

Exploring Gender
in the Literature
of the Indian Diaspora

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Edited by

Sandhya Rao Mehta

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PREFACE

This collection of critical essays locates itself at the intersection of gender and diaspora studies, exploring the multiple ways in which gender is expressed, explored, interpreted, written about, and performed in the literature of the Indian diaspora. Theoretically underpinned by various studies on diaspora privileging hybridity and transnationalism framed within the discourse of feminist and queer theories, this collection brings together a number of ways in which heteronormative experience within the diaspora is resisted, challenged and questioned. Referencing such iconic works from the Indian diaspora as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*, this anthology also includes chapters on Attia Hosain, Abha Dawesar, Amulya Malladi, Anita Rau Badami, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Kiran Desai. Some of the essays also use other South Asian writers such as Monica Ali and Bapsi Sidhwa to compare the diasporic experience in similar settings. Framed together, these essays point to ways in which gender is negotiated within the political and public sphere by questioning established narratives and predilections of accepted social conventions within the nation and in the diaspora. It also identifies ways in which women affect transformation within their social contexts and create agencies through processes of acculturation within diasporic spaces. The process of exploring queer spaces is investigated through characters for whom matters of emasculation and feminisation remain significant markers of selfhood. This anthology also investigates the way in which gender is performed through Indian film scripts set in the diaspora, pointing to ways in which the liberatory aspect of queerness finds expression within the imaginative settings of foreign lands. Gender is also found and performed in everyday situations of cooking and clothing, both conventional chores associated with women, who are then able to transform such tropes to align them with continuing identity formations.

This collection is divided into three sections. The first section, entitled "Reading Gender", includes essays which reflect the way in which writers of the Indian diaspora approach contexts within the nation to re-define significant ways of approaching politics and gender. Thus Gemma Scott's essay discusses the feminising of Indira Gandhi's Emergency in India by Salman Rushdie in his path-breaking novel *Midnight's Children*. Scott's

argument that Rushdies's diasporic position enabled a re-interpretation of Emergency historiography which more usefully centred Gandhi's own use of female positions to foreground her role as the nation's caretaker, points to ways of gendered narrative which successfully challenge established history. Sanchari Sur, in her essay "Communal Violence and Women at Home and in the Diaspora in Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Night bird Call?*", uses the historical episode of the attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India, by state forces to flush out Sikh extremists and the resulting anger by Sikhs around the world, to suggest ways in which female characters negotiate trauma, loss and exile in ways that empower them within the nation as well as in the diaspora. Tulika Bahuguna's essay "Purdah and Zenana: Re-visioning Conventions" similarly articulates the contrasting attitudes to Muslim conventions of the veil by diasporic writers such as Attia Hosain, for whom the spaces viewed as representing repression and silence take on diametrically different meanings when involved in the lived experience of everyday life.

The second section of this collection, entitled "Writing Gender", brings together multifarious ways in which women occupying marginal spaces within the diaspora transform, define and reflect themselves through the tropes of labour, cooking and clothing. Monbinder Kaur's essay "Blurring Borders/Blurring Bodies: Diaspora and Womanhood" explores the way in which hybridity allows for the female body to process the multiplicity of diasporic experience through a fragmented experience which allows for hybridity. The process of attaining selfhood is at the core of Stephanie Stonehewer Southmayd's and Elizabeth Jackson's essays on V. S. Naipaul and Jhumpa Lahiri respectively, each one of them compared to Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. Both these essays, "Diasporic Mobility and Identity in Flux in V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*" and "Gendered Diasporic Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*", centre around the creation of female diasporic spaces through positions of disadvantage, often using labour as a unifying strategy for self-definition. Exploring the culinary routes to identity, Shashikala Muthumal Assela examines how South Indian curries become expressions of cultural conflict in her essay "Kitchen Politics and the Search for an Identity: *The Mango Season*", and Priyanka Sacheti's reading of Jhumpa Lahiri's and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novels and short stories through her contribution "Clothing, Gender, and Diaspora" traces the relationship of female characters with clothing, examining the ways in which their clinging and removing of select pieces of clothing testify to the gain, loss and re-gain of diasporic identities as they are being processed by female subjectivities.

These negotiations are the unifying theme of the third section of this anthology, entitled “Performing Gender”. The essays in this section speak to the ways in which gender is explored, lost, created and re-created within imaginary spaces which allow for exploration of sexualities. Uma Jayaram’s essay, “The Masculinisation of the Native Gentleman: A Close Reading of Neel Haldar in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*” examines the effect of diasporic displacement on an aristocratic ruler forced into exile. Haldar’s journey to destitution, Jayaram suggests, enables him to re-discover his lost masculinity in a process in which his fall from grace is, in many ways, also a process of feminising him. Sexuality as a site for experimentation and play is also brought out by Harshi Syal Gill’s “Sexual Realisation in a Historical, Social, and Cultural Context: Abha Dawesar’s *Babyji*” where, tracing the cultural and religious origins of queerness in the classical Indian tradition, the author narrates a character’s adolescent sexual experiments, a process which ends with the realisation that India can no longer be the site for such explorations, as a result of which the protagonist decides to move away from the country. The notion that queerness is best played out outside the Indian space is also brought out by Margaret Redlich’s examination of the way in which gay relationships are investigated in Indian films in her essay “Something is Happening: Narrating Queerness in the Films of Karan Johar” as she reiterates the way in which diasporic spaces make possible a more fluid and effortless negotiation of queer identities in Bollywood cinema, which, when showcased within the nation, still creates furore and agitation. Gender is written about and performed within a context of displaced communities, it is suggested, in ways that question and resist traditional interpretations allowing for an engagement with non-traditional versions of family and relationships, but only when enacted outside the geographical space of the Indian nation.

This collection, thus, attempts to bring together diverse ways of examining gender in Indian diasporic fiction. It brings together a variety of approaches with which to negotiate identities and create new selves. Including the works of senior academics, emerging scholars, as well as those outside academics, such as playwrights and journalists, this anthology of critical essays provides fresh perspectives on the role of gender in the Indian diaspora, allowing for new interpretations of established texts as well as introducing lesser known writers. While recognising the theoretical bases of constructions of gender and diaspora, this anthology also reflects on individual works of fiction in the firm conviction that the text is the ultimate representative of narrative. While fiction celebrates, interrogates, examines and places gender firmly at the

centre of diaspora studies, it is to the individual works that we turn to contextualise the predicament and the possibilities of diaspora.

This collection would not have been possible without the support, co-operation, and patience of all the contributors. I would like to thank them all for sharing their work in this anthology. I would also like to thank Ayesha Heble for her help in proofreading the chapters, Adrian Roscoe for his generous foreword, Sanjiv Mehta for typesetting the manuscript, and Cambridge Scholars Publishing for accepting this anthology for publication.

FOREWORD

Diaspora and its complex literary issues, while receiving modern scholarly attention, are not of course entirely new. Whenever, historically, people left home and hearth to begin new lives across the world, diasporic concerns came into play. This often brought about interesting questions. If they were writers, how would they capture the new landscape, culture and climate? How would they preserve the culture and values left behind? Indeed, would they even want to do this? How would they begin to see themselves in relation to the motherland and what from it would they still cherish and want to preserve? What social and moral change would the new environment engender? Fundamentally, what threat would it all pose to identity? And would it matter anyway? Such questions, presumably, were as important in remote centuries for Romans settling in Gaul or Malta and Normans settling in Britain, as for the British themselves settling in India, North America and Australasia, Spaniards settling in South America, Frenchmen in Senegal, Germans in West Africa. And now for Indians settled all around the globe.

Literary criticism acknowledges that amidst the modern upsurge of modern literature in English, India has been remarkable for the quantity and quality of its output, with many of its writers now global household names. While much critical attention has been paid to writers working in India itself, less attention (with exceptions) has been paid to writing, and especially women's writing, from across the Indian diaspora. Hence the timely appearance of a volume that explores this literature, and specifically gender issues within it, from a feminist point of view. The essays in this collection examine these concerns as they arise in various different contexts. Issues of identity, mobility, communal violence, masculinisation, kitchen politics, sexual realisation, and even clothing, all come under penetrating and revealing scrutiny. Timely and relevant, I am sure that this collection will add to the growing scholarship on the rich area of the Indian diaspora as it establishes itself as an important part of global literature.

Professor Adrian Roscoe

INTRODUCTION

REVISITING GENDERED SPACES IN THE DIASPORA

SANDHYA RAO MEHTA

The ubiquitous image of knitting, stitching, quilting and cooking as a metaphor for the experience, and the narration of diaspora links it to the perceived feminine task of collecting, remembering and documenting memory and images of the past. While the choice of moving from one physical location to another is primarily seen to be a male one, as evidenced by much sociological research, the onus of retaining memories of home, of recreating them within new contexts and ultimately acting as cultural harbingers of homeland culture, remain vividly feminine. The challenges inherent within this contradictory situation is central to current discourses of the diaspora, reflecting as it does, the problematics of gendered roles within an act which remains outside the agency of women. While diaspora as a historical and contemporary condition has embraced issues of transnationalism, globalisation, hybridity, and multiculturalism, the intersection of gender and diaspora and the way these have impacted each other has been less explored. Linked to the notion of diaspora as a heteronormative experience, the focus on feminine as well as queer subjectivities within the discourse of transnational migration points to multiple ways in which issues within diaspora studies remain deeply normative. Increasingly, such normative practices are being resisted and women's perspective on the question of diaspora and its associated concerns increasingly focused upon. In its literary manifestations, the site within which the diasporic subject is placed has been extensively, but problematically, explored in ways that privilege the heterosexual male experience, silencing those outside its reach. As Sneja Gunew, for example, asks, "While diaspora often evokes a homeland, how do women writers assert, negotiate, and contest multiple, political ideas of home across time, history, and geography?" (8). Tracing early studies on diaspora to subsequent work on feminism, this chapter explores the routes

which enabled gender to become a central focus in diaspora studies, suggesting that a sustained study of the multiple ways in which gender impacts diaspora creates spaces in which normative practices could be challenged. It also suggests that, rather than focusing on overarching definitions and theories which could link diverse experiences, diaspora studies are increasingly pointing to ways in which individual experiences of travel and migration are rooted in particular contexts and that no theory would adequately reflect the complexities of diaspora in the contemporary context.

Defining Diasporas

Diaspora as an evolving concept can be traced to the early work of William Safran, who defined the diaspora as referring to a community which was historically dispersed and shared a common desire to return to the homeland. The Jewish, Armenian and Greek movements were seen to represent such definitions which retained the binary division of the diaspora as adhering to a homeland/hostland dichotomy, with the primary emotions associated with such a movement being those of loss, memory, and an inextricable link to the past. Subsequent interpretations, as those of Robin Cohen, elaborated on the notion of travel and suggested that diasporas could be divided into various categories based on the impulses which began the travel. Thus his divisions of victim, labour, trade, and colonial diasporas, while widening the group of communities which could be included in the experience of diaspora, still divided travel into ethnicities and binaries of us/them and travel as going “away” from the homeland (18). Recognising the forces of globalisation and transcultural travel, Kachig Tölöyan, in his inaugural issue of the journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* in 1991, emphasised the idea of the diaspora as being stateless, thus associating it with transnationalism: “The term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meanings with a larger semantic domain that includes works like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community” (4-5). Subsequent work on globalisation and migration studies widened its scope by underlining the complex nature of travel within the global North and South and, often, within it. James Clifford referred to the complexity of the term by warning that “we should be wary of constructing our working definition of a term like ‘diaspora’ by recourse to an ‘ideal type’” (306) as certain types will then be more or less diasporic than others. Brian Axel’s use of the term “diasporic imaginary,” while focusing on the violent basis of diaspora, also points to the

movement away from origins to a space where specific conditions of time and context determine the new community: “the diasporic imaginary, then, does not act as a new kind of place of origin but indicates a process of identification generative of diasporic subjects” (412). This is further asserted by Brubaker for whom it is important “to treat diaspora not as a bounded entity but as an idiom, stance and claim” (1) moving away from place of origin primacy: “In sum, rather than speak of ‘a diaspora’ or ‘the diaspora’ as an entity, a bounded group, an ethnodemographic or ethnocultural fact, it may be more fruitful, and certainly more precise, to speak of diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices, and so on” (13).

Some of the most influential work surrounding the changing concept of diaspora revolved around the cultural studies of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, with an increased focus on travel, migration and identity formations being seen as fluid and transforming. Hall’s suggestion that cultural identities are best seen as evolving and developing challenged the assumption of a fixed diasporic identity, allowing it to be seen as a process rather than a historical fact:

The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference, by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (235)

Hall’s focus on developing diasporic identities, rather than focusing on a common national experience which, while helpful in the colonial struggle, did not evoke the realities of developing social realities, was also voiced by Paul Gilroy’s famous metaphor of the ship on the sea as evoked in his *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* which did much to point to diaspora as an evolving concept by showing that those affected by the experience of forced migration displayed links to England as well as to Africa, thus questioning the nostalgic desires for home which had marked earlier studies on the diaspora. Vertovec subsequently suggested that diasporic experience should be viewed “by both structure (historical conditions) and agency (the meanings held, and practices conducted, by social actors)” (24). The complexity of the term “diaspora” soon allowed for the term to be used in various cultural, social, economic and ethnic contexts, all of which remained largely patriarchal.

Gendering the Diaspora

Referring to the state of African Diaspora Studies, Tina Campt and Deborah Thomas observe that work on the African diaspora still revolves around issues of travel, migration and homeland at the expense of more “expansive” notions, leading to re-asserting binary positions. This has various limitations for the study of diaspora:

Such analytic formulations often deploy notions of origin and authenticity that impede a deeper appreciation of the more complex dynamics that undergird diaspora. Moreover, such frameworks can privilege the mobility of masculine subjects as the primary agents of diasporic formation, and perpetuate a more general masculinism in the conceptualization of diasporic community. (2)

While the definitions of the diaspora as a static, historical moment of Jewish dispersal as suggested by Safran and Cohen have been reviewed and revised to include multiple migrations and establishment of transnational networks, the masculine underpinnings of this metanarrative are clearly implicit. Thus, Gayatri Gopinath in her iconic book *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* outlines the inherent patriarchy of the etymology of “diaspora” as indicating a dispersal, a scattering of seed, with the associated metaphor of the land left behind as the static, unchanging root and the seed which has travelled being seen as capable of transformation and regeneration. Quoting Stephan Helmreich, Gopinath suggests the usefulness of acknowledging “[t]he patriarchal and heteronormative underpinnings” (5) of diaspora which establishes the primacy of patriarchal practices of the term. This is a point also made by Kira Kosnick who suggests that the androcentric metaphor of dispersal privileges “male procreation and patrilinear descent” (123). The distinction between diaspora as fact or process marks the point at which feminist studies could enter the debate and allow it to move beyond its concerns with race and ethnicity, linking the experience of travel with those individual, feminine voices which could not be meaningfully associated with earlier definitions. Linked with the rising activism of feminist work in the developed world as well as their questioning by feminists of the developing world, this focus on individual experiences of travel, migration and belonging assumed a more gendered perspective, particularly following the works of Chandra Talpade Mohanty and M. Jacqui Alexander, who focused on the limited way in which the feminist agenda had hitherto taken up the mantle of protest on behalf of women of colour, assuming that the complexities of women around the

world were all similar and not differentiated by ethnicity, colour, race or social classes. This led to an increased focus on the narratives of women migrants as well as attempts at developing sustainable theories which would provide the required terminology to deal with women's experience within the diaspora. Thus, Anthias and Yuval-Davis explore the interconnections between sexualities and diaspora, while Sara Ahmad et al. investigate the way in which race, class, gender and sexuality intersect with notions of home and uprooting, and how differences addressed by feminists articulate the uprootings and formations of home (1-4). Avtar Brah's investigation of "diasporic spaces" through the linkages of home, border and diaspora "covers the entanglements of genealogies of dispersal with those of 'staying put'" (83), allowing for the complex notion of "home" to be problematised within feminine contexts. Gopinath also voices the notion that feminism has not adequately addressed the issue of how the nation is defined by heterosexuality and that the diaspora carries the burden of traditional patriarchal assumptions with it.

While earlier studies attempted an essentialised study of gendered diaspora based on continuities of shared experiences, subsequent works focused on the divergent ways in which travel and migration affected different communities in specific ways. The rise of feminist works, particularly those which challenged western discourses, allowed for a sustained study of the role of women within the diaspora as well. Chandra Talpade was one of the first scholars to point to the need to move away from sweeping statements on third world feminism:

The relationship between "Woman"—a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc.)—and "women"—real, material subjects of their collective histories—is one of the central questions the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address. (334)

Linked to diaspora, this connection between the stories of "real women" and their experience of a hitherto patriarchal social movement became an important way of questioning and resisting metanarratives of migration. An important question which arises in this context is whether diaspora provides agency to women who emerge from a nationalistic narrative into a transnational experience or whether women find themselves further marginalised in the new society owing to factors of race and ethnicity beyond the challenges of gender. While women have traditionally been identified with the nation and glorified as the custodians of cultural heritage, the role which they played in the process of travel and migration to a new land remains a rich area of investigation. Within the nationalist

narrative, women have been viewed as the arbiters of social morals. As Partha Chatterjee suggests of the national movement in India, “[t]he home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality” (239). Just as women were at the centre of national identities, the diaspora too accords such homemaking roles to the immigrant woman, who, thus defined, begins to enact them using multiple strategies of food, dress and forms of labour. If women are literally responsible for the reproduction of the nation in biological terms (Yuval-Davis) even in the diaspora, such spaces are replete with possibilities of acquiescence, resistance and negotiation, although largely determined by particular conditions of class, race and other specificities. As women continue to be associated with the retention of memories and homes, as well as, by association, the arbiters of family values and cultures even within new geographical locations, the process and extent to which these roles are performed is a significant point of investigation.

As notions of creating new homes are seen to primarily fall on the shoulders of women in the diasporic family, the existing silences of female experiences within the narrative and process of diaspora need to be articulated. Anita Mannur suggests that “[w]omen are frequently (but problematically) associated with positions within the domestic cultural economy and charged with maintaining the edifice of home life” (17) and maintains that diaspora’s expectation is toward “a faithful reproduction of Indianness” (17). In many ways, gender becomes an important consideration for the diaspora as women are not only seen to be retainers of cultural identities but are actually responsible for physical reproduction in the homeland as well as the new land. They are also seen as pivotal in establishing new boundaries based on ethnic and national identities and “as participants in national economic, political and military struggles” (Al-Najie 120) even when outside the nation. The centring of women as an integral part of definitions of family was one that was long accepted by, not only the nation, but also within the context of migration and diaspora. As Kira Kosnick shows, all family re-unification programmes within the United States were determined with only the normative heterosexual relationship within marriage being considered authentic until 1990, thus limiting definitions of gender and the family to those accepted by the nation state (Kosnick 123). Studies by Anthias and Yuval-Davis and Mohanty and Alexander also dwell on the legitimacy of heteronormative identities to the state which prioritises images of women as symbols of the nation. This normative expectation has travelled with the diaspora for, as Al-Ali suggests, “[d]iasporic anxieties around issues of preservation and

temporal continuity often focus on cultural-biological reproduction, and are linked to this, by a need to control sexuality, particularly the sexualities (practices and desires) of women” (125).

Queering the Diaspora

An important development within studies of feminism and sexuality has been the inclusion of queer studies within the diaspora. In many ways, in spite of protestations to the contrary by critics who resist the link between the queer and the diaspora sharing exclusivist positions, the potential marginalisation of the queer and the diaspora within normative communities has allowed for a sustained exploration of gendered identities within diasporic spaces. Thus, if diaspora has the same connection to the nation as the queer to the heteronormative society, the resistance to both definitions would allow for a layered discourse of multiple aspects of gender studies. Kosnick suggests that “differential sexual desires and non-normative family formations in migration processes and diasporic life” (125) have yet to be integrated into emerging studies of diasporic societies. Meg Wesling, however, warns against the common analogy of the queer and diasporic subjects being twins, suggesting that the queer would “subvert gender normativity” in the same way that the diaspora would trouble “geographic and national stability” (31). Gayatri Gopinath’s path breaking study of queerness within the diaspora addresses the lacunae in the research on sexuality and nation, pointing to the fact that traditional feminism does not adequately address the way in which nationalism is based on heteronormative sexualities and “the ways in which nationalist framings of women’s sexuality are translated into the diaspora, and how these renderings of diasporic women’s sexuality are in turn central to the production of nationalism in the home nation” (9). Gopinath’s study of queer films made by Indian filmmakers illustrate the way in which feminine subjectivities of the queer often struggle to locate themselves within traditional definitions of home, nation and the diaspora, capable of being expressed only “through the latent homoeroticism of female homosocial space” (25).

Diaspora and Literature

While gendered spaces within the diaspora have become central to the study of migration in transnational and globalised contexts, its literary manifestations, voicing various concerns, approaches and attitudes to the representation of this complex experience, are equally varied in treatment

and range. While theorists link feminist concerns with concepts of marginalisation, hybridity, identity and race, literary critics have more commonly called for increased focus on specific tales of travel which allow for women to voice their own particular situations outside the established framework of gender studies. Thus Vijay Agnew suggests that undocumented feminist narratives succeed in erasing the anonymity of women and give them agency as they narrate their life tales: "Feminists' 'alternate archives' give us access to the everyday lives of women. These archives supplement academic methodologies such as oral histories, interviews, and ethnographic studies. Together, these methods and various forms of evidence shatter anonymity and create a better understanding of what internments, migrations, escapes from danger and violence, and refugee status really mean" (8). In "Diaspora and Cultural Memory", Anh Hua links writing with the art of quilting, both of which are gradual processes, achieved over a long period of reflection: "Quilting is an activity that has conventionally been done by women, and which has been devalued by masculinist art theorists as 'craft' and not 'high art'. Both quilting and writing require time, patience and imagination, and creativity" (192). She goes on to show how the remembering and collecting of stories of the past allow women to articulate the ways in which their negotiations with race, culture and patriarchy were affected. Women scholars, like those who are engaged in quilting, she says, are better equipped to express the events of daily life as lived by millions of families within the diaspora. The articulation of distinct experiences within specific forms of diasporic experience emerges at the centre of narratives of women who attempt to move beyond the limits of socially and culturally constructed identities. Whether the diaspora offers such liberatory spaces is much debated, for the process of writing is itself a struggle for those who have not had a voice. Maria Ng illustrates this as she speaks of writing her memoirs which could not begin at the beginning the way conventional, male traditions of narration did, for, "this linear progression is a narrative that bears no resemblance to the constantly shifting perspectives that present themselves as one reviews one's life and tries to make sense of events, of commissions and omissions, of departures and arrivals. It does not reflect the perpetual conflict between the nature of representing/writing and remembering" (34). Sneja Gunew views this conflict within the female artist, of being at once the author as well as the subject of a tale, as symptomatic of the predicament of the female diasporic voice. The trauma of using patriarchal language which narrated the original journey in order to show personal struggles in a new land is problematic for the woman narrator who needs to create new ways of expressing her predicament of

belonging. Susan Friedman's comment that "it is writing by women that takes gender as its focus that most clearly highlights the complexities of diaspora and reveals the omissions and hidden assumptions in debates about 'the new migrations'", points to the complexity as well as the significance of focusing on women's narrative within the diaspora (Parker 3).

Linked to studies which dwell on the narrative of gendered spaces within the diaspora includes the notion of gender as performance as articulated by feminist studies such as those of Judith Butler. Based on Simone De Beauvoir's distinction between sex and gender, that "[o]ne is not born but becomes a woman," (519) Butler underlines the connection between gender and identity: "In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted *through a stylized repetition of acts*" (519). The performative aspect of gender, when linked to identities within the diaspora, allows for a negotiation which the gendered subject projects into new contexts. Often, such negotiations take the form of tropes such as clothing and food which are conventionally tied to feminine experiences, re-locating them in contexts which allow for new ways of exploring diasporic identity. Using Brubaker's suggestion that the diaspora be seen as a "category of practice," Sukanya Banerjee notes that this notion could be used to "underline how diasporas both reflect and are forged through a panoply of practices—indeed through intimate practices that become the ground for contesting and consolidating notions of identity and difference" (11). Based on the cultural work of Ketu Katrak, Anita Mannur shows how, what she calls "culinary citizenship" allows for the creation of diasporic identities through food. Using cook books as well as narratives which revolve around food, Mannur shows the way in which displacement and identity are articulated and negotiated, with food as a symbolic centre of diasporic experience, particularly in so far as it projects the nostalgic memories of the way home is remembered. "Culinary discourse," for Mannur, "sets in motion an extended discussion about the imbricated layers of food, nostalgia and national identity" (28). Thus, while, as seen earlier, women have been seen to be the arbiters of national identities, "[d]iasporas produce their own version of this gendered logic by repeatedly insisting that the task of the female Indian immigrant subject in diaspora, or in this case, the cookbook, is to be vigilant about the faithful reproduction of Indianness" (17). The way in which such expectations are accepted, resisted or modified by the diaspora remains an area rich in creative and critical potential.

One of the most notable features of gender and diaspora studies appears to be the questioning and sceptical reception of essentialised gendered narratives which overarch as depicting a universal experience. Campt and Thomas, in their collection of critical essays of writing in the African diaspora, aim “to relinquish any claim to a universal or shared definition of diaspora” (3) as any hegemonic narrative which seeks to explore the complete range of diasporic experience would be required to be reformulated. Parker suggests that monolithic approaches to diasporic narratives should be avoided and credence given to specific tales of particular communities focusing “on the diversity of diasporic experience” (2). It is a point made by Gunew as well, who derides the attempts at making homogenous statements around the labels “South Asian” and “woman”, privileging, instead, the way in which religion, language, even generation reads into the complexities of individual experiences and narratives of diaspora. Susan Friedman voices similar concerns that much of the writing on migration assumes a certain amount of homogeneity in terms of its focus on national origins at the expense of other realities such as gender, sexuality, language and class, among many other variables, and suggests a less “reductionist” approach to the exploration of migration and literature (17, 23). Sam Naidu concurs that the spaces newly occupied by the diaspora are heterogeneous and varied in many ways: “...I identify not only some of the similarities that may partially be ascribed to some ‘notional’ origin within a specified geographic region, but also how these writers who have migrated to the far corners of the globe are confronted with geographic, climactic, culinary, linguistic political and economic differences” (369).

The multiple ways in which gender is situated within the discourse of the diaspora in contemporary studies point to the need to privilege individual experiences and specific contexts over generalised portrayals of gendered diasporas. While the intersection of feminist and migration studies have effectively resisted the metanarratives of travel, belonging and identity, the gendered spaces within the diaspora itself need to be explored for their potential to formulate identities which both resist as well as talk back to the centre. As all experiences of travel differ from one another, as do all narratives of diaspora, the implicit danger of allowing sweeping representations of gendered diasporic experiences is evident. As Campt and Thomas suggest, narratives of the diaspora can only be those of “individuals and communities situated very differently within a given diasporic formation”, (2) paving the way toward unpacking specific diasporic experiences, including those which concern themselves with issues of gender and sexuality. Emerging work on diaspora thus rejects a

monolithic approach in recognition of the many approaches to the notion of diasporic subjectivity. By giving agency to the gendered spaces within the global diaspora, literature allows for complexities of hitherto marginal voices to be articulated and explored.

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PART I

READING GENDER

CHAPTER ONE

GENDER AND THE INDIAN EMERGENCY: REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

GEMMA SCOTT

Abstract

Salman Rushdie's fiction has often been criticised for its representation of women, particularly by feminist literary critics. In *Midnight's Children* the female villain, "The Widow", is consistently demonised, largely by invocation of female gendered subject positions and cultural stereotypes, which has, unsurprisingly, often proved unpopular. Given Rushdie's diasporic position and the assumed perspective of an observer, a question which arises is whether there is a more positive way in which to view Rushdie's manipulation of gendered images here. The novel deals with the political Emergency in India; the demonised widow is a reflection of its imposer, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. This chapter will examine Rushdie's gendered representation of the Emergency and The Widow particularly, largely as a result of his self-avowed cultural displacement making possible an alternative reading of history. It will also consider Gandhi's own manipulations of aspects of female gendered identities, notably the nationalist image of "Bharat Mata", and suggest that Rushdie's depiction of these be viewed more positively. Furthermore, this chapter will explore the way in which the demonising serves as a form of resistance—to Gandhi, in particular, and the Emergency more broadly. Given the repression of civil liberties (with which Rushdie's novel powerfully deals, particularly in the form of the period's coercive sterilisation programme), and the neglect of these in historiography and even collective memory, this chapter will foreground the writer's diasporic position and argue that Rushdie's representation is in fact a vital

contribution to resistance and to disrupting official narratives of this history.

Keywords: Salman Rushdie, diaspora, gender, women, Indira Gandhi, Emergency, power, sterilisation

Introduction

On June 26th 1975 Indira Gandhi declared an internal State of Emergency in India. The declaration followed rising unrest in the country during the previous year, notably through Jayaprakash Narayan's opposition to Gandhi's Congress and subsequent student (amongst other) movements. Following an investigation into allegations of electoral misconduct, the Allahabad High Court convicted Indira Gandhi of two counts of malpractice, and her electoral position was deemed void on June 12th. As a result of what Gandhi felt was this "deep and widespread conspiracy" and the subsequent "challenging of law and order" she imposed the Emergency, transforming India into a one party state with the ability to rule by decree (Gandhi, *Speeches and Writings* 177-178). This was unequivocally to safeguard her own interests as well as, allegedly, those of the country's order, unity and functioning. In the days following the declaration, authorities arrested and detained without trial much of the political opposition and other dissenters, and imposed stringent press censorship. Over the next nineteen months, the government embarked on schemes of slum beautification and family planning, which in the political climate of emergency enforcement, descended into the mass demolition of thousands of homes and the forced sterilisation of millions of citizens.¹

These events are central to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The novel particularly focuses on Indira Gandhi's role in the Emergency and the sterilisation programme that ensued, which has been described as more "intensive and aggressive than any other birth control programme in India" (Soni 141). In his non-fictional work, Rushdie has made it clear that his reasons for charting a broad history of India, for "handcuffing" protagonist Saleem to the nation, were to represent Indira Gandhi and her actions during the Emergency. In his introduction to the Folio Society edition of the novel, he describes his trip to India in 1975 which served as his inspiration for *Midnight's Children*. He asserts:

Just after my return from India, Mrs Gandhi was convicted of electoral fraud, and one week after my twenty-eighth birthday she declared a State of Emergency and assumed tyrannical powers. It was the beginning of a long period of darkness which would not end until 1977. I understood

almost at once that Mrs Gandhi had somehow become central to my still tentative literary plans (ix).

Clearly Rushdie holds this trip as an important inspiration for the novel. During the trip, Rushdie observed the events leading up to the declaration of the Emergency as a visitor, with a self-professed sense of cultural displacement informing his perspectives, observations and critiques. He observed the Emergency similarly, both culturally and physically distanced from events. Rushdie's diasporic perspective, this study will argue, is central to the novel's resistance to the internal events of the Emergency.

“We are a Nation of Forgetters...”: Gender and Marginalisation in Historiography

In the historiography of independent India, this period of Emergency has been relatively unexplored. As Emma Tarlo notes in her pioneering study of sterilisation and demolition, it has “slipped through the net” of academic disciplines, often being perceived as too contemporary to warrant historical attention, yet too far in the past for other study (2). Accusations of dictatorship that inevitably followed this implementation of a one party state, along with the constitutional suspension of civil liberties and freedom of speech, fit uneasily within nationalistic renderings of India as the world's largest democracy. One result of this has been the “enormous political effort [that] has gone into wiping out the Emergency as a live memory” which Ashis Nandy has identified as being propagated by Congress and non-Congress parties alike (qtd. in Tarlo 21). On behalf of the Congress party, in power during the Emergency, this has largely been done by adopting a defensive standpoint that places blame for all Emergency excesses on the shoulders of Indira Gandhi's son, Sanjay, who rose spectacularly to power during this period as head of the Youth Congress. Whilst he was no doubt a key figure, Sanjay cannot be blamed for an entire programme, yet this has become “part of the party's official history” (Mehta, xiv). Journalist Sumanta Banerjee has seen the events staged by the BJP government around the twenty-fifth anniversary of the declaration of Emergency as a similar attempt to marginalise its more oppressive and controversial aspects in national history, instead confining it to the realms of commemorative memory. He wrote in 2000 that Indira Gandhi “would have had a hearty laugh at the acrobatics being indulged in by both the perpetrators and victims of the Emergency alike” (Banerjee 2205).