, masculinist focus of the novel. At the most basic level, lay readers describe a powerful identification with Ashima's representation, explaining either that they learned about their mother's difficult experiences of immigration by reading the novel or that they were touched by what their mothers had described as a strong identification with Ashima. As Auditi, a Bengali-American reader and former English teacher selected to participate in the Choudhry article, "Four Conversations About One Thing" for *bookslut.com* explained:

In many ways, yes, as much as another's writing possibly can. For the first several chapters I just kept crying as I saw my own mother reflected in Ashima (Gogol's

mother). I think that the way that Gogol views her is characteristic of how a second generation Bengali-American might look at his or her mother. It was only as an adult that I came to understand and appreciate what my mother had gone through, and Gogol goes through that same process. At the end of the novel Gogol is 32, my age, and I felt I had learned something with him.

Auditi identifies with Gogol's second-generation positioning. She eloquently describes her identification with Gogol's cultural education and the empathy that she felt for her own mother's experiences, triangulated in a literary connection to Gogol and Ashima. NetSAP reader Pooja described a similar experience: "I know my cousin was telling me her mom really identified with the first half of the book more. And so did my mom, because they could understand the whole thing, getting married, coming here, adjusting to the life here and bringing up your children here" (8). For Pooja the novel presents opportunities for both first and second generation readers to assess their experiences and to examine them side by side.

During an interview with Raj, one of the young men who strongly identified with *The Namesake* and a regular participant in the book club, I asked if he felt, as I did, that there were troubling gender stereotypes in the novel. He refuted my observation explaining that his mother's identification with Ashima recalibrates the presence of stereotypes: "In terms of stereotypes in *The Namesake*, I mean, you could say Gogol's parents are stereotypical, but my mom said it's just like her life, so I don't know what to tell you, you know" (Raj 38). Raj's reading values the novel for giving voice to his mother's experience of immigration, and by extension offering a context for his own experiences. Of course, none of these readings resolves the determinative, essentializing representations of Ashima in the novel. But by attending to how these readers *use* the novel to connect with their parents', and in this case, their mothers', unwritten histories

of immigration, lay readerly desire revalues the novel's gendered determinism. These readers' motivated interpretive practice bypasses the dominant patriarchal narrative of Ashoke and Gogol's reconciliation, appreciating Ashima's isolation, struggle, and eventual adaptation instead.

The foundational appeal of *The Namesake* for NetSAP readers is its portrayal and representation of second-generation South Asian American subjectivity. These readers valued the novel for its depiction of a fraught bicultural identity. As Sunil explained, it presents a portrait of "Indians and how they see themselves in this country," and it offers instruction on how to negotiate "multiple personalities," "a dual life," and "to walk [through] both these worlds very fluidly" (Sunil 10). Similarly, Meera told me that she felt Lahiri's novel "articulates [...] this identity crisis that does exist for I think the majority of South Asians that I know [...] It's coming to terms with the world that you live in, and the household that you grew up in, and you have this tie to your relatives there [in South Asia] that don't completely understand your life here [...] so you are constantly playing multiple roles at once." The novel narrates familial histories of immigration and problematizes the trials of assimilation. As Raj explained, "I just remember that it was, it was touching in a way that you want to connect with your parents' history and the way that they brought you up, but sometimes it's not necessarily best for you and what you want" (Raj 9). Perhaps the most simple yet equally powerful assessment of the pull of readerly identification in *The Namesake* came during a book club meeting on Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in the Sieve*. The reader, a young Muslim, Indian-American woman who is a very active member in the book club explained, "*The Namesake* is about being and feeling that you are Gogol" (Nectar in a Sieve Transcript

35). Ethnic identification with various characters in the novel drives and constructs readerly desire for the novel's depictions of ethnic American subjectivities. Yet as Kaplan explains, identification cuts both ways, engendering interpretive complacency but also enabling feminist recuperation.

Conclusion

The reception contexts of the popular literature of writers such as Arundhati Roy, Chitra Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri offer a reminder that the complex act of identification and tacit or overt displays of readerly desire enable therapeutic literary effects. Furthermore, these recuperative reading practices can also create monolithic constructions of identity, dismissing the "weak moments" of a text rather than confronting their various, and variously constructed, meanings. Sociologist Bandana Purkayastha argues that diasporic cultural production marketed towards the "desi," or South Asian, community in the United States reinscribes the gap between people of South Asian descent and mainstream American culture. The global industry of marketing culture depends precisely on this group remaining "ethnic," and therefore South Asian consumers in the U.S. are targeted "by segmented identity marketing initiatives" making their subsequent patterns of consumption a confirmation of their "essential" preferences. (119). In tackling the specific marketing practices around literature, Purkayastha explains that South Asian Americans are enticed by this literature because it is presumably about their culture and experiences. By making strong connections between the literature and the community, they often accept literary and cultural representations as offering insight about the entire ethnic community rather than just parts of it (139). Purkayastha describes a circular logic in which the lay reader's desire for literary identification produces a

flattened, limited concept of South Asian immigrant communities in the U.S. In turn, these images are granted the sheen of ethnic authenticity, creating a demand for similar narratives in which representations quickly turn stereotypical.

Similarly, academic attempts to redefine the canon do not always recognize how desires for identification, the fetish of authenticity, and the strategies of the literary marketplace drive and are in fact constitutive of their efforts and conclusions. Lay readers can tactically mobilize stereotypes produced by literature because the role of desire is more explicit in their reading practice, but this does not mean that their readings are devoid of a certain amount of auto-essentializing. Issues that define their cultural citizenship or sense of belonging in the U.S. such as gender roles, class standing, and assertion of an ethnic rather than racial identity shape the parameters of their discussions and the readings that they produce. Lay readers' identifications with *The Namesake* provide little direct challenge to the hackneyed tropes of South Asian diasporic literature that it reproduces. As Patricia Chu notes, narratives such as “the ‘immigrant romance,’ [...] the abjection of the Asian mother; the construction of the Asian Americans as artists; [...] the figuring of Asian American women as sentimental heroines, brave immigrant foremothers, devoted daughters, and postmodernist authors” retain an intractable thematic presence in this fiction (Chu 19). But by studying the uses of this literature in a particular interpretive context we see that lay readerly desires also drive imaginative and empathetic readings that can reimagine the limited, “weaker” features of the text, recalibrating elements of the novel’s entrenched gender bias. This kind of interpretive contextualization elucidates a model of reading that foregrounds the situated, dynamic and dialogic nature of interpretive practice, reminding us that the act of reading

always involves the reading subject's assertion within and submission to the symbolic realm.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Jeffrey J. Williams, "The Culture of Reading: An Interview with Janice Radway," *The Minnesota Review*. Spring 2006.
http://www.theminnesotareview.org/journal/ns6566/iae_ns6566_cultureofreading.shtml

Epilogue

Is that all you got in there? I get asked that question all the time. It baffles me. Does John Updike get asked this question? Does Alice Munro? It's the ethnic thing, that's what it is. And my answer is always, yes, I will continue to write about this world, because it inspires me to write, and there's nothing more important than that.

—Jhumpa Lahiri¹¹¹

Jhumpa Lahiri's latest volume of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, was just released this past spring of 2008. The much-anticipated publication of this volume, which debuted at number ten on a best-seller list published by *USA Today* and shot to number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list less than two weeks after its publication, has thus far been accompanied by complimentary reviews from almost every major news publication.¹¹² While several of these reviews celebrate *Unaccustomed Earth* as a groundbreaking, original work of fiction—evidence not only of the second-generation's "coming-of-age" but also the arrival of the third-generation of South Asian immigrants in the U.S.—the frenzy of reviewership reproduces a very familiar set of expectations for the ethnic writer. Lahiri's understandably defensive response in the above epigraph makes these expectations explicit, and suggests that questions asked of the South Asian diasporic writer remain discouragingly uniform over time. How then do we begin to

¹¹¹ Jhumpa Lahiri responding to a question about writing about the Indian American experience. See Boris Kachka, "The Confidence Artist." *New York Magazine*. March 27, 2008.

¹¹² See "Turning Short Stories into a Main Course," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 28, 2008; "Jhumpa Lahiri: 'Unaccustomed Earth' for those on new soil" *International Herald Tribune*, April 4, 2008; "A literary harvest!" *The Hindu*, Monday, April 7, 2008; "American Children" *The New York Times*, April 6, 2008; "Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth*: A New Emotional Wisdom," *The Village Voice*, April 1, 2008; "The New Global Nomads," *Slate*, April 3, 2008.

revise these expectations and counter the repetitive, stultifying questions that we ask of the ethnic writer?

In this dissertation, I propose a methodology of reading that would advance critical efforts to interrogate expectations of authenticity and ostensible cultural bias. And in doing so, my aim has been to demonstrate that literary meaning is not forged solely or primarily at the site of articulation.¹¹³ Rather than dwelling on the formulation of a new set of questions to ask the ethnic writer, my central aim throughout this project has been to redirect some of the accountability for the creation of literary signification and the often-confounding politics of cultural representation onto the reader.

In the preceding chapters, I argue that a complex politics of recognition and representation in lay and academic reading publics produce the female South Asian diasporic writer as the bearer of cultural tradition and authenticity. Through the development of an ethno-textual reading methodology—in which I strive to put lay and academic readers into critical dialogue with one another as well as the text and its various literary historical contexts—this project interrogates lay and academic readerly desires for an authentic female ethnic subject, representations of the model minority myth, and community recognition. In contrast to modes of literary critical analysis that illuminate the effects of historical circumstance on discursive representation, my project is invested in demonstrating how literary representation, particularly through the discursive workings of interpretation (whether it is published or circulates within an unofficial literary public), shapes knowledge, truth, and notions of authenticity.

¹¹³ Janice Radway, "Reception Study: Ethnography and the Problems of Dispersed Audiences and Nomadic Subjects," *Cultural Studies*, 2:3, 359-376.

I would like to conclude these efforts by collating future avenues for research and inquiry that this methodology has inspired me to consider. In particular, a politics of reading that values the text's multiple meanings and acknowledges its changing significance in different reading publics prompts a consideration of the literature classroom as yet another example of an interpretive community. One of the challenges that I believe educators continually face in the literature classroom is how to negotiate complex identity politics when teaching so-called minority texts and cultures. How do we open up conversations about the relationship between interpretation and subjectivity while cautioning students not to flatten out their own experiences to match up with textual representation? How do we recognize the indeterminacy of identity categories while acknowledging their very "real" influence on how students shape their lives and view their worlds? This project offers a consideration of how lay readers negotiate similar questions, and how they form bi-cultural affiliations through literature, using South Asian diasporic fiction simultaneously to refute and mobilize expectations of ethnic authenticity. It would, however, be rewarding in future work to situate some of these same ethno-textual methodologies within the already dialogic space of the literary classroom. I would be particularly interested in investigating the gaps and affinities between how secondary school educators and university teachers present multiethnic literatures to their students, and how these groups address some of the challenges of identification, authenticity imperatives, and other forms of readerly desire that students bring to their readings.

Another possible avenue for the development of this project would require an expansion of the ethnographic research. As I mention in the introduction, the NetSAP

book club has several thriving regional chapters including one in Chicago and one in the Bay Area. Patterns of Indian migration to these U.S. regions vary in terms of South Asian immigrants' ethno-religious affiliations, class/caste background, regional origin, and linguistic difference.¹¹⁴ Thus, one future project would study whether U.S. regional location affects patterns of South Asian affiliation and literary preference. This line of inquiry could lead to a productive conceptualization of a transnational methodology. As I learned from a conversation with a NetSAP interviewee who was born and raised in New Delhi, book club meetings are becoming increasingly popular in India. Ushered in by a thriving, upwardly mobile middle class leisure economy, and of course the global reach of Oprah Winfrey, these meetings are regularly held in public spaces such as the India Habitat Centre, a cultural community center in New Delhi, as well as in private residences. It is my sense that situating the reading praxis of South Asians living and working in the region in dialogue with reading preferences and interpretive predilections of South Asian diasporics would offer insight into issues introduced in this dissertation, such as the construction of ethnic authenticity in the West, nationalist nostalgia, the machinations of the international publishing market, debates on Indian English, and the workings of the global culture industry.

The third and final possibility that I am considering for this project's expansion takes inspiration from an idea broached in the introduction of this dissertation. While the book club remains a fascinating site of community readership and collaborative interpretation, the ever-increasing popularity of social networking sites, the internet blog, as well as the increasing interactivity of "official" sources of general media reviewership

¹¹⁴ See Judith M. Brown. *Global South Asians : Introducing the Modern Diaspora*. New Approaches to Asian History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

through online discussion forums, inevitably has altered the way that we think about reading, interpretation, and criticism, recasting them as explicitly communal activities. I do not mean to evoke the utopian rhetoric of the “internet revolution” as a mode of deliverance from the isolation of modernity— after all, one aim of my project is to contribute to ethnographies of reading that define the activity as “always already” dialogic and collaborative. Rather, I am interested in exploring these online formats as alternative sites of communal readership and authorship that hold particular purchase for ethnic and racial coalitional communities in the United States. I find it particularly interesting that these online communities retain an interpretive connection to the literature that purportedly represents them, and that they use blogs as sites in which they publicly refute general media and academic critical perspectives. For example, a few days after *Unaccustomed Earth* was released, the writers and readers of the South Asian cultural interest blog sepiamutiny.com and the South Asian Journalists Association (SAJA)—which both have a very strong internet presence for the diasporic community— had already assembled and assessed general media reviews of the collection. These sites opened up forums of discussion wherein readers could openly debate the consensus of published review, and challenge not only the blogger’s assertions but other readers’ opinions, producing in several instances well-considered and illuminating insights into Lahiri’s reception, the expectations for the ethnic writer, and their own disdain or affinity for her work. And although the blog also invites some pretty empty commentary, there is something remarkable in the encounter of so many critical perspectives in one site.

Ending this epilogue with a consideration of the blog as a new site of literacy and a locus of simultaneous authorship and readership provides me with the opportunity to

acknowledge the indispensable critical perspectives that have contributed to the formation of this dissertation project as it stands. I understand that this dissertation unavoidably privileges the voice of its author in interpreting the uses and meanings of these texts. And yet, my intent throughout the project has been to honor and share what I have learned from the readers who have lent their voices, scholarship, and critical investments to the conceptualization and completion of this project.

Appendix 1

Interview Questions for NETSAP Book Club Interviewees

General Reading Practice

1. Would you describe yourself as an avid reader? If so, then why do you like reading? How does it enhance your life? If not, are there reasons why not? Are you too busy, are there other things you enjoy doing more?
2. What are your favorite genres to read? What kinds of books do you usually enjoy? Do you like fiction, non-fiction, poetry, drama, newspapers, magazines?

South Asian Diasporic Literature

3. Do you have a specific interest in South Asian diasporic literature? What are some of the authors that you have read? Please list as many names as you can remember off the top of your head.
4. Who among those writers are your favorites? Can you tell me why?
5. Do you like to read lots of multiethnic literatures or is South Asian diasporic your preference? What other kinds of multiethnic literatures interest you? Why? What is it that you enjoy about reading them?
6. What initially compelled your interest in South Asian diasporic literature? Was there anything in particular you were hoping to learn or find out about yourself and/or your identity by reading this literature?
7. Are there any particular themes that you see repeated in this body of literature? If so, can you name a few of them? Can you tell me a few of the books that you've seen those themes repeated in? Have you given any thought as to why these themes may repeat?
8. What do you think about those themes? Do you think that they are important and informative, do you think they provide accurate representations of South Asian diasporic culture? Can you give me some specific examples of where they might be accurate and where they might be a bit unfounded?
9. Do you think that South Asian literature is politically empowering? If so, in what senses?

10. What is the benefit of describing a shared experience? If it is common to all of us, what is the use in reading about it?

South Asian Literature, Identity and Reading Practice

11. Does South Asian diasporic literature tell readers of South Asian descent anything valuable about their diasporic identities? Has it helped you figure anything out about your identity? If so, what is it? If not, what does it leave out?
12. Do you think that people who aren't of South Asian descent would have any interest in South Asian diasporic literature? If so why? Do you know people who are interested in the literature? What writers in particular seem to interest them?
13. What compels interest in South Asian diasporic literature outside of the community of South Asian diasporic? Why do you think people of other races and ethnicities might be interested in reading this body of literature? Could they learn anything from it?
14. Do you think there is a difference between the South Asian diasporic writers that people inside the community like and those who people outside of the community might like? Can you give me specific examples of which writers you're thinking of?

NetSAP Book Club

15. How long have you been involved in NetSAP book club? How many meetings have you attended?
16. Why did you get involved in NetSAP book club?
17. How do you decide which meetings to attend?
18. What have been some of your favorites meetings/discussions? Which books have those meetings centered on?
19. Have you ever been a part of any other book clubs?
20. Do you attend other NetSAP events?
21. Why do you think that this book club formed around South Asian identity? What do you think the purpose of forming book clubs around an ethnic identity might be?
22. What do you think of the conversations at the book club meetings? Do they generally meet your expectations?

Appendix 2

List of Interviewees (Table 1)

Name	Date of Meeting	Gender, Regional or Ethnic Affiliation
Manju	10/22/2005	Female, Indian American
Moira	10/27/2005	Female, Indian American
Madhu	11/14/2005	Female, Indian
Sujata	7/7/2006	Female, Pakistani American
Sunil	6/10/2006	Male, Bengali, Indian American
Nishi	6/11/2006	Female, Pakistani American
Raj	7/12/2006	Male, Bengali, Indian American
Priya	7/14/2006	Female, Indian American
Meera	7/15/2006	Female, Indian American
Padma	9/10/2006	Female, Indian American
Pooja	9/10/2006	Female, Indian American
Priti	9/11/2006	Female, Indian
Ash	9/12/2006	Female, Indian
Ajay	9/12/2006	Male, Indian
Aparna	10/11/2006	Female, Pakistani American
Anil	10/12/2006	Male, Indian American
Lalita	10/13/2006	Female, Indian American
Monali	11/7/2006	Female, Indian American

Note: All names have been changed to protect privacy.

Book Club Meeting Dates (Table 2)

Book	Author	Date
The Feast of Roses	Indu Sundaresan	11/5/2006
The Red Letters	Ved Mehta	6/8/2006
Two Lives	Vikram Seth	7/13/2006
The Red Carpet	Lavanya Sankaran	9/14/2006
The Royal Ghosts	Samrat Upadhyay	10/12/2006
The Inheritance of Loss	Kiran Desai	11/9/2006
Nectar in a Sieve	Kamala Markandaya	2/8/2007

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