Bridges, Borders and Bodies

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To Guido, for walking the sky with me.

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INTRODUCTION

Bridges, Borders and Bodies investigates how transculturality is articulated and theorised in contemporary fictional works by South Asian diasporic women writers from England, Canada and America from the 1990s to the early years of the current millennium. I see South Asian diasporas as being transcultural legacies of colonialism, while constituting transcultural forms of postcolonial reality in today's globalised world. Bringing diasporic and transcultural theories to bear on contemporary South Asian women's fiction renders this particular body of literature a valuable resource to address current debates and discussions concerning issues of migration, misogynist violence and human rights, discrimination based on gender, race and class. Intrinsic to these debates are ruminations on family and kinship structures as well as community loyalties, where South Asian female subjectivities are constructed around perceptions and navigations of individual freedoms and communal cultural responsibilities. I hope to challenge stereotypes and traditional beliefs about South Asian women in diverse diasporic situations, which have contributed to ossifying certain gender roles and expectations – both within South Asian contexts and in the hegemonic Euro-American societies identifying predominantly as white, heterosexual and middle class.

Diasporic experience has significant implications for the formation of identity and the articulation of ethnicity in diasporic communities as well as those communities' relationships to the other (local or diasporic) ethnic groups of the host countries. Given the unprecedented global scope of technology, communications, travel and media, the nature of contemporary South Asian diasporic experience is significantly more convoluted and ambivalent than that of earlier migratory movements from the Indian subcontinent. Generalizations should therefore be made with caution, since the circumstances surrounding diasporic movements from South Asia are various.

I am aware that the term 'South Asian' has obtained currency in academic and literary discourses, whereby the term is lauded as being inclusive of the diasporic communities with subcontinental affiliations, now resident in the USA, Canada, England and the Caribbean. Consisting of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka, South Asia is a region of great linguistic, cultural, economic, ethnic and religious diversity. These nations which in recent years have been able

to develop their own particular focus of power, are based very much on arbitrary divisions in connection with local economic, political and cultural groupings. The term has been debated with regard to its feasibility in delineating this particular diasporic group identity, indicating its heterogeneity (see Schlote, 2006: 388-390). One notes the category of 'South Asian' is often used synonymously with 'Indian' and the indiscriminate use of the term 'South Asian' results in forgetting or ignoring the diversity of the peoples from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka etc.[1] A new hierarchy seems to have emerged, privileging certain groups (often denoting those literally from the geophysical space of India, with mainly Hindu sensibilities) while causing other groups to become invisible within its boundaries.[2]

While I am cautious about using the terms 'Indian' and 'South Asian' synonymously, I have chosen 'South Asian' to denote that particular diaporic identity, being aware of the multiplicity of South Asian identity positions, which may or may not subscribe to the label. Hence I use the term advisedly with a pragmatic bent in my readings here in the light of Indira Karemcheti's (uneasy) observation in the context of diasporic literature that:

> Names of peoples and cultures […] shift during global movements, usually in the direction of greater generalisation, so that Indians, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans […] become equally 'South Asian'. […] 'The proper name', then, here represents geographic/national specificity, particular diasporic history, and recognised racial identity. To think of the South Asian's name as 'proper' means to confer ownership of identity to the diaspora, to concede that identity indeed is a property, that is, a commodity that can be employed for greater or lesser profit, and to accord the South Asian diaspora the right to claim an appropriate – i.e. self-identified- history and race. (Karemcheti, 2014: 101, 102).

Self-identified histories are pertinent in this discussion with regard to how agency is expressed in diasporic situations textualised in South Asian diasporic women's literature. I am mindful of this especially when addressing works by Indo-Caribbean women authors, who have the term 'Indian' or rather the prefix 'Indo-' integrated into their naming practice to differentiate themselves from Caribbean authors of Creole and Afro-Caribbean origins, and to consolidate their historical connections to India. In this light, Mariam Pirbhai observes with regard to the Indo-Caribbean indentured context, 'rooted as the majority of indentured peoples are in religious tenets and customs, their literatures are often grounded in a distinctly Hindu ethos' (Pirbhai, 2009: 9). Additionally in line with current practices of referring to those of the Indian diaspora as 'South Asian' with

the appropriate hyphenated suffixes of "–American", "–British" and "–Canadian", I find that this also allows for the interrogation of the concept of transculturality in diasporic situations, with regard to ideas of in-betweeness and cultural hybridity, which will be dealt with later in chapter 1.

The corpus of texts discussed encompasses ten novels, where the South Asian protagonists are in various stages of migration and integration into their new host countries. I read the different forms of identity negotiation undertaken by the protagonists as transcultural transgressions. These transgressive strategies illustrate different extents of transcultural rooting and shifting between two or more (often incompatible) cultural worldviews.

Seemingly implacable cultural value systems exacerbate discriminatory behaviours both within and outside diasporic communities which render South Asian women's integration into their chosen home matrices highly ambivalent, indeed problematic. In my interrogation of such in the literary analysis of the novels discussed here, I wish to incite reflection on current feminist critical approaches, which allow for more transnational and transcultural applicability, rather than mere reliance on and transposition of Eurocentric feminist frameworks on South Asian contemporaneities. Contiguous with this, I examine how South Asian diasporic female subjectivities are imagined in these works by South Asian diasporic women writers, with regard to narrative perspectives, voice and spatiotemporalities, where female migrant histories bear relevance to contemporary feminised diasporic experience.

The South Asian protagonists articulate diverse forms of diasporic female identity, embedded and active in the social structures of their fictional worlds, which are depicted in predominantly realist modes in all the novels. These protagonists portray different degrees of autonomy in exercising forms of transculturality necessary in shaping their new home spaces. While I do not read (nor do I advocate reading) these novels as sociological documents, I recognise that these fictional works address realities in South Asian diasporic women's lives in such ways that '[t]he art of story-telling – fiction itself – is given a legitimacy here in so far as the means by which experiences otherwise lost may be captured' (Mishra, 2007: 180). The realities of South Asian diasporic female experience have clearly captured the imaginations and political consciousness of the contemporary South Asian diasporic women writers discussed here, who themselves are situated diasporic subjects. Their imaginative ruminations contribute to the fictional constructions of individual diasporic women, diasporic collectives and the knowledges that these possess. The creative

processes of these writers thus give rise to ways of thinking that gradually make visible the transcultural facets of South Asian diasporic female experience, which deserve articulation and discussion. In line with Vijay Mishra's observation that 'the aesthetic becomes a site from which critical thinking can take place' (Mishra, 2007: 149), besides analysing these novels as creative fictional works, I read them as the diasporic writers' political commentary and critique on issues pertaining to nuanced understandings of South Asian feminine realities.

Personal Migrations and Motivations

My interest in the field is partly to be contributed to my own situation as a South Asian diasporic woman living in Germany for the past 20 odd years with occasional sojourns in England, Canada and the US.

Diasporic experience is inscribed into my natal context: my mother hails from Kerala in South India, while my father was born in Negri Sembilan, Malaysia, the son of Keralan parents, who had migrated there in the 1930s. Given this background, and the fact that I was born and raised in Singapore, a multi-racial and multicultural city-state, a hub of cultural and commercial activity in Southeast Asia, I could be considered a 'double-diasporic' South Asian woman. I moved to Germany in 1990, to go to university. Trying to integrate into Indian-German communities left me exhausted and puzzled, since I was made to understand that I was not "really Indian". At the same time, integrating into German mainstream society was proving to be a challenge in itself, despite my fluency in the language. I began to interrogate what it meant to be 'Indian' and what it took to become 'German'.[3]

My undergraduate seminars in postcolonial literatures led me to further research into Indian women's literature written in English as a graduate student, whereby I encountered diasporic novels written by South Asian women living in Great Britain (e.g. Ravinder Randhawa's *A Wicked Old Woman*, 1987) and in the US (e.g. Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, 1989, and Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*, 1993). The period from the 1990s to the beginning of the new millennium – the temporal setting of most of the novels I address here – was also a time where I was negotiating my own diasporic space and sense of displacement. My own travels to the USA to re-acquaint myself with relatives there helped consolidate my interest in diaspora studies. On a visit to Chicago in 1997, my cousin presented me with a copy of *Our Feet Walk the Sky* (1993). This collection captured my attention with its particular focus on South Asian American women's diasporic experience depicted in poetry, short stories and critical essays.

The volume gave me the added impetus to interrogate the viability of transcultural approaches in addressing diasporic situations. South Asian diasporic women's fiction proved accessible in understanding the nuanced dynamics of diasporic experience and strategies of homing.

My main line of inquiry involves investigating whether transculturality could be contingent on elucidating diverse forms of female agency in the light of feminist considerations that are rooted in South Asian diasporic contexts. The novels I have chosen to discuss here are symptomatic of a period significant for the emergence of an 'ethnic minority' women's literature that seeks to challenge and transgress cultural boundaries in its descriptions of South Asian women's diasporic lives. In contrast to recent publications[4] on South Asian diasporic women's literature, my work draws attention to the complexities of multiple degrees of belonging through memories and generational negotiations that are informed and filtered through particularly female diasporic movements between India, Caribbean, England and Canada and America articulated in these novels.[5] These geographical spaces are historically connected with the colonial history and postcolonial contemporaneity of India[6] where all the writers (but one) whose works are discussed here, have their ancestral roots. South Asian diasporic women writers problematise the double estrangement of women in both South Asian as well as European and North American societies, which are inherently informed by (heteronormative) patriarchal social scripts. I find that these connections contribute to a transcultural web between these spaces, allowing for rich readings of the novels using the transcultural paradigm.

South Asian Diasporic Women's Writing before the 1990s

The following is a brief inventory of novels written during the 1970s and 1980s (i.e. post-1965) by South Asian diasporic women addressing diasporic experience in England, Canada and the USA, which set the stage as it were for later literary works. South Asian diasporic women's writing (in English) seems to have been a less common phenomenon during this period and fewer names are known.

Bharati Mukherjee, who styles herself as 'an American writer of Indian origins' (Hogan, 1997), wrote *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), and *Wife* (1975), both of which illustrate a woman-centred viewpoint of diasporic life in the USA. Both have often been marked as pioneer texts in South Asian women's diasporic writing.[7]

Another lesser known author is South Asian British writer Kamala Markandaya[8] who settled in post-WWII England. While most of her

novels deal with Indian women's experience on the subcontinent, her only novel of migration is *Nowhere Man* (1972) which describes the diasporic experience of a South Asian man in England. South Asian British writer Ravinder Randhawa's *A Wicked Old Woman* (1987) deals specifically with a South Asian British woman and the conflicts she confronts; this novel has often been analysed with a view to elucidating the difficulties of cultural negotiation.[9] Randhawa was also responsible for the first South Asian women's literary collective in England: the Asian Women Writers' Workshop which later became the Asian Women Writers' Collective[10] first formed in 1984 in London.

Suniti Namjoshi, who moved to the UK from Montreal, Canada, has produced five poetry collections and several works of fiction, among them *Feminist Fables* (1981), The *Conversations of Cow* (1985), *The Blue Donkey Fables* (1988) and *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989).[11]

South Asian Canadian writer Uma Parameswaran published two volumes of poetry[12] and a play, in the 1970s and the 1980s. The play *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees* (1989) was the forerunner for her 2002 novel *Mangoes on the Maple Tree,* which addresses the generational conflicts of two South Asian Canadian families in Winnipeg.

During the 1970s and 1980s South Asian diasporic women's writings were often published alongside Black women writers.[13] Since the 1990s, novels, poetry collections and short fiction anthologies, volumes of critical essays as well as websites based on South Asian women's diasporic experiences and works have been published with their main agendas devoted to questions of cultural negotiation, memories and relationships to India (the so-called 'sending' country) as well as familial structures, female sexuality and agency.[14]

While there are numerous anthologies, essay collections and monographies investigating South Asian diasporic experience in general, there are a number which focus expressly on South Asian diasporic women. I draw attention to two examples of such works which serve to illustrate and articulate the transgressive dimensions in South Asian diasporic women's identificatory processes.[15]

Her Mother's Ashes and Other Stories by South Asian Women in Canada and the United States (vols. I, 1994 and II, 1996), edited by Nurjehan Aziz, contain the diversity of South Asian American and Canadian women's experience fictionalised by writers and theorised by academics. The anthologies are not about plain nostalgia, which contributes to the pathologisation of diasporics; rather 'it is about memory, history and the material realities of South Asian diasporic women's lives'

in North America (Mukherjee, 1994: xvi) involving diverse degrees of transgression of cultural and other boundaries.

Shamita Das Dasgupta's *A Patchwork Shawl: Chronicles of South Asian Women in America* (1998) focuses on solely experiential records rather than fictional representations. Diverse subjective positions are employed as the basis for theoretical investigations into the lived experiences of South Asian women in the USA, whereby ethnic identity cannot be separated from the postcolonial identity. Boundaries imposed by disciplinary and literary requirements are transgressed by combining 'the creative with the critical, the subjective with the objective, the emotional with the analytical' (Das Dasgupta, 1998: 15).

By no means an exhaustive survey of writing currently available, these collections incorporate creative fictional representations across the genres of short stories, poetry and autobiographical pieces, as well as critical essays and colonial and postcolonial histories.[16] The texts show the multifarious levels of scholarly and creative engagement by South Asian diasporics which articulate the diversity and ambiguities of South Asian diasporic women's experiences. In these collections, questions of cultural identity as well as personal agency are addressed and negotiated, whereby subcontinental cultural perceptions are never far from these negotiations. This rich backdrop of creative and critical writing by South Asian diasporic women writers and scholars provides the context in which I analyse the novels, especially since a number of these writers have also contributed to these collective projects.

A Note on the Authors

The novels to be discussed are Ameena Meer's *Bombay Talkie* (1994), Bhargavi Mandava's *Where the Oceans Meet* (1996), Yasmin Ladha's *Women Dancing on Rooftops* (1997), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Marina Budhos' *The Professor of Light* (1999), Meera Syal's *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (1999), Atima Srivastava's *Looking for Maya* (2000), Uma Parameswaran's *The Sweet Smell of Mother's Milkwet Bodice* (2001), Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* (2003) and Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White* (2003).[17]

Another pertinent aspect in my choice of texts is that many of these writers, aside from Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee and Meera Syal, are not very well known in the international literary mainstream.[18] This adds another dimension to my work here, in that it seeks to digress from the widespread practice in much literary criticism, of validating writers who have been integrated into the international Anglophone diasporic literary

canon[19]. In my opinion, many of these lesser known writers' works contribute to more nuanced readings of South Asian diasporic female identities across diverse regional and socio-economic backgrounds, thus extending the palette of creative fictional texts available for studying contemporary women's writing and diasporic literature. Some of the protagonists in these fictional works are second generation diasporics, whose perspectives provide valuable substrates to examine experiences of South Asian women who do not have first-hand memories or emotional ties with the subcontinent and yet count India as a viable cultural resource for their particular diasporic situations.

From South Asian standpoints and western perspectives on South Asian cultures, men are often viewed as the more active agents in negotiating foreign territory, since it is considered acceptable for them to be active in interacting with mainstream agents of the dominant society in public spheres. Women however are supposedly relegated to the private domestic sphere, where they are expected to fulfil their roles of caretakers, dictated by cultural value systems. Visibility is accorded to topics, such as childbirth, familial relationships, domestic violence, cooking, creativity, sexuality, job opportunities, education, marriage; here questions are raised about the stereotypical images of subjugated, silently suffering South Asian women. Hence I read these texts as subverting 'ethnocentric perceptions of women in western contexts of independence and individuality, which South Asian cultures are perceived as denying' (Hussain, 2004: 1).

The protagonists of the novels grapple with their identities and their new environments as well as with cultural knowledges, ancestral genealogies, which serve to root them in South Asian traditions. At the same time they are motivated to make use of the host cultures' resources alongside their natal contexts, in order to facilitate richer lives, with perspectives for reinvention and personal development. Refuting common stereotypical representations, the protagonists are highly active, liminal characters, who show a complexity of reflection on their own in-between status in their dual or multiple cultural contexts.

The writers themselves inhabit hybrid spaces which allow them to envision and create diasporic narratives which bring out the ambiguities of transcultural lives. They are also part of the post-1965 wave of migration from India and the Caribbean to the UK, the US and Canada[20], either as first-generation professionals or students, or as young children and teenagers who then reached adulthood in the countries and now hold professional jobs. Most of these writers are of the middle class and several combine creative writing with posts as professors of literature, as business

women, media personalities or feminist activists. Despite their own comparatively privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, I find these writers address feminised diasporic experience located in diverse class positions, extending transcultural agency across class boundaries.

Ramabai Espinet is a writer, a poet, a professor for Women's Literature at Seneca College, York University, Toronto as well as a feminist activist. Uma Parameswaran is a professor for English Literature at the University of Winnipeg, a writer, a poet and active in immigrant women's issues in Winnipeg. Yasmin Ladha is an English instructor in the liberal studies program at the Alberta College of Art and Design, Calgary.

Meera Syal is a writer, actress and a well-known figure in the British entertainment scene. Preethi Nair is a novelist and a business consultant in London. Atima Srivastava is a novelist and has worked in television as a film editor and a director.

Bhargavi Mandava is a writer, a poet and a music critic based in Los Angeles. Marina Budhos is a writer of fiction and non-fiction as well as a journalist; she lives in New York City. Ameena Meer is a writer and a journalist, also resident in New York. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a novelist, poet and professor of Creative Writing at the University of Houston; she also serves on the board of *Maitri*, an organisation in San Francisco which helps South Asian women in domestic violence situations.

The prolific writing produced by these South Asian diasporic women writers in the last two decades could be read both as a professional coming-of-age of these writers in their chosen home spaces with a concomitant agenda to make South Asian diasporic women's experiences more visible.

Feminised Diasporic Experience

Feminist critics have long criticised how critical theory has been brought to bear on female experience.[21] They have elucidated the value of female experiences (historicised and contemporary) for women writers in the shaping of literary texts. Thus these women writers create with a view to recognising, identifying and commenting on gendered forms of social inequality which still contribute to subjugating women in diverse cultural contexts and spaces, as well as to eliciting forms of female agency in order to envision social change.

The main agenda of second wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s was to challenge the exclusion of women and the naturalization of gender ideologies in hegemonic knowledge production, which notably impacted

on diaspora studies especially in the 1980s and 1990s. Here a particularly gendered perspective was being grafted on the interrogations of diasporas being depicted as homogeneous and essentialized; firstly, by including women's experiences and secondly, through exploring the myriad ways in which women's experiences might differ from men's in their contributions to diasporic formations (Al-Ali, 2010: 118).

Contingent with received gender perceptions of men as rational beings, men have long been viewed as providing reliable and authoritative historiographic accounts – masculinised narratives which have been privileged in buttressing cultural veracity in public spheres, to the exclusion of female perspectives. Female narratives have been often invalidated (as mundane, overtly emotional and irrational), rendered invisible, either by being subsumed into (and instrumentalised by) grand historical, political (nationalist) and cultural narratives, or by being marginalised and edited out of cultural scripts altogether. At the same time, from South Asian standpoints and western perspectives on South Asian cultures, men are often viewed as the more active agents in travel, exploration of foreign geo-political spaces, as well as initiating, evaluating and navigating forms of contact with cultural Others. Women, often relegated to the private domestic sphere, are expected to fulfil their roles of caregivers and producers of progeny, as dictated by cultural value systems (without questioning), which often represent patriarchal interests.

South Asian diasporic experience and its historiographies, as depicted in these narratives, are feminised through valorising female migratory experiences both in past and present contexts, by focussing on feminine spaces, relations and activities marking women's diasporic movements. Examples of such feminisation include, for example, the procurement and cooking of food, carrying cultural mementoes from the homeland to arrange and shape new home spaces, facilitating familial and kinship connections and interaction, relating to the larger diasporic communities, memorialising originary home spaces and cultural knowledges for progeny, providing female solidarity and comfort through memory, keeping alive hopes for return. The private female migratory journeys undertaken by female ancestors are reinscribed in the narratives, juxtaposing them against journeys of the more contemporary diasporic protagonists, which include (metaphoric and physical) returns to the originary homeland of India as reversals of the ancestral migrations.

My readings of these novels occur against the backdrop of South Asian diasporic histories in the contexts of the United States, England, Canada and the Caribbean, especially with a view to elucidating transnational connections engendered in the course of these migrations. The transculturality

paradigm used to read these feminised diasporic movements, focuses on the ability to both root in and shift between cultural perspectives, indeed transcend and trangress boundaries, to effect translations of cultures transported into the new socio-cultural matrices. At the same time, I also interrogate the idea of cultures as being conceived of as discrete entities with impermeable boundaries. I discovered a peculiarly feminine transculturality within these identificatory negotiations, locating concepts of hyphenation, cultural hybridity and doubled vision in the borderland spaces of South Asian female diasporic experience. I regard contemporary South Asian diasporic women's fictional writing fruitful ground to address the causality of colonial and postcolonial histories on the perceptions of South Asian diasporic women.

The enunciation of diasporic experiences by fictional characters in these works, as I find them, opens up the diversity of subject positions within the diasporic communities in England, the United States and Canada. The images of the South Asian diasporas in these locations are interrogated by unearthing the issues of the gendered nature of diasporic experience and the power relations evident in these:

> [A]t the level of everyday social practice, cultural differences are persistently racialized, classed and gendered. Diaspora theories need to account for these concrete cross-cutting structures. Diasporic experiences are always gendered. But there is a tendency for theoretical accounts of diasporas and diaspora cultures to hide this fact, to talk of travel and displacement in unmarked ways, thus normalizing male experiences. (Clifford, 1997: 258)

The power differentials that mark women's experiences of displacement are often pivotal in most literary representations by South Asian diasporic women writers.[22] South Asian diasporic women occupy a besieged space marked by multiple marginalization (Russell, 2002; Vijaysree, 2001). And yet these narratives focus on the process of transplantation and translation, rather than exclusively on the agonistics of uprooting and disjunctive crisis. Thus survival is the main goal when these protagonists are confronted with what Meena Alexander terms the 'shock of arrival', followed by efforts to surmount the obstacles to integration and adaptation into the new home environment:

> Migrancy, a central theme for many of us in this shifting world, forces a recasting of how the body is grasped, how language works. Then too at the heart of what happens […] is the question of post-colonial memory. The shock of arrival is multifold – what is borne in the mind is jarred, tossed into new shapes […] What we were in that other life is shattered open. But

> the worlds we now inhabit still speak of the need for invention, of ancestors, of faith. A time of literally explosive possibilities, we must figure out how to live our lives. The shock of arrival forces us to new knowledge. What the immigrant must work with is what she must invent in order to live. Race, ethnicity, the fluid truths of gender are all cast afresh. Nationality, too, that emptiest and yet most contested of signs, marks us. The old question 'Who am I?' returns – I am what others see me as, but I am also my longings, my desire, my speech. (Alexander, 1996: 1)

Alexander's understanding of migration is salient to constructions of South Asian diasporic female identity; her observations on the body, language and voice that also incorporate the idea of postcolonial identities as shaped by memories and new ways of thinking. Applying Alexander's ideas here to reading South Asian diasporic women's experience in these novels, it becomes apparent that the protagonists recalibrate their understanding of South Asian and Euro-American mainstream cultural value systems as well as finding strategies to effect ways of belonging. Here consistent acts of breaching and bridging cultural boundaries become essential acts of everyday living and reinventing of individual selves that may not always be contingent on shoring up community values.

The ability then, to both root in and shift between cultural perspectives, seems requisite to transgress, indeed transcend borders and boundaries, to effect translations of cultures transported into the new sociocultural matrices. South Asian women writing diaspora problematise the double estrangement of women in a patriarchal world as well as in (white) mainstream societies, where new homes are set up against all odds (Vijaysree, 2001: 131). Similarly Jane Marcus observes: 'Estrangement seems built into the female condition; may we say then that all women artists are strangers – though some women are stranger than others?' (Marcus, 1989: 276). This sense of never really belonging, reminiscent of Ramabai Espinet's concept of the perpetual 'nowarian' (*The Swinging Bridge*, 152), consistently reinforces the South Asian woman's need to see that 'life has always to be made possible' (*The Long Silence*, 193). Alexander's 'shock of arrival' then jars the 'nowarian' South Asian diasporic woman into re-evaluating the cultural value systems informing gender roles, indeed re-conceptualising these to allow for more affirmative ways of acquiring agency.

In view of wider social debates in European and North American spaces (for my purposes here) involving migratory politics and the diverse degrees of integration of the various diasporic communities, a remarkable emphasis on gender politics has come to the fore.[23] The cultural frameworks of the diverse diasporic situations as well as the mainstream

societies of the host countries have been made into arenas where women's rights are addressed and negotiated both on personal and public planes. Examples of pertinent issues which have been focussed on in the media include 'honour killings' and forced marriages evident in South Asian communities in the UK, Canada and the US, as well as the headscarf observances (in Muslim communities) and female genital mutilation practices (among African diasporic communities) in Germany, France and Switzerland. The issues mentioned above frequently serve as instances of problematic integration; indeed they are connected to the overarching problem of female emancipation both in Europe and on the North American continent and are frequently cited as touchstones for the degree of integration achieved. Female identity, in the context of cultural perceptions of sexuality and community honour, forms the crux of such public debates which often focus on collective levels as if every diasporic subject had the same experience – a circumstance that merits critical attention. Questions of female emancipation and agency form the pivotal focus of the narratives I have chosen to discuss here.

I situate my work in the interdisciplinary arena of diaspora studies and my main points of reference are the diverse works that have emerged in that field, connecting with the general scholarly trend towards more transcultural readings of South Asian diasporic experience. My methodology thus entails a re-grounding, as it were, of postcolonial, diasporic and transcultural approaches in close readings of individual literary texts. In this light, I also subscribe to Uma Parameswaran's feminist agenda of retrieving, recording and re-reading South Asian diasporic narratives in order to rethink Euro-American literary canons (Parameswaran, 2007: 156)[24]. This study is intended as a contribution to interrogations of identity politics as depicted in literary texts produced by South Asian women of the diaspora. A salient aim here will be to encourage further dialogue on ideas of cultural belonging and citizenship on transnational planes of relation and negotiation.

Laying Out the Land

In what follows I explore how the multifarious identificatory strategies that South Asian diasporic protagonists engage with, as transcultural transgressions. I use the term 'transgression' in a positive light, which, while breaking with stereotypical notions, involves circumventing cultural constraints and going against the grain, thus allowing for spaces of empowerment for South Asian diasporic women. There are however, instances of failed transcultural transgression. In these readings, the in-

betweenness of the South Asian female protagonists of the diasporic novels, who are gifted (or cursed, depending on one's perspective) with a sense of belonging to two or more worlds will be of import; I consider them as possessing two or more (often incompatible) cultural worldviews. In my initial encounters with the term 'transcultural' and my subsequent attempts to glean an understanding of the term in the context of my study of diasporic literature, it became apparent that transculturality entails the crossing of cultural boundaries in more ways than one, and their being rendered permeable in the diasporic individual's perceptions and negotiations of cultural tenets.

The first chapter 'Diaspora and Transculturality' maps out the concepts of diaspora and transculturality, where I draw on ideas of hyphenation, hybridity and mestiza consciousness to link the two concepts. Short histories of the South Asian diasporic movements to England, America and Canada will be provided to address how these interact with perceptions and constructions of contemporary South Asian identities in diaspora. I will also delineate a broadly diachronic description of South Asian diasporic women's writing, against which I will analyse the literary representations I have chosen to discuss.

The second chapter 'Bridges Across Black Waters' illustrates the connections made between contemporary diasporic lives and South Asian diasporic histories. South Asian diasporic women writers have found it imperative to recall and inscribe the old diasporas in their creative fictions. Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* and Marina Budhos' *The Professor of Light* examine the journeys of indentured labourers to Trinidad and Guyana, showing the relevance of both maternal and paternal ancestral diasporic experiences for the more contemporary diasporic frameworks of their female protagonists.[25] Transculturality is evident in the significance the protagonists ascribe to the role played by India in their diasporic situations as lived out in Canada, New York and England. This is rendered even more complex when one considers that India is accessed through the sociocultural and historical contexts of Trinidad and Guyana. The cultural ambivalences described in the novels are due to the inherent exclusion, cultural invalidity and minority status ascribed to the Indo-Caribbean experience in Caribbean socio-political history. Besides this form of invalidation, female diasporic experience is underscored by the forms of violence perpetrated on South Asian women by their families and the communities, both in historical and contemporary contexts, in public and private spaces.

The third chapter 'Literary Representations of Misogynous Violence' concerns how divergent cultural value systems are transported and

implemented to check female sexuality in the contemporary diasporic time frame and thus protect South Asian male honour, which is considered intrinsic to South Asian cultural integrity. More specifically, this chapter examines how domestic violence in South Asian diasporic situations affects women's self-images and their perceptions of female agency and sexuality. It addresses the betrayal of women in heterosexual relationships between husbands and wives as well as community and family networks which are supposed to provide emotional and material support. The betrayal is exacerbated when the violence committed is explained away as a deviant cultural phenomenon by the dominant society which uses multicultural paradigms to absolve itself from taking an active role in recognising South Asian women's human rights and denouncing male perpetrators. The novels to be addressed, focussing on three main types of domestic violence: rape, violence associated with dowry practices and honour killings, are: Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* (2003), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and Ameena Meer's *Bombay Talkie* (1994).

The fourth chapter 'Transcultural Tiffin' investigates how transculturality is feminised and negotiated through the representation of woman-centred perspectives involving cooking and food in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White*.[26] In this particular reading of South Asian diasporic women's writing, female genealogies come to the fore which involve the transmission and transmutation of cultural values through culinary knowledges from mothers to daughters. Transculturality here is negotiated through particularly feminised experience through food, foodways and culinary practices in domestic spaces in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White* (2003). A common trope in both novels is the Indian spices which are accorded special roles as cultural vehicles and barometers implemented in the protagonists' formations and negotiations of feminised diasporic subjectivity. An additional aspect of feminising diasporic experience involves the feminised spaces of spice shops and kitchens as sites of interaction and relations between mothers, daughters and other female characters, which, at the same time, function as transcultural zones of contact with the larger diasporic communities and mainstream society.

The final chapter 'Routes to the Roots' examines the return of the second-generation South Asian diasporic woman to India as a transcultural strategy of identity negotiation. Return is effected in three different ways in the novels: a) through an actual temporary physical relocation to India[27], b) an imaginary return by engaging in relationships with South Asian men

in diasporic situations, c) through engaging with musical cultural productions which represent Indianness. The 'myth of return' underscoring much of diasporic fictional writing is often portrayed as an impossible if not ambigious project for the diasporic subject. The return of the second-generation South Asian diasporic woman to India is the pivotal event in the narratives addressed here. The novels which engage with the notion of return, are Ameena Meer's *Bombay Talkie* (1994), Bhargavi Mandava's *Where the Oceans Meet* (1998), Meera Syal's *Life isn't All HaHaHeeHee* (1999), Atima Srivastava's *Looking For Maya* (2000) and Ramabai Espinet's *The Swinging Bridge* (2003).

These novels can be viewed as feminist textual strategies of creativity with distinct political aims of presenting transformative literary narratives that articulate the tensions of diaspora and patriarchy. Contingent on this, I have recourse to Sam Naidu's observation that "the women represented in women's writing are not constructed by patriarchy but are self-constructed within and in opposition to cultural formations" (Naidu, 2008: 372). Here I consider then how South Asian diasporic women writers have identified and imagined a transcultural feminist literary aesthetic, in their engagements with the following: early and contemporary gendered experiences of South Asian migration; genealogies and transmissions of cultural heritages down female lines; the attempts by female protagonists to interrogate and implement the diverse sociocultural resources to which they have access, in their self constructions

Contemporary diasporic life is linked to subcontinental and colonial history – a feature that may not be immediately apparent to readers of these diasporic novels. Valorisations of South Asian cultures appear to provide the protagonists with certain resources to inculcate a rootedness which in turn can help facilitate integration. Thus the cultures of origin could also function as springboards to engage with other cultural matrices in the new host countries. The ambivalences inherent in accessing gendered migration histories and cultural knowledges, in the juxtaposition of the past and the present, are evident in all the novels discussed here.

This book is intended to contribute to the current spectrum of academic work being done in diaspora studies, in that it expressly brings together concepts like diaspora, transculturality, contemporary women's writing and transnational feminist critical approaches to bear on South Asian women's diasporic literature.

CHAPTER ONE

DIASPORA AND TRANSCULTURALITY

Diaspora invokes images of movement, scattering, restlessness, displacement, possibilities of reinvention and desires of belonging. It is rife with the possibilities of reinvention, desires of belonging and ambivalences of transgressing and transcending boundaries, physical, psychological and cultural.[28] Often used in conjunction with racial and cultural differences, diaspora has been instrumental in interrogating the tensions generated by attempts at situating selves and communities in new matrices far from natal spaces. Avtar Brah addresses how diasporic spaces, imaginaries and sensibilities are intrinsic to the concept of diaspora in the shaping of multiple locations of home and abroad:

> Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; […] Diaspora space is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them' are contested. […] the concept of diaspora space […] includes the entanglement […] of the genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'. (Brah 1996: 208-209)

Articulating both moments of inclusion and exclusion then, diasporic conditions often bear the stamp of 'unbelonging' – at best an uneasy belonging – caused by the marginal positioning of diasporic communities in 'host' societies. Here the ensuing cultural dis-/re-orientations negotiate older and newer cultural contexts in the shaping of identities conscious of, and attempting to bridge differences.

The term 'diaspora' is problematic since the attendant questions of origins, shared history and contemporary solidarity, render it ambivalent. The most common understanding of the complex term 'diaspora' is the either voluntary or forced mass relocation of communities with common geo-political origins, from their home spaces to other regions. Related understandings of the term involve 'a state of enduring consciousness of living away from home, adapted to the new social and cultural context'

(Baumann, 2010: 23). Critical attention should be paid to the deployment of the term for any and all contexts of global movement, displacement and dislocations.

Several theoretical models describing the phenomenon of diaspora and addressing diasporic identity have acquired prominence in academic discourse, as epistemes to accommodate the cultural configurations created by the massive migrations that have characterised the late colonial period through the decolonisation era to the start of this millennium[29]. Attendant concerns include concepts of hybridity[30], flexible citizenship (Ong, 1997), and transmigration (Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc, 1997) where transnational connections, as well as multiple and fluid identities have gained currency in critical debates on diaspora (see Vijaysree, 2001: 130). Khachig Tölölyan describes the term 'diaspora' as being part of 'a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community' (Tölölyan, 1991: 4), all of which can be considered part of the vocabulary of transnationalism.

Considered the epitome of transnationalism, diasporas 'embody the question of borders, which is at the heart of any adequate definition of the Others of the nation-state' (Tölölyan, 1991: 6). Transnationalism has been defined as 'processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement' (Shukla, 2003: 12).[31] Such connections are maintained through family and kinship systems as well as social networks by women who, on migrating, are often responsible for finding points of access into the diasporic communities as well as the mainstream. These effect some form of integration into the new environment through various activities, e.g. finding schools for their children, temples and other places of worship for community interaction, hospitals, shopping facilities to buy familiar foodstuffs and clothes etc. Most women have some relation of dependency to the country of destination through their husbands or fathers; these constitute not just different identities but also distinct cultural practices, language needs, religious observances and values, diverse gender relations and attitudes, as well as work traditions. Avtar Brah has also observed that transnational constellations of power have influenced the feminisation of migration, due to the dependence of the international division of labour on women workers (Brah, 1996: 71).[32] This provokes reflections of asymmetrical relations between India as the sending country and Euro-American countries, forged by colonization, decolonization and globalisation:

> A transnational approach is particularly appropriate for India, which like the United States, is a plural society. 'Indian' culture stands for the nation, whether it represents in reality regional expressions or nationalist interpretations that homogenize regional and religious differences. (Das Gupta, 1997: 573)

In this context one need only consider India's intrinsically transcultural social fabric with its numerous languages, regional customs, social castes and classes, cuisines, religions and peoples. These diverse influences have contributed in the past and still contribute to India's overall cultural set-up. They have also been transported by South Asian immigrants to their new homes on other continents and are still significant in the diasporic imaginary. The histories of South Asian diasporas show the transnational links between the Caribbean, England, India, America and Canada – a pertinent reason for my focus on creative works produced in these particular regions. These connections are maintained even in the present-day context of multiple migrations due to tertiary education programmes, better job opportunities, marriages and reunification of families. Such contemporary migrations frequently entail movements between America, Canada, England, India and the Caribbean – it is these diasporic trajectories that form the crux of my readings of these literary texts.

South Asian Diasporic Histories

As one of the most important demographic dislocations today, the modern South Asian diasporas represent a significant force in contemporary global culture. These diasporic cultures also play an important part in subcontinental cultures and have redefined the manner in which South Asians perceive themselves (Ghosh, 1989: 73). The South Asian diasporas have recourse to subcontinental histories and regional perspectives in their identity articulations; they are direct legacies of the British colonial empire[33]. Indeed the South Asian diasporas can be considered a form of migration in reverse; as the flip side of colonialism, it remains to be seen whether 'a sort of inverse symmetry between these two movements of populations, between empires and their diasporas' exists, which reflect and interpenetrate one another' (Paranjape, 2000: 67-68). Such a reading could allow for imaginary relationships between India and its diasporas that provide fruitful ground for theoretical reflection in social and cultural theory as well as literature.[34]

In this light, it becomes apparent that it is not just diasporic communities that are affected to different extents by the so-called host countries, but the reverse is also true. The metropolitan centres of former

empires have not remained untouched or unchanged by histories which they imagine happened elsewhere and are thus peripheral to their worldviews.[35] Remarking on the production of texts on diasporic phenomena, Parvati Raghuram and Ajaya Kumar Sagoo have observed that diasporic thinking can contribute to a destabilising of cultural borders or boundaries, whereby '[w]ritings on diaspora often call upon a heady concoction of these to create a particular imaginary of diaspora' (Raghuram et al., 2008: 5). Hence, what was formerly the centre of empire is host to new kinds of colony from various regions where empire once held sway; a highly ironic circumstance that is simultaneously pertinent to transculturality, since the validity of cultural borders and their supposed impermeability are questioned.

Although massive migrations of people from the subcontinent have become more apparent in the latter half of the last century, South Asian diasporic communities have existed in England, the USA, and Canada since the nineteenth century.[36] All three countries are thus linked, both amongst themselves as well with India and the Caribbean[37], through the history of colonisation and contemporary postcolonial migratory movements. This commonality plays a significant role in contemporary diasporic writing, since much of what is produced today in diasporic creative fiction is influenced by the shared history of colonial times. The following maps out colonial activity and the ensuing South Asian diasporas and their effects on cultural perceptions and practices:

> It began in the 1830s in the form of indentured labour and continues to be replenished by voluntarily migrating professionals and information technology specialists. It is drawn from over a dozen different regions of India and extends to the most backward as well as the most advanced countries of the world. It covers half a dozen religions, all major castes including the ex-untouchables and Brahmins, and a wide variety of occupations ranging from unskilled labourers to highly skilled professionals. During its century and a half, different groups within the Indian diaspora have undergone profound social, religious, economic, political, cultural and other changes, discarding some traditional practices, adapting others to new circumstances, and evolving over time distinct ways of life. Their relations to India too have passed through different phases, characterised initially by nostalgia, later by virtual amnesia, and more recently by a relatively detached search for cultural roots. (Parekh et al, 2003: preface)

This description succinctly articulates transcultural processes that took place and still take place, which provide each South Asian diasporic community in the regions mentioned with their own specific context. The