Where the Global Meets the Local: Female Mobility in South Asian Women's Fiction in India and the U.S

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ABSTRACT

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Where the Global Meets the Local: Female Mobility in South Asian Women's Fiction in India and the U.S.

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This dissertation attempts a comparative study of fiction by women writers from the South Asian diaspora in the United States and by women writers who live in India. It examines the possibility of building “unlikely coalitions,” to borrow a term from the feminist critic Chandra Talpade Mohanty, between these two ostensibly different groups of writers. This dissertation brings together fiction by the diasporic South Asian writers Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Thrity Umrigar and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and homeland writers such as Githa Hariharan and Shashi Deshpande to argue that despite their fraught relationship, these two groups of writers are united by a common interest in the challenges confronting female mobility in different spaces. The four main chapters correspond to the four different modes/sites of mobility that the writers explore – global migration, the domestic space, the nation-space and the city. Home exists as a common metaphor for these divergent spaces. These writers complicate the idea of home, demonstrating how home has a precarious existence on the borderline between freedom and constraint, safety and danger.
DEDICATION

To Siddhartha and Jiya
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INTRODUCTION: WOMEN WRITING MOBILITY

In early 2006, I migrated to the US with my husband, then an employee with a leading Indian technological consultancy service. My exposure to and experience of the U.S. was limited, mostly filtered through fiction and the media, and I looked forward to my relocation with both excitement and trepidation. Nothing prepared me for what would follow. My husband’s first assignment was in Shoreview, a small city in Minnesota. As the plane circled for descent over the airport at Minneapolis, all I could see was a thick white blanket over houses and trees. It was winter at its peak. The next day, all alone in my then barely furnished new apartment after my husband had left for work, I felt lonely and homesick. I knew that my visa situation did not permit me to work. We knew nobody in Shoreview and I found myself wondering what to do with my time. Our neighbors in the predominantly white neighborhood that we moved into were polite but distant. When my husband was away, I stayed indoors, watching television endlessly or emailing or video chatting with my family and friends back in India. I did not know how to drive – like many professionals in Indian cities I had relied heavily on public transport and in any case, I was cautioned against going out on my own since I was in an unfamiliar place. I remember only too well the feeling of entrapment that I had experienced, and wondered at the irony of having traveled across continents to find myself locked inside my house. I found myself asking what global mobility holds for women. I was not aware then, but I think the seeds of my future research were being sown.
My interest in women and mobility was sharpened by my subsequent enrolment for a Ph.D. in English at Ohio University and by my coursework, which included courses on Asian American literature, women in Native American literature, transnational feminism and Women and Gender Studies. I grew increasingly aware of the way texts and writers intersected. The precariousness and complexity of female mobility was not confined only to the ethnic American/diasporic South Asian writers that I read but also surfaced in the work of writers based in India, identified as homeland writers. When Dr Amritjit Singh, my dissertation director, suggested a comparative study between diasporic and homeland writers as a possible dissertation topic, mobility seemed to be a useful starting point. By bringing, broadly speaking, ethnic American fiction and postcolonial fiction under the same umbrella, I adopt the paradigm that Singh and Peter Schmidt discuss in their introductory essay, “On the Borders Between U.S. Studies and Postcolonial Theory” in Postcolonial Theory and The United States: Race, Ethnicity and Literature. Singh and Schmidt defend U.S. ethnic studies against charges of being provincial and idealistic, of “naively stressing narratives of self-determination against cultural stereotyping” (4) that emerge from comparisons with postmodern, postcolonial and British cultural studies. Instead they argue that, “many of the concepts associated with postcolonial studies that have proven so influential – such as double consciousness, mobility, hybridity, and revision; a third space that is neither assimilation nor otherness; histories of coalition building and transnational diasporic connections -- have a rich genealogy in U.S. ethnic studies as well, especially with reference to people of color” (4). Following Singh and Schmidt, my dissertation resists the categorization of ethnic
American writing as provincial by locating some of its important concerns in the work of the homeland women writers – primarily summed up by the theme of female mobility across natural and constructed borders.

My project defines mobility for women in terms that are literal and metaphorical, geographical and social. It explores the literal movement of women across physical spaces, like the phenomenon of global travel or migration from villages and small towns to bigger cities. At the same time it also examines mobility as a movement across mental spaces --- across the socially constructed boundaries of the feminine sphere of the “home” and the masculine sphere of the “world.” As Alexandra Ganser points out in her study on American women’s road narratives, the “mythology of mobility has been marked by a distinct genderedness, built on the ideological division of spheres into private, domestic and feminine and the public, outward-bound and masculine” (17). In my project, mobility also indicates a negotiation of the hierarchical divisions of class, race and caste.

By December 2012, I had progressed to writing my dissertation on women and mobility. One morning, while surfing the net for news on India, I read about the young physiotherapy student in Delhi, raped and brutalized on a bus by a gang of predators, her male companion nearly beaten to death. The young woman died a week later of severe internal injuries. The brutality and violence surrounding her death shocked the nation. Suddenly there was a surge of action – angry protests and demonstrations in New Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai and in other major cities in India, against state apathy, the climate of lawlessness and the general lack of concern for women’s safety. The incident brought
questions of women’s mobility in the public space sharply to the fore – the young woman was out at a “safe” hour in the night, with a male companion in one of the more affluent parts of the city. I was also personally moved by her story of upward mobility – the daughter of a cargo handler at the airport, she was about to start interning as a physiotherapist at an upscale Delhi hospital. Her father had sold off land inherited from his parents to fund her education and not, as is the case with most Indian families in similar circumstances, to fund her marriage. Traditionally, mobility for women has meant the ability to travel unimpeded between the private and the public sphere and has been equated with agency – an almost transgressive agency and energy, as Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan observes.¹ The transnational feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty describes the presence of borders in her life as something that is both “exclusionary and enabling” (2) – “borders,” she writes, “suggest containment and safety, and women often pay a price for daring to claim the integrity, security, and safety of our bodies and living spaces” (2). The young physiotherapy student from Delhi had crossed several borders that are literal as well as metaphorical, but to what effect? In her case too, mobility proved to be a fraught concept. Does the crossing of the various borders – between the private and the public, home and abroad, the safe and the unsafe - translate into any kind of autonomy or power for women? That is a fundamental question my dissertation addresses.

¹ “Some sort of division of private and public spheres seems to have always and universally accompanied the construction of genders...Among women’s most common acts of transgression has been the crossing of boundaries from one sphere and activity to another” (“The Feminist Plot And The Nationalist Allegory” 71-72).
My preliminary research confirmed to me that mobility in general is a vexed concept, uniting movement and stasis, agency and the lack of it in uneasy tension, additionally complicated by the introduction of gender into the discussion. In her foundational book *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong explores this paradox of mobility in immobility. Wong attempts to locate a tradition of Asian American literature as distinct from a mainstream canon; she establishes the intertextuality of Asian American literature through a study of four recurrent motifs – food, doppelganger, mobility and ludic discourse. Wong uses the concepts of “necessity” and “extravagance” drawn from Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* as a framework for her reading. She states: “Necessity and Extravagance signify two contrasting modes of existence and operation, one contained, survival-driven and conservation-minded, the other attracted to freedom, excess, emotional expressiveness, and autotelism” (13). Wong discusses human experience under the heads of “necessity” and “extravagance,” where necessity describes the experiences of the Asian American immigrants and extravagance that of the more privileged white citizens. “Necessity,” she writes, “usually appears with words like force, demand, or constraint; Extravagance with words like urge, impulse, or desire” (13). In her chapter on mobility, Wong uses her theoretical apparatus primarily to frame the experiences of constraint and dislocation suffered by Asian Americans, not necessarily women alone, as minority citizens and immigrants in the U.S. She uses the phrase “necessitous mobility”² in the

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² In the chapter, “The Politics of Mobility” Wong draws a line between movement in mainstream and Asian American discourse. “In the former,” she writes, “horizontal
context of Joy Kogawa’s novel *Obasan* to refer to the forced movement of Japanese Canadians across the country to various internment camps during World War II. On the surface this was mobility as it involved a traversing of space – at the same time, it was “not-mobility” since the Japanese Americans had no choice in the matter. Their routes were charted for them and they were forced to adopt them at great personal cost. Wong’s framework can be very well extended to cover other narratives of mobility. I lean on Wong’s approach to describe the journeys of the female protagonists in the works under review in my project. While on the one hand, there is mobility or a movement across space, on the other there is no personal choice involved in the movement, as evident, for example, in the experiences of the women in most of Indian American writer Jhumpa Lahiri’s work.

Lahiri’s works often describe the academic and professional migration from South Asian countries to the U.S. where students migrate for more globally valued higher degrees and superior professional opportunities. Her fiction foregrounds the migration narratives of their wives who accompany graduate students, academics and IT professionals – the heartache and loneliness they suffer as a result of their relocation, their “necessitous mobilities” which are a product of compulsion rather than personal choice. In the story, “Mrs. Sen’s,” from Lahiri’s collection of short stories *Interpreter of Movement*.
Maladies, the protagonist Mrs. Sen follows her academic husband to the US and strives to keep a sense of home alive through her elaborate and time-consuming preparation of traditional Bengali dishes. In Unaccustomed Earth, the wives of the Indian graduate students who have migrated to the U.S. struggle to adapt to their new country, depend on their children to negotiate the challenges of their new home, and eventually find themselves unable to keep in step with their husbands. In Unaccustomed Earth, in particular, one can find traces of what Elaine Showalter refers to as the “double-voiced discourse” in fiction -- the separation between the more obvious “orthodox” plot and the more subtle “muted” plot. While ostensibly the stories in Unaccustomed Earth are about the first generation Americans, the “muted” plot that gradually reveals itself, particularly in the first two powerful stories, is that of their desperately lonely mothers. The “necessitous mobility” born out of domestic obligations is also evident in the works of a number of non-diasporic Indian women writers, including Shashi Deshpande, a prominent Indian writer in English. In her novel The Long Silence, the protagonist Jaya dutifully follows her husband all over Bombay, in a parody of the exile voluntarily undergone by pious wives of Indian Hindu mythology to keep their exiled husbands.

3 “One implication of this model is that women's fiction can be read as a double voiced discourse, containing a 'dominant' and a 'muted' story, what Gilbert and Gubar call a 'palimpsest.' I have described it elsewhere as an object/field problem in which we must keep two alternative oscillating texts simultaneously in view: 'In the purest feminist literary criticism we are . . . presented with a radical alteration of our vision, a demand that we see meaning in what has previously been empty space. The orthodox plot recedes, and another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background, stands out in bold relief like a thumbprint” (Showalter “Feminist Criticism and the Wilderness: Pluralism and the Feminist Critique”)
company. But her spatial movement can hardly be said to correspond with choice or mobility.

The transnational theorist Andre Aciman also identifies this paradox of mobility and immobility in his theoretical framework of “permanent transience.” Aciman avers that this condition is peculiar to exiles from their homelands who find themselves locked in a sense of transitoriness despite their movement across space. He claims: “Exiles can be supremely mobile, and they can be totally dislodged from their original orbit, but in this jittery state of transience, they are thoroughly stationary – no less stationary than those displaced Europeans perpetually awaiting letters of transit in the film Casablanca. They are never really in Casablanca, but they are not going anywhere either. They are in permanent transience” (13). While exiles may travel long distances in search of a new home, when they do find one they are unable to strike roots, haunted as they are by memories of their old home. The price they pay for the severity of their dislocation is that they experience home as shifting, precarious and susceptible to loss – a situation that a number of diasporic writers take note of in their work. Bharati Mukherjee, who began writing well ahead of other South Asian American women writers, has been criticized for the unfettered mobility she invests her protagonist with in the eponymous Jasmine. Jasmine arrives in the U.S. as an undocumented immigrant with questionable intentions⁴, but proceeds to negotiate multiple spaces as well as identities with ridiculous ease. The critical storm surrounding Jasmine’s mobility sometimes dilutes the novel’s importance.

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⁴ When Jasmine’s husband Pankaj loses his life to an assassin’s bullet in Jallandhar, Jasmine heads to the US with the intention of committing sati or immolating herself on the grounds of the Florida campus Pankaj had dreamt of migrating to.
in bringing to light the more sobering effect of transnational migration, embodied in the
Indian ghettos in New York, where the residents are locked in a time warp. The Indian
inhabitants of Flushing are characterized by a strange liminality, living in apartments of
“artificially maintained Indianness,” (Jasmine 128) cooking Indian food and devouring
Indian films. Steeped in eternal nostalgia for their homes in the subcontinent, the
Vadheras and the other Indians in Flushing are prime examples of Aciman’s “permanent
transients” who live at “home” even when they “abroad.” Mukherjee’s Wife, too, paints a
similar picture of a “little India” in Queens where the protagonist Dimple and her
husband Amit move in temporarily.

My project looks at selected works of six Indian women writers writing in English
– Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Jhumpa Lahiri, Thrity Umrigar, Bharati
Mukherjee, and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. To all appearances, Deshpande could not be
more removed from the other writers on my list, including the other homeland writer
Hariharan. Her narration is sparse and her prose minimal, unlike Lahiri or Divakaruni’s
lyrical expressions and Mukherjee’s spirited turn of phrase. Hariharan, incidentally, is
known for her poetic language, her play with form as well her sharp focus on political
issues – attributes not found in Deshpande. The action in Deshpande’s novels, rarely if
ever, steps out of the physical boundaries of the house, let alone the country; on the other
hand, Devi, the protagonist in Hariharan’s The Thousand Faces of Night, returns to India
with an American degree. Besides, Deshpande’s reservations about the writers from the
diaspora are well-known. She has been vocal in many forums about her anxieties
regarding diasporic writing, which she views as an open pandering to Western tastes and
the attention such writing receives in the global market. In her article, “The Globalization of Literature,” Deshpande writes:

Many of us in India, writers and critics, are uneasy about the popularity of a certain kind of Indian writing abroad, about its being more visible, even in our own country. One had this uncomfortable feeling that it is the powerful and rich countries who make the decisions about what is good writing. I see a parallel to this in the beauty contests, in which the young women shape themselves to fit into a certain kind of beauty – a conformity to a Western idea of beauty. Globalization, in other words, has begun to mean a standardization; and the standards are those of the developed world. Standardization is always the enemy of excellence, of originality or genius, since it means a cutting away of the edge of differences.

Reading Shashi Deshpande and Githa Hariharan in conjunction with select writers from the diaspora reveals that despite the “edge of differences” (Deshpande) these writers are united by a focus on shared themes and experiences. The diasporic Indian writers do much more than simply peddle an exotic India in a global market, or indulge in a “commodification of ethnicity” (Shankar and Srikanth) as the discussion that follows will amply demonstrate. In fact, my project builds “unlikely coalitions,” to borrow a term from the feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty, between these two distinct groups of writers. Again, I would like to reiterate that this is by no means an attempt to homogenize -- or in Deshpande’s phrase, to standardize the work of a group of diverse writers. In the Introduction to their edited work Post Independence Voices in South Asian Writings, the
editors Malashri Lal, Alamgir Hashmi and Victor J.Ramaraj point out the relevance of the word, “voices” in their title: “it is the individual voices we must listen to carefully in order to recoup for the effects of homogenizing discourses and to improve our listening” (8). I have attempted to be sensitive to these “individual voices” in my comparative study.

A key question that my project asks is if the categorization of these two groups of writers into writers from “home” and “abroad” is airtight. Though Umrigar is a writer from abroad, both of her novels are set in the city of her birth, Mumbai/Bombay. The first half of Mukherjee’s *Wife* is set in Calcutta (now Kolkata) and her *Miss New India* is based entirely in small town India as well as in Bangalore, India’s Information Technology hub. Jhumpa Lahiri’s latest novel *The Lowland* revisits the Calcutta of the fifties and sixties, in particular the Naxalite Movement of the late sixties in West Bengal. The young female protagonists of Mukherjee’s novels are burdened by expectations arising from the characteristic South Asian practice of arranged marriages. The characters in both of Umrigar’s novels bear scars of the Bombay riots of 1992-93. These writers are perhaps operating on an impulse similar to Salman Rushdie’s, whose visit to his old home in Bombay, by his own admission, provided the impetus for writing his *Midnight’s Children*.5 I show in my project that these are writers from abroad by virtue of their location; their creative material aligns with that of the writer from home --- Shashi

5 “It is probably not too romantic to say that that was when my novel *Midnight’s Children* was really born; when I realized how much I wanted to restore the past to myself, not in the faded greys of old family snapshots, but whole, in Cinemascope and glorious Technicolor” (Rushdie 9-10).
Deshpande and Githa Hariharan too expose to scrutiny the institution of marriage or for that matter, the changing landscape of the city in her work.

On the writers writing about India from outside India, Rushdie says that their “physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions…imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind” (10). Yet he implies that these “Indias of the mind” are no less valuable than the “real” India. He adds: “it maybe that when the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect the world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost…the broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed” (11). I hope to have accomplished to some degree in showing that the “broken mirror” in Umrigar’s work or in Lahiri’s work is no less a reflection of its time than Deshpande’s “unflawed one.” In my dissertation, thus, I argue that Indian women writers from the diaspora as well as in the homeland are united in their commentary on the precariousness of female mobility – and in the allied deconstruction of the binaries of home and abroad, the private and the public, and the safe and the unsafe. I use the motif of mobility to establish intertextuality among these writers across differences in space and context.

Asian American Literature and South Asian Writers

In 2013, I attended the annual MELUS conference: “The Changing Landscape of American Multietnic Literature through Historical Crises” in Pittsburgh. I was part of a panel called “South Asian American and South Asian Diasporic Literature” and I
remember wondering why our papers had to be categorized under such a broad theme. My paper was on the non/presence of race in the work of Jhumpa Lahiri and Meena Alexander. My fellow panelists were presenting on topics as varied as Internet picture brides and the Indian Canadian writer Rohinton Mistry; the one thing our papers had in common was that they all dealt with diasporic South Asian writers. The panel title seemed too easy a label and I remember thinking even then that our panel might have been better served by the inclusion of papers on other Asian American writers. The discussion across texts would have surely been richer. Hopefully that kind of panel organization was an aberration but today as I work through my introduction, it indicates to me the ambiguous relationship that South Asian American literary studies has always had with Asian American literary studies --- to borrow a phrase from Rajini Srikanth and Lavina Shankar, “a part yet apart.” In their book bearing the same title, Shankar and Srikanth map the relationship of “South Asian America” to larger Asian America through a collection of interdisciplinary essays --- a relationship well summed up by Rajiv Shankar in his foreword: “South Asians may now be ‘a part’ of the new Asian American banner, but too many differences and divergences keep them ‘apart’ from the established Asian American (i.e. East/Southeast Asian American) identity” (xiii). A term which actually began as a tool of “political empowerment” (Shankar and Srikanth 5) developed into one of inclusion and exclusion. The label “Asian American,” write Shankar and Srikanth, started as:

A term of political empowerment, meant to bring together peoples of Asian descent to whom the racist and discriminatory terms of ‘Oriental’ had been
applied…In practice, however, this construction of identity excluded everyone outside East Asia; in fact, even within the ‘included’ groups, membership was limited to the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos, with the Koreans and the Vietnamese being ‘added’ later. The racial dimension implicit in the term ‘Asian American,’ automatically excluded all non-Mongoloids from membership, including, of course South Asians. (5)

The exclusion from membership for South Asian Americans in the larger Asian American community also extended to cultural production. A major concern for Shankar and Srikanth was the fact that “scholarship and teaching in the field of Asian American studies have only recently begun to include South Asian perspectives – even though the first wave of South Asian immigrants to this country dates back to the early part of the twentieth century” (7). The one South Asian American text that Asian American curricula across the U.S. seemed for some time to include Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, ironically a novel which found little appreciation and much rancor among South Asian scholars and readers because of its controversial representation of India as well as the protagonist’s facile remaking of her identity in the U.S. *Jasmine* is the only South Asian American novel to have found place in Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s work *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, a book that the journal *American Literature* endorsed as “the first comprehensive theoretical praxis for Asian American literature since Elaine Kim's 1982 work . . . Wong’s virtuosity with sophisticated theory and massive amounts of data ably demonstrates the rigor and range of Asian American Studies.” Incidentally, Elaine Kim had come under fire from South Asian American
scholars for omitting to mention South Asian Americans in her path-breaking *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to The Writings and Their Social Context*, the first book-length study on the genre. Kim had primarily included writers of Chinese and Japanese origin and a few Korean and Filipino American authors, but had left out Vietnamese and South Asian American writers.

In *From Necessity to Extravagance*, Wong includes Bharati Mukherjee in her discussion on mobility; by including Mukherjee in her alternative canon, she seems to be making a gesture of inclusion, however inadequate. As recently as 2004, Wong examined the Japanese American writer Lydia Minatoya and the Indian American writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in an essay titled, “Middle-class Asian American Women in a Global Frame: Refiguring the Statue of Liberty in Divakaruni and Minatoya” for a comparative reading of the work of these two writers using the the Statue of Liberty for a motif. In this case too, the use of the common label “Asian American” is significant.

The changing demographics of Asian Americans as well as insistent demands within the academy have resulted in a gradual expansion in the definition of Asian American literature in course curricula, as evident in Amy Ling’s note on “Teaching Asian American Literature” in the *Heath Anthology Newsletter*. Ling observes that, “as South Asians and Southeast Asians are beginning to be recognized as writers, the boundaries of Asian American literature are stretching.”

On the other hand Ruth Yu Hsiao notes the pressures from within the academy – teachers, students and scholars -- to review the limits of Asian American literature. In her notes to her essay, “ A World Apart: A Reading of South Asian American Literature”
Hsiao mentions the call “for revising Asian American curriculum to accommodate new
groups” issued in the proceedings of the Association for American Studies 1995 annual
conference, “ReViewing Asian America: Locating Diversity.” She further observes that
the “the increased diversity of students has forced many of us to expand our curricula and
introduce a greater variety of ethnic authors of Asian origin” (217) and cites as example a
practice she started in 1987 of including works by Bharati Mukherjee in a course on
to Interethnic Asian American Literature*, a survey of the writing of North American
writers of Asian descent which addressed the gaps in Elaine Kim’s work by including
writers of South Asian and Vietnamese descent along with Chinese, Japanese, Korean
and Filipino American writers.

Fifteen years have passed since the publication of Shankar and Srikanth’s work
articulating their concern about the marginalization of South Asian American literature
within the academy. A look at the descriptions of Asian American courses in English
departments of premier American schools somewhat allays the anxiety. At the Asian
American Studies program at Cornell University, AAS 1100 or Introduction to Asian
American Studies carries the following course description:

An Interdisciplinary, cross-cultural introduction to Asian American Studies
focusing on historical and contemporary issues. Major themes include: Identity
and stereotypes, gender, family, community, education, migration and labor, and
anti-asianism. We will go beyond the U.S. mainland to include Asians in other
parts of the Americas --Caribbean and Latin America. We will focus on Chinese,
Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, South Asians and Southeast Asians in the Americas. The purpose of this course is fourfold: (1) to introduce students to the multifaceted experiences of Asians in the United States and other parts of the Americas; (2) to examine how a diverse group of people came to be identified as “Asian Americans” (3) to understand the role of difference -- gender, class, ethnic -- in the formation of “Asian American” identities; and (4) to link historical experiences with contemporary issues. (np)

While expanding its focus of study to include a large number of Asian-origin groups, this course also acknowledges the need to recognize the differences within “Asian American” and stresses the fact that it is not a monolithic category. Similarly, the Asian American Studies minor program at Tufts University is described as “an interdisciplinary field dedicated to an examination of the diasporic East Asian, Southeast Asian, South Asian, and Pacific Islander populations. It applies the methods and perspectives of traditional academic disciplines, such as history, sociology, anthropology, education, psychology and literature, to understanding the histories, communities, and cultures of Asian Americans.”

In the general climate favoring an expanded definition of Asian American literature, I hope that my dissertation would contribute to closing the gap between South Asian American and Asian American literature. I return to Ruth Yu Hsiao’s helpful essay to identify contact points between these two fields. According to Hsiao, “A common thread that runs through all literary expressions of ethnic groups is the evolving self-identity of ethnic writers as reflected in their works. Whether in autobiography or in
fiction, they write primarily to name themselves and to represent their experiences as they go through the various stages of encountering the dominant society” (218). Hsiao argues that all ethnic writing, beginning with Jewish American Literature, exhibit three modes of self-identity – that of the cultural emissary, the “American voice” and finally appropriation. The diasporic Indian writers in my project do not inhabit the conciliatory or near apologetic mode of the cultural emissary; they have forged an “American voice” (Hsiao 224) and their writing “projects a confidence that comes claiming America as home,” (224) evident in the work of Lahiri and Divakaruni. Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* gives us disturbing back stories of the Indian model minority in the U.S. – the maternal dispossession and rebellious children who surround successful Bengali families in the U.S, the distorted shadows of the medical students and Spelling Bee winners. In the story “Only Goodness” from the collection, Rahul fails to live up to family expectations to make it as a doctor against his inner calling to be a playwright and finally ends up an irredeemable alcoholic. In “Nobody’s Business” Sangeeta drops out of Harvard to work in a bookstore, rejects alliances with conventionally successful Bengali men her parents find for her and eventually is duped by her philandering non-Indian fiancé. The novels under consideration in my project also demonstrate what Ruth Yu Hsiao identifies as the third mode of self-identity for Asian American writers – appropriation. Writes Hsiao: “In the third mode ethnicity is subsumed under appropriation in the quest for an artistic model. The preoccupations of earlier Asian American writing – how to be accepted, how to assimilate and secure one’s rights as an American – have lost some of their urgency in the third mode. In some cases, it is fair to ask whether the label ‘ethnic’ could still apply
because of its non-ethnic content” (227). Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *One Amazing Thing* is a multivocal novel with diverse ethnic characters; besides the South Asian characters like Uma, Tariq and Malathi, her cast also comprises of the spirited Chinese American girl Lily and her grandmother Jiang, the black Army veteran Cameron, and the white Pritchetts. Jiang still has an Indian/Bengali connection, but with the Pritchetts and Cameron, Divakaruni appropriates, much like Michael Ondaatje (Hsiao) “a milieu and language …vastly different from her own” (Hsiao). She admits as much in an interview to Norah Piehl from the *bookreporter*, “I had a difficult time initially with Mr. Pritchett, who is a white man in his early 70s. I haven't known anyone like him closely, so I had to do a lot of imagining and rewriting. But then I became very fond of him. His story, when it came, surprised me. Many readers and reviewers have said that it was the one that moved them most” (*bookreporter.com*). A unifying thread across the narratives of these characters is how the U.S. has failed all of them as a dream location – now they are looking toward India for emotional fulfillment.

Remigration plays a huge role in the work of Thrity Umrigar; by basing her novels in India rather than the U.S. she participates in a kind of creative remigration, the kind that Lavina Shankar and Rajini Srikanth gesture toward in their essay, “South Asian American Literature: ‘Off the Turnpike’ of Asian America” (Singh and Schmidt 370). According to Shankar and Srikanth, what prohibits the easy co-optation of South Asian American writing into Asian American writing is its rejection of US-centeredness. However, this decentering also adds to the possibility of expanding the limits of Asian American literature. Shankar and Srikanth say:
South Asians’ writing frequently exhibits a tendency to render the United States not as the central stage on which the action of their texts unfold, but as only one site of relevance amidst a number of possible locations worldwide. The nation-state of the U.S. recedes into the background, and the membership within the American polity is not typically a central concern. Both tendencies – the concurrent invocation of other homelands and the relative lack of concern with issues of citizenship and belonging within the U.S. structure – have inhibited the easy incorporation of writing by South Asian Americans into the domain of Asian American literature. (Singh and Schmidt 371)

The “concurrent invocation of other homelands” (Shankar and Srikanth) is present in Divakaruni’s *One Amazing Thing*, where the action is divided between locations in India and the U.S. Though the novel is still concerned with “citizenship and belonging” (371) within the U.S. structure, Divakaruni does not restrict herself to Asian Americans, instead extending her focus to talk about other Americans who are dispossessed within the U.S. system such as the inner-city African American, Cameron – or poor whites like the young James Pritchett. Most of Umrigar’s *The World We Found* is set in Mumbai in India, though the U.S. also has a role to play, while *The Space Between Us* is set completely in India. *The World We Found* ends with Nishta’s flight to the U.S., but her journey is shrouded in doubt and apprehension instead of being centered in the rhetoric of the Promised Land. In *The World Next Door*, Rajini Srikanth probes the” invocation of other homelands” further; she argues that South Asian American writers “complicate the idea
of place” (69) by situating their work not only in the U.S. but also in places outside it, opening the reader’s imagination to locations outside the U.S. and also showing how the nations are inextricably intertwined. Such a connection is most powerfully evident in Umrigar’s novels – particularly *The World We Found* with its background of the Twin Towers explosion, which also affects the lives of the Muslim couple Iqbal and Nishta in Mumbai. In *The Space Between Us*, Raju, the protagonist Bhima’s son-in-law, dies of AIDS, a disease widely regarded as a consequence of globalization, leaping and spreading across national boundaries.

Social and Historical Background to the Works

The works included in my dissertation reflect important social and political developments taking place locally and globally, which have a singular influence on women’s mobility, signaling my project’s relationship to transfeminist discourse. I am indebted, among others, to the work of Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, Ella Shohat, Gayatri Gopinath, Sara Ahmed, Trinh T.Minh-ha and Katarzyna Marciniak. I have been particularly influenced by Mohanty’s conceptualization of “feminism without borders” (2) which is distinct from a ““border-
less’ feminism” (2), one that, while acknowledging the differences that borders represent, “envisions change and social justice” (2) across and through these borders. My dissertation foregrounds the common interest that South Asian writers in the U.S. and India have in highlighting the vexed issues of empowerment, privilege and visibility that confront Indian women, despite the writers’ admitted differences. Gayatri Gopinath’s work on the representation – or the lack of it - of the queer in cultural production has sensitized me to the attempts of some Indian women writers to acknowledge and celebrate homoerotic relationships between women in their work. I have been similarly influenced by Katarzyna Marciniak’s work on the discourse of alienhood which provided me with the critical lens to analyze the crisis in identity and sense of marginalization experienced by immigrants in the U.S. – an issue that diasporic South Asian women writers frequently return to.

South Asian diasporic writers in the United States, such as Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri, all focus on the phenomenon of global migration, particularly academic migration from India to the United States. The fate of the illegal immigrants to the U.S. has been well documented in print and on film – a group for which immigration does not result in the fulfilment of the American dream. Besides the hardship and near impossibility of migrating without the required papers, immigration itself may result in a life of poverty, hard menial work, low wages and living in conditions of extreme surveillance. The fiction of the South Asian women writers from the diaspora joins in the conversation on the challenges of immigration, by showing up the “darker” side of privilege. This group of writers focus on the pain of dislocation
suffered by the supposedly privileged immigrants – the human cost of cleavage from the original homeland, of progressive alienation from their progeny and of the inability to assimilate to a new culture.

The fiction by these diasporic writers is also significant for the way they explore the effect of migration on women. The migrant wives in Mukherjee and Lahiri’s stories are loath to give up their traditional Indian clothes and accessories, and while this inability may symbolize a nostalgic link to the home they have left behind, it also emphatically marks their difference or strangeness in an American street or neighborhood. The family also comes under tremendous pressure from immigration. The migrant wives not only have to sacrifice their attachments and close bonds with family and friends back in India, but also contend with raising children who are increasingly alienated from them -- to borrow a term from Jhumpa Lahiri, the “child of America.”

The loneliness of the mothers/wives and the generational conflict is a pivotal theme in Lahiri’s most recent collection of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*, as well as her first novel *The Namesake*. 8 Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s short story, “Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter,” first published in the *Atlantic* (April 1998), offers another touching reflection on the emotional reconfiguration of families caused by migration. Here we experience the narrative perspective of Mrs. Dutta, who migrates to join her son and his family in the US following her husband’s death. Despite their best intentions, her son and daughter-in-law

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8 However, Ashima, in *The Namesake* fares marginally better than her successors in *Unaccustomed Earth*. She starts working outside the house, grows more independent financially and emotionally and is able to fend for herself even after the premature demise of her husband, Ashok.
are strangers to her and their American lifestyle remains a mystery that she fails to unravel. In a poignant conclusion to the story, Mrs. Dutta is made aware of her own redundancy in her son’s family: “a silhouette – man, wife, children, joined on a wall – showing her how alone she is in this land of young people. And how unnecessary.” The feeling of redundancy felt by a majority of female immigrants is aggravated by immigration and labor laws that are not friendly to female mobility. As per current immigration policy, the dependents/wives of H1B work visa holders cannot work in the US, even if they may be highly skilled professionals themselves. Driving is crucial to female mobility in the U.S., but till about a decade back dependent visa holders could not even take a driving test in some states such as Illinois. In some welcome news, however, on April 8 2014, the Times of India, a leading Indian newspaper, reported that “the U.S will soon come out with a series of policy initiatives and changes in the existing rules including allowing spouses of H1B visas to work in America.”

The legal aliens who are at the center of such diasporic fiction may be “legal,” as opposed to the “illegal” aliens, but as Permanent Residents or legal aliens, they are already othered in many ways with reference to the citizens. In the U.S., for example – in contrast to Canada and Australia – landed immigrants have no voting rights and their democratic participation rights are limited through various devices in place. While they may not share the experiences of the poor immigrants who sneak in surreptitiously across the border, dodging surveying copters, their sense of belonging and citizenship is also

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9 “H1B visa classification permits a foreign national to work in the United States for a temporary period. It is available for offers of employment that are in a specialty occupation” (murthy.com).
complicated in serious ways. And on the surface while they do achieve the American
dream, their achievement is shadowed by a sobering sense of loss – an issue that some of
the writers included in my project reflect in their work.

The phenomenon of global migration does not go unnoticed by Shashi Deshpande
or Githa Harihanan. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Devi is also a part of the academic
migration to the States, though her journey is curtailed by her mother and by the
traditional pressure of marriage that Sarita in Deshpande’s novel *The Dark Holds no
Terrors* resists. *The Long Silence*, the house that Jaya, the protagonist, moves to actually
belongs to her brother. But it has been left to her since he has moved to the States and has
no intentions of ever coming back. There is a partial reflection of the cost of immigration
that Lahiri and Mukherjee indicate in their texts. In the absence of her older brother, Jaya
has to step into his shoes and take responsibility for her truant younger brother. She not
only has to discharge his duties as a senior member of the family, but also finds herself
isolated in her time of trouble, unable to share her own anxieties over her husband with a
close family member. Deshpande’s fiction also looks at changing equations between
partners in a marriage in sharp detail, brought about by the economic mobility of women
– a phenomenon that, much like migration, affected the construction of the family. In *The
Dark*, the shift in the traditional breadwinner status from the husband to the wife—Sarita
is a thriving doctor while Manohar is a teacher who struggles to make ends meet—
corrodes their relationship. Deshpande also documents the pressures of social and
economic aspiration on this family. The novel shows that Sarita is equally to blame for
Manohar’s unraveling by pushing him toward a college job, which brings financial returns to the family but is clearly something that Manohar is not emotionally invested in.

Thrity Umrigar brings the mobility of specific groups as well as individuals under the scanner in her texts. Both of her novels included in my dissertation *The Space Between Us* and *The World We Found* unfold under the shadow of the Bombay riots of 1993 – perhaps a first for any female diasporic writer. Of course Indian writers from the North American diaspora such as Rohinton Mistry have written about the riots in unsparing detail in their work, notably in Mistry’s *Family Matters*. Mistry points an incriminating finger at the right-wing Hindu organization, Shiv Sena, for the tension that exploded between the Hindus and the Muslims during these clashes as well as for the planned massacre of many innocent Muslims. Mistry’s novel suggests that the Shiv Sena is responsible for the murder of the family of Hussain, the Muslim employee of one of the characters, Mr. Kapur. Unlike Mistry, Umrigar avoids going too deep into the events that constituted the riots – the instances of gruesome violence, the loss of lives, and the bloodshed – to train her lenses instead on the toll they took on intimate, domestic lives. Her novel is more interested in the quiet violence in domestic lives instead of the gory violence on the streets. Through the story of Iqbal and Nishta, *The World We Found* makes a telling comment on the way the political can impinge on the personal. The story opens some twenty years after the riots, but its wounds are still fresh in the lives of Iqbal and Nishta, a couple in an inter-religious marriage. The riots affect both of them in similar yet different ways; Iqbal finds comfort in his family and community, choosing to work with his uncle in a menial job undeserving of his credentials, moving his family into
a rundown Muslim ghetto for reasons of security. Nishta, courageous and free-spirited, suddenly finds her freedom and mobility seriously compromised, for her own safety, as her husband would have it – giving up her life outside the house, wearing a burqa to mark her religious affiliations in the Muslim ghetto they live in. The simmering undercurrent of tension between the Hindus and Muslims in India is fanned by the Twin Tower explosions. In the last scene when Iqbal makes a desperate bid to get his wife back at the airport, Adish is able to stop him by taking advantage of his appearance – bearded and Mullah-like - and have him arrested under the suspicion of being a terrorist.

Umrigar frequently cuts across borders in her work. If *The World We Found* shows the global impact of 9/11 with particular reference to an Indian city with a history of sectarian violence, *The Weight of Heaven* alludes to global eco-capitalism. While at the heart of this novel, similar to Umrigar’s other works, lies a narrative of personal relationships, it also makes a reference to capitalist projects that exploit the ecology – rivers and forests and the surrounding human life. Events in *The Weight of Heaven* are set in motion by an agreement that the Indian government enters into with the American drug company HerbalSolutions, leasing it several acres of forest land holding the girbal tree. Herbal Solutions plans to use the tree’s leaves in its alternative diabetics-control medicine, in the process depriving the villagers living around the forest of their traditional livelihood of using those trees for firewood.

Both Umrigar and Deshpande document the migration from rural areas to the city and its consequences. In *The Long Silence* we witness the beginning of this influx – crowds that swarm into Mumbai following some natural calamity in the interiors that
make the conditions unlivable and huddle in the streets, alien faces that close in on Jaya’s children on the beach and attempt to grab their ice lollies. In *The Space Between Us*, those numbers have made the city their own, carving out spaces from it for the bastis/slums they inhabit. They no longer peer at the wealthy through the car windows as in Deshpande’s Mumbai, but have now entered their houses as bona fide employees, troubling the binaries of insider and outsider, safety and danger, as the relationship between Sara and Bhima amply demonstrates.

**Chapterization**

What is common to all my chapters is the focus on “home” in its multiple projections – in its most literal manifestation of houses, of the natal as well as marital home, the nation-space and finally, in its affective resonances of belonging and not belonging. My dissertation is also about how women, in particular, negotiate a sense of “being home/ not being home,” to borrow a term from Chandra Mohanty and Biddy Martin. My first chapter examines how both Lahiri and Mukherjee’s works focus on home in the sense of the immediate family – the relationship between spouses and between parents and children– as well as in that of the characters’ search for a home following their relocation from India. The second chapter looks closely at the representation of home as the domestic space and the many complex ways in which marital relationships are navigated in the context of Deshpande and Hariharan’s work. The third chapter examines the nation-space as home, at related ideas of citizenship and alienhood (Marciniak), and also at how certain groups find themselves “unhomed” in the dominant and hegemonic construction of the nation and of the (heteronormative) family.
The concluding chapter looks at the search for a new home in the context of internal migration, where the characters’ movement from rural areas to more urban spaces sets the stage for their self-discovery and negotiation of identity.

The “homes” are represented as fissured – paradoxically prone to security and violence, repression and freedom, underlining the challenges to female mobility. The works included in my dissertation expose the dangers within the home, complicating the lines between the safe/familiar and the unsafe/strange, and here I join in conversation critics like Rosemary Marangoly George as well as Mohanty and Martin who have commented on the ambivalent texture of the home. The challenges to individual well-being may come from those closest to us, who are entrusted with our security – parents, children and spouses – and in the case of the nation-as-home, the State machinery. A number of the texts I study address the grey areas in marital relationships. In Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*, the marriages between the older generation of husbands and wives are marked by an emotional distance. They may share lives, but their marriages lack a sense of companionship. In the story “Hell-Heaven,” that is part of the collection, *Aparna*, disillusioned and dissatisfied in her marriage, prepares to commit a most spectacular suicide when she finds out that the object of her infatuation Pranab is getting married to an American woman. She painstakingly attaches her sari all over her body with safety pins, douses herself with gas and prepares to set herself ablaze. While she is saved in the nick of time by a harmless inquiry from her neighbor, this incident underlines the potential for violence in someone living a life of stasis, brooding, even obsession. Mukherjee’s *Wife* shows the slow disintegration of a marriage unable to
sustain the pressures of migration, ending suggestively in the grotesque murder of the husband by the wife. In Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces*, Devi struggles to cope with her husband Mahesh’s long absences on business trips and increasingly feels alienated and unhomed in her own home. Two other novels discussed in my dissertation attempt to probe the veil of secrecy and shame surrounding intimate partner violence. In *The Dark Holds no Terrors* the husband battles a deep sense of inferiority complex owing to his wife’s professional success and rapes her in schizophrenic oblivion. In *The Space Between Us* the wealthy, upper middle class Parsi wife finds herself the victim of unprovoked violence on the part of her suspicious, possessive husband. In both cases, spousal violence is an attempt to redress fears of emasculation, brought about by the reversal of traditional roles in a marriage in one and by over-possessive maternal love in the other. Umrigar, in particular, trains her lenses on relationships where surveillance and violence are not external forces, but intrinsic to the domestic spaces. Both in *The Space* and *The World We Found*, husbands and mothers-in-law collude to keep the female protagonists trapped indoors, their mobility circumscribed. Iqbal may not be given to fits of irrational rage like Freddy, but just like Freddy and Manohar, he feels threatened by Nishta – by her discovery of the remnants of her old spirit following her reunion with her old friends, in particular – and is provoked enough to physically abuse her. His mother Ammi, meanwhile, keeps a hawk’s eye on Nishta’s movements outside the house.

Indeed, the antagonism of women, who have internalized the logic of patriarchy, toward other women is another common thread that runs through these works. Not only mothers-in-law, but also mothers prove to be resistant to their daughters’ aspirations of
mobility. In *The Dark Holds no Terrors*, the strongest opposition to Sarita’s dreams and ambitions comes from her conservative mother, who would rather have her daughter marry and raise children than sacrifice the better part of her youth to a demanding medical profession. In *Roots and Shadows*, Akka, the family matriarch, frowns upon her niece Indu’s decision to marry the man she loves and move to the city. In *The Thousand Faces*, Devi’s grandmother attempts to trap her in the image of the ideal Indian wife through her stories of the self-sacrificing wives from Hindu mythology – Gandhari and Damayanti. The generational divide is also evident in Lahiri’s short stories, where mothers and daughters find themselves arrayed in opposition over important decisions in life, like Ruma’s mother’s disapproval of Ruma’s choice of a white husband. Of course, the maternal control in these cases stems from love – and from an earnest wish to do well by the daughters. But the conflicting visions of what constitutes happiness for the younger women prove limiting to the “daughters’” growth. In Lahiri’s short stories, shared experiences of motherhood and common stories of heartbreak eventually pave the way for some reconciliation between the mothers and daughters, but in Deshpande’s novels, particularly *The Dark Holds no Terrors*, the differences remain largely unresolved. Sarita is able to reenter her natal home only after her mother passes away.

The home paradoxically also emerges as a site of empowerment and liberation for the women. Sarita voluntarily leaves her marital home to return to her natal home – her parents’ house – for some soul-searching and is eventually able to arrive at a degree of clarity regarding her marriage. She cuts her flight from her husband short, musters the courage to overcome traditional resistance and communicate with her father about the
abuse she has suffered in marriage, and finally decides to confront Manohar. Nishta in *The World We Found* finds support from unexpected quarters. If her home has Ammi as the perennial watchdog, she also finds help here from Mumtaz, her sister-in-law who resists her brother’s well-meaning, paternalistic attempts to restrict his wife’s movements. Following the riots, Iqbal had married Mumtaz off early to an older man she feels no love for in a desperate bid to safeguard her, but Mumtaz resents this decision taken on her behalf as she feels trapped in the marriage. In *Roots and Shadows*, Indu realizes to her own surprise that the models of womanhood in the home she had left behind are not vulnerable and weak, but display a stoic ability to adapt to situations which she perhaps herself lacks, despite her education and increased exposure to urbanity. The domestic space which is so prone to discontentment and violence also allows regenerative homosocial bonds to thrive between women, like Mumtaz and Nishta’s literal and metaphorical sisterhood. Mumtaz and Nishta are sisters-in-law. But besides the bonds of family, they are also joined in union against the oppressive love and protection of the family. Finally, it is because of Mumtaz’s help that Nishta is able to flee Iqbal and her constricted life in the ghetto in Bombay. In *The Space Between Us*, the battered wife Sara draws courage from her spirited domestic help, Bhima. Their mutually sustaining and nourishing friendship is able to subvert the hierarchical relationship between employer and employee, at least momentarily. If Bhima nurses Sara, a victim of domestic abuse, back to physical as well as emotional health through her love and loyalty, Sara too fills the gaping void in Bhima’s life left by an absconding husband and son and a daughter’s untimely loss with her concern and guidance.
In my dissertation I also look at the broader projection of the nation as a home, and how the construction of the figure of the “stranger” (Sara Ahmed) inhibits mobility/movement for select individuals and groups. Umrigar’s *The World We Found* and Divakaruni’s *One Amazing Thing* both take into account narratives of strangeness and how differently they affect male and female bodies. One’s “recognition”\(^\text{10}\) (Ahmed) as a stranger in one’s own country can limit one’s mobility considerably. Umrigar’s novel demonstrates the toll that the Bombay riots take on Iqbal’s personal as well as social capital, marking his transformation from secular student activist to a religious fanatic, from well-placed bank employee to a humble menial worker at his uncle’s store. His world shrinks to the Muslim ghetto he is forced to take up residence in, fearing the danger to his life from marauding Hindu mobs. The construction of the Muslim as the “stranger” underlies Divakaruni’s novel *One Amazing Thing* as well. The novel documents the havoc that 9/11 wreaked on many Muslim families in the US, through the narrative of Tariq, a first-generation American and his family. The Twin Tower explosions mark Tariq, as it does many Muslim youths, as a “strange” body -- waiting at the passport office, Uma idly observes how Tariq’s beard may cause him to be frisked in airport security lines.

Strangeness marks female bodies differently. In Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*, the men – Ruma’s father, for example – has no problems blending into the crowd because of the way he looks and dresses. It is her young mother who stands out awkwardly in her

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\(^{10}\) Ahmed on the construction of the stranger: “The stranger comes to be faced as a form of recognition: we recognize somebody as a stranger, rather than simply failing to recognize them” (21).
saris, bindis and Indian jewelry. Ruma’s father works outside the home and his greater exposure to the new culture allows for his smoother assimilation in it. Trapped inside the house in her load of domestic responsibilities, Ruma’s mother finds it harder to let go of her past. In Umrigar’s *The World We Found*, Nishta is doubly othered. As a Muslim in a Bombay reeling from the riots the risk to her life is great; as a Muslim woman, she also risks violation to her body as Mumtaz’s experiences demonstrate\(^\text{11}\). Nishta follows Iqbal to the ghetto, dons a burqa and gives up all work outside the house, except for chaperoning her young niece to and from school. In Nishta’s experiences, we are again confronted with the problematic representation of the home, where binaries of safety and danger are deconstructed. Nishta inhabits a precarious space as a Hindu who has converted to Islam. Her confinement inside the house and in the burqa is supposed to keep her “safe.” The safety, however, proves suffocating to her spirit and comes at the price of her freedom.

If the Muslim is the other in the Hindu right-wing construction of the national space as a predominantly Hindu one, in the heteronormative construction of the family the queer is the strange/other. My dissertation discusses the positioning of the queer in the domestic space. Both of Umrigar’s novels can be read compellingly in the context of queer scholar Gayatri Gopinath’s criticism that popular diasporic Indian films, like *Bend it like Beckham* and *Monsoon Wedding*, fight shy of depicting the possibility of a same sex love in a homosocial environment – through the “displacement of queerness from the

\(^{11}\) In a sanitized representation of the fate of both Hindu and Muslim women in the aftermath of the riots, Mumtaz is molested by a supposedly helpful Hindu neighbor.
space of the home and the bodies of female characters to the space of not-home and the bodies of gay male figures” (Gopinath 127). In Gurinder Chaddha’s *Bend it like Beckham*, Gopinath observes, the narrative dodges the possibility of homoeroticism in the homosocial bond between the two female leads and invests queerness instead in Jasmit’s gay friend. In *The World We Found*, however, queerness resides “in the space of the home and the body” of an important character—Kavita, who nurses a heartache over her unrequited love for her friend Armaity. Kavita’s sexual orientation, however, is not conducive to her mobility. She is forced to conceal her relationship with her German girlfriend Ingrid—indeed her trips abroad to meet with her girlfriend can be classified as another example of necessitous mobility— and lives under the socially sanctioned guise of the dutiful unmarried daughter cohabiting with her mother. She goes through life in fear of beingouted, which would have dire consequences, and it is only toward the end of the novel that she can bring herself to come out to her closest friend Laleh. However, the conclusion to Laleh’s story is definitely a step up from the culmination of the lesbian relationship found in homeland writer Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman* (2002), where the protagonist Astha gives into deeply internalized social and familial pressures and returns to her life of familiar domesticity while her lover leaves the country.

Umrigar’s novels perform the important job of incorporating the narrative of the queer into that of the home. Ruth Vanita writes that “ongoing same-sex relationships, for both men and women, often coexist with the obligations and privileges of marriage, and may function as primary erotic and emotional relationships” (Vanita 3). While the novel stops short of describing the relationship between Sara and Bhima as a lesbian
relationship, it has a physical and tactile component that cannot be ignored and is clearly, the primary emotional relationship in the lonely lives of both women.

Finally, what is common to the writers included in my dissertation is the way they bring audibility and visibility to the narratives of the marginalized --- the domestic help, the victim of domestic abuse, the neglected wife and mother, the queer – stories that are perhaps unlikely to find a place in more widely publicized and profitable media. In the diversity of the narratives that I have included, I align myself with Chandra Mohanty, pushing against the essentialist categorization of the Third World woman as a monolithic entity in Western feminist discourse.

My first chapter “Mobility and Privilege” brings together diasporic Indian writers Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee to examine the consequences of transnational migration for women. Both Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* and Mukherjee’s *Wife* expose global travel for some women as a parody of mobility, as the female characters in both works find their spatial freedom seriously affected as a result of their relocation. Their worlds shrink to the small, modestly-priced apartments their husbands can, at least initially, afford. Additionally, because of their close affective ties to their homeland as well as their inability to assimilate to a culture that is foreign to them, the Indian immigrants live out their lives in little Indias of their making. The writers also show how the insularity of the female characters is aggravated by racial boundaries outside their homes – a deep fear of miscegenation in Lahiri’s work – and the distance from their children inside their homes. Through its parallel locations in India and the US, Mukherjee’s *Wife* takes a more uncompromising look at the fruit of transnational migration. Dimple expects her relocation
to the US to liberate her from life in the oppressive traditional “joint” household she
marries into, but her move to the US paradoxically results in another form of
incarceration. Lahiri’s and Mukherjee’s works also explore the trope of the home as a site
of latent violence. Lahiri’s stories represent the relationship between spouses as well as
between mothers and daughters as stressful and not always mutually supportive. In
Mukherjee’s novel, the violence is more explosive where Dimple’s experience of sheer
redundancy leads to dangerous escapist fantasies that have a hair-raising climax.

While Lahiri explores the effect of transnational mobility on women, Hariharan
and Deshpande’s works hold up for scrutiny the challenges to female mobility in
traditionally familiar spaces – the domestic space and the family. My second chapter,
“Home and Mobility” explores the representation of the domestic space in two of
Deshpande’s best known works The Dark Holds no Terrors and That Long Silence as well
as Hariharan’s The Thousand Faces of the Night as simultaneously sheltering and
oppressive, limiting and empowering to women. The Dark delineates the limits to female
agency enforced by members of the natal home who internalize patriarchal dictates – in
this case, Sarita’s mother who is not only more partial to her son, but also frowns upon her
daughter’s assertion of her individuality in her choice of career as well as partner. While
marriage provides an escape from this constricting environment, it brings its own
liabilities in the form of a professionally unsuccessful spouse whose frustrations and
insecurities find an outlet in the sexual violence he inflicts upon his wife. Like Lahiri’s
work, Deshpande’s novels too project the domestic space as one riven by violence. In That
Long Silence, Jaya’s sense of duty toward her husband enforces a stifling silence on her;
the home also produces psychologically ruptured individuals like Kusum or Sita. In Hariharan’s novel, Sita channels her frustrated artistic energies into shaping her husband and daughter’s lives with a calculated ferocity. The novels focus on the lack of verbal or emotional communication in the most intimate of relationships – in *The Thousand Faces* the silence that exists in the relationship between Sita and her husband, Mahadevan, is also mirrored in that between her daughter Devi and Mahesh. But the female protagonists also find ways to subvert this silence. Sarita decides to speak her rape while Jaya ruptures her silence through her writing – the candid self-examination of the novel.

My third chapter “Strangers in an Un/Strange Land” looks at the construct of the nation-space within the framework of female mobility, with reference to Thrity Umrigar’s novel *The World We Found* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel *One Amazing Thing*. I employ Sara Ahmed’s discourse of “stranger danger” to examine the production of the stranger, in times of national emergencies, like the Indo-China war of 1962 in Divakaruni’s novel and the Bombay riots in Umrigar’s work. As post 9/11 works, both novels also register the peculiarly vulnerable position of Muslim men and women in the global climate of suspicion and fear surrounding Islam. The novels consider the gendered experience of mobility in the context of the homogenizing discourse of the nation, demonstrating that while men marked as strange or Other find their freedom and agency compromised, women are twice othered, owing to the exclusionary policies of patriarchal forces inside as well as outside the home. The alienation that the men experience finds expression in brute force, like Iqbal’s manhandling by the police at the airport and his arrest on suspicion of being a terrorist in *The World* or Tariq’s father’s disappearance in a
post-9/11 sweep and his return as a physically and psychically damaged body in *One Amazing Thing*. While both writers handle with kid gloves the vulnerability of female bodies during incidents of sectarian violence – the women in both the works are largely unharmed physically, except for Mumtaz’s molestation in Umrigar’s novel -- their female characters suffer the well-intended yet frustrating patriarchal interventions from the men in their lives. In *The World We Found*, Iqbal coerces Nishta to erase all traces of her old life, including her Hindu name, in his attempt to protect her while Jiang in *One Amazing Thing* submits to a loveless marriage determined by her father to save her from the possibility of life in an internment camp. The women in both novels appear to trade one prison from another.

My final chapter “Women and the City” looks at female mobility in the context of internal migration, with reference to Thrity Umrigar’s novel *The Space Between Us* and Shashi Deshpande’s novel *Roots and Shadows*. My chapter examines how the city can be prohibitive as well as conducive to female mobility. In Umrigar’s novel, migrating to the city proves empowering for its protagonist Bhima, providing opportunities of financial independence, and allowing her to survive and raise an orphaned granddaughter without male support. The city also inspires dreams of upward mobility, helps her forge unlikely friendships across class divisions and liberates her mind her from religious prejudice. At the same time, the novel shows up the sad limits to the city’s influence. Bhima and Sera’s friendship is unable to withstand the taint of class consciousness. In *Roots and Shadows*, the city is more an absent presence, existing largely in Indu’s memories. Indu briefly returns from the city to her ancestral home in the village and the novel describes how her
migration has helped her develop a balanced perspective on the advantages and limits of both rural and urban life.

In conclusion, the six writers studied in my dissertation interrogate the idea of female mobility, in the process reorienting our sense of settled categories such as home and abroad, foreign and native, safety and danger. Their works show that home, the starting point of all travel, is not always a haven of security, and abroad, with its association of liberation and distance, may not always be empowering and liberating. I return to a quote by Malashri Lal: “the truth-teller for contemporary Indian works is not necessarily the person who belongs to the local culture, because such a person would muffle the possibility of a larger discourse” (295). Lal’s words echo Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the two groups of “storytellers” which “overlap in many ways” (363) – the one “who has come from afar” (363) as well as the one “who has stayed at home” (363). According to Benjamin, “the actual extension of the realm of storytelling in its full historical breadth is inconceivable without the most intimate interpenetration of these two archaic types” (363). I hope that my study, in its attempt to bring under one roof the “local” and the “global” Indian writers, truth-tellers from the diaspora as well as home, would help avoid the perils of a narrow discourse and pave the way for richer and more extensive studies on female mobility.
CHAPTER 1: MOBILITY AND PRIVILEGE IN *UNACCUSTOMED EARTH* AND *WIFE*

And while is it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile’s life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.

-Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile”

Best of all, I felt safe in this country from the persecutions we were accustomed to, and that was more than enough to make a young man permanently cheerful.

-Charles Simic, “Refugees”

Theorists of transnationalism have acknowledged that the “transnational” is a fraught term, a paradox that carries implications of agency and disempowerment, pain and gain at the same time. While they have been more inclined to address the high costs of transnationalism, particularly in their focus on the exile’s trauma, they have also been interested in seeking some redemption for the term. Edward Said writes that “seeing ‘the entire world as a foreign land makes possible originality of vision.’ Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that…is contrapuntal” (Said 49). Similarly, Eva Hoffman claims that “being deframed, so to speak, from everything familiar, makes for a certain fertile detachment and gives one new ways of observing and seeing…this perhaps is the great advantage, for a writer, of exile, the compensation for the loss and the formal bonus – that gives you a perspective, a vantage point” (50). Fiction writers from the diaspora have been especially invested in exploring this idea of simultaneous “loss” and “bonus” in the transnational experience. This chapter examines the intertwined ideas of loss and bonus, disadvantage
and privilege in South Asian American works of fiction — the novel *Wife* by Bharati Mukherjee and the collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri— with special reference to the trope of mobility.

Both *Wife* and *Unaccustomed Earth* explore the experience of educated Bengali immigrants from India to the United States, “legal” aliens with papers that grant them greater access to economic resources and professional opportunities compared to their counterparts without documentation, such as the protagonists in Bangladeshi British writer Monica Ali’s *In the Kitchen*, the Indian American writer Kiran Desai’s *Inheritance of Loss* and in the story “One Out of Many” in V.S. Naipaul’s *In a Free State*. With their unrestricted movement across borders, and their consequent trajectories of upward mobility, the documented workers in Lahiri’s stories and Mukherjee’s novel would appear to be a privileged lot. For women in particular, the ability to move out of the private space to the public has always been considered empowering; as part of global travel, this mobility translates into a unique privilege since untrammeled movement is available only to the documented minority. However I argue in this chapter that this equation of mobility with privilege for immigrants — even the ones lucky enough to have documentation - is probably overdetermined. Both *Unaccustomed Earth* and *Wife* are compelling studies in mobility in relation to a lack of privilege experienced by immigrants, especially women, in their new land. The lack of privilege manifests itself in the lack of “local” mobility that stands out starkly against their global mobility and in the complicated roles they play in the lives of their spouses and children.
The Privileges of Mobility in *Unaccustomed Earth*

*Unaccustomed Earth* is Lahiri’s third published work of fiction – a collection of five short stories and a triptych. This chapter will concern itself primarily with three stories, “Unaccustomed Earth,” “Hell-Heaven” and “Only Goodness” and the triptych “Hema and Kaushik.” The immigrants in Lahiri’s work in general do not need to pull themselves up by the bootstraps, the way Jasmine in Bharati Mukherjee’s novel of the same name or Chanu in Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* must do. Their migration “is prompted not by economic necessity but by a desire…to expand educational opportunity or pursue increasingly challenging, and therefore fulfilling, employment” (Srikanth 58). So what are some the bonuses of global mobility that Lahiri’s text foregrounds? These are the ability to travel unmolested across national borders and the easy access to documentation. Natalie Friedman points out in her provocative reading of Lahiri’s earlier works. According to Friedman, “Lahiri’s depictions of the elite class of Western-educated Indians and their children’s relationship to both India and America dismantle the stereotype of brown-skinned immigrant families that are always outsiders to American culture and recasts them as cosmopolites, members of a shifting network of global travelers whose national loyalties are flexible” (112). The term “global travelers” is an apt description of Lahiri’s characters in *Unaccustomed Earth*, who are defined by a flowing mobility, flying across continents and setting up temporary homes around the globe without encountering any roadblocks. In the title story “Unaccustomed Earth,” Ruma’s father travels through a number of countries in Europe in package tours. In the triptych “Hema and Kaushik” Kaushik leads a nomadic life, fleeing the United States to
wander through Latin America, briefly working in Africa, the Middle East and Rome before ending up in Thailand, his passport on him all the time. Documentation is something that is taken for granted, neatly tucked into a list of travel jitters, and never allowed to grow into an overwhelming concern. Recalling his trips to India, Ruma’s father remembers “the anxiety they provoked in him, having to pack so much luggage and getting it all to the airport, keeping documents in order, and ferrying his family safely so many thousands of miles” (8). This reflection is the solitary reminder we have in the entire book of Lahiri’s characters’ status as “aliens” in America. The significance of these papers emerges when set against the words of the Yugoslavia-born immigrant poet Charles Simic, who spent his formative years as a refugee: “It’s hard for people who have never experienced it to truly grasp what it means to lack proper documents. We read every day about our own immigration officers, using and misusing their recently acquired authority to turn back suspicious aliens from our borders. The pleasure of humiliating the powerless must not be underestimated” (121). Fortified by legal documentation, Lahiri’s characters are spared this humiliation.

Closely paralleling this global movement across borders is a more local movement between houses. This is how Friedman writes about *The Namesake*, Lahiri’s second work of fiction and her first published novel, “In *The Namesake*, Lahiri’s immigrant family challenges the stereotypes of the disenfranchised immigrant who remains in one place once he or she reaches America’s shores, trapped by poverty or political and legal restrictions” (113). Friedman’s reading is equally applicable to the families in *Unaccustomed Earth*. Lahiri’s characters claim physical spaces easily in this
new land, transitioning from small student apartments to spacious well-appointed houses in the suburbs, each acquisition marking a stage in their realization of the American dream. As Friedman observes, there is a sense of entitlement to goods and experiences in the new land that their undocumented counterparts visibly lack. Evidently Lahiri’s focus is not the “immigrant family that is beset by poverty or persecution, blatant racism, or a punishing quest for economic success” (Friedman112). Racism is understated in the text, as in the story “Only Goodness” when Sudha recalls how Rahul and she were “teased at school for the color of their skin” (143) but the experience is low in impact, leaving no traces in the siblings’ adult lives. Indeed, Lahiri’s characters in these stories seem to inhabit strangely deracinated spaces. The privileges are all too visible, thrown into relief by the conditions of other varieties of transnationals like the refugees. Wrapped in these immigrant success stories, it would be easy to overlook the substantial human costs – the shadowy mothers and children who are more the “children of America” (Lahiri).

The Costs of Mobility: The Maternal Waste

Lahiri’s Unaccustomed Earth is haunted by shadowy mothers, women who toil in the houses while their husbands move out and up in the world and their children grow away from them. The fact that the mothers in Unaccustomed Earth lack speaking voices further emphasizes their marginality. Their stories are told by an implied omniscient narrator, mostly filtered through the perspectives of their husbands and children. One can of course argue that this is a text primarily addressing the experiences of the children of immigrants, the second generation Americans, but we are still allowed some access to the
emotional life of Ruma’s father (“Unaccustomed Earth”). Ruma’s mother, on the other hand, is already dead when the story opens and it is left to the reader to tease out and piece together details of her life, much like assembling a puzzle. In “Hell-Heaven,” the mother is alive, but we see her character unfold chiefly through the eyes of her daughter, who learns to sympathize with her mother only toward the conclusion of the story. Lahiri’s mothers often do not have names, going by descriptors such as Usha’s mother or Ruma’s mother. When they do have names, like Usha’s mother Aparna, these are overshadowed by their identities as wives and mothers, perhaps signifying that immigration reduces these women to their most functional identities as wives and mothers instead of individuals in their own right. I frame my discussion of the liminality and marginality of these immigrant mothers and wives with Zygmunt Bauman’s theory of wasted humans.

In *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*, Bauman offers the interesting argument that “the production of ‘human waste’, or more correctly wasted humans (the ‘excessive’ and ‘redundant,’ that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay) is an inevitable accompaniment of modernization and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity” (5). He argues that waste is a product of modernity’s relentless drive for invention and, hence, an essential part of creation: “for something to be created, something else must be consigned to waste. The wrapping – the waste of the creative act – must be torn apart, shredded and disposed of lest it clutter the floor and cramp the sculptor’s moves. There can be no artistic workshop without a rubbish heap” (22). Bauman uses his metaphor to describe the
superfluous population that is generated in the creation of the modern state – the refugees 
and asylum-seekers who have to be evicted in order to firm the state’s geographical as 
well as ideological borders. I would like to extend Bauman’s theory of wasted humans to 
suggest that the redundant mother in Lahiri’s fictional world represents a version of 
modernity’s waste, the “costs” of the creation of the narrative of immigrant success, the 
redundant figures that are left by the wayside as their husbands and children chisel their 
models of the American dream. Emotional dispossession and liminality among mothers 
form the basis for the successful functioning of Bengali American culture.

What is common to these mothers is the extreme isolation and insulation that 
global mobility produces. Through Ruma and her father’s reminiscences, we come to 
know that her mother had arrived in the States as a young bride, moving into a tiny 
apartment with her student husband. Torn away from everything that is familiar and dear 
to her, she is intensely lonely, an experience for which she never forgives her husband 
(40). While Ruma’s father blends into his new life – indeed, he can easily pass off as an 
American (11) ---her mother remains resistant, unable or unwilling to assimilate, 
preserving and asserting her difference in her “brightly colored saris, her dime-sized 
maroon bindi, her jewels” (11). She keeps her experience of home alive through her 
performance of Indianness, specifically Bengali-ness. She is Said’s exile, who “with very 
little to possess… hold[s] on to what you have with aggressive defensiveness” (Said 51).

“Hell-Heaven” is considerably more somber in its depiction of the consequences 
of isolation. Here too the mother moves to the States after an arranged marriage, but this 
is a marriage with little companionship or affection. Her sense of loneliness is
compounded by the presence of a spouse who is reserved and “wedded to his work” (65). Her daughter Usha observes:

My father was a lover of silence and solitude. He had married my mother to placate his parents; they were willing to accept his desertion as long as he had a wife. He was wedded to his work, his research, and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate. Conversation was a chore for him; it required an effort he preferred to expend at the lab. (65)

Like Ruma’s mother, Usha’s mother too refuses to abandon old habits of dress and food, “wearing the red and white bangles unique to Bengali (emphasis mine) married women, and a common Tangail sari…a thick stem of vermilion powder in the center parting of her hair” (61) and safety pins fastened to her gold bangles, a “practice that he [Pranab] associated strictly with his mother and sisters and aunts in Calcutta” (61). Like Ruma’s mother, Usha’s mother’s displacement is primarily spatial, while her emotional affiliations still reside in Calcutta. Her deep infatuation with the young Bengali student Pranab is largely because of their shared roots in Calcutta and because of his willingness to lavish the attention on her that her taciturn, work-obsessed husband does not provide.

The figure of the lonely and dislocated mother also lurks in “Hema and Kaushik,” the three-part novella that concludes the collection. Both Hema’s and Kaushik’s mothers feel out of place in the States. The former, in particular, is unassimilably Indian, her body marked as such by her saris and the vermilion in her hair. The instant friendship between the two women at a children’s playground is reminiscent of Usha’s mother’s bond with Pranab -- a relationship forged in the hearth of shared memories and nostalgia for “lives
left behind” (225), growing out of an urgent need to find familiar and intimate spaces in a sometimes alienating landscape. Lahiri’s text observes perceptively how exile can also function as a social leveler. Class differences, perhaps unbridgeable in their native Calcutta, are “irrelevant” (225) to these lonely women in Cambridge, one the daughter of a clerk in the General Post Office and the other the daughter of an Anglophile lawyer (225). Lahiri subtly doffs her cap to the liberating potential of global mobility, its ability to loosen traditional binds of caste and class, but she does not pursue this thread to a noticeable extent. Like the friendships between women elsewhere in the collection, this alliance is short-lived, terminated by the decision of Kaushik’s family to return to India.

Sadly Kaushik’s mother falls prey to cancer – a deeply isolating and immobilizing disease, as we know from the eloquent testimony of Audre Lorde’s cancer journals. Lorde talks about the “isolation” and the “loneliness of difference” that is the fate of patients struggling against cancer. She writes: “Spring comes, and still I feel despair like a pale cloud waiting to consume me, engulf me like another cancer, swallow me into immobility, metabolize me into cells of itself; my body, a barometer. I need to remind myself of the joy, the lightness, the laughter so vital to my living and my health” (The Cancer Journals Kindle). The only flawless model of a family in this collection is ultimately ruptured by death, a cost to outweigh all privileges. In keeping with the trope of the shadowy mothers, Kaushik’s mother is literally reduced to a ghost, wasting away as the cancer eats into her body. Further, Kaushik’s mother returns to the U.S. to create a distance between herself and her mourning relatives in her final days. She uses the move to create the final separation between herself and India, wearing Western clothes and
drinking Johnny Walker – her death in this sense signals both physical and cultural death. Her parents, Kaushik’s grandparents, learn to mourn her much before her actual passing. Exile is a figurative death; Kaushik recalls that “my grandparents already lived in a state of mourning since 1962, when my parents were married” (253) and his mother left for America. At the same time, like Ruma’s mother who is resurrected through her daughter’s memories, Kaushik’s mother too is a powerful absent presence who lives on in her son’s memories. Her presence pervades the house so much so that Chitra, his father’s new wife and her two daughters, seem like intruders. Chitra’s long hair cruelly reminds him of his mother’s locks that had shed under the assault of the disease, and of the fact that one day Chitra would too grey and grow old alongside his father “the way my mother was meant to” (276). Finally, the two little girls’ discovery of the old photographs of his mother that his father had hidden away provokes him into a jealous, possessive outburst that alienates him from the family forever.

The “global mobility” of the mothers is compromised by a condition that Andre Aciman refers to as “permanent transience” (13). In Letters of Transit, Aciman writes that “exiles can be supremely mobile, and they can be totally dislodged from their original orbit, but in this jittery state of transience, they are thoroughly stationary…they are in permanent transience” (13). Though Usha’s family buys a house in Natick, MA, they occupy it as if “they were still tenants, touching up scruff marks with leftover paint and reluctant to put holes in the walls… when the sun shone through the living room window, my mother closed the blinds so that our new furniture would not fade”(72). As permanent tenants, they are loath to assert any claim or ownership over their acquisitions.
Closely allied to the idea of “permanent transience” is that of “compulsive retrospection” (Aciman 13): “even a ‘reformed’ exile will continue to practice the one thing that exiles do almost as a matter of instinct: compulsive retrospection. With their memories perpetually on overload, exiles see double, feel double, are double. When exiles see one place they’re also seeing – or looking for – another behind it” (13). In “Hell-Heaven” Usha’s mother is given to “compulsive retrospection,” constantly recalling the country she had left behind in the food she cooks and the clothes she wears. Pranab and she bond over shared memories of life in Calcutta, of its music, films, leftist politics and poetry. Usha recalls how “the songs from the Hindi films of their youth…cheerful songs of courtship…transformed the quiet life in our apartment and transported my mother back to the world she’d left behind in order to marry my father” (65).

For these mothers, the unhindered movement across borders serves as an ironic contrast to their confinement in the small, cramped spaces of American student apartments. Usha observes how before her family met Pranab, she would return from school to find her mother “with her purse in her lap and her trench coat on, desperate to escape the apartment where she has spent the day alone” (63). Thus the global mobility does not translate into any daily “privilege” for the mothers in Lahiri’s stories as they are left to negotiate invisible, formidable borders in their new lives, in their marital spaces as well as between two different cultures.

The older women in *Unaccustomed Earth* experience a peculiar redundancy after crossing borders – their husbands seem to have no deep need of them and neither do their children. Indeed the relationship between the older couples in the book is marked by a
visible lack of warmth. In any case, these marriages are traditional Indian marriages, arranged by the elders of the family and founded on a compatibility that is more social than personal. On their own and in the absence of a supportive familial network, husbands and wives seem at a loss to negotiate the initial distance which becomes almost unbridgeable with time. Ruma recalls that her father was never openly appreciative of his wife’s cooking, and perhaps by extension, her toil in the house. Probably this also accounts for the pressure that Ruma feels when her father comes to stay with her and she knows she has to cook for him. Her mother’s redundancy is also brought home in the way her father gradually erases traces of his wife’s existence after her death, first by selling the house which was a witness to their history as a couple and secondly, by welcoming another woman into his life who could not be more different from his late wife—a professional who preferred Western clothes to a sari and who was brave enough to withstand the isolation of living in an American suburb (29). Houses function in these stories as sites of memory, which have to be parted with before the owners can move on with their lives. For the fathers, here and in the triptych, “Hema and Kaushik,” disposing of the houses enables new beginnings, of which their dead wives are no longer a part.

Lahiri’s mothers are compelled to look for a purpose in living outside their domestic spaces. Ruma’s mother rediscovers her zest for life in a promised tour to Europe. Usha’s mother finds evidence of her non-disposability in her friendship with the younger Pranab. With the hindsight of adulthood, Usha realizes that her mother was in love with Pranab, because he was “totally dependent on her, needing her for those months in a way my father never did in the whole history of their marriage” (67). However this
dependence is only temporary, and the arrival of Deborah, the American woman Pranab falls in love with and eventually marries, deprives Usha’s mother of the fleeting taste of family life that she had imaginatively experienced in the States. I find the photograph of Pranab with Usha’s mother quite telling in this context. In that photograph, Pranab “hovers in the corner of the frame, his darkened, featureless shape superimposed on one side of my mother’s body” (64). His shadow is a metonymy for him, and we understand that despite Usha’s mother’s infatuation with Pranab, any physical contact between them can at best be digitally engineered. At the same time, the wavering shape that is Pranab suggests the impermanence of the small family that the three of them had built. “It was always the three of us” (64) Usha recalls, but with Deborah’s arrival, Usha’s mother is ejected from the photographs and now it is Deborah and Usha’s turn to pose for happy mother-daughter pictures. Usha’s mother simultaneously cedes her space in her daughter’s heart to Deborah, for we are told that Usha falls in love with Deborah, in “a way young girls often fall in love with women who are not their mothers” (69). The isolation of the women in Lahiri’s Unaccustomed Earth is aggravated by their lack of any solid friendship, other women, white or Indian, with whom they might share their loneliness. Of course, when Pranab leaves Deborah for another Bengali woman, the only person Deborah can reach out to is Aparna, in an example of what Stephanie Li calls the “most meaningful interracial intimacy in the story” (Li 118). Yet even this example is flawed because as Li points out, “despite the obvious similarities between Deborah and Aparna, the latter does not share the story of her own heartache” (121).
While the mothers and daughters eventually bond, it is not before the daughters are grown women, who can then empathize with their mothers through the common experiences of heartbreak or childbirth. Aparna shares the story of her aborted suicide attempt with Usha to help Usha get over her own shattering experience of a broken heart.

Unlike Ruma’s father, Kaushik’s father in “Hema and Kaushik” is deeply in love with his wife, the awareness of imminent separation infusing their marriage with passion and romance. Yet like Ruma’s father, his period of mourning is short-lived. He seeks companionship, something that an adolescent son immersed in his own grief is unable to provide, and his need for company results in a bond with somebody very different from his wife. In a reversal of Ruma’s father’s situation, he assents to a traditional arranged marriage with, as Kaushik puts it, “an old-fashioned girl half his age” (264), reminding us that the memories of a lost love is not enough to sustain an immigrant in a foreign land – one needs the tangible presence of a companion.

Lahiri’s text is sensitive to the plight of these wives and mothers who accompany their husbands to the States and then have to deal with the shock of dislocation, because she had witnessed her mother’s struggles to adapt first-hand. Rachel Hore, who had interviewed Lahiri for The Independent, writes, “The importance of work is a theme she [Lahiri] frequently touched upon, perhaps engendered by witnessing her mother’s difficulties.” In the same interview, Lahiri lets on, “I value work so highly. It gives me a sense of self.” While her father “was part of another family structure [in an office setting] contributing to another purpose, [my] mother would go for days and days at home. The outside world was scarier for her longer.” Work signifies the immigrant’s access to the
world outside his or her home, his ability to engage with it – a privilege that is denied to
the women in Lahiri’s stories. This is also a telling comment on the gendered effect of
immigration. While global mobility is a privilege available to the documented
immigrants, their gender in a large part determines their local mobility.

The Cost of Mobility: Children of America

The relationship between the “wasted” mothers and their children is complex, rooted in both love and conflict. Towards the end of “Hell-Heaven” Usha narrates, “My
mother and I had also made peace; she had accepted the fact that I was not only her
daughter but a child of America as well” (82). The “child of America” is another casualty
of global mobility and is closely tied to maternal waste. The first-generation Americans
in Unaccustomed Earth share an ambivalent relationship with their parents, born of them
but shaped by a culture that is alien to the older couples: the children of America “seem
foreign in every way from the texture of their hair to the shapes of their feet and hands”
(54). They violate parental expectations; Ruma in the title story fails to get admission to
an Ivy League School and also marries a white man much to her mother’s displeasure;
Sangeeta in “Nobody’s Business” drops out of her Ivy League school; or they lead double
lives like Sudha in “Only Goodness,” whose wild avatar in college is far removed from
the responsible elder daughter her parents are used to seeing. What also stands out in
these stories is a healthy distrust on the part of the older generation of cross-cultural
alliances. In the story, “Nobody’s Business,” for example, Sangeeta’s parents try to set
her up with eligible Indian men. In the title story, Ruma’s mother does her best to
dissuade her daughter from marrying Adam, insisting that the marriage would end in
divorce: “‘You are ashamed of yourself, of being Indian, that is the bottom line,’ her mother had told Ruma again and again. She knew what a shock it was; she had kept her other involvements with American men a secret from her parents until the day she announced that she was engaged” (26).

Ruma’s mother implies that the divide between the cultures is unbridgeable, and also that by marrying outside the Indian community, Ruma is somehow guilty of betraying her own kind. The distrust of whiteness is perhaps also fuelled by an anxiety about blood contamination - the urge to preserve racial purity in the hope that it will assure the continuation of cultural heritage. Eva Hoffman points out that “upheaval and dislocation can sometimes produce some rather more conservative impulses of self-defense and self-preservation” (54). The parental apprehension over mixed marriages seems mostly to come from this impulse to self-preserve, the desire to insulate the community from external influences, an instinct that complicates the idea of global mobility. How effective is this mobility if it only ends up making the women so hysterically protective of their own ethnic boundaries?

In “Imagining Homelands” Bharati Mukherjee resists the confinement of a hyphenated identity, pushing for a greater inclusiveness in the experience of what it means to be an American: “I claim myself as an American in the immigrant tradition of writers I most admire…yet it is still, after fifteen years of aggressive correction, a rare literary notice that does not identify me as ‘Indian’” (82). Mukherjee has been taken to
task for her supposed selling out. Yet like Mukherjee, Lahiri’s daughters rebel against the imposition of a similar hyphen, claiming identities with their American counterparts rather than with their Indian heritage. In “Hell-Heaven” Usha has more in common with the American Deborah than her own mother. Besides the same taste in clothes, Usha and Deborah share similar tastes in books and fictional characters – Pippi Longstocking, Anne of Green Gables, Nancy Drew and Grimm’s *Fairy Tales*. Also of interest here is the daughters’ approach to their native language, Bengali. Usha would much rather converse in English with Deborah. Ruma, too, fumbles with Bengali, choosing to scold her son in English, finding an intimacy with English that Bengali fails to provide. On the exile’s relationship to his or her native language, Hoffman says: “because we learn it unconsciously, at the same time as we are learning the world, the words in one’s first language seem to be equivalent to the things they name. They seem to express us and the world directly” (49). It is interesting to see how English, rather than Bengali, “expresses” Ruma and Usha and their world directly. The influence of Bengali is watered down further in the case of succeeding generations, like Ruma’s son, Akash, who knows only stray Bengali words and for whom English is the first language.

Lahiri’s daughters, with the exception of Sangeeta in “Nobody’s Business” choose to date and marry European or American men. On the surface these alliances are more compatible than those of their parents, but they are less than perfect too and both

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12 While Lavina Shankar counts her among the South Asian American writers who “often exoticized South Asia and simplistically attempted to appeal to mid-1970s and 80s mainstream white liberal feminisms,” Debjani Banerjee charges her novel *Jasmine* with “catering to a First World audience while still mining Third World for fictional material.”
Sudha and Ruma grow sadly aware of the walls that separate their husbands from them. Ruma frets over the lack of shared experience with Adam—“an awareness had set in that she and Adam were separate people leading separate lives” (26) while Sudha finds herself withholding crucial family secrets from Roger, out of fear that he would not understand: “[Sudha] had never told Roger about the old game of hiding beer cans, a fact that now tortured her. But once again she chose not to tell Roger, fearing that he would blame her, that he would judge Rahul” (157). Sudha knows that Roger, correct, white and British, would fail to see their teenage smoking and drinking binges for what they were—furtive rebellion against the roles scripted for them by immigrant parents eager for success. She goes to the extent of denying her brother’s problems, even trusting the care of her young son to him. The intellectual and emotional companionship Sudha and Roger otherwise share is weighed down by their cultural incommensurability. Sangeeta in “Nobody’s Business” rejects the Bengali suitors her parents find for her, choosing instead to date the philandering Farouk who goes by the American-sounding name Freddy. Sangeeta’s relationship with her Bengali heritage is vexed too—while she resists its hold on her through her rejection of the potential alliances, the man she falls in love with is a brown-skinned man with an American moniker, similar to her Americanizing her name into Sang. Through the experiences of these “daughters,” Lahiri seems to suggest that the children of America occupy liminal spaces—their attempt to claim identities as Americans is not wholly successful.

Moving as adults to a new world with its unfamiliar set of rules and structures, the parents are vulnerable, leaning on their children to translate its complications for
them. Lahiri seems to imply that there is a demand on the children of America to be parents to their parents. Sudha helps her parents negotiate the complexities of life in small-town America, showing her father how to gather up leaves in a bag, calling the repair department in her “perfect English”(139) to have their appliances fixed and initially even justifying Rahul’s alcoholism. In “Hell-Heaven,” Usha’s attitude toward her mother is that of hostility tinged with a sense of protection, illustrated in the incident where her mother encounters Usha’s growing sexual awareness, a passage that deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

> When I began menstruating, the summer before I started ninth grade, my mother gave me a speech, telling me that I was to let no boy touch me, and then she asked if I knew how a woman became pregnant. I told her what I had been taught in science, about the sperm fertilizing the egg, and then she asked if I knew how, exactly, that happened. I saw the terror in her eyes and so, though I knew that aspect of procreation as well, I lied, and told her it hadn’t been explained to us. (‘Hell-Heaven” 76)

This is an interesting moment in the parent-child interaction, because Usha’s mother is clearly terrified by what she regards as a premature termination of her daughter’s childhood. Usha understands her mother’s terror very well and lies to keep up the illusion of a childhood unsoiled by “adult” knowledge. Ironically, here their roles have been reversed, and rather than her mother protecting her from a violation of her childhood, it is Usha who is protecting her mother from the shock of the discovery that her daughter is
leaving her childhood behind. The reversal of roles further emphasizes the limitation imposed by global mobility on new female immigrants.

The Cost of Mobility: The Absent Son/s

The absent son is a useful trope for exploring the complex and fraught relationship between immigrant parents and their children in *Unaccustomed Earth*. In stories largely dominated by daughters, the sons are conspicuous by their absence. The distance between Romi, Ruma’s itinerant brother, and his father and sister is more than spatial, so much so that the reader does not even find out about Romi’s reactions to his mother’s unexpected death. It is no accident that the sons in “Hell-Heaven” are stillborn. In “Hema and Kaushik,” Kaushik rejects his role as a son in his father’s new family, and in “Only Goodness” the trope of the absent son assumes tragic proportions, with Rahul’s periodic physical absences from his family culminating in his irrevocable expulsion from their lives owing to his chronic alcoholism.

In “Only Goodness” as in the other stories, characters are essentially isolated, invisible walls cutting off communication between parents and children, husband and wife, and brother and sister. This is a story more than any other about the children of America, where Sudha, since she feels cheated out of an American childhood, makes sure that her adored brother has one, buying him the “right toys” (136). Like all immigrant Bengali parents, her parents set a high premium on academic success, their father going so far as to tape success stories of Bengali children on the refrigerator. For a while it does look as if Sudha and her brother Rahul are growing to be a part of the grand “circle of accomplishments “(151) of Bengali children: “After Rahul graduated from high school
their parents celebrated, having in their opinion now successfully raised two children in America. Rahul was going to Cornell, and Sudha was still in Philadelphia, getting a master’s in international relations” (129).

The heavy burden of parental expectations tells on both Rahul and Sudha’s lives. While at home Sudha is the dutiful elder daughter, “her persona scholarly, her social life limited to other demure girls in her class” (129) in college, she lets her hair down, “going to parties and allowing boys into her bed. She began drinking, something her parents did not do” (129). Rahul, on the other hand, revolts against the Bengali standards of academic success, rejecting biology and organic chemistry in favor of film and English literature. It is obvious that the humanities is where his heart lies. More than just examples of adolescent rebellion, the choices made by Rahul and Sudha have to be understood in the light of their histories as children of immigrant parents: “no matter how well Sudha did, she felt that her good fortune had been handed to her, not earned” (140). Though Lahiri’s text does not spell it out, Rahul’s alcoholism is aggravated by the pressure of immoderate parental expectations and his inability to meet them.

I find it useful to think of Rahul too in terms of Bauman’s theory of “waste.” Bauman writes that “waste is the dark, shameful secret of all production” (27). Rahul’s academic failure is the family’s guilty secret, which they try to cover up with elaborate lies (151). He is also the waste which has to be expelled in order to maintain his family’s impression of order and harmony. According to Bauman, “when it comes to designing the forms of human togetherness the waste is human beings. Some human beings which do not fit into the designed form nor can be fitted into it” (30). With his college drop-out
status, his forays into playwriting and his older actress-waitress girlfriend who has a
daughter from a previous marriage, the drunk, “wasted” Rahul does not “fit” into the
form of human togetherness that is his family or other Bengali immigrant families and is
left with no choice but to leave home. It is significant that he runs away with his mother’s
gold jewels. These jewels are representative of his father’s material success in America
(159). Dropping out of Cornell and managing a Laundromat, Rahul is denying his parents
their boasting privileges of parental glory.

It is worth noting that Lahiri chooses to place an alcoholic son – a blot and a
failure (151) -- at the center of this story though she filters it through the perspective of
his sister. While, as Friedman observes, in The Namesake, Lahiri challenges the
stereotypes of the disenfranchised immigrant, in Unaccustomed Earth she builds on this
challenge by showing us moments of vulnerability in narratives of enfranchisement - the
darker side of the immigrant privileges of mobility and economic progress.

In Kaushik, the other “absent” son who is never home, we have an embodiment of
the exilic condition. Lahiri chooses to entrust a first-generation American with this
burden, along with the older characters in the book who have experienced the wrench of
spatial dislocation. While Lahiri, with her characteristic economy, does not spell it out,
Kaushik’s problem appears in part at least to spring from his family’s inability to put
down roots anywhere. As his father explains to Hema after the family has moved back to
the States from India: “‘He was furious that we left, and now he’s furious that we’re here
again’” (239). Later in the novella Kaushik describes the two moves he had made in his
life as “colossal upheavals” (309) implying that they had affected him far more than he
had made known. For Kaushik, the loss of his mother is also metonymic of the loss of a home, a motherland. Identifying the loss of a parental figure as a major trope in *The Namesake* as well as *Unaccustomed Earth*, Reshmi Dutt-Ballerstadt writes that “the death of the mother or the father also becomes the simultaneous death of belonging to the motherland and the fatherland. It is the death of memory and a disruption of the hyphenated existence when the hyphen itself is disrupted” (*Naming Jhumpa Lahiri* 161).

Having already suffered dislocation in the form of the family’s migration to the States, Kaushik’s mother’s illness and consequent death serve to further destabilize his physical and emotional foundations.

In the third and final part of the novella, “Going Ashore” Kaushik is literally a nomad, traveling the world as a successful photojournalist-- Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. His ties with his own father are feeble and their only contact is Kaushik’s photo credit that appears in the newspapers the latter subscribes to. The nomadism is complemented by a failure to find emotional anchors or other “homes.” None of his relationships with women last for long, given his inability to commit himself. While a relationship lures him to Italy, it ends on a sour note. Kaushik recalls that “though at the time he could never come up with a reason not to, he could not bring himself to propose. She had not taken hold of him; he could see now that that was the problem” (306). His passionate relationship with Hema has to end too because she senses this lack in him and opts instead for the stable support that marriage to Naveen represents.
Kaushik is marked by the paradoxical necessity to put down his roots, and a simultaneous inability to hold on to them for long. On the one hand everything about his life is provisional. He lives in a “rented room with rented furniture, rented sheets and towels” (316), his camera bags always packed and his passport in his pocket. At the same time, he looks forward to his sojourn in Asia because it would provide him with an excuse to “be still,” if only for a few years. Hema observes that he has the ability, and more importantly, the need to connect with strangers (316). Ambreen Hai points out that “Kaushik…represents the pathology of a rootless individual who has never recovered from the compounded (and related) early losses of his mother and home” (201). She goes on to argue that “his multiple transplantations and the loss of natal family and cultural roots seem to have damaged irrevocably his ability to form alternatal connections, to create either his own nuclear family or to adjust to his father’s remarriage and step family” (201). Hai coins the term “alternatal,” a fusion of “alternative” and “natal” to refer to all those connections and relationships that an individual is capable of building outside the peripheries of his or her natal family. Kaushik’s drifting is also a metaphorical drifting, borne out in his inability to form alternatal connections. He answers well to Chicano artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena’s description of “our generation” as belonging to “the world’s biggest floating population: the weary travelers, the dislocated, those of us who left because we didn’t fit anymore, those of us who still haven’t arrived because we didn’t know where to arrive at or, because we can’t go back anymore” (129).

The multiple meanings of homelessness converge in the following lines from the text: “He [Kaushik] was reminded of his family’s moves every time he visited another
refugee camp, every time he watched a family combing through rubble for their possessions. In the end, that was life: a few plates, a favorite comb, a pair of slippers, a child’s string of beads” (309). Here the comparison discreetly undercuts the privileges of global mobility. Kaushik’s jetsetting family could not be more different from the refugees scrabbling in the mud, yet in the final analysis, their fates seem aligned – they carry their “homes” with them in the material possessions that they have. It is a condition that is very personal, yet deeply imbricated in the global. Kaushik’s provisional life since childhood affects his ability to belong to or claim a home. He is deeply distrustful of homes because of their impermanence, and hence withdraws into the world of photography. When he is behind the camera, his disconnect from the world is complete – when photographing a murder victim, “he felt untouched by the situation, unmoved once he was behind the camera, shooting to the end of the roll” (305).

I include Hema’s story in the discussion on sons because her search for a home offers an interesting comparison to that of Kaushik. Outwardly, Hema’s life is more stable than Kaushik’s. Yet her life too charts her attempts to find a “home” as much as Kaushik’s journey. Like Sudha, Hema is conscious of the walls separating her from her parents. They cannot fathom her inability to find a suitable partner in the eligible Indian men they line up for her, assuming instead that her sexual preferences are different.

Reshmi Dutt-Ballarstard locates a “third space” for the children of immigrants, the result of a double displacement or the inability to fit in “both within the country of their birth and their parents’ homeland” (173). Hema finds her “third space” in Rome and in classical studies, just like Moushumi from The Namesake had found hers in France and
the study of French. Like Ruma and Sudha, she seeks an alliance with a white man, but while in the earlier cases, the relationships survive with or in spite of the cracks, here it fails to mature into anything permanent.

Hema is powerfully drawn to Kaushik in the same way that he is drawn to her. It recalls the way many years ago, both sets of parents had spontaneously sought out one another: “Their parents had liked one another only for the sake of their origins, for the sake of a time and place to which they’d lost access. Hema had never been drawn to a person for that reason, until now” (315). As Ambreen Hai notes: “[Hema’s] passionate connection to Kaushik seems linked to the fact that he was in some sense fundamentally part of her natal world, the familial matrix of Bengali Americans in Boston into which she was born, whose clothes she literally grew up wearing, and in whose old pram she breathed fresh air” (225). This is a connection even more potent than sexual attraction. Hema is aware “without having to be told, that she was the first person he’d ever slept with who’d known his mother, who was able to remember her as he did” (313). In his relationship with Hema, Kaushik enjoys a brief touch of home.

In her incisive essay on Lahiri’s representation of “difference” in *Unaccustomed Earth*, Srikanth argues that Lahiri’s “Indian American characters don a veneer of difference, a thin surface that is only skin deep” (63). This superficial difference, Srikanth claims, allows her characters to be easily absorbed into mainstream America without disturbing its fabric too much. But clearly the differences are more than skin deep. Lahiri shows how while the second generation of Indian Americans may conform outwardly and
appear to have become part of the mainstream, their inner landscapes are fraught with experiences that are intimately linked to their identities as children of immigrants.

Global and Local Im/mobility in Wife

Like Lahiri’s, Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife* interrogates the privileges of global mobility for women. In fact *Wife* presents a far more dismal picture of the consequences of global mobility. While Lahiri’s mothers have a measure of success in breaking out of their cages of isolation late in life, Dimple’s loneliness in *Wife* explodes into paranoia and schizophrenia. *Wife* tells the story of a young Bengali girl in Calcutta, Dimple Basu, who regards marriage as her liberation from her straitjacketed and routine life. She enters into an arranged marriage with Amit and migrates to the U.S. with him. In the U.S., an idle and intensely isolated Dimple experiences a downward psychological and emotional spiral, leading to the novel’s violent end.

Some of the claustrophobia inherent in *Wife* can be traced back to the author’s own experiences. *Wife* was written at a time when Mukherjee had acquired a reasonable degree of academic success in McGill University, Canada, as a tenured professor. Yet by her own admission, this was also one of the darkest and most depressing periods in her life as an immigrant. The racism she encountered in Montreal and Toronto had the effect of turning her into a “housebound, aggrieved, obsessive and unforgiving queen of bitterness” (“An Invisible Woman” qtd in Alam). Fakrul Alam writes how “in the 1970s growing unemployment and increased emigration from Asia to that country[Canada] led to a series of attacks on blacks, Indians and Chinese immigrants in cities such as Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto” (10). As Alam notes, in her award-winning essay,
“An Invisible Woman,” “Mukherjee describes the many humiliations she suffered in public because of her racial origins, of harassment suffered at the hands of customs officials who questioned her right to be in Canada, or of private detectives in hotels and department stores who suspected her of unlawful entry into their domains” (Alam 34). Some of her bitterness over her “housebound” ness, as she calls it, is reflected in Dimple’s struggle against her imposed immobility.

_Wife_ complicates the discussion of mobility by introducing the paradox of immobility-in-mobility early on in the story. Unlike the older women in Lahiri’s texts, who experience immobility as a result of their displacement, Dimple Basu grapples with immobility even before her marriage when she is at home in Calcutta. According to Alam, Dimple’s situation was typical of what Mukherjee had observed about young Bengali wives in Calcutta in her year-long stay in the city with her husband Clark Blaise: “Mukherjee’s anger at the predicament of Bengali wives in Calcutta merged with her own frustrations as an Indian immigrant in an intolerant Canada to give _Wife_ the feel of a book bred in bitterness and tinged with violence” (38). Dimple is physically mobile, yet her emotional and mental trajectories are already circumscribed by a web of expectations that lead up to the one big moment in her young life, her marriage. For Dimple, life before marriage appears to be one of endless waiting. The word “waiting” with its associations of existential inaction recurs several times in the text. For example, Mukherjee writes that “in the winter, when power cuts were less frequent, she [Dimple] would say it was not doing without electricity that she hated, but the waiting, the endless waiting”(7). Dimple also discloses that, unknown to her best friend Pixie, “reading
novels, studying for exams, flipping through film magazines were strategies of waiting” (9). Marriage promises to be a kind of watershed in her life, filling her with passion (13) and Dimple waits desperately for “real life to begin” (13).

Dimple’s sense of reality is already confounded with fantasy, foreshadowing the novel’s ambiguous conclusion. Heavily influenced by the glossy magazines that she reads, she cannot but compare her prospective husband to the young executives she sees in clothing advertisements (14). But marriage proves to be sadly anti-climactic. While she believes that the “best part of getting married” (20) is freedom and self-expression, she finds her marriage curbing her sense of self-expression in more ways than one. Her existence is spatially constricted as she has to live with her husband, his querulous and ageing mother and younger brother in a small house. She discovers that her life after marriage is bound by a patriarchal script as she is forced to perform the roles of a self-effacing wife and a dutiful daughter-in-law. She dresses in bright colors because Amit likes them and tries to copy the supposedly more fashionably dressed and polished Mrs Ghosh. When she realizes that she does not quite meet Amit’s expectations of a bride – tall, slim and “convent-educated” (26) – she tries to tailor herself to meet his needs, embarking on a fruitless exercise to teach herself English. She is even given a new name, Nandini, because her mother-in-law does not like her old name. We learn how, “his [Amit’s] disapproval was torture; all her life she had been trained to please. He expected her, like Sita13, to jump into fire if necessary” (28). Marriage does become a watershed

13 Sita is the wife of Rama in the Indian epic Ramayana. She is held up as the paragon of all wifely virtues. The reference here is to her ordeal by fire to prove her chastity to her
in her life, but not in the way that she had hoped for. Dimple asks Amit, “Which one do you like better? The old me or the new one?” (22). Though Amit responds by saying he likes both, the new “me” is ironically self-fashioned only according to rules laid down by her husband.

Dimple’s increasing sense of isolation adds to her immobility. Her interactions with her parents and Pixie become limited to stealthy phone calls, even as she fumbles for some sort of connection with her new husband. Her personal borders are violated by an eavesdropping landlord and by the noises in the house that make it hard for her to even conduct that call in peace – her brother-in-law Pintu “coughing in the bathroom, spiders behind the kitchen door” (20). Her sense of repression culminates in a latent streak of violence, which erupts unexpectedly as when she smashes her mother-in-law’s thermometer (25). We have clear indications of the beginnings of her schizophrenia when she starts to talk to herself (20). Illnesses of a seriously debilitating nature seem to stalk the female immigrants – be it Dimple’s schizophrenia or the cancer that afflicts Kaushik’s mother, perhaps symbolic of the pressure exerted by immigration on the body and psyche of the female immigrant. Dimple’s discovery of her pregnancy further heightens her sense of confinement. Initially she refuses to accept the new development, treating the changing contours of her body with hostility and suspicion: “Sometimes under the cover of her loose sari, she gave vicious squeezes to her stomach as if to force a vile thing out of hiding” (30). When it becomes impossible to ignore it, she devises wild

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husband and the world. Of course, the Ramayana has been retold from Sita’s point of view by many recent writers in several Indian languages.
and desperate schemes to expel the new life from her body, taking a morbid pleasure in self-induced vomiting (31). Mukherjee describes Dimple’s body as swelling with “unvented hate” (33) rather than life. Her frustration finds murderous release in the mice and roaches scurrying in her bedroom and the goldfish she tries to drown in the toilet bowl. As with marriage, she begins to regard her impending immigration as a kind of rebirth and the unborn baby as “unfinished business” (42): “It cluttered up the preparation for going abroad. She did not want to carry any relics from her old life; given another chance, she could be a more exciting person, take evening classes perhaps, become a librarian” (42).

Here Dimple seems to echo the sentiments of her creator. Mukherjee, herself, on several occasions has compared immigration to a kind of rebirth. In an interview to the Iowa Review in 1990, she refers to her early impressions of America as a “chance for romantic reincarnation” (Bradley 40) as opposed to Canada which, like England, is “the old world” (Bradley 40). When asked if she saw immigration as an experience of reincarnation, Mukherjee says, “Absolutely! I have been murdered and reborn at least three times” (Bradley 46). The comment by Ratna Das, whom she meets at a tea hosted by her friend Pixie, does undercut Dimple’s naïve and hopeful optimism to an extent. Das tells her: “You may think of it as immigration, my dear… [B]ut what you are is a resident alien” (46). Immigration does not imply unconditional acceptance by the new homeland, embodied in the oxymoronic denomination “resident alien.” The discourse of the “alien” is itself problematic, as Katarzyna Marciniak observes. It “brands exiles as outsiders, the ones who do not and will not fully belong, and may only aspire to provisional belonging.
Thus, it seems that the INS’s agenda is to imprint these ‘others’ with the language of alienhood so that they will not easily blend in or become one of ‘us’” (Marciniak xiii). The resident alien occupies a liminal space, already marked as other or different.

Dimple moves to the States, only to find herself in a miniature India. Their hosts live in a neighborhood which has a “thousand Indians,” (54) where one is warned to keep one’s distance from the “sahebs” (54). Andre Aciman’s “permanent transience” can be used to describe the experiences of Mukherjee’s immigrants in Wife as well. Here, too, in spite of their global mobility, the immigrants are strangely stationary, tethered by invisible yet inextricable bonds to their homes in India. Commenting on the lack of expensive furniture in his house, their host Jyoti tells them: “Who wants to buy tons of furniture? You’ll only lose money on it when you go back home. I’m going to retire when I’m forty, go back and build a five-lakh house and become the maharaja of Lower Circular Road”(54). The Basus’ first party in Manhattan is an exclusively Indian gathering, where the attendees exoticize the “sahebs”, who, they claim, “bathe only once a week” (62) and wash clothes in the bathroom sink, cook and consume Indian food and listen to Indian, specifically Bengali, music. The point of reference in the conversations at such parties is always India, whether they are discussing Indian films or comparing chickens and milk at home and abroad. Jyoti tells Dimple “not to restrict herself to Bengalis, or else she’d miss a lot of the experience of being abroad” (67). This is ironical, since Dimple’s “experience of being abroad” would seem to consist only of interacting with other Bengalis. Unlike Lahiri, who, as critics have noted, avoids any overt reference to the political in her works, Mukherjee shows how the alienation that Dimple
experiences in her new homeland is fueled in part by a mutual distrust between the US-born American natives and the new immigrants. Walking into a deli to buy cheesecake, Dimple is greeted by the coarse laughter of the salesman and his friend. The salesman’s attempts to explain his laughter at her ignorance – “Nothing against you. Nothing against your people” (60, emphasis mine) - find an uneasy echo in the “othering” of the Americans that the Indians frequently participate in. In *Wife* there is a slight potential for collision between the dominant and the marginalized groups which Lahiri glosses over.

Significantly, the two halves of Dimple’s lives – the Indian and the American half - almost seem to mirror each other. In the States, too, owing to her sheer lack of activity, Dimple has to devise Beckettian strategies of waiting to fill her time, from innocuous ones like cleaning windows and vacuuming the house and dressing up in her absentee house owner Marsha’s clothes to the more perilous ones like contemplating seven ways of committing suicide (102). “I’m always a Before… [I] guess I’ve never been an After.” (95) Dimple once tells Ina Mullick, a woman she meets at one of the Indian parties. These words sum up the reality of Dimple Basu’s existence. She never does achieve the After in her life.

But perhaps the greatest cost that Dimple incurs as a result of her transnational mobility is to her marriage. In Calcutta, despite her disappointment in her marriage, her relationship with Amit has its moments of tenderness, as when they steal out on dates (21). She exhibits a willingness to please him and make him happy. In the States, their altered circumstances, as immigrants trying to find a toehold in a new land, affect their equation. Jobless and insecure, Amit sheds the authority and control he had exuded in
their house on Dr Sarat Banerjee Road: “There she had experienced him in terms of permissions and restraints. Here in New York, Amit seemed to have collapsed inwardly, to have grown frail and shabby” (88). He shows up unfavorably against other men like Jyoti Sen and looks towards her for reassurance. Deeply implicated in traditional patriarchal beliefs, where employment is a function of masculinity, both Dimple and Amit struggle to come to terms with his unemployment and his feminization. Outwardly sympathetic, Dimple privately tells herself that, “a man without a job wasn’t a man at all” (102). She takes an almost voyeuristic interest in Jyoti Sen – “she liked to squirrel away information about Jyoti Sen” (85) -- and later slips into an extra-marital affair with an American.

Like Lahiri, Mukherjee too underlines the impossibility of her female protagonist forming alliances with other women which could possibly reduce her insularity. In the first place, Dimple’s exposure to American women is rather limited. While the first house that the Basus rent in the States belongs to a friendly American couple, that gesture of friendship leads nowhere because of the subsequent disappearance of the couple from the scene. Dimple’s alienation is also heightened by her painful awareness of her own foreign-ness. “How could she live in a country where she could not predict these basic patterns, where every other woman was a stranger, where she felt different, ignorant, exposed to ridicule in the elevator?”(112) When it comes to Indian women, Dimple’s choices are limited and she can, at best, maintain a superficial friendship with Bengali women like Ina Mullick and Meena Sen. In Wife as in Unaccustomed Earth, healthy
female friendships that can mutually nurture and support are conspicuous by their absence.

In Manhattan, Dimple spends her days all alone in her apartment, while Amit chases his American dream. Time hangs heavy on her hands, resulting in a chaotic lifestyle - immoderate sleep, irregular meals and addiction to television. Dimple’s paranoia swirls to dangerous heights, “worrying herself sick over footsteps in the hall and glass eyes in keyholes” (115). Her excessive television viewing fuels an increasing disconnect between reality and fantasy, so much so that the conclusion, narrated in feverishly rapid prose, is bafflingly ambiguous. Dimple apparently murders her husband, though the act itself is shrouded in a blur of reality and fantasy. Bradley writes how “her violence reveals the psychological trauma of a young woman banging against an invisible cage” (xiii.) Dimple’s final and irrevocable descent into madness is an outcome of her immobility, her lack of reasonable avenues to social life in her new situation.

Conclusion

An interesting point of comparison between the two texts is the way they complicate the representation of the maternal. Global mobility exposes the maternal - and by extension, the “home” - as a site of aggression and latent violence. Dimple Basu literally “skips” her baby away, skipping till she has a miscarriage, and possibly, brutally murders her own husband. Usha’s mother in “Hell-heaven” contemplates a most painful and spectacular suicide, pinning her clothes to her body and dousing herself with gas,

14 “Then she saw the head fall off – but of course it was her imagination because she was not sure anymore what she had seen on tv and what she had seen in the private screen of three A.M. – and it stayed upright on the countertop, still with its eyes averted from her face” (Wife 213).
saved in the nick of time by an unsuspecting neighbor. While on the one hand, the
mothers in the works under consideration are largely self-effacing and prone to
“wastage,” there is the spark of rebellion against normative Indian femaleness in their
potential for almost self-destructive violence.

I return to Lahiri’s text, or more specifically, to the epigraph in *Unaccustomed
Earth*. Lahiri borrows her epigraph from Hawthorne’s story “The Custom House”:
“Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted,
for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had
other birthplaces, and so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their
roots into unaccustomed earth.” The implication seems to be that transplantation is
beneficial and nurturing, that striking their roots into unaccustomed earth may lead to
human nature “flourishing.” The stories, however, give the lie to such an idea. I suggest
that Lahiri deliberately makes use of such an epigraph, raising readers’ expectation only
to unsettle them and like Mukherjee, she complicates the idea of “flourishing” for the
transplanted subject.
CHAPTER 2: “CLOSE THE DOOR, STAY IN AND YOU’RE SAFE”: MOBILITY AND HOME IN SHASHI DESHPANDE’S *THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS* AND GITHA HARIHARAN’S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

That is what I see women writers as doing – opening virgin territories, pushing back frontiers, letting the light into hitherto dark, ignored areas.

-Shashi Deshpande, “Writing From the Margin”

The search for the location in which the self is “at home” is one of the primary projects of twentieth century fiction in English.

-Rosemary M. George, *The Politics of Home*

My discussion of women writing mobility now turns toward three novels by South Asian women writers in India --- Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds no Terrors* (1980) and *That Long Silence* (1990) and Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992). Deshpande is a flag-bearer among Indian women novelists writing in English and her work offers an interesting comparison with that of diasporic women writers. In contrast to the fluid and almost kaleidoscopic space explored by most diasporic writers, Deshpande’s novels are firmly rooted to in local, often semi-rural setting, and her characters are seen negotiating this passage from the rural and small town life to the big city owing to the demands of education, profession and in the case of the women in her novels, the family. In her Afterword to Deshpande’s novel, *A Matter of Time*, feminist critic Ritu Menon observes, “rather than serve up a dish that experiments with the spices of the Orient, Deshpande assumes her reader’s familiarity with the everyday ingredients of her offerings, relying upon their fresh, home-cooked flavor to have readers asking for more” (np). Menon’s observation can be applied with equal logic to Hariharan, who, despite her travels abroad and her education in three different
countries, prefers to situate her stories in India, her geographical home. In an interview with The Hindu Business Line, Hariharan says: “I would be happy to write about any place and society; this is the one I happen to know best because I live here so I feel stimulated and maddened by it. My deepest sadness and my little hopes for the future are all rooted in India” (August 2009).

This chapter extends my exploration of the kinship between writers from “home” and “abroad,” particularly their common interest in complicating the representations of mobility. If Lahiri looks at the consequences of global mobility for women in Unaccustomed Earth, Deshpande and Hariharan emphasize the challenges to mobility for women within spaces traditionally held to be their own – the private and the domestic. I examine Deshpande and Hariharan’s portrayal of the domestic home as a highly complex site, as a space that is liberating and confining, sheltering and destructive at the same time. Home here refers to the natal and the marital, the spaces women are born into as well as the ones that they create or replicate through marriage, spaces which do not easily resolve into binaries of the familiar/safe and strange/unsafe. Deshpande and Hariharan show how violence and silence map onto these spaces and how a sense of belonging or being at-home eludes the female protagonists of their novels.

Borders and Transgression in The Dark Holds no Terrors

As noted before, The Dark Holds no Terrors unfolds the story of Sarita, a doctor, who rebels against her orthodox family, particularly her controlling mother, to marry the man she loves, Manohar, an impoverished poet. The family resistance to Manohar is sharpened by the fact that he is not financially sound, and also because he belongs to a
different, possibly inferior caste. Sarita walks out of her natal home to marry Manohar, but her hopes of a happy marriage and a home of her own are short-lived because Manohar sexually abuses her. She is also ostracized by her family, so much so that she is not even informed of her mother’s death. When she finds out, she returns home, and this return enables her the necessary space and time to introspect, leading to a crucial decision in the novel’s climax.

Sarita’s transgression or her crossing of patriarchally mandated borders between the private space and the public is at the heart of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*. In her discussion on the use of space as a “gendered concept” in the works of Shashi Deshpande and Nina Sibal, the critic Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan writes:

> Some sort of division of private and public spheres seems to have always and universally accompanied the construction of genders…Among women’s most common acts of transgression has been the crossing of boundaries from one sphere of activity to the other – historically this has taken the form of cross-dressing, participation in war, celibacy, religious devotion, adulterous love, seizing the ‘book’ (the wise woman, the witch) different kinds of work leading to economic independence, etc. (71-72)

*The Dark* is primarily the story of Sarita’s continuous effort to step out of a home cracking under the weight of orthodoxy and tradition to engage with the world outside, and of the stiff resistance she meets with from her family in her natal home. The strongest challenge to her mobility comes from her mother Kamala, who, rather than the men in her immediate family, signals patriarchal ideology in the novel. Sarita’s relationship with
Kamala is fractious and conflicted, of a piece, as Ritu Menon notes, with the “ever more complex relationships between the women in [Deshpande’s] novels” (Menon 254). In having Kamala as Sarita’s most hostile opponent within her immediate family, Deshpande demonstrates how women internalize the dictates of patriarchy and often turn out to be the worst antagonists for other women.

Sarita constantly resists the gendered role of a daughter, with its firmly drawn boundaries, that the older woman seeks to cast her in. Much against her mother’s wishes, Sarita opts for a career in medicine, with its arduous and long trajectory, against a more easily achieved B.A degree in the humanities. Kamala’s main objection in discouraging her daughter from studying medicine is her gender – “But she’s a girl” (144). She tells her husband:

> Medicine or no medicine, doctor or no doctor, you still have to get her married, spend money on her wedding. Can you do both? Make yourself a pauper, and will she look after you in your old age? Medicine! Five, six, seven…god knows how many years. Let her go for a B.Sc…and you can get her married in two years and our responsibility will be over. (144)

Kamala’s concerns about her daughter’s career choice are influenced by traditional anxieties about a woman’s future in a patriarchal society, a society that viewed marriage as a woman’s ultimate goal, where unmarried women occupy spaces of marginality. Pursuing a career in medicine would take several years and Kamala fears that it might affect her daughter’s chances of finding an eligible match. Besides she is worried about over-investing economically in her daughter. Since a daughter is not expected to provide
for her parents in old age, Kamala sees little use in investing in Sarita’s education. Incidentally, Sarita’s negotiation of the passage between the private and the public spheres has close parallels with the writer’s own life. In an interview with the journalist Aditi De, Deshpande states: “My father (the noted playwright Sriranga) was very liberal. He did not differentiate between his son and two daughters. In fact, marriage never entered his agenda for us until my mother reminded him that daughters had to be married.” In another interview with Anna Rego for The Hindu, Deshpande recalls that her mother was highly educated but a “deliberately submissive housewife. She chose to embrace the traditional role of wife and mother, because in those days society wasn’t too accepting of educated or career-oriented women. But my sister and I were very career-minded and at a certain level I believe my mother resented us for that.” The tension in the relationship between the two women in The Dark might be seen as carrying the generational conflict between Deshpande and her own mother. Like her creator, Sarita too finds an unlikely ally in her normally reticent father who supports not only her dreams of education, but also more importantly, her freedom to choose what she wants to do with her life. He tells her mother, “Look, she knows how it is. I can pay either for her marriage or her studies. She chooses to be educated. Let her. It’s her choice” (italics mine, 144). The more liberal positions of fathers in fiction and real life regarding a daughter’s education speak of a subtle shift in social values, of the slow emergence of a generation of enlightened men who were more receptive to a woman’s right to narrow the divide between the private and the public.
Sarita’s “transgression” also extends to the other important decision in her life besides her career – her marriage. Rather than submit to a traditional arranged marriage like a compliant daughter, she exercises her personal choice with regard to her partner. The marriage is based on love and mutual attraction. Artistic, outgoing and flamboyant, Manohar is everything that Sarita is not. But the marriage can also be seen as her attempt to assert her independence from her mother’s repressive shadow. Not only does she choose her own partner, but she also finds a highly undesirable match from a conventional point of view. Manohar does not hold a white-collar job; more importantly he belongs to a different caste. When Kamala finds out about Sarita’s decision, she is furious. Mother and daughter have the following exchange (italics not mine):

“What caste is he?

I don’t know.

A Brahmin?

Of course not.

Then, cruelly...his father keeps a cycle shop.

Oh, so they are low-caste people, are they?

The word her mother had used, with the disgust, hatred and prejudices of centuries had so enraged her that she had replied...I hope so. (96)

Kamala’s “disgust, hatred and prejudices of centuries” stem from her blind and uncritical endorsement of the Hindu caste system, where a hierarchy of humanity initially based on work divisions devolved to fix human value within a birth-based caste system. Kamala’s parochial outlook is in contrast with Sarita’s broader and more humane perspective,
perhaps a consequence as well as a symptom of the younger woman’s mobility --- the exposure that her education gives her. Sarita pays a heavy penalty for her transgressive mobility. When she walks out of home to marry Manohar, the doors shut behind her. Kamala snaps all ties with her, so much so that Sarita is not even informed of her mother’s painful death from cancer.

A Space of “Violence and Nurturing”

In deconstructing the binaries of the private and the public, the home and the world, *The Dark Holds no Terrors* projects a home that is no safe refuge, no convenient point of departure and return. As Rosemary George observes:

One distinguishing feature of places called home is that they are built on select inclusions. The inclusions are grounded in a learned (or taught) sense of kinship that is extended to those who are perceived as sharing the same blood, race, class, gender or religion. Membership is maintained by bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control. Homes are manifest on geographical, psychological and material levels. They are places that are recognized as such by those within and those without. They are places of violence and nurturing. (9)

The paradox of “violence and nurturing” is very visible in Sarita’s home. In order to achieve a sense of inclusion in her home, Sarita is required to concede her agency – her personal aspirations. If she is to appear less “foreign” she has to submit to patriarchal expectations regarding her role as the daughter – compliant and predisposed to marriage and loving service to the family. *The Dark Holds* amply demonstrates that liminality and exile are not necessarily unique to immigrant life and fiction. Sarita is on an unfulfilled
quest for a home --- a space of belonging and acceptance -- throughout her life. While her runaway marriage to Manohar leads to her expulsion from her natal home, her gender ensures that she is exiled within the family. As a daughter who will be eventually given away in marriage, she can claim no permanent place in her natal home. Her younger brother Dhruva is the family’s favorite. As Amrita Bhalla notes, “Saru’s mother had assumed the voice of patriarchy and enforced traditional gender biases in her house. Dhruva her son had been the center of their world and Saru the unloved, unwanted daughter. The novel gives expression to the myriad ways the son is privileged over the daughter in Indian households” (33). While I agree that Kamala enforces gender biases in her home, I do not support the contention that Sarita is the “unloved” and “unwanted” daughter. The novel is not without Kamala’s gestures of affection toward her daughter, though such moments are few and far between – on Sarita’s fifteenth birthday she surprises her with a gift of earrings. Her anxiety about Sarita’s marriage is also not uncommon among Indian mothers; after all she wants to secure her daughter’s future.

At the same time there is no denying that Dhruva is the favored child and the son preference shows itself in a number of subtle and not so subtle ways. Sarita recalls how a puja, a prayer ceremony, always preceded the lunch and the aarti (a religious ceremony) on Dhruva’s birthday. On the other hand, “my birthdays were almost the same…a festive lunch, with whatever I asked for…an aarti in the evening; but there was no puja” (169). Sometimes the difference in Kamala’s perception of her children is unapologetically stark, as in the following exchange between a young Sarita and her mother (italics not mine):
Don’t go out in the sun. You’ll get even darker.

Who cares?

We have to care if you don’t. We have to get you married.

I don’t want to get married.

Will you live with us all your life?

Why not?

You can’t.

And Dhruva?

He’s different. He’s a boy. (45)

Built into Kamala’s injunction is the understanding that the daughter belongs to another family and has no permanent claim to her natal home.

Besides the son preference, Sarita’s freedom at home is compromised by various other demands and expectations of patriarchy and tradition. Her transition to womanhood – her “growing up” – is marked by a sense of shame, a word that reverberates throughout the text. Her mother instills in her an acute self-consciousness over the changing contours of her body. Sarita remembers, “and it became something shameful, this growing up, so that you had to be ashamed of yourself, even in the presence of your own father” (62). When she begins menstruating, for example, she is made to experience a kind of foreignness within the family, a physical and emotional ostracism. As per Hindu custom, a separate space is demarcated for her for the days of her menstruation. Her mobility is restricted on those particular days. She is not allowed to enter the kitchen and the puja/prayer room, two rooms which have a special significance in orthodox Hindu
households, so much so that she admits to feeling like a “pariah,” (62) “with my special
cup and plate by my side in which I was served from a distance, for my touch was, it
seemed, pollution” (62). The custom reflects a deep-seated patriarchal discomfort
regarding female sexuality, banishing the female body to invisibility and marginality
during menstruation. The physical alienation corresponds to a sharper sense of
emotional upheaval that Sarita experiences, brought about by a consciousness of her
difference: “It was something quite different, much worse. A kind of shame that engulfed
me, making me want to rage, to scream against the fact that put me in the same class as
my mother”(62). It is not until Sarita goes to medical school that she is able to
understand her body and dismiss the social and cultural taboos surrounding menstruation.
Her study of anatomy and physiology results in her release “from a prison of fears and
shames. Things fell, with a miraculous exactness, into place. I was a female. I was born
that way, that was the way my body had to be, those were the things that had to happen to
me. And that was that!” (63). The binaries of the private and the public collapse here,
with her home trapping her in a “prison of fears and shames” and the not-home
empowering her with knowledge of her own body.

15 In her article “Is it a crime to menstruate?” writer and gender activist Rita Banerjee
observes that the “notion of the menstruating women being ‘unclean’ and ‘polluting’ is
upheld by most across all strata of Indian society – rural and urban, educated and
illiterate, rich and poor.” Banerjee further quotes from her book *Sex and Power: Defining
Histories, Shaping Societies* to show how this unease with female sexuality has a long-
standing tradition, endorsed by ancient Indian texts like the Vedas: “Menstrual blood was
regarded as one of the most evil manifestations of a woman’s power” with the ability to
“burn, bite, scratch, poison and even kill a man.” This practice has been prevalent – like
many foundational ideas of patriarchy- in many other cultures too, such as Jewish and
Zoroastrian.
Fifteen years after she had walked out of home, Sarita returns after her mother’s death to salve her bruised body and soul. Standing on the threshold of her natal home, she suddenly remembers the myth of Krishna and Sudama, particularly a textbook illustration “showing Krishna and his queen Rukmini running joyously to greet poor, ragged Sudama standing at the palace gates” (15). Her recall of the myth as she waits at her doorstep indicates her awareness of her position as supplicant ---- like Sudama --- as well as a hope of regeneration, since Sudama’s renewed contact with Krishna had resulted in his material upliftment. The memory of the myth also underlines Sarita’s ambiguous position with regard to her home, a curious mix of expectation and distance as both insider and outsider.

The house itself is metonymic of the promise and disappointment held out by a home. While it confronts Sarita with images of sameness - “the same seven pairs of large stone slabs leading to the front door on which she had played hopscotch as a child,” (15) “the same sagging easy chair” (16) and the pictures on the wall – there is also change. Her father, Sarita notices, had “changed…an alteration that made him not just the same man so many years older, but another man altogether”(16). Amrita Bhalla

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16 The friendship between the Hindu deity Krishna and his childhood friend Sudama is a part of Indian mythology and is widely regarded as an example of friendship across caste and class boundaries. Sudama, an extremely impoverished Brahmin, seeks out his friend Krishna, a god who is also the ruler of Dwarka, to ask for help and reprieve from his modest circumstances. When the two meet, Krishna welcomes him with warmth and affection and Sudama finds himself unable to admit the real reason behind his visit. But Krishna, the all-knowing, divines the purpose of his visit– when Sudama returns home he finds that his ramshackle hut has disappeared. There is a palatial mansion in its place and his wife and children run out to greet him, dressed in the finest robes.
observes that the house is “never depicted as a cocoon, a nurturing haven or a peaceful retreat…there are no easy solutions in stepping back into the house” (26). Sarita is the “unwelcome guest” (18) who discovers that she no longer owns a room in the house. Her feeling of homelessness finds a visual metaphor in her suitcase, which, “like a homeless refugee…lay desolately in the hall…which is my room? I have none…” (32) Her room has been taken over by a new arrival, a tenant, Madhav. This appropriation of Sarita’s physical space in the house has an emotional parallel. Madhav seems to have filled the void in her father’s life left by Kamala’s death as well as the desertion of his children to be his companion and surrogate son. In this new configuration of relationships, Sarita is once again the outsider. Deshpande writes how “the childish grief of being unwanted swamped her unreasonably again and again. Looking at Baba and Madhav together, she felt stricken anew” (83). Sarita’s redundancy is the cost of her transgression. But it is also an outcome of patriarchy. While Baba’s partnership with Madhav may have come about in part because of the older man’s loneliness, it also underscores a serious lack of communication between father and daughter and her easy dispensability in his life. Barring the significant moment in the text when he defends her right to a career of her choice, and her emotional breakdown and confession toward the end of the novel, there are very few actual conversations between Baba and Sarita.

Sarita leaves her natal home to marry the man she loves. But marriage too fails to provide her with an alternate home, in its shared connotations of a house as well as an affective space of belonging. Membership in a home has some benefits – the “nurturing” that paradoxically exists with the violence – which Manohar and Sarita have to forfeit
when they move out into the world. Without suitable employment and families to bail them out, the newlyweds are vulnerable to the economic pressures they encounter outside their homes. They cannot even afford a house of their own and have to make do with a small one-room apartment in a slum, on loan from a friend. Sarita recalls, “Then, this ridiculous anti-climax. To defy your parents and family, to resolve to get married in spite of them, and then to be obstructed by the lack of a home!” (38). However, in spite of their limited finances, their early years of marriage are reasonably contented. Ironically the rot seeping into their marriage coincides with their upward mobility, a consequence of Sarita’s growing professional success.

From just being Manohar’s wife, Sarita acquires an independent professional identity as the “lady doctor.” “And now,” Sarita says, “when we walked out of our room, there were nods and smiles, murmured greetings and namastes. But they were all for me, only for me. There was nothing for him. He was almost totally ignored” (42). Manohar does not take well this effacement of his identity in their relationship. He develops a severe form of schizophrenia, where his frustration finds vent in the darkness of the night, in marital rape. The disempowerment in their marriage that he chafes under --- the sense of emasculation that he experiences - finds redress in a display of brute power over his wife. Incidentally in her focus on domestic abuse, Deshpande is a pioneer among Indian women writing in English. As Ritu Menon observes, “The Dark Holds no Terrors was one of the earliest novels in English to deal with wife battering, a bold subject for a first novel by any reckoning” (254). The “wife battering” is a telling comment on a society that is riven by powerful cross currents -- the increasing mobility of the modern, educated
Indian woman on the one hand and the hold of patriarchal institutions on the other. These patriarchal structures are resistant to the shift in her role from caregiver to provider on the other, intent on keeping her in her predetermined place in the private/domestic.

When the violence begins, Sarita is in denial, putting down Manohar’s roughness “to the ardor of his love” (42). Most of the rapes in the story are sparked off by incidents (such as the following) that demonstrate to Manohar his wife’s growing achievements and his corresponding diminution. Out shopping in preparation for a holiday to different cities in South India, a luxury by middle-class standards, Sarita and Manohar run into a couple of friends. The husband comments with a possible tinge of envy: “Lucky fellow. We’ve been dreaming of Matheran for years. Can’t afford even that” (111). (Matheran is a hill station in Maharashtra, where the story takes place.) And his wife retorts “tartly”: “If you had married a doctor, you’d have gone to Ooty too” (111). Her words serve as another stinging reminder to Manohar as to who holds the purse strings in their house. That night, he rapes Sarita once again. His deep resentment of his dependence on her, which he is socialized to conceal during the day, slips out during the unguarded moments at night. This is an assault all the more terrifying because he seems to have no memory of it the following morning (111).

The Intimate Stranger

In Manohar, the reader encounters the figure of what I would like to identify as the “intimate stranger,” a figure that blurs the binaries between the familiar and the strange, which lends further credence to home as the space of both “violence and nurturing.” Sarita is assaulted in the apparent safety of her house, by none other than her
own husband in what ought to have been a moment of love and intimacy. Manohar, affectionate and mild-mannered by day, is transformed into a monster at night, deliberately seeking to inflict pain and humiliation on his wife. It is in the confines of her bedroom that Sarita is haunted by a nightmare - of a stranger, who stalks her with an obvious intent to kill. The following passage from the prologue is quoted in its entirety because of the way it upholds the collapse of boundaries between the intimate and the strange, known and the unknown:

The face above mine was the face of a stranger. Blank, set and rigid, it was a face I had never seen. A man I did not know. Strangely, this brought an odd relief...this was him, the stranger who had come into my dreams for a few nights, leaving behind a fear that invaded even my waking hours. The stranger with the brown scarf whom I discovered standing that night at the head of my bed. And I, so frozen with terror that I could not move. Not even when his hands moved slowly, like some macabre slow motion sequence, towards my throat. I tried to call out, to scream. Nothing issued out of me, but silence. (11)

Sarita wakes up, just as the “stranger” tries to talk to her, and finds herself in the middle of a waking nightmare, the rape (12). The powerful concluding lines of the prologue introduce us to the trauma that Sarita is being subjected to and also reveals the identity of the “stranger”: “I turned my head slightly, fearfully, and saw him beside me, snoring softly. No more stranger, but my husband” (12). There are multiple levels of strangeness at work here. Manohar is literally an unrecognizable stranger because of his schizophrenia, his irrational violence that parallels Dimple Basu’s murder of her husband.
in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife*, and his complete disassociation every morning with the perpetrator of this nightly violence. He is metaphorically a stranger too because of his abnormal sexual behavior in a familiar space.

In fact binaries between intimacy and strangeness are unsettled throughout the book. The figure of the intimate stranger is all pervasive in the book; relationships, with the possible exception of the friendship between Sarita’s father and Madhav, exist bereft of communication. They are draped in silence. Words are left unsaid. Perhaps the strongest example of silence in the novel is Sarita’s inability to confront her husband about his actions in the mornings after the rapes. She is disarmed by his air of normalcy, his apparent lack of memory of what happened the night before: “I should have spoken about it the very first day. But I didn’t. And each time it happens and I don’t speak, I put another brick on the wall of silence between us” (96). She tries to shatter the silence without success, and even considers taking legal help. But the rupture of the silence surrounding spousal violence within marriage is associated with very public and social shaming, and this awareness inhibits Sarita, forcing her into more silence.

In her presentation of the silence surrounding domestic abuse, Deshpande foreshadows recent legal and public responses in India to a spate of rapes reported by the media. Even today, marital rape is something that women prefer to bury in secrecy. Victims and lawmakers seem complicit in this attempt to write marital rape out of visibility. In a report on domestic violence in the *Livemint*, Sreeparna Ghosh reports the serious discrepancy “between what is reported in national surveys such as the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) and the figures from the police’s National Crime
Records Bureau…[according to the national survey] 8% of married women have been subject to sexual violence, such as forced sex …[Yet, Ghosh states] the analysis of data from NFHS-3/health survey and the NCRB/crime records indicates that for the most part, instances of domestic violence reported by women in national surveys never make it to the police or the courts.” While Sarita’s shame is an important reason why she cannot bring herself to seek legal help, the law has/had little to offer battered wives. The novel was published in 1980 and until 1983, there were no specific provisions in India’s laws to address violence within the home. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act eventually came into effect in 2005. One can also point to the recent controversy regarding the amendments to the anti-rape law suggested by the Verma Committee in the wake of the uproar following the infamous Delhi gang rape of December 2012. One of the recommendations of the Committee was that sexual violence in marriage be recognized as an offence punishable by law. The Indian government, however, ignored the recommendation.

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17 Following the national outcry over the gang rape and death of a trainee physiotherapist in Delhi, December 2012, the government set up the Verma Committee, a three-member committee headed by former Chief Justice J.S. Verma, to review existing laws against sexual crimes. Among other recommendations, the Committee strongly advocated the criminalization of marital rape. I quote from the Verma Committee report, “We therefore recommend that i. The exception for marital rape be removed ii. The law ought to specify that a. marital or other relationship between the perpetrator or victim is not a valid defence against the crimes of rape or sexual violation. b. The relationship between the accused and complainant is not relevant to the inquiry into whether the complainant consented to the sexual activity. c. The fact that the accused and the victim are married or in another intimate relationship may not be regarded as a mitigating factor justifying lower sentences for rape.”
The silence enveloping husband and wife also seeps into their relationship with their children. Sarita shares an ambivalent relationship with her adolescent daughter Renu, struggling to communicate with her. While the novel does not spell it out, it is clear that Renu is affected by the strain in her parents’ marriage, and her instinctive understanding of this tension spills over into her paintings— not “sunny gardens” or “colorful pictures” but pictures of thick forests drawn in black (33). Also, Sarita is unable to move far away from her mother’s specter. Renu bears a strong physical resemblance to Kamala, and seems to have also inherited the older woman’s air of scrutiny when she regards her mother. It is not clear if Renu does this because she disapproves of her mother’s resistance to gender conformity. But her surveillance of her mother is very reminiscent of her grandmother.

A Space of Imprisonment and Liberation

Sarita’s return to her natal home after Kamala’s death results in liberation from the emotional baggage she has been carrying all along. For the first time, she “speaks” her rape – to her father rather than her female friends. This is a significant moment in the story, not only because Sarita breaks the silence that exists between two generations, but also because she does so at Baba’s behest. Baba demonstrates an understanding of the oppressive weight of silence [“I often feel sorry that we left so many things unsaid, your mother and I” (199)] and prompts his daughter to speak. Sarita, however, lacks the vocabulary to articulate her rape; the familiar discourse of conflict in marriage fails to sum up her experience. Sarita begins hesitantly: ‘He’s cruel to me … in bed” (200). A little later she tells him: “He attacked me… he attacked me like an animal that night. I
was sleeping and I woke up and there was this… this man hurting me. With his hands, his teeth, his whole body…” (201). Sarita still struggles with inadequate vocabulary to identify her horrific experience; the novel was published in the early nineties when rape, let alone marital rape, was a huge taboo in Indian society, struggling to make its presence felt in legal and public discourse. As Geetanjali Gangoli observes: “Rape and child sexual abuse are among the most discussed yet ‘unknown’ parts of Indian social and legal life” (334). Though Sarita finally voices her experience of sexual violence to Baba, she is unable name her rape, taking recourse to the discourse of strangeness to facilitate expression, identifying Manohar as “this man,” and “an animal,” anything but her husband.

Baba cautions her against running away from Manohar who is on his way to meet her and instead to “stay and meet him. Talk to him. Let him know from you what’s wrong” (216). Her brief withdrawal from her responsibilities as wife and mother also affords her the time for introspection, leading to an altered and more mature perspective on her problems. She is finally able to acknowledge to herself the decay in her marriage: “I have been clinging to the tenuous shadow of a marriage whose substance has long since disintegrated because I have been afraid of proving my mother right” (220). The novel is open-ended, concluding neither with a reconciliation between husband and wife nor with Sarita putting an end to her marriage. But it does end with Sarita’s emotional preparedness to break the silence between her husband and herself. Menon’s comment on the women in Deshpande’s novels is telling: “Implicitly we know that it is the men in their lives who will have to accommodate the changed reality because the women have
now crossed what Malashri Lal calls the ‘threshold,’ metaphorically speaking. They need never leave the home or make a dramatic transition from private to public, but they have forever changed the space they inhabit” (Menon 255). Things are not going to be the same between Sarita and Manohar again. At the end of the novel, Sarita crosses the threshold, literally and metaphorically. She walks out the gate to discharge her responsibilities as the lady doctor in response to a neighbor’s call for help, an identity that she now inhabits more comfortably. The gate “swung” (221) behind her but there is the promise of a return. In her essay “Writing from the Margin,” Deshpande comments:

The problem is that rebelling is generally understood to mean walking out on a marriage (the echoes of the door Nora banged behind her seem to haunt us!) the problem lies in thinking that walking out is a liberating process. Whereas, to me, it is always clear that an understanding of oneself is what really liberates, it is this that opens out a number of possibilities. To walk out, or away, is to carry the old self with oneself. (159)

Deshpande deconstructs oppositions in her conception of a home; home has the potential to be both prison and liberation, signified here in Sarita’s increased self-knowledge that her stay in her natal home allows her and in turn, encourages her to open the doors of communication with Manohar. I owe a debt to Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s discussion of Anuradha Ramanan’s Tamil short story, “Prison” (1984) in her book Real & Imagined Woman, particularly her attention to how Ramanan “explores the concept of the ‘prison’ creatively” (69). Rajan says that sociologists have observed how Indian women experience social space in oppositions and that Ramanan “deconstructs these oppositions
by blurring spatial designations” (70). I aver that Deshpande participates in a “similar blurring of spatial designations.”

The Subtle Violence of Silence in *That Long Silence*

The theme of silence in intimate relationships that Deshpande touches upon in *The Dark Holds* receives fuller treatment in *That Long Silence*, the winner of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi (National Academy of Letters) award in 1990 and possibly her most well-known work. Jaya Kulkarni is a dedicated stay-at-home wife and mother who lives in Mumbai with her husband Mohan and her two children. Mohan is guilty of financial scam in his workplace and this forces the family to go underground, out of their well-appointed house in the Mumbai suburb of Churchgate to their modest apartment in Dadar. This temporary respite from her schedule as a wife and mother provides Jaya with the time to introspect and re-evaluate her life and relationships. The outcome of these ruminations is *That Long Silence*, an autobiographical novel. As a result of this extended meditation on important moments in her life as well as her relationships with her husband, her immediate family, and her male and female friends, by the end of the novel Jaya is, much like Sarita, a changed person.

The invisible yet impenetrable “wall of silence” (*The Dark Holds* 96) between spouses, between parents and their children, and between siblings, is pervasive in this novel. The home or the domestic space is fraught with tension and unfulfilled longing because of these multiple levels of silence. Yet it is also one that enables some soul-searching in the protagonist Jaya. As Rajan observes, “The writing of the novel, which is a mix of memory and current happenings allows her [Jaya] to break out of ‘the long
silence’ wrought by the weight of different repressions. She is now prepared to reevaluate her life” (73).

Outwardly, Jaya, the central character of That Long Silence, seems to have a less emotionally troubled life than Sarita. While her relationship with her husband Mohan is far from ideal, it does not explode into ugly domestic violence. Till Mohan encounters the bumps in his professional life, she leads a fairly cushy life as the spouse of a high-ranking professional. Yet for Jaya, silence is as much a matter of compulsion or enforcement as it is for Sarita. Like Sarita, she finds herself constantly challenged by the models and expectations of patriarchy that undermine her class privileges of education and money. For Jaya, as for Sarita, a stable and nurturing home – before and after marriage – proves elusive.

A patriarchal and highly gendered perception of the role of women is at work in Jaya and Mohan’s marriage. Unlike Sarita, Jaya agrees to an “arranged” marriage by submitting to her brother Dinu’s matchmaking. Ostensibly Dinu has her best interests at heart, but she later realizes that he “had wanted to be free of his responsibility for an unmarried younger sister, so that he could go ahead with his own plans” (93). While Dinu shares a warm relationship with his sister, unlike Sarita’s stormy relationship with Kamala, both Kamala and Dinu seem to be motivated by identical perceptions of the daughter/sister as a liability that needs to be addressed. Mohan, on his part, agrees to marry Jaya because she answers well to his requirements of a model wife --- affluent, English-speaking and educated. In all of this, what is interesting is Jaya’s silence, a
silence that is imposed as neither Mohan nor Dinu even consider her personal choice in the matter of her marriage.

For Mohan, Jaya is his ticket to upper-class identity, a social class he has no access to as an impoverished Brahmin boy. Dinu tells Jaya that Mohan wants “an educated, cultured wife” (90). Mohan admits as much to her. At a wedding he attends as a child, where his less privileged status is emphasized by the segregated seating for guests, he sees some well-groomed and well-spoken women who leave an indelible impression on him – their strongest attraction is the fact that they speak fluent English. In Mohan’s own words, “They spoke as if it was a real language, easily and fluently, you know, quite unlike the English I’d heard too then … as they were leaving, the girl said something. I can’t remember how wonderful it seemed to me to be able to talk like that. To be so…so easy and…confident and how terrible it was to be shut out…to be different” (90). When he meets Jaya for the first time, he is struck by how much she sounds like that girl and wants to marry her (90). Jaya is his access to a world that has been denied to him, a world of privilege and entitlement that the ability to speak perfect English symbolizes. Jaya might not be mobile herself – her own course in life is mapped out by the men in her life, her brother and her husband. But she is a vehicle of upward mobility for Mohan.

In Chapter I, I had discussed how the global mobility of women in Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* is at significant odds with their being enclosed in small American apartments. The women in *The Dark Holds no Terrors* as well as *That Long Silence* are under no such spatial restriction. They travel between houses, from homes to schools,
from workplaces to their homes, and from smaller towns to bigger cities. Yet, like Lahiri, Deshpande too brings this seemingly unfettered mobility under scrutiny. Sarita walks out of her home and its atmosphere of suffocating patriarchy, only to find that marriage does not guarantee the kind of freedom she is looking for. Jaya is not given to such explicit gestures of rebellion, yet we find her calling into question her personal experience of mobility. When the novel opens, she and her husband have moved from their plush house in the city (Churchgate) to their much smaller apartment in the suburbs. The details of Mohan’s scam at his workplace are never made known, but he is advised by his partner in crime to make himself “unavailable” (11) till the storm blows over. Mohan decides to take cover in their apartment in Dadar and Jaya has to follow suit. Her reflections reveal her awareness of her total lack of choice in this decision. Mohan had “assumed I would accompany him, had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans. So had I. Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband’s travails…” (11)\(^1\) To permit herself an illusion of choice, Jaya draws parallels with these loyal wives from Hindu mythology, who had followed their husbands uncomplainingly into lives of hardship, even to afterlife. Then in a moment of wry honesty, she rejects them. These myths do not accurately describe her

\(^{1}\)Sita, Savitri and Draupadi are the ideal wives of Indian mythology. Sita, the heroine of the epic *Ramayana*, had followed her husband Rama into fourteen years of exile to honor a promise made by his father. Savitri had bravely followed the God of Death when he was carrying her husband Satyavan’s soul away with him, and had impressed the god enough to win Satyavan’s life back. Draupadi, the heroine of the epic *Mahabharata*, had rejected a life of comfort in the palace to accompany her five husbands into the forest, after they had been cheated out of their kingdom by their cousins.
situation. Mohan is in exile to escape the consequences of his petty crime, and not out of a sense of filial duty like Rama. Like Savitri’s husband Satyavan, he is “dead” too, but it is an erasure he has had to manufacture to evade detection. Jaya is aware that it is the force of habit rather than wifely devotion that compels her to follow her husband to this other, clandestine life, embodied in the labored image of the “two bullocks yoked together… [t]o go in different directions would be painful and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?” (12) “Necessitous mobility,” a term used by the Asian American critic Sau-ling Cynthia Wong would aptly describe Jaya’s experience of mobility in this case, a movement born of coercion rather than her own free will. Of course, Wong’s study of mobility addresses the immigrant protagonists of Asian American texts --- for example, in her reading of Joy Kogawa’s novel, Obasan, she observes how the travels of Naomi, a victim of the Japanese internment, across the Canadian landscape projects a “directionality of movement, divorced from freedom of movement” (138). I find “necessitous mobility” a particularly suitable description of Jaya’s travel – literal and metaphoric --- in That Long Silence. Like the protagonists of the Asian American novels that Wong foregrounds, Jaya’s moves – her marriage, her travel inside the city, her professional experience -- are directed by larger, paternalistic

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19 “One striking difference presents itself upon even the most cursory comparison between mainstream and Asian American discourses on mobility. In the former, horizontal movement across the North American continent regularly connotes independence, freedom, an opportunity for individual actualization and/or societal renewal – in short, Extravagance. In the latter, however, it is usually associated with subjugation, coercion, impossibility or fulfillment for self or community – in short, Necessity” (Wong 121).
forces beyond her control, and exhibit a curious bifurcation between “directionality” and “freedom.”

The Violence of Naming

The motif of “directionality without freedom” also underlies the theme of naming in the novel. Jaya has two other names – Suhasini and Seeta - and each name suggests the possibility of an alternate identity for her. But these names/identities are patriarchal impositions rather than her personal choices. Jaya was born in 1939, in the thick of India’s freedom struggle. Her father names her Jaya: “Jaya…Jaya for victory” (15), a name that signifies something larger than the child herself. Mohan renames her Suhasini after marriage, or the one with the beautiful smile.20 While Suhasini is a specter - “nobody had ever called me by that name, not even Mohan” (15) - it is a feeble reminder of the claim that Mohan has on her. The latter is visibly annoyed when she “disowns” that name: “he never failed to say reproachfully, ‘I chose that name for you’” (15). The spectral Suhasini also exerts subtle pressure on Jaya as an alternate persona, a memory of all that she is not but ought to be - a “soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman” (16).

Seeta is the name Jaya chooses for herself, the pseudonym that she writes under, and is representative both of her desire for literary recognition, and the simultaneous circumscription of her professional ambitions. Jaya has a strong sense of social consciousness, which she would like to channel through her writing, yet her stories about

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20 In some Hindu communities in India, women are expected to change their first names after marriage. As Kalpana Sharma observes: “It is almost as if getting married also means wiping off your previous identity and completely subsuming yourself in one chosen by your husband and his family” (The Hindu).
the oppression and victimization of women are rejected by male editors, scoffed at as “middle-class stuff, women’s problems” (146) which are ironically considered different from “real life, real problems” (147). Finally, she has to create Seeta to realize her ambitions of being a writer while conforming to patriarchal, masculine notions of what women’s writing should be like – “light and humorous pieces” on the experiences of a middle-class Indian housewife. “Seeta” tames the fire in Jaya and refocuses her attention on writing material that is neither subversive nor threatening to the status quo, in accordance with the instructions of her male editor:

And for me, she had been the means through which I had shut the door, firmly, on all those other women who had invaded my being, screaming for attention; women I had known I could not write about, because they might – it was just possible – resemble Mohan’s mother, or aunt, or my mother or aunt. Seeta was safer. I didn’t have to come out of the safe hole I’d crawled into to write about Seeta. I could stay there, warm and snug. (149)

Seeta “silences” Jaya, just as Suhasini, the “woman who lovingly nurtured her family” (16) is a covert threat to the real Jaya. But Jaya “cannot find in these prescribed roles of Suhasini or Seeta, one that is large enough to inhabit full-time. She finds herself fragmented, harassed and distressed by the many roles she is supposed to joyfully take” (George 148). While Seeta and Suhasini may represent potential alternate identities for Jaya, they limit rather than promote the fuller expression of her individuality.

Here I would like to briefly mention that That Long Silence is widely considered the “most autobiographical of Deshpande’s writings” (Bhalla 35), particularly in her
examination of the woman as artist/writer. There are shades of the writer’s own protest in Jaya’s scornful comment: “as if women’s experiences are of interest only to women” (147). Deshpande has always fiercely resisted the title of a “woman writer,” insisting that, “when I sit down to write, I am just a writer – my gender ceases to matter to me” (“Writing from the Margin” 144). A bit later in the essay, Deshpande observes wryly: “one thing I do know… that not only are women’s experiences of interest only to women, women’s lives and experiences can never take on the larger dimension of being human or universal. I learnt that it is the male experience that is the universal experience” (146). Through Jaya’s interrogation of the role and responsibilities of the “woman writer” That Long Silence articulates the author’s resistance to the othering and the devaluing of women’s experiences.21

The Silencing of Kusum

Kusum represents another possibility of identity for Jaya, one she can potentially slide/degenerate into.22 Kusum is a distant relation, the niece of Jaya’s aunt, Vanita Mami, whom Jaya takes in when she is on the verge of a mental breakdown. Kusum is an

21 From the same essay: “I now realize that I myself was so imbued with this idea of women’s lives being of less importance, so brainwashed by what I had imbibed from our culture, that I too had, at first, tried to get away from this so-called taint of inferiority by writing about men, by having a male protagonist, by using a male narrator… I now know that to regard women’s writing, irrespective of everything else, as inferior, minor and trivial, is not an objective value judgment, but a male subjective assessment; it is men who think this way…” (Deshpande “Writing from the Margins” 147).

22 Critics have unanimously acknowledged the importance of Kusum in Jaya’s life. George writes how, ‘Jaya’s sense of her self is demarcated by her ‘mad cousin,’ “(147) along with other models of female subjugation in the novel. According to Bhall, Kusum is the “one ‘mirror’ to show Jaya what she was not” (38).
intimate stranger – “no relation” (19) to Jaya’s, as the text emphasizes, but at the same
time closely connected to her. With her gaunt frame and sagging breasts, Kusum is a
caricature of feminine desirability and fecund motherhood, a parody of Jaya’s alter ego
Suhasini. Jaya stands in an uneasy relationship with Kusum, using Kusum’s
insanity/crumbling sanity to assure herself of her own sanity: “And so with Kusum’s
madness I became aware of my own blessed sanity. Thank God, Kusum, you’re nuts, I
had thought; because you’re that, I know I’m balanced, normal and sane” (24).

Kusum can also be framed in Julia Kristeva’s discourse of abjection, the complex
process of subject formation where whatever is unassimilable to the Self is ejected as
waste. The abject stands in opposition to the Self; an abject, says Kristeva, “is not my
correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would
allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of
the object – that of being opposed to the I” (1). We find Jaya frequently defining herself
as a “not-Kusum” (24).

Kusum’s abject status is emphasized by the images of dirt and waste that
invariably surround her. She impresses her “own brand of squalor” in the room she
occupies for a very short time: “a frayed, grimy bra trailed disconsolately across the arm
of a chair, a comb with an ugly hunk of hair in it leered at me from the dressing table”
(20). Jaya also recalls “the rank, sweaty odor of her body, the fetid, unwashed stink of
her mouth, and most of all her anguished cries, ‘Don’t go, Jaya, don’t leave me here and
go, stay with me’” (128). Kusum is not wanted by her children and when she finally
drowns herself, her death is largely unmourned. Jaya’s mother informs Jaya about
Kusum’s suicide: “She was of no use to anyone after she went crazy, nobody needed her” (22). But paradoxically, Jaya needs her, because the abject’s relationship to the Self is complex; it is “something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object” (4). Jaya needs Kusum because “as long as Kusum was there, I had known clearly who I was; it had been Kusum who had shown me out to be who I was” (24). While the abject has to be expelled in order for the self to maintain an impression of health, it is only by defining oneself against the abject that the Self can lay any claim to wholeness.

Jaya finds herself poised precariously on this borderline between herself and Kusum, between sanity and madness, between indispensability and redundancy, and nowhere is this more evident than when she goes to live in her natal home in Ambegaon. Here Kusum and Jaya are forced into a partnership – “how hatefully they had clubbed our names together when we went to live in Ambegaon after Appa’s death. Jaya and Kusum” (125). Kusum literally becomes her shadow self, actively seeking her company when she is alive, and invading her memories in death. When towards the end of the novel, Mohan storms out of the house after a bitter confrontation, Jaya finds herself “engulfed by the ghost of Kusum, welcoming me to the category of unwanted wives, deserted wives, claiming me joyfully at last as a companion. I could not escape her any more: there was nowhere I could go; nowhere else she could go either “(125). It is also helpful to think about Kusum as, to borrow another term from Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, Jaya’s “double,
variously known as the alter ego, the shadow, the Doppelganger...” (77). Wong writes how “by projecting undesirable ‘Asianness’ outward onto a double – what I term a racial shadow – one renders alien what is, in fact, literally inalienable, thereby disowning and distancing it” (78). Though not a “racial shadow,” Kusum is Jaya’s other, and provokes the latter’s resentment because she houses Jaya’s deepest insecurities -- her shaky control over her own life, her fear of her redundancy within her family, and her lifelong search for a space where she can belong and be valued: “And there was Kusum with her ‘I must go home’” (21).

The House as the Home

The physical counterparts of the home – houses – also testify to the operations of patriarchal consciousness and are implicated in a strange politics of claim and disavowal. Deshpande writes that “houses have always played a big role in all my novels” (24) and *That Long Silence* is no exception to the rule. Jaya’s shifting claim on a permanent home is emphasized by the many houses she moves in and out of during the course of the story. After her father’s unexpected death, her mother sells off their house in Saptagiri, where Jaya had grown up in, and moves back to her parents’ house in Ambegaon for family support taking her children with her. Jaya tells her friend and mentor Kamath: “My mother made me homeless. She sold our home” (153) (emphasis mine). But for Jaya, the sense of a home is mediated and affirmed through the presence of her father. In spite of

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23 “One of the bitterest Necessities for Asian Americans has to contend with total devaluation of their Asian ethnicity. If they stomach it, they get caught in a cruel bind: to become acceptable to a racist society, one must first reject an integral part of oneself” (“Encounters with the racial shadow” Wong 77). To be acceptable to her society and home, Jaya must reject the “Kusum” in herself.
her obstinate claims on Saptagiri – she annoys her mother by going straight to Saptagiri instead of Ambegaon for her vacations --- she soon realizes that without her father and her paternal grandmother, Saptagiri ceases to be home. Her mother’s widowhood disempowers her and as a fatherless child, Jaya’s claim on that paternal home is considerably weaker.

Jaya and Mohan move out of their house in Churchgate to their old house in Dadar, but curiously it is in the crumbling building in Dadar rather than her well-appointed Churchgate house that Jaya feels truly “at home,” with “none of that frightening disorientation that overcomes me when I wake up in a strange place and can’t connect myself to the world” (18). The Churchgate house is “strange” because the family that lived in it was a careful construct, the memory of which is as remote as a “glossy, colored advertising visual” (4). In Dadar, Jaya is under no compulsion to keep up the charade of the model family and can admit to herself that she had “often found family life unendurable. Worse than anything else had been the boredom of unchanging pattern, the unending monotony” (4). Like Sarita’s withdrawal into her natal home that had allowed her the time to reflect and put things in perspective, Jaya’s move into the Dadar house leads to moments of startling clarity. The house at Dadar is a powerful connection to her past, and in the comforting proximity of the “ghosts” (12) of her past – “Makarandmama, Ai, Dada and his friends, Rahul,” Jaya also sees her own “ghost,” a woman who had let herself be swamped by her nesting and housekeeping instincts: “This is what I saw, the ghost of a woman who had scrubbed and cleaned and taken an inordinate pride in her achievements, even in a toilet free from stains and smells” (13).
Of interest here is the role that the city of Mumbai plays in Jaya’s mobility narrative. Mumbai, their larger “home,” features more prominently in this novel than in *The Dark*. The pace and the bustle of this (then) fast-growing city set off Jaya’s immobility/ circular trajectory. The book gives us sporadic glimpses of the city - Churchgate Station, Tilak Bridge, the “mobs, the brawls, the drunkards, the schoolchildren, the coy newlyweds. And processions” (54). From her porch, a newly married Jaya watches men with flags and banners march by, united in protest or demand, and she is conscious of a change in the air. She recalls, “I had a queer sensation, as if something was breaking up, a design or a pattern I was familiar with. Without it, I would have to face the unknown” (54). The shifting pattern is also reflected in the growing migrant population of Mumbai. People from the “barren countryside” (72) “pour” into the city foraging for food and shelter, substantially altering its topography: “They were everywhere, on pavements and station platforms, under bridges, in parks huddled in frightened groups on traffic islands at night” (72) The refugee children pick the city clean of “anything that could be eaten, used, bartered, converted or sold” (72) The changes in the city’s landscape are more than cosmetic. The expanding population refuses to stay within its limits, impinging on the lives of Jaya and Mohan and others like them, as in the incident on the beach, where Jaya senses and fears the predatory instincts in the hungry young children who gather to watch her children eat their ice-creams. This is a Mumbai where the gulf between the haves and the have-nots is widening with serious consequences. Greed, competition, and the fight for survival are some of the impulses
that also lie behind Mohan’s misstep at his workplace. Mohan’s corruption is of a piece with this furiously mobile world.

“A precious dungeon”: Home in *The Thousand Faces of Night*

*The Thousand Faces of Night*, which won the 1993 Commonwealth Prize for Best First Book, tells the story of Devi. The novel begins with Devi returning from the U.S., breaking up with her American boyfriend in the process, to marriage with Mahesh, fixed by her widowed mother, Sita. Her narrative is interspersed by the stories that her grandmother Pati tells her, drawn from Hindu epics about model Indian wives. Devi’s life in her marital home is lonely since Mahesh’s work takes him frequently out of town. Her father-in-law Baba and the old domestic help Mayamma provide her with a level of companionship but Baba passes away soon. She feels alienated from her pragmatic and ambitious businessman husband and their inability to have a child drives them further apart. She is drawn to her neighbor, the flamboyant musician Gopal and elopes with him. However, that partnership too yields no emotional returns and finally, Devi returns to her natal home and her mother, greeted by the sounds of the veena\(^4\) that Sita had discarded after her marriage.

Like *That Long Silence*, Hariharan’s novel too takes note of the Indian immigration to the U.S. that was developing momentum in the nineties, though its interest in the phenomenon is more sustained compared to Deshpande’s novel. *The Thousand Faces* acts as a reality check to the discourse of unchecked freedom and mobility for the Indian female immigrant found in works such as Bharati Mukherjee’s

\(^{24}\)A musical stringed instrument
Jasmine. Sita sends Devi to the U.S. to acquire an American degree where she starts seeing Dan, a fellow African American student. The decision to send Devi abroad for higher studies is fairly radical, given the fact that she comes from a conservative family, where marriage is regarded as the ultimate destiny for a woman; that decision also marks an important step in Devi’s engagement with the public sphere – the world. And yet Devi’s stay in the U.S. is shadowed by a sense of transience. She is unable to regard her relationship with Dan as anything but temporary. Her life in India trails her in the marriage proposals from suitable Indian grooms that her mother keeps mailing her: “All through her two years of M.A. there had been stray proposals from India, neat little letters from her mother on the bridegroom’s prospects, or his parents’ reputation for liberalism, making them promising in-laws for a risky oddity, an America-returned bride” (5). Devi herself is acutely conscious of the role of the family in her life – “far too important, far too precious” (3) to be compromised by a permanent relationship with the American Dan. More importantly, she is aware of the distance between her and Dan, and understands that their partnership has been forged in the hearth of racial otherness in the U.S. which may not survive when taken outside the country. He was “Devi’s answer to the white claustrophobia of an all-clean, all-American campus. Even before they could come together in friendship, approach romance, a link had formed itself between them across the classroom, a bond forged on the fringes of middle-class, vitamin-popping milk-drinking America” (3). Though they are both not white, that itself is not enough to cement their relationship in a bond of permanence. In a gathering of Dan’s black friends, Devi finds herself on the fringes, “surrounded by people, in increasing isolation, terrified
of drawing attention to herself, but aching for any means to do just that” (4), unable to fully participate in the conversation in the room about being “black in white America” (4). Devi is able to break up with Dan because of her awareness of this distance from him; her American dream$^{25}$ – one cannot miss the use of the word in the conclusion to the first part of her novel – is fleeting and inconsequential like a dream and not resonant with the material success and upward mobility characteristic of the immigrant’s success story. As if stirred out of a dream, she is able to slip into her old life easily so much so that she gazes “wonderingly” (20) at Dan’s wedding gifts – a shirt and a swimsuit as “relics I cannot place in time” (20).

Like Deshpande’s writings, Hariharan’s novel too posits the home as a space of violence and strangeness that does not support female mobility. The natal home affords Devi little opportunity for growth as an individual. While Sita does send her abroad to study, her reasons for doing so are not all that academic – she sends her away to avert some adolescent misadventure. The reader does not see Devi use her American degree in any way. Of course, that is also due to Mahesh’s preference for a stay-at-home wife. As in Deshpande’s novels, women internalize patriarchal logic and prove resistant to other women’s aspirations of mobility. Sita’s determined charting of her daughter’s course in life has its own tragic backstory, where she herself was the victim of patriarchal expectations. An accomplished and dedicated veena player before marriage, Sita is

$^{25}$“As she ran up the waiting place, she felt her American years slip away from her shoulders and trip her up in dank, stagnant puddles around her feet. The brief dream (italics mine) was over. She raced ahead, not so much to escape her purgatory, but to meet halfway, naked and vulnerable, her home-coming” (The Thousand Faces 11).
compelled to abort her musical ambitions because of her father-in-law’s disapproval as
the older man and family head believes that her alternate passion is a threat to her
primary duties as a wife. Even as she discards her veena to focus on becoming the perfect
daughter-in-law and wife, Sita channels her unused energy and passion into shaping the
lives of her husband Mahadevan and her daughter, sculpting them into models of great
social success, risking their personal dreams in the process. Her husband becomes a “full-
fledged sahib… who could list among his achievements a new car, a chauffeur, three full-
time servants and a gardener, the best of schools for his daughter” (104) and Devi
becomes her “new veena” (104) to be moulded into the ideal wife, daughter-in-law and
mother. These narratives of success have their casualties. Mahadevan dies, it appears,
from sheer exhaustion while Devi marries a man who fits the bill of a good Indian
husband—materially sound and from a good family, but with whom she feels no
intellectual or emotional compatibility. In an audible echo of The Dark Holds, in The
Thousand Faces Devi describes Mahesh as a stranger. Mahesh is by turns, a “polite
stranger” (49) a “reasonable stranger” (49) and finally “the shadowy stranger”26 (54) who
would rather have his wife join painting classes than take up a job, who desperately wants
a heir and grows frustrated when Devi is unable to provide him with one.

Sita’s relentless “tending” of her daughter finds an echo in the tending of her
garden:

26 Devi describes her marriage thus: “This then is marriage, the end of ends, two or three
brief encounters a month when bodies stutter together in lazy, inarticulate lust. Two
weeks a month when the shadowy stranger who casually strips me of my name, snaps his
fingers and demands a smiling handmaiden. And the rest? It is waiting, all over again, for
life to begin, or to end and begin again” (54).
Sita would start the new shoots off in the right direction, well before the possibility of any rebellion. Then she would check every day to see that it grew almost horizontally: a difficult, painstaking job, since the natural growth of the plant is upward…The tender, clinging young creeper, so eager to be led in the right direction, so rewarding for a trainer, reminded Sita of Devi. She sprayed it herself, insecticide and fungicide once a week, and hormonal growth helpers once a month. The results were gratifying; in a year, the wall was covered with long brush strokes of sharp-edged, tiny leaves, the milky, ivory blooms shy and promising. (98-99)

Sita only realizes the consequences of her tampering with nature when she gets the news of Devi’s elopement with Gopal. After the initial shock and disappointment, Sita significantly picks up her discarded veena. Her daughter’s clear rejection of the route she had chalked out for her appears to redirect Sita to forgotten paths. The novel ends where Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds* begins, with Devi opening the gate of her natal home, greeted both by the sight of the garden growing “wild and overgrown” (139), away from Sita’s pruning hand, as well as the sound of the veena --- perhaps prophetic of the freedom from restraint and the premium on individual choice that the lives of both women are now going to embody. In a comparative study of the work of both Deshpande and Harihara, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan points out that “the ‘advance’ over *That Long Silence* lies in the heroine’s unequivocal rejection of marriage, and in her seeking of newly-forged ties with the mother; the sameness lies in the absence of options for women
outside the bounds of family” (231). Hariharan’s novel concludes with the possibility of
the home --- here the family -- emerging as a space of nurturing.

In the novel Pati and Baba, members of the older generation, demonstrate how the
patriarchal logic is disseminated. Experienced storytellers both, their narratives script
ideal wifehood for Devi. Pati is Devi’s paternal grandmother, someone whom Sita with
her cool pragmatism defines as the “senile fabulist” (104). Pati envelops Devi’s summers
in stories from Hindu myth and legend - narratives that center on loyal and steadfast
wives like Damayanti and Gandhari. As Devi notes, these are “no ordinary bedtime
stories” (27) but each chosen for a “particular occasion, a story in reply to each of my
childish questions” (27). Pati’s stories have a specific purpose – they “fashioned moulds.
Ideal moulds, impossibly ambitious, that challenged the puny listener to stretch her frame
and fit into the vast spaces, live up to her illustrious ancestors” (27). So for example, the
story about Gandhari tying a blindfold around her eyes to keep step with her blind
husband comes in response to Devi’s question about a photograph of her mother with a
veena, trying to make sense of this unfamiliar incarnation of a familiar figure. Pati’s
story, as all of her stories, frames that act of denial and cruel suppression of individual
wishes in the service of the family, in a narrative of wifely devotion, meant to have an
effect on her young listener. Pati, perhaps half-knowingly, abets in the dissemination of
patriarchal consciousness by attempting to nudge her granddaughter into “ideal moulds”

27 Damayanti was the wife of the king Nala. Pati’s story has to do with Damayanti’s
swayamvara or literally, “self-chosen groom,” the ancient practice in royal households of
princesses choosing their grooms from an assembly of invited suitors.
28 Gandhari was the wife of the blind king, Dhritarashtra from the Hindu epic
Mahabharata, who decided to wear a blindfold for the rest of her life in act of wifely
solidarity with her husband.
(27) through the powerful medium of the story – as Karen D’Souza observes, “Devi’s grandmother, Pati, illustrates the role of women in disseminating the traditional stories from one generation to another, indicating their complicity in the promulgation of patriarchal ideology” (35). Baba, on the other hand, is a more conscious abettor, still smarting from personal scars of his wife deserting him for a life of spiritual pursuit. While Pati’s stories, Devi observes, “were a prelude to my womanhood, an initiation into its subterranean possibilities. His define the limits… They always have for their center-point an exacting touchstone for a woman, a wife” (51).

The narrative of Mayamma reminds Devi as well as the reader of the huge gaps between Pati’s myth-laden narratives and the lived realities of the subaltern Indian woman. As D’Souza points out, “In his (Baba’s) absence Devi is then introduced to the bleak subaltern histories of real rather than mythologized women, recounted by the aging family servant Mayamma” (34). Mayamma is the subaltern who “speaks” about her lot in curiously non-judgmental and detached terms. With a philandering, abusive husband, an

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29 Parvati, Baba’s wife, secretly leaves home to become an ascetic. Her decision to become an ascetic seems to be her rejection of the confining “mould” of domesticity. Probably given her generation and time, asceticism is the only means of rebellion available to her, something that foreshadows Devi’s elopement.

30 On the multiple narratives in her novels, Hariharan says: “My novels would be impossible without plurality in many ways of narrative voices, alternative scenarios, reinterpreted tales and so on. Perhaps this is also a comment on the nature of the eternal tale. My novels have been, so far, preoccupied with the powers of the simple—but not simplistic—tale. And it is in the nature of these stories all of us hear and retell that they are never finished. There is no authoritative version; they must be twisted and retold for our times and lives” (Pioneer 1999).
oppressive mother-in-law and a thankless son who dies a painful, diseased death, Mayamma exists as a grotesque parody of the trajectory of the ideal Hindu wife.

Incidentally the relationship bordering on friendship between employer and domestic retainer that is explored more fully in Thrity Umrigar’s *The Space Between Us* is found here too, though in shadowy form. Mayamma tells Devi of her flight from her home, from the haunting memories of her mother-in-law and son and how Parvati had taken her in and given her a “home”: “from that day, Devi, Parvatiamma was my sister, my mother, my daughter” (82). But the relationship does not last long enough to be redemptive for Mayamma. Parvati leaves home and Mayamma stays behind, the senile family retainer who is treated with indulgence but no respect, Devi’s surrogate mother-in-law without the privileges and power of the real one.

Conclusion

“I don’t like to call myself a feminist writer,” stated Deshpande in an interview with the journalist Aditi De, “I say I’m a feminist, but I don’t write to propagate an ism.” Deshpande has always been careful to dissociate herself from the political, but it is remarkable how her -- and Hariharan’s -- projection of the domestic space can be read as metonymic of the nation-state, as a site that is simultaneously perilous and safe, strange and familiar, with firm rules that lie behind exclusion and inclusion. This is something that I will explore further in the next chapter.
I think any novelist would have to be fascinated by a city like Bombay. It’s a madhouse, bursting with color and noise and people and melodrama and stories. -Thrity Umrigar, “Bookslut.com.”

This chapter extends my interest in examining the theme of female mobility as represented in fiction by select Indian/South Asian women writers. As shown in my previous chapters, while diasporic writers Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri offer a subtle critique of global mobility for women in their fiction, India-based writers Shashi Deshpande and Githa Hariharan demonstrate the limits of female mobility in the domestic space, in the process interrogating its social projection as a space of safety and care. These writers problematize the dichotomy between mobility and immobility for women in their writing, by demonstrating that spatial mobility may not always be empowering or liberating, and conversely, that spaces of confinement may sometimes function as spaces of liberation. In this chapter, I consider female (and male) mobility in the nation-space, with special reference to Thrity Umrigar’s novel *The World We Found* (2012) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel *One Amazing Thing* (2010) respectively. Central to my discussion is the stranger danger discourse, which is common to both texts and can be located in their portrayal of the global aftermath of 9/11. I owe a debt of gratitude to feminist theorist Sara Ahmed’s work on strange bodies and her discussion of how the figure of the stranger complicates the experience of place and home for the individual.
In her work *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality*, Sara Ahmed discusses the figure of the stranger in a number of discourses:

The stranger is clearly figured in a variety of discourses, including the crime prevention and personal safety discourse of ‘stranger danger.’ In such a discourse, which is clearly a field of knowledge that marks out what is safe as well as what is dangerous, the stranger is always a figure, stalking the streets: there are some-bodies who simply are strangers, and who pose danger in their very co-presence in a given street. (3)

I engage with this discourse to show how individual mobility in the nation-space is determined by one’s identity as a stranger or citizen as well as to emphasize the constructedness of such identities.

Ahmed also writes that “the alien stranger is … not beyond human, but a mechanism for allowing us to face that which we have already designated as the beyond” (3). The stranger, Ahmed suggests, is an arbitrary construction, manufactured in opposition to us/the native, to house our insecurities and fears about difference and about the Other. The stranger and the native are bound in a relationship of conflicted intimacy – while we/the native may designate the stranger as “the beyond,” we also need it to assure ourselves about our status as natives, as those who belong as opposed to those who do not. Without the stranger, the native or the citizen’s existence is suspect.

Ahmed further identifies strangers as “not simply those who are not known in this dwelling, but those who are, in their very proximity, already recognized as not belonging, as being out of place. Such a recognition of those who are out of place allows both the
demarcation and enforcement of the boundaries of ‘this place,’ as where ‘we’ dwell” (21-22). Within the boundaries of “where we dwell,” one’s identification as a stranger, as someone “not belonging, as being out of place,” strongly affects the experience of individual mobility. I argue that Umrigar and Divakaruni’s texts deconstruct the binaries of individual mobility and immobility in the nation-space, by bringing to light the state’s strategic use of the stranger danger discourse to establish the nation as a homogeneous space through practices of ethnic and racial exclusion. While my focus is mostly on the female characters in the texts, I also bring in the male characters to highlight the differences in the way the discourse affects both men and women. The mobility of women in the texts are affected not only by the state’s practices but also by the wellmeaning yet oppressive practices of the men in their lives – the husbands and fathers.

The Religious Stranger in The World We Found

What is also common to both these novels is their setting. Umrigar and Divakaruni are both based in the U.S., yet they choose to write about non-American locations, facilitating, as Rajini Srikanth points out, a decentering of the U.S. in the consciousness of the American reader. Umrigar’s novel is set against the background of the Bombay riots that burnt the city between December 1992 and January 1993. The riots were sparked off by the politically motivated demolition of the historical Babri mosque in Ayodhya in northern India by a mob of Hindu zealots led by a well-known politician, L.K. Advani. The mosque had presumably been built on a site of great religious and emotional significance to Hindus. Ayodhya is believed by many Hindus to be the birthplace of Rama, a Hindu deity and the protagonist of the epic Ramayana. Following
the destruction of the mosque on December 6, 1992, several cities in the country erupted in unprecedented sectarian violence; Bombay, now Mumbai, was one of them. The violence occurred in two phases, December 7-27 1992 and January 7-25, 1993 (“Mumbai riots 1992-93: The days that changed the city,” Firstpost). The official death toll was 900, but hundreds more went missing and were presumed dead for years, and several thousands were displaced from their homes to newly formed Muslim ghettos. Umrigar’s novel not only evokes this climate of terror and mob hysteria through the memories of two of its protagonists, Iqbal and Nishta, but also takes a closer look at the lasting scars left by these riots – the invisible borders between individuals and communities.

The World We Found is the story of four friends – Kavita, Nishta, Laleh and Armaiti – idealistic women deeply committed to social and political justice. Nishta, who is a Hindu, marries a Muslim college friend Iqbal, and is promptly ostracized by her family. Laleh settles down to a blissful marriage with the well-to-do Adish, another college friend and fellow Parsi, while Armaiti migrates to the States and marries an American, Richard. Kavita, on the other hand, is a closet lesbian who loves Armaiti. With Nishta’s marriage and Armaiti’s immigration, the friends drift apart till a crisis brings them together. Armaiti discovers that she is suffering from terminal cancer and wants her friends with her in her last days. Laleh and Kavita trace Nishta to a Muslim neighborhood, in visibly strained financial circumstances, under a new Muslim name. Iqbal too has changed visibly from the secular activist they used to know in college into a paranoid and possessive husband and we later learn that the change is due to his traumatic experiences in the Bombay riots. When Iqbal turns down their request to allow
Nishta to travel with them to see Armaiti, Laleh and Kavita take it upon themselves to help her escape her family, which not only includes Iqbal but also his vigilant mother Ammi. In this venture they are assisted by Nishta’s sister-in-law Mumtaz.

The events in the novel also unfold under the shadow of the Twin Towers attack. Like the Bombay 31 riots, 9/11 is also present as memory and as a visible effect. Laleh’s broken tooth reminds her of the “New York skyline after the towers went missing, a gap that drew attention to what was absent” (4). The gap is metonymic of the disruptions that significantly and permanently altered the physical and emotional landscapes of India and America. 32 The trope of the danger within --- the threat of violence and disruption brewing inside the nation-as-home --- is a significant one in the text, manifesting itself early on in the cancer gnawing surreptitiously at Armaiti’s body and in Richard’s surprise extra-marital affair which puts an immediate end to their apparently happy marriage.

31 Till 1995, India’s financial capital Mumbai was known as Bombay. In 1995 the right-wing nationalist party Shiv Sena won the elections in the state of Maharashtra and announced that Bombay was to be renamed Mumbai after the city’s patron goddess Mumbadevi. The Shiv Sena had been pushing for this change quite a few years before 1995, arguing that the name Bombay was a residue of colonial rule, a corruption of the name Mumbai. Umrigar, however, refers to the city as Bombay in all her work. Many other writers including Suketu Mehta, Rohinton Mistry and Salman Rushdie have chosen to do so as a form of symbolic resistance.

32 In an interview with India Abroad, Umrigar goes into the depth of what the “gap” signifies: “Other things were lost in that fire – things that were harder to define. The fire had taken that ridiculous, cocky self-assuredness of Bombayites who believed we had been blessedly spared the communal hatreds that gnawed like a cancer at the rest of India; that easy, nonchalant tolerance, which made us celebrate Christmas, Id and Diwali with equal gusto; that swaggering superiority that made us believe we were too smart, too sophisticated, too cosmopolitan to fall for the petty manipulations of politicians who pitted one group against the other. That Bombay was different from India. The fire had taken my innocence, my childhood and the city of my childhood.”
Armaiti “had been afraid of the dangerous, unpredictable thing residing in Richard’s heart, and it turned out that she had been carrying her own dangerous, unpredictable thing, nestled in her brain” (15). This “dangerous, unpredictable thing” could well be a metaphor for the emotions that fanned the flames of suspicion regarding Islam in Bombay in 1993 and in different American cities after the 9/11 attack. Violence is the link between both nations, and loss and pain are important themes in a story that is built on the memories of two carnages motivated by religious fundamentalism. The other important link between the two nations is the construction of the Muslim as stranger. Inderpal Grewal comments on the increased “demonization” (Grewal 207) of the figure of the Muslim terrorist that the Twin Towers attack fuelled:

[M]any other nation-states used the new alliance against ‘terrorism’ as an opportunity to repress insurgent movements and thus to support nationalist projects of state power in many parts of the world. In India, for instance, the Muslim as terrorist has become a discursive regime produced by right-wing Hindu groups and the Indian state. There the figure of the ‘Islamic terrorist’ is an already familiar representation within dominant media, so that 9/11 provided an opportunity for its further demonization (207).

While the Bombay riots are the defining moments in The World We Found, 9/11 is not far away from memory. Iqbal’s sense of alienation in Bombay is aggravated by what takes place in the U.S. The World We Found is a poignant depiction of the othering of Muslims locally and globally, in a Bombay rocked by sectarian violence first, and then in a post 9/11 world --- more pointedly through Iqbal and Nishta’s changing fortunes. Iqbal
is in some ways representative of the people worst affected by the Bombay riots. As Suketu Mehta observes in his narrative non-fiction *Maximum City*, “There hasn’t been a major riot since. But the fault lines had been set. An entire segment of the population had been made to feel like foreigners in the city in which they were born and raised” (46).

Iqbal turns into a stranger in the neighborhood overnight ---- to return to Ahmed, a “some-body” who “pose[s] danger in their very co-presence in a given street” (3). Umrigar’s text is full of examples that show how Iqbal is at the receiving end of suspicion because of his religion, a situation that the riots aggravate. He is the victim of rampant cultural stereotyping:

Leaving college and getting a job at the bank had been like waking up from a dream: the jokes on Eid about whether he had slaughtered a goat before coming to work that morning; the automatic assumption that he supported the Pakistani team during the India-Pakistan cricket matches; the hostile looks directed his way every time there was a terrorist attack anywhere in India. (145)

From having been a secular social activist who falls in love with and marries a Hindu girl, Iqbal turns into a born again Muslim who intensely “dislikes Hindus,” (62) prefers to stick close to fellow Muslims and coaxes his wife into religious conversion. However it is clear from the text that this transformation is more externally induced than internally realized.

Iqbal is unable to dodge the dragnet of the stranger discourse and even close friends like Adish are not above tarring him with the same brush. When Laleh and Kavita succeed in helping Nishta escape her house, Adish is worried about the payback, and
suspects Iqbal capable of the worst kind of vengeance – “how far would he go to restore his sense of honor, to avenge the betrayal?” (225). In the novel’s climactic scenes at the airport, Adish resorts to religious profiling of a serious kind to buy Laleh and her friends enough time to get away. He uses the stranger danger discourse to his own advantage and gets Iqbal arrested under the suspicion of being a terrorist. In response to Adish’s call for help, the policemen pounce on Iqbal and assault him, without bothering to investigate the charges against him seriously. His “long beard, his mullah-like attire” (290) incriminate him, as Adish knew very well that they would. Sara Ahmed writes how “the projection of danger onto that which is already recognizable as different – as different from the familiar space of home and homeland – hence allows violence to take place: it becomes a mechanism for the enforcement of boundary lines that almost secure the home-nation as safe haven” (37). The policeman’s immediate response to the red flag of terrorism is symptomatic of state violence that functions to impose and sustain arbitrary boundary lines between the safe/citizen and the dangerous/stranger. Adish had “counted on the inspector’s own prejudices, had used the inspector’s visceral distrust of Muslims to play off against Iqbal’s otherness” (290) and he succeeds.

The incident at the airport also testifies to the dual effect of religion and class on Iqbal’s im/mobility. Iqbal is disadvantaged twice over, through religion and class and his abjection is reinforced by comparisons with Adish, the rich Parsi entrepreneur who also happens to belong to a religious minority. Yet the Parsis in Bombay are a model minority who rarely find themselves ever in the thick of ethnic tension. Also unlike Iqbal, Adish has been born to wealth and his economic status ensures him a certain immunity from
social discrimination. The meeting between Adish and Iqbal is a crucial section of the book (79), which brings up the riots for the first time. Of relevance to the novel are their differing responses to it. Adish’s recall of the riots is that of a deeply affected bystander, but a bystander nevertheless, who thinks that the riots were “horrible” because “it was a blot on Bombay’s reputation. The secular, easygoing city that I had known had changed forever during that time” (89). But to Iqbal, Adish’s comments can only be “theoretical…something to talk about over dinner” (89). Unlike Adish, he had lived the “blot” and experienced all the horror that came with it.

Iqbal is one of the many nameless, faceless victims of politically engineered tragedies who do not find a place in the master narrative of official casualties, in the numbers of deaths and disappearances. His story offers a counter-narrative to the official discourse, going beyond statistics to bring up the many spiritual deaths that remain unaccounted for. As Nishta observes:

Maybe when they counted the casualties and death toll from the 1993 riots, they should’ve counted men like Iqbal also, good, open-hearted men who died a spiritual death in those riots, men whose lives were spared but whose spirits burned along with those who were set on fire in their homes or out on the street, whom the mad mobs consecrated with gasoline and then set aflame. (220)

Despite his obvious bitterness Iqbal retains his kindness and humanity and does not condone the 9/11 attacks, saying that “these people make me ashamed of my faith” (221).

If with Iqbal, the text probes the limits to mobility in the nation-space experienced by the male members of a minority group, with Nishta it explores the gendered
experience of im/mobility. Nishta is at a disadvantage not only because of religion and class like her husband, but also because of her gender. Though not born a Muslim, she is Ahmed’s stranger by association. While she does not have to actively negotiate the hostility her husband encounters in his workspace because she is a homemaker, she has to grapple with her own experience of marginality. Her upper-class Hindu parents find it hard to accept her marriage to Iqbal, cutting her out of their lives and banishing her memory to oblivion. The trope of death/disappearance is prominent in the section of the narrative that relates to Nishta. In fact, she colludes in her own erasure or metaphorical death. “Nobody here by that name,” (55) she lies to her friends when they run into her. When she does show her face under her burkha, it is under a different name and identity – a “plump, severe-looking, middle-aged woman” who goes by the name of Zoha (58).

The World We Found, in a manner reminiscent of both Lahiri and Deshpande’s texts discussed earlier, also explores the limits to female mobility in the home-as-domestic space. Like the mothers in Lahiri’s short stories, Nishta too finds her life mapped and regulated by a familiar web of domestic chores and family responsibilities. As with Jaya in Deshpande’s The Long Silence, the home is marked for Nishta by the experience of subtle violence, a sense of “not being home,” to borrow a phrase from Mohanty and Martin. Theorizing home, Mohanty and Martin observe that: “‘being home’ refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; ‘not being home’ is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself” (90). Both Nishta (and Kavita) in Umrigar’s text
experience their homes as not being home, since they are forced to repress their differences within themselves to accept the “safety and coherence” that their homes have to offer. Nishta and Iqbal’s marriage was the culmination of their youthful idealism that challenged religious and economic boundaries. But in a world where religion has been heavily politicized, the bond is corroded. In response to the Bombay riots and the subsequent communal tension, Iqbal grows hystERICally protective of Nishta, and ends up limiting her communication with the world outside her home. While Nishta outwardly complies with his wishes regarding the way she lead her life, resentment simmers within her, and this is evident in their heated exchange following Adish’s visit. Nishta responds angrily to Iqbal’s sneering claims that he has done his best for the “Hindu princess” (124). She tells him: “Princess…that’s what you call a woman who you keep a prisoner in her own home? Who is not allowed to talk to her friends?” (124). While Iqbal is oppressed by the state on the one hand, as a man he recapitulates state oppression at home.

Nishta is physically circumscribed within the boundaries of her house and her neighborhood, her life bound up in a daily routine that consists of household chores, looking after her aged mother-in-law, and escorting her young niece to and from classes. Mobility is a privilege associated with class and religion and when Nishta marries Iqbal who comes from a comparatively inferior social and economic class, much like Manohar in The Dark Holds No Terrors, she forfeits her class privileges: “Coming from an affluent, high-caste Hindu family, she had always taken certain privileges for granted. But Iqbal’s family was poor, and there were constant reminders of this” (166). There is a
nagging sense of inhibition that she experiences because of her mother-in-law’s penny-pinching ways and because of the visible decline in her living standards. She is also complicitous in her own captivity (174), falling in with Iqbal’s wishes out of a misplaced sense of love and loyalty— for example, when Iqbal confiscates her cell phone to stop her from communicating with her friends, she does not resist and initially even refrains from calling them from a payphone.

Iqbal demands that Nishta wear the burqa. The text is interesting in the way it addresses competing discourses surrounding the burqa, its complex sense of power and disempowerment. As the transnational theorist, filmmaker and writer Trinh T.Minh-ha reminds us:

If the act of unveiling has a liberating potential, so does the act of veiling. It all depends on the context in which such an act is carried out, or more precisely, on how and where women see dominance. .. So that when women decide to lift the veil one can say that they do so in defiance of their men’s oppressive right to their bodies. But when they decide to keep or put the veil they once took off they might do so to reappropriate their space or to claim a new difference in defiance of genderless, hegemonic, centered standardization.(2)

When Nishta puts on the burqa for the first time she is aware of, as Trinh puts it, its “liberating” potential, its subversive power that lies in the wearer’s Panopticon invisibility: “she could wear this cloak and disappear within it, be reduced to nothing more than a pair of eyes looking out onto the world, spying on it while it couldn’t spy back” (187). The possibility of invisible surveillance that the burqa offers recalls the
disciplining architecture of Jeremy Bentham’s blueprint of the Panopticon that Foucault brings to our notice. Maliha Masood also points out the power of vision that the veil may confer in her essay, “On the Road: Travels with My Hijab”:

As a physical barrier, the veil denies men their usual privilege of discerning whomever they desire. By default, the women are in command. The female scrutinizes the male. Her gaze from behind the anonymity of her face veil or niqab is a kind of surveillance that casts her in the dominant position. It enables a woman to uncover with her eyes, to make visible that which is forbidden. So there seems to be an acute relationship between veiling and vision that undercuts the legacy of social, cultural, political and religious meanings associated with the Muslim veil. (226)

But Nishta also experiences the invisibility as paradoxically debilitating: a “claustrophobic, buried alive feeling” (188). The discomfort is physical, felt at a very tangible and corporeal level, as well as emotional: “Her face broke out in sweat brought on by the unimaginable heat under the hood and a heart-pounding fear that was existential. It felt like death – a slipping away, a disappearance, obliteration” (188). It is not just her body that is obscured by the garment, but also her voice, because when she speaks, Iqbal does not hear her and she realizes that she has to speak louder than usual to be heard (188). The discourse on the burqa moves into larger questions of a woman’s

33 Masood discusses this aspect of the veil too in her essay: “At first, it felt like a bandage wrapped around my skull. I had trouble hearing people speak unless I faced them head-on and watched their lips move” (213).
autonomy and control over her body. While Iqbal claims that the garment is protection, a shield against the “lust” in the eyes of predatory men, Nishta resists this sexual policing, transferring the onus of responsibility on the men instead: “then they’re the ones who should wear the burkha…on their dicks” (189).

The burkha is also metonymic of Nishta’s larger experience of spatial confinement. Her closest family members, her husband and mother-in-law, collude in the figure of the jailer. The surveillance she is subjected to manifests itself not only in Iqbal’s confiscation of her mobile phone, restricting her communication with the world outside her house, but also in her mother-in-law Ammi’s very physical watch over her. Ammi is a sinister presence in this story, silent but pervasive, constantly seated on the porch and keeping watch on the streets below, particularly on her daughter-in-law. Stealing out of her house to make a secret phone call to her friends, Nishta says: “Habit made her turn around and glance up at the fifth floor of her apartment building. Almost immediately her mother-in-law, sitting on the balcony as she did everyday of her life, waved at her. Nishta marveled at the fact that even at this distance, Ammi could spot her among all the other clad women” (190). Nishta and her sister-in-law Mumtaz have to go to great lengths of subterfuge and deceit to evade the older woman’s hawk-like gaze. Ammi’s policing action – similar to Pati’s stories in Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces* though definitely more virulent – enforces patriarchal control in the home. Her collusion is the only way to ensure Iqbal’s control within the domestic space.

Iqbal’s curbs on Nishta’s mobility and his attempts to confine her to a life of domesticity arise in part from his desire to shield her from the hostility he himself had to
confront as a result of his religion. In fact, his anxiety about Nishta traveling abroad to meet Armaidt is well-founded, in the context of the paranoia surrounding Islam post-9/11 U.S. While the text is not totally unsympathetic to Iqbal, it shows how his decisions, however well-meaning, have unfortunate consequences. Nishta’s independent spirit is broken. Because he appropriates all powers of decision-making in their relationship – whether it is his abrupt resignation from his job at the bank or his decision to undergo a vasectomy – Nishta is gradually pushed toward a silent, secondary role in their marriage. The “Hindu princess-jailer” exchange is a crucial one in the story for it marks Nishta’s refusal to stay silent and invisible any longer, and to try and take ownership of her life.

The Paradox of Home

Just like Sarita’s natal home in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Nishta’s marital home deconstructs binaries of imprisonment and release, proving to be a space of claustrophobia and conversely, liberation. Her resistance to Iqbal’s autocracy is generated within the home itself. While she finds it “stifling” (169), it also incites a surge of violence and energy in her. She wants to “kick” open the door, “rip off her burqa” (168) and run away to a “place where he’d [Iqbal] never find her” (168). She finds an ally in Mumtaz, and they conspire to throw Iqbal and Ammi off the scent as she sneaks out of her house, first for her visa interview, and later her flight to the States. When she steps out of her neighborhood for the first time, she throws her veil back from her face, gazing on and letting the world gaze on her. The visa interview, her first major challenge in the world outside her home, helps her rediscover some of the courage and resourcefulness that had marked her activism as a college student. She refuses to be intimidated by the
snooty visa officer’s inquisition and converses with him in French, smartly distancing herself from the cultural stereotype of the poor and disempowered Muslim woman that her down-at-heel appearance might have suggested, and earning his confidence in the process.

Nishta’s gradual literal and metaphorical unveiling in the events leading up to her flight from home culminates in the literal rejection of the burkha in the airport. If the burkha signified “deadness,” escape from its confines implies her transition to life. In response to her friends’ anxious queries, she admits to feeling “naked…exposed…scared. And free” (302), much like a newborn. Nishta’s impending departure to the States recycles popular discourses of immigration to the United States as a kind of rebirth for immigrants endorsed by writers like Bharati Mukherjee and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, but the text problematizes it by framing her future in doubt rather than cheerful optimism. Nishta’s future in the States is uncertain, as the voices around her – Laleh, Kavita and Adish – remind her, and the text offers no validation that her flight out of India is final.

Her thoughts inside the plane foreshadow the liminality of her life as an immigrant and her unstable sense of home: “She tells herself that she has to start practicing letting go right now, from inside this giant steel beehive, from this place that is already both India and not-India…her body will simply have to catch up with its new reality, her brain will have to learn to selectively remember and not remember” (303). But all her reflections in the novel’s conclusion are in the present tense, perhaps to communicate to the reader that what is important for the time being is the immediate present, and Nishta’s triumph, however transitory.
The Queer (as) Stranger

Kavita’s marginality and sense of victimization in her homes – the domestic as well as the national -- parallels that of Nishta. In India, queer activism did not begin till the 1980s, and as recently as December 2013, the Supreme Court upheld Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, re-criminalizing homosexuality, leaving people with alternative sexualities vulnerable to social and legal harassment and pushing them into the shadows. Kavita is forced to keep her lesbianism under careful wraps. She is another stranger at home, the lesbian outsider and perceived sexual deviant against whom the heterosexual citizen can construct his or her normalcy. Her brother Rohit seems to echo the popular social view of same sex attraction as a sexual perversion when he tells her that “homosexuality is what men do to each other in prison” (31). However flawed this description, it at least acknowledges the sexual preferences and practices of men. Women are written completely out of the sexuality narrative, as the novel emphasizes: “it was India in the late 1970s and how would anyone even know what name to give this strange, unseemly obsession with another woman?”(31). A young Kavita struggles with an intense and confusing attraction toward her close friend Armaiti, but has to mask her lesbianism under the socially respectable garb of the virgin-spinster daughter who lives with her aged mother; she constructs a heteronormative persona for herself. Till she meets her German lover Ingrid, she leads a claustrophobic existence, gently rebuffed by Armaiti, trapped in her prison of guilt and shame, and driven to seek sexual fulfillment in “unsatisfying, silent encounters” (132) initiated by masseurs in massage parlors.
In its attention to Kavita’s sexual orientation, the text offers a counter-narrative to the “sanitizing of ‘home space’” (Gopinath 130) similar to the counter-discourse Gayatri Gopinath locates in South Asian films such as Deepa Mehta’s Fire and Ismat Chughtai’s short story “The Quilt.” Gopinath has been outspoken in her views regarding the deliberate and inadvertent erasure of female homoeroticism in South Asian and diasporic South Asian cultural productions. She is highly critical of the representation of homosexuality in Mira Nair’s much feted film Monsoon Wedding despite the presence of a gay character in an apparently rigidly heteronormative Indian family, for “in effect, placing female homoeroticism outside the realm of the naturalized/rationalized space of the all-female ritual” (a ladies get-together prior to the wedding), thereby replicating “dominant nationalist discourse that defines queer female sexuality as unnatural, inauthentic, and alien to the sanctified spaces of home and nation” (123). Umrigar’s text parallels Gopinath’s sensitivity to the “slippage” between female homosociality and female homoeroticism, by focusing on the possibility of sexual and emotional attraction between women in an all-female space -- the close friendship between the four women in her novel. Kavita’s coming out to Laleh, in the chapter following Nishta’s outburst against Iqbal, is a significant moment in the novel. In a movement parallel to Nishta’s stepping out of her house without her veil, Kavita strips off her metaphorical veil. She introduces Ingrid to Laleh and Adish, and in a small way, forces her way into visibility, though it is uncertain if she manages to come out to her own family.

Kavita’s story also intersects with Iqbal’s in other disturbing ways. His humiliation at the airport at the hands of the policemen recycles earlier memories in the
text of police brutality. The text had previously referred to the oppressive powers of the state, manifested through its disciplining tactics -- in baton charges by policemen on protesting students and Kavita’s subsequent molestation in prison. Kavita’s punishment is primarily an exercise in misogyny, where the best way the policemen can think of coercing a woman with a voice into submission is by objectifying her -- by invading and abusing her body. The memory of the incident haunts Kavita for the rest of her life, and its cancerous growth into a guilty, shame-filled memory adds to her existing sense of alienation. The state, Umrigar’s text seems to suggest, colludes in the creation of its strangers.

The Spatialization of Violence: Bombay’s Muslim Ghettos

Umrigar’s text acknowledges the lasting and visible effect of the riots on individual mobility through its references to the Muslim ghettos that formed in Bombay after the carnage, to allow its residents a sense of security and freedom. Iqbal and his family flee their homes in upmarket areas and move to the “shithole neighborhood” (89) where he currently lives, largely because of “the safety in numbers, in case those Hindu butchers decide again to spill more Muslim blood” (89). This movement is an illustration of Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s concept of “necessitous mobility,” that I have

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34 In the Livemint &The Wall Street Journal, Priyanka P. Narain writes about this ghettoization of Bombay following the riots: “After the 1992 riots in response to Babri Masjid’s demolition, India’s most cosmopolitan city saw its social fabric ripped, then shredded. The biggest casualty was housing. People who had lived together for decades suddenly became suspicious of each other’s religious identities, and the city gave birth to countless communal ghettos. Even the wealthy and well-established among Muslims found themselves moving out of largely Hindu suburbs such as Andheri and Vile Parle to Muslim localities in Jogeshwari, Kurla and Mahim.”
explored in detail in Chapter II --- a mobility that is paradoxically empowering and
disempowering since it is a matter of necessity rather than choice. Iqbal and his family’s
movement to the ghetto is not a matter of choice. Within the ghetto itself, they may enjoy
a sense of safety, but this safety itself is questionable when one examines the
circumstances that warranted the creation of these ghettos. The “ghettos” in Mumbai are
physical reminders of the walls between the two communities exacerbated by the riots.
To quote the journalist Naresh Fernandes, “In the aftermath of the riots, significant
numbers of Muslims – whose community members formed the majority of the dead
during the violence – began to seek out safer neighborhoods and to create new havens”
(Mint 10 December 2012). Fernandes adds that “the largest of the Muslim islands to
emerge was the township of Mumbra, about 40 km from downtown Mumbai.” In 2012,
Mumbra had a population of “800,000 people – more than 80% of them Muslims”
(Fernandes). Fernandes quotes P.K. Shahjahan, a professor at the Tata Institute of Social
Sciences: “Mumbra proved attractive for members of the riot-scarred minority
community because it had a long presence of Konkani Muslims who owned land there.”
While the threat of physical violence may not be as potent as before, middle-class
Muslims, says Fernandes, continue to “gravitate toward Mumbra to avoid the
discrimination that they routinely face in finding homes in many parts of the city,” in
what, again, is an example of “necessitous mobility.” Nishta finds living in the ghetto a
complex experience, where her safety is bound up in her confinement within the ghetto.

The Muslim neighborhood Laleh and Kavita track Nishta down to, located
somewhere on the fringes of urban Mumbai, is a fictionalized version of Mumbra and the
other primarily Muslim spaces that Narain and Fernandes write about. It is a shadow land not immediately visible to the local urban dweller. Laleh, who has lived in Mumbai all her life, “had never been to this part of the city—this all-Muslim neighborhood—before” (52) with its “street teeming with people and flies, the cubbyhole-sized shops that lined the road, the stench of rotting vegetable and fish from the open-air market” (53). The neighborhood’s spatial marginality finds an echo in the emotional and imaginative marginalization of its residents. They are at the receiving end of suspicion and hostility primarily because of their religion.  

The cab driver tells Laleh and Kavita conspiratorially, “Can’t trust these beef-eaters, memsahib” (52, emphasis mine). Even as he stereotypes all Muslims as beef eaters who cannot be trusted, the cab driver asserts his own identity as a trustworthy non-beef eater [read Hindu], thus conflating religious identity with moral worth. Fernandes aptly describes these ghettos as “enclaves of exclusion” which contest the city’s narrative of itself as a “progressive, cosmopolitan metropolis” (Fernandes). The fragility of the categories of self and other, citizen and stranger, are shown up when Laleh and Kavita find themselves othered in the ghetto, as a result of the spectatorial gazes being flipped. Not wearing a burkha like the rest of the women around them makes them vulnerable to a peculiar kind of male attention—catcalls, wolf whistles, and a totally unsolicited escort who insists on walking them to Nishta’s house.

35 “…Mumbra residents say they have no defence against their neighborhood being stereotyped as a safe house for terrorists. Over the past decade, the police claimed to have arrested several terrorists in Mumbra. The most notorious case involved the killing of 19-year-old college student named Ishrat Jahan Shamim Raza by the Gujarat police in 2004” (Fernandes “Island City: Mumbai then and now”).
The Nation and its Strangers: One Amazing Thing

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s novel is set against the background of an earthquake in an unidentified city in the U.S, possibly San Francisco and is based on her own experience of natural disasters, particularly her work with the survivors of Hurricane Katrina. The earthquake which is at the heart of the narrative brings together a motley cast of characters, most of them immigrants, in the temporary refuge of an unidentified visa office. The characters include a young Muslim American, Tariq, struggling with the aftermath of September 11; Jiang, an Indian Chinese woman longing to get back to her country of birth; Cameron, an African-American veteran who is seeking redemption from an old curse; Malathi, a visa office worker and a new immigrant on the brink of an adulterous affair with her Indian boss; Uma, a young Indian graduate student. All the characters are headed to India on their individual quests. To distract themselves from the physical and emotional trauma of the quake as well as to keep the simmering tension in the group in check, Uma suggests that they tell one another stories from their lives – that “one amazing thing,” powerful and unreal, that had a transformative effect on their lives.

The attacks of September 11 figure prominently in this novel, allowing the text room to reveal how that one event transformed the space of the American nation, distinctively blurring the identities of native and stranger, home and beyond, for some of its inhabitants. In an article in The Los Angeles Times, Divakaruni writes about her own brush with the paranoid racism generated by the Twin Tower explosions: “I’ve been aware, since Sept. 11, of the backlash in this country against people who are or, to the uninitiated eye, look Islamic or Middle Eastern…the other day, outside our local grocery,
a man shouted at my children and me, using an obscenity I won’t repeat, “Ay-rabs, go home!” Tariq’s story in One Amazing Thing perhaps reflects her personal outrage at this indiscriminate labeling. Inderpal Grewal writes how the discovery that the hijackers of the planes used for crashing into the towers were Muslim resulted in:

A racial formation of all Muslim males, whether rich or poor, as terrorists, made barbaric by allegiance to religion and thus as different as possible from the civilized, cosmopolitan Westerner and the secular American nation. Thus within the racial hierarchies of the United States, another racial formation was created that produced a new Other (albeit from an old history); at the same time new ‘Americans’ were constructed through their solidarity with those who died or suffered in the attacks and through their difference from the ‘terrorists.’ (208)

Lori Peek writes that “the attribution of blame and the subsequent scapegoating that followed 9/11 left those who shared a common ethnic or religious identity with the hijackers – who, it would quickly be discovered, were all Arab Muslim men – feeling fearful and isolated” (22). There is tacit acknowledgement of this “racial formation of all Muslim males” as terrorists in Uma’s observation when she sees Tariq for the first time – she notices that his beard is “of the kind that in recent years made airport security pull you out of line and frisk you” (4). According to Sara Ahmed: “strangers are read as posing danger wherever they are; the projection of danger onto the figure of the stranger allows the definition of the subject-at-home, and home as inhabitable space, as inherently safe and valuable” (32). Projecting all possible danger in the nation-space onto the figure
of the Muslim terrorist helped promote a sense of the American nation as “inherently safe and valuable,” its safety only compromised by the presence of these strange bodies.

Tariq’s story is representative of what happened to many Muslim families in the U.S. as they experienced an unexpected change in their fortunes following 9/11 and were persecuted because of their religion. The threat to the nation following the terrorist attacks resulted in a surge of nationalism that validated new exclusionary practices, turning longstanding residents into strangers. Overnight Islamic and American became mutually exclusive identities, as is evident in the decline of Jalal’s Janitorial Services, owned by Tariq’s father. Tariq recounts how the enterprise “has lost many of its biggest customers since 9/11. Though no one came and said it, people weren’t comfortable having Islamic cleaners going into their offices when they weren’t around. It didn’t matter that the same men had been cleaning those offices for over a decade” (135). In an incident reminiscent of the post 9/11 sweep of about 1200 Muslims by the federal authorities, Tariq’s father and his assistant are picked up from their office by the FBI and whisked away to an undisclosed location. Tariq narrates: “We’d heard about things like this. Government agents, some said the FBI, would pick up people from our community. Sometimes there was a reason; often there wasn’t – at least not anything that was

36 A number of diasporic writers have addressed the impact of 9/11 on minority groups in the US. A notable example is Mohsin Hamid’s The Reluctant Fundamentalist. The protagonist Changez, in spite of his Ivy League education and privileged white collar job, is unable to dodge the suspicion directed at him after the crash.

37 Gary Younge writes in The Nation about these sweeps: “Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, broad sweeps of people from predominantly Muslim countries resulted in ‘the preventive detention’ of 1200, mostly men, voluntary interviews of 19,000 and a program of special registration for more than 82,000. Not a single terrorism conviction emerged from any of this.”
explained to the detainees. Some were released within a few days. For others, it took much longer. We knew men who had been deported, along with their families” (135). Some children, first-generation Americans, were in fact deported to Karachi in Pakistan without adults.

Tariq’s father is returned alive. While the text is silent surrounding his experiences in detention, Jalal is visibly traumatized and eventually suffers a stroke. The text echoes the silence surrounding the fates of many of the detainees in the post-9/11 sweeps. His lawyer advises the family to “let things be” (137) as in most of these sweeps, there were “no official records” (137) of Jalal’s arrest. Tariq sums up the vulnerability of the average Muslim when he says, “Who would we go to, asking for reparation? It was a bad time for Muslims in America” (137). His mother decides to leave the U.S. for her Indian home, but for Tariq, a first-generation American, the spatial as well as emotional move is not so easy to achieve: “Apart from lifestyle differences, there was another issue. This was my country. I was an American. The thought of being driven from my home filled me with rage” (139). For men like Tariq and Jalal, America is their home, though they risk marginalization and expulsion as aliens. Tariq is taken in by some mysterious

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38 The following excerpt from Lori Peek’s Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans After 9/11 testifies to this complicated experience of home, particularly for first-generation and second-generation Americans: “Muslim Americans are no strangers to this “perpetual-foreigner” stereotype. Following 9/11, however, these encounters took on a much more hostile tone. Selina, a second-generation Pakistani American who was born and raised in New York, emphasized the pain associated with verbal harassment: “It really hurts. You’ve been living here, and I hate it when somebody says, ‘Go back to your country; go back home.’ This is my home. I live here. Who the hell are you to tell me? Honestly, that’s the way I feel. I’ll just give them a dirty look. I try not to answer. But it really hurts. I can’t see myself living anywhere else but here” (66).
Muslim young men, who house and feed him without charging him. The novel does not dwell on them at length, merely mentioning their “pamphlets and handmade signs” (140) that fill the living room as well as the “march” that they are planning. The huddle of these unidentified Muslim young men, who are close “like brothers” (143) and offer Tariq a sense of community and home, call to mind the ghettos in Umrigar’s novel, creating little islands that may not show up on printable maps.

A similar discursive production of the stranger is at work in the story of Jiang, the old Chinese lady in the group, who finds her life irrevocably changed because of the Indo-China border dispute in 1962. Juxtaposing Tariq and Jiang’s stories also help clarify the gendered experience of mobility, where Jiang’s agency is questioned not only by the state-sponsored exclusionary practices, but also by decisions taken by the family on her behalf. Jiang was born in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in India, once home to one of the largest Chinatowns on the subcontinent. While the Chinese presence in India “dates back much farther, at least to the 5th century A.D.” (International Business Times) Chinese, “principally ethnic Hakka from the provinces of Gunagdong, Jianxi and Fujian” (IBT) have lived in Calcutta for two-hundred-odd years, since the city was the capital of British India. They came to work in Calcutta’s port, concentrating on “manufacturing activities, particularly in tanneries, where they produced leather goods, a profession that’s off limits to Hindus” (IBT), eventually settling down in the region of Tangra. The Chinatown of Divakaruni’s youth is a self-contained world, its drab exterior zealously guarding secrets from prying eyes:
From outside her house, in the narrow alley lined with the smelly gutters typical of Calcutta’s Chinatown, an observer would have seen the ugly, square front of a building, windowless and muddy red like its neighbors…should the observer have peered into the interior of the house, he would have seen only another brick wall – the spirit wall, built for the express purpose of deflecting the outsider’s gaze. (71)

The walls upon walls screen from view all evidence of the affluence of a thriving community, and are also metaphors for the forced invisibility of Chinatown’s residents. Jiang observes that “no one gave the Chinese any thought” (71). The Bengali Hindus, the majority population in Calcutta, look down on the Chinese immigrants since they work with the hides of animals in tanneries, an unclean occupation in the eyes of the upper caste Hindus. The novel goes behind the wall to reveal not only the hoarded wealth of Jiang’s father and other members of the Chinese community, but also signs of taste and aesthetic refinement – sculpted lions, rosewood tables, poetry recitation on moonlit nights, and antique calligraphy scrolls – that stereotypes of Chinatown do not otherwise support.

The Chinese in Calcutta’s Chinatown militate against their enforced invisibility, referring instead to the non-Chinese as “ghosts,”39 denying the Bengalis any materiality

39 In an interview with Sarah Anne Johnson, Divakaruni acknowledges her literary debt to Maxine Hong Kingston. She says, “Maxine Hong Kingston really influenced me with The Woman Warrior. I’d been ready for that book when I read it, which was when I was doing my graduate studies at Berkeley. It opened up so many things for me, and it made me aware of the importance of her subject matter, and also gave me permission for my subject matter. I love the way that story plays such an important part in her book, and story plays a very important part in my books – telling stories, listening to stories, old stories out of our culture and how they affect us – all of those things” (56). Some of that influence is evident not only in Divakaruni’s use of multiple stories in her narrative,
as they themselves stake a claim to their tangibility and presence in the city. Chinese children are taught to keep the “ghosts” at an arm’s length “to keep family secrets safe” (72) but Jiang betrays her family secrets by falling deeply in love with a ghost. Despite the long cohabitation of the Chinese and the Bengalis, the two worlds are non-permeable, separated by the borders of race, religion and class. While Jiang’s father tells her: “Can fish love birds?” (76), Mohit’s family is shattered at the prospect of miscegenation and by the idea of “their only son, carrier of the generations-proud Das name marrying a Cheenay heathen” (77) and breeding “slant-eyed, octopus-eating grandchildren” (77). Finally, the Indo-China War puts an end to their love.

The undercurrent of strangerhood that marks the interaction between the two communities is inflamed by the Indo-China War of 1962. In October and November 1962, India fought a month-long war with China. As a result, “the Chinese living in India were painted as traitors conspiring to help defeat India. Large demonstrations against China were staged in various cities, during which Chinese restaurants – and generally any establishments with the word ‘Chinese’ in their names were vandalized” (D’Souza). The novel evokes this climate of indiscriminate suspicion and hostility against the Chinese in Calcutta’s Chinatown:

People stopped patronizing Chinese businesses. Stores were vandalized. A popular Chinese restaurant was set on fire because a group of customers got food poisoning and believed it was part of a deliberate plot to kill Indians. Chinese banks failed. Crimson slashes of graffiti denouncing Chinese spies appeared on also in her use of the term “ghosts” to distinguish between the immigrant Chinese and the Indians.
the walls of the houses where Chinese families were known to live. The government ordered individuals of Chinese origin to register themselves and present papers for identification. Jiang and her brother were lucky. They had been born in a hospital and had Indian birth certificates. (79)

Similar to what was experienced by many Muslims in post-9/11 U.S., the state generated the “stranger” through violence or through its failure to check violence against minority groups. Years of cohabitation are swept aside as the bodies of the Chinese in India are marked as strange and brought under surveillance. As Sara Ahmed states: “To be an alien in a particular nation, is to hesitate at a different border: the alien here is the one who does not belong in a nation space, and who is already defined as such by the Law…the techniques for differentiating between citizens and aliens, as well as between humans and aliens, allows the familiar to be established as the familial” (3) The Chinese in India find themselves legally categorized as aliens, the ones who “do not belong” (Ahmed 3) as evident in the demands for registration and identification papers; this categorization assists in the soldering of a national identity, against the looming threat of alien invasion.

Jiang and Mohit find themselves located on opposite sides of the metaphorical border. Mohit, who was earlier willing to forsake his family for his love, now abandons Jiang under intense social pressure: “Already he had received threats because people knew about me. He was afraid his family would be targeted as sympathizers…Forgive me, he said. I love you, but I can’t fight a whole country” (79). The Chinese are not only socially ostracized, but they are also physically herded to an internment camp in Deoli, in
a manner reminiscent of the Japanese internment in America and Canada during World War II. The strange bodies are removed to a restricted space, in a bid to sanitize the nation-state of alien pollutants. In the novel, Jiang is spared the sorry fate of many victims of the Chinese internment; but she faces a different kind of internment as her father marries her off to the much older Curtis Chan, in exchange for a safe passage to the United States.

The passage to America marks a rebirth for Jiang, though again not in a celebratory, Bharati Mukherjee mode a la *Jasmine*, and closer to Nishta’s migration/rebirth in *The World We Found*. Like Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth*, *One Amazing Thing* too offers a subtle interrogation of the idea of global mobility. Jiang’s experience of mobility across continents results in a “new, compacted existence” (83). The Chans settle down in another Chinatown, which, unlike the Chinatown of Calcutta, is a self-contained world. Whereas in Kolkata, the borders between Chinatown and the rest of the city are more porous – Jiang meets Mohit in her shoe store, which is in a well-known Calcutta shopping hub – here “everything Jiang required for daily life lay within the boundaries of Chinatown – markets, movie theaters, the houses of friends, the children’s schools” (83). In the new country, ironically she no longer needs to speak English, and “along with the language she had once prided herself on speaking so well, she let go of that portion of her past where English had played an important part” (83).

Yet like the mothers in Lahiri’s text, “home” is suspect for Jiang. Despite having buried her past in her American present, a reunion with her brother unlocks a flood of memories of the country of her birth (84) and she impulsively decides to go back for a visit. Jiang is
in a state of permanent suspension between the two worlds – like the mothers in Lahiri’s fiction, her mobility translates into a state of liminality or of “permanent transience.”

Divakaruni complicates the sign of the stranger by including in her novel the story of Cameron, the African American ex-military man who takes charge of the traumatized group inside the earthquake-hit embassy. Cameron’s narrative complicates the discourse of stranger danger by showing that the stranger need not always be a noticeably alien body. He is one of the few Americans in a group consisting mostly of immigrants and first-generation Americans, so Tariq views him as a foreigner, albeit “a dark skinned one” (33). Yet as a black American, he is placed rather precariously on the borderline between the familiar and alien/strange. Tariq resents having to take orders from Cameron, despite the latter’s experience handling emergency situations as an army man, and tells him, “This is an Indian office. If anyone is to give orders, it should be the visa officer” (33). Malathi shares Tariq’s hostility toward Cameron, her suspicion aggravated by well-meaning injunctions from female relatives back home about staying away from dangerous black men (14). Cameron’s “attack” on Tariq, who is half his size, only confirms Malathi’s fears, never mind that the former was only trying to save them from being buried alive. Cameron is trapped in the official white discourse that constructs black men as violent and hyper-sexualized, that scholars like Patricia Hill Collins have addressed in their work. Cameron’s strangerhood is in part an outcome of such

\[40\] Like their female counterparts, men of African descent were also perceived to have excess sexual appetite, yet with a disturbing additional feature, a predilection for violence. In this context, the “White heroes” of Western Europe and the United States became constructed in relation to the “Black beasts of Africa” (Collins *Black Sexual Politics*).
“discursive colonization,” to borrow a term from Mohanty. Both Tariq and Malathi are unable to look beyond Cameron’s foreignness and appreciate his mature handling of the crisis.

Despite his non-immigrant American identity, Cameron’s experience of personal strangerhood centered in race is no less intense than Tariq’s or Jiang’s. He “wanted to hold his arm up against Tariq’s, his far darker skin. He wanted to tell Tariq how it had been growing up with no money and skin that color in inner-city Los-Angeles” (36). Among his community, Cameron occupies a liminal space of uncertain identification, because his fellow African Americans fail to empathize with his ambitions of upward mobility. According to his girlfriend Imani he is an Oreo (193), a black man with aspirations to whiteness, refusing to settle for an assistant manager’s post at the grocery he works at and preferring instead to apply to a private college. When Imani tells him that she is expecting his baby, Cameron is terrified at the prospect of having to reconcile himself with the personal and professional fates reserved for most young inner-city blacks – “the ghetto seemed to be closing in on him” (193). But while he cannot wait to get away from the ghetto and his own people, it is with Imani that Cameron experiences a sense of calm and stability. The novel brings out this duality in his character well: “Tangled together in bed afterward, he felt an easefulness that was foreign to him. Usually, he had to be constantly doing something, pushing himself. But at these times he felt he could lie there forever” (192). The moments in Imani’s apartment hint darkly at Cameron’s abortive attempts to rise above the limits of his circumstances.
Cameron wins a sports scholarship to a reputed private college. However, he soon finds out that he is the only black student in most of his classes, a little island in a sea of privileged white faces. He feels “dull and unprepared” (193) and is “intimidated into silence, which his teachers took as indifference” (196). He now longs for the comfort of the ghetto and racial connection, reminiscent of the problematic safety “in numbers” that Iqbal looks for in his ghetto in Bombay in *The World*. His grades plummet and finally he drops out and joins the army, taking a route he had so desperately tried to avoid.

Cameron’s narrative is probably similar to the experiences of many inner-city young blacks who find their social mobility seriously affected because of racial discrimination and economic disempowerment.

**Conclusion**

In the introduction to her book *Strange Encounters*, Ahmed writes that “…this is not a book about strangers (or aliens). Rather it is a book that attempts to question the assumption that we can have an ontology of strangers, that it is possible to simply be a stranger, or to face a stranger in the street. To avoid such an ontology, we must refuse to take for granted the stranger’s status as a figure” (3). What is common to Umrigar and Divakaruni novels is precisely such a resistance to an ontology of strangers. If Tariq and Malathi are hostile to Cameron, the other first-generation Americans like Uma and Lily rally around him, acknowledging his leadership and helping him in every way they can. Lily, in particular, is an important figure in the counter-narrative that the novel provides to the stranger danger discourse. She reaches out not only to Cameron but also to Tariq, working as a bridge between the bitter and insecure young man, whom fate has already
dealt a raw hand, and the rest of the group. She is the only one who wields some influence over him, at one point telling everyone that Tariq reminds her of her own brother, underscoring the bonds that strangers have despite differences in race, ethnicity, gender, class and religion. “There isn’t a single protagonist,” says Divakaruni about her novel, “but an ensemble of heroes, all of whose stories are equally important in creating community.” Having a collective protagonist “collapses the walls dividing characters and cultures; what endures is a chorus of voices in one room” (Lahiri).

Similarly, Umrigar’s text, through its close attention to Iqbal’s back story, cautions the reader against any hasty judgments about him. While Laleh and Kavita assume at the beginning of the story that Iqbal is his wife Nishta’s “jailer,” his experiences in the novel prevent the reader from arriving at a similar unambiguous conclusion. Iqbal compares the 9/11 attack with the Gujarat riots\(^{41}\), “At least the Americans who died were killed by foreigners. But the Muslims in Gujarat were butchered by their own countrymen. Has anybody been brought to justice? Of course not. Because a Muslim death means nothing in this cursed country” (91). The Muslims are reduced to nothingness, an abjection that is reflected in Iqbal’s altered physical and

\(^{41}\) Iqbal is referring to the Gujarat riots of 2002, the inter-ethnic violence that flared up in the western Indian state of Gujarat in February 2002 that lasted for about three months. The violence was triggered by the burning of a train in Godhra, resulting in the death of Hindu pilgrims on their way back from the disputed site of Ayodhya, leading the Hindus to vent their ire on the Muslim community in the state. A number of political commentators hold that the riots were preplanned and were essentially a pogrom. The then Chief Minister of Gujarat and now Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi was accused of instigating and fuelling the violence, though a Special Investigation Team appointed by the Supreme Court of India cleared him of all charges in 2012.
psychological state. Adish sees him for what he is, “a broken, tormented man, whom secular society had failed completely” (92).

Sara Ahmed suggests that “we can only avoid stranger fetishism – that is, avoid welcoming or expelling the stranger as a figure which has linguistic and bodily integrity – by examining the social relationships that are concealed by this very fetishism” (5-6). Both Umrigar and Divakaruni’s novels do the important job of exposing stranger fetishism, by looking closely at the covert social and political dynamics that structure the figure of the stranger and problematize national identity.

I think what I love and admire the most about Bombay is the sheer tenacity of its people. The desire to get up and face another day, even if you’re living in the worst of squalor and misery.
- Thrity Umrigar, The Indian Express

With each novel there is a central image which stays with me like a leitmotif through the writing of the novel. With Roots and Shadows, it was the family at a meal.
- Shashi Deshpande, “In First Person.”

The final chapter in my study focuses on women in the city, consistent with my project’s larger interest in female mobility in multiple spaces as represented in the fiction of various Indian women writers writing in English. A defining mark of modernity is migration – the movement of people from one place to another owing to several factors. While an earlier chapter examined the significance of transnational migration for women, this chapter takes a closer look at a local/internal form of migration – the rural-urban migration - and its effect on women, with special reference to Thrity Umrigar’s novel The Space Between Us (2006) and Shashi Deshpande’s novel Roots and Shadows (1983). I argue that in these two novels, the city emerges as a complex space, paradoxically liberating and disempowering, both conducive and resistant to female mobility.

The city of Bombay/Mumbai plays an important role in Thrity Umrigar’s second novel, The Space Between Us (2006). At the heart of the novel is the layered relationship between Sera, an upper middle-class Parsi woman, and her employee, Bhima. In an interview with Sujeet Rajan in Indian Express, Umrigar elaborates on the relationship between maids and their female employers that she witnessed in her
employed as a domestic worker at the wealthy Sera Dubash’s house; but despite the hierarchy of mistress and maid, the two women forge a warm and deep friendship -- an unlikely bond across social and religious differences that allows the different Bombays to meet briefly, the upper-class Bombay as well as the Bombay of the slums. Sera is Bhima’s mentor and benefactor, giving wings to her dreams of a better life for herself and her granddaughter Maya who is orphaned by the untimely death of her parents. Bhima, in turn, helps Sera deal with her personal nightmare, a violent marriage. However when Sera’s son-in-law Viraf seduces and impregnates Maya, Sera is forced to make a difficult choice.

The novel celebrates Bombay’s potential for the empowerment and upward mobility of its migrant poor, like Bhima and her husband Gopal, offering them opportunities for economic independence and holding out the promise of a better future. While Bhima’s origins are unspecified, we learn that that Gopal is a laborer who migrates to the city from a village where his brothers are petty farmers, in search of a better livelihood. To begin with, Gopal makes good progress at his work in the factory where he is employed and is able to provide for his family, until an accident sets him back,
depriving him of employment and eventually forcing him to return to his village. Unlike Gopal who is literate, Bhima is limited by her lack of literacy and the only gainful employment that she can find in the metropolis is work as a domestic help. But she is an equal partner in her marriage, contributing to the family income, as opposed to life in the village, where her role would have possibly been more of a nurturer and less of a provider. Her exposure to the lifestyle of her employers, the Dubashes, compounded with the unfortunate experiences that result from her illiteracy, (such as the thumbprint that Gopal’s employers coax out of her, forcing her to sign away her compensation money), makes her hope for a different, cushier life for her granddaughter Maya than the one she has known. As the sociologist Pierrette Hondanagneu-Sotelo observes: “Unlike the working poor who toil in factories and fields, domestic workers see, touch, and breathe the material and emotional world of their employers’ home” (qtd. In Marciniak 347). Bhima’s employment allows her a unique vantage point which fans her dreams of upward mobility. She looks at education not only as an escape route from the daily grind and poverty her life is steeped in but also as providing access to the social capital she has lived without all her life. When Gopal is laid up in hospital with an amputated arm, Feroz Dubash comes to Bhima’s help, speaking authoritatively to the hospital staff and getting them to attend to Gopal more carefully. Bhima is deeply impressed:

So this is what education does, Bhima thought. It opens doors for you. She wondered if her Amit would someday be like Feroz, able to get others to do things for him. She was thrilled and repulsed by the thought of Amit exercising such naked power over someone else. How that doctor had burst, like one of the Pathan
balloonwalla’s creations. A few words from Feroz Sahib and he had collapsed totally. And now, Gopal would get the help he needed. (217)

Of course, Bhima is not quite correct here. Feroz Dubash’s clout does not come merely from education. It is partially inherited, a product of his social class. But her naïve observation at least allows her to visualize a different trajectory for her son Amit and for her granddaughter Maya from the one she has known. While she had discontinued her daughter Pooja’s education to put her to work as domestic help, she sends Maya to school. Maya is the first generation in Bhima’s family to attend college. When she finds out about Maya’s pregnancy, Bhima’s immediate worries are about her granddaughter’s inability to complete her undergraduate degree in accounting and become a “bookkeeper at a good firm” (21). All promises of the “bright path that had rolled out before Maya… [t]he good job that would inevitably await her, thanks to Dinaz’s and Viraf’s influence and business contacts, the escape from the menial, backbreaking labor that had marred the lives of her mother and her mother before her” (21) dry up. The future Bhima dreams of for Maya is far removed from the one she had conceived for Pooja and is more closely allied to what she had wanted for Amit. The city allows this gradual change in Bhima’s attitude by providing her with a glimpse of a world that is considerably different from her own, a world that bends and overturns gender roles as she has traditionally known them.

Bombay’s Parallel Worlds in *The Space Between Us*

The city also allows Bhima a unique spatial mobility, evident in her daily trek for work to “town” from the unnamed slum that she lives in. Her access to the city’s various locations allow her a sense of liberation, however brief, from the experience of
congestion that she has to deal with in her home in the slums. If *The World We Found* explored the Muslim ghettos of Bombay, *The Space between Us* takes a close look at its slums --- the result of frenzied migration from impoverished rural areas to urban spaces, the lack of affordable housing in Bombay and escalating real estate prices. The historian Gyan Prakash observes that “the megacities of the developing world, swollen with rural immigrants, are burgeoning with slums and squatter settlements pointing to the increasing urbanizing of poverty and raising the specter of a ‘planet of slums’” (20). Bombay is such a megacity, an urbanscape sharply divided between opulence and poverty; Umrigar’s novel brings this division vividly into focus. On her solitary visit to the slum to check in on an indisposed Bhima, Sera “felt as if she had entered another universe” (113) though her apartment was “less than a fifteen-minute walk away from the basti” (113). The spatial congestion of the basti or slum, where ramshackle houses exist cheek-by-jowl, is paralleled by the jostle for individual space and a singular lack of privacy, embodied in the communal restroom where men and women queue up every morning for their turn, the common water fountain, intrusive residents who exhibit an unholy interest in the lives of their neighbors (like Shyam who drops catty hints about Maya’s early morning sickness) and the cacophony of various sounds. Bhima routinely experiences a “helpless despair” (38) when she enters the basti\(^{43}\) she lives in and its claustrophobic affect is best summed up in Maya’s outburst against her grandmother early on in the novel:

\(^{43}\)“But the description of life in the slums where Bhima lives--as well as the scene when Sera enters the slum for the first time--are based on teenage memories of visiting slums on several occasions. I recall the horror that I felt the first time I saw the inside of a slum---something that most middle-class people are not privy to--and tried to capture that horror in this novel.” (Umrigar, Interview in *Mumbai Tehelka*)
You don’t know what it’s like to sit here all day with the door shut, hearing the sounds of the outside world, hearing doors slam, children playing games, the women in the basti talking, and wondering if they’re gossiping about me. I feel like a prisoner, but then I ask myself, Who is my jailer? I am my own jailer. I don’t know which is darker, Ma-ma – this room with no electricity or the veil of shame that hangs over me. (53)

Maya is hiding her pregnancy in her room, the product of an illicit and short-lived liaison with Viraf. Forced into celibacy because of his wife Dinaz’s pregnancy, Viraf seduces Maya and gets her pregnant. However Viraf has no intentions of owning up to the fling, let alone claiming the baby as his own. Their liaison is no more than a temporary lapse of judgment for him, a way of satiating his physical needs. Maya struggles with feelings of guilt and shame as she is aware of the stigma of unwed motherhood bound to attach to her once the baby is born. Her sense of incarceration arises as much from the “room with no electricity” she is forced to hide her shame in as from the fear of gossip around her prying out her secret. The architecture of the slums seems to encourage intrusion, and already Shyam has noticed her morning sickness. The city gives Bhima the opportunity to leave this life of confinement and invasion behind her every day -- for her work in Sera’s well-appointed house, to the open-air market to purchase groceries and occasionally to the beaches with Maya in the few instances of bonding between grandmother and granddaughter that we see in the novel.

Maya is finally forced to abort her child. I aver that Maya’s aborted child is the abject double of Dinaz and Viraf’s legitimate child, joined in a conjunction that is
metonymic of the relationship between Bombay’s slums and its high rise buildings. The slums in Bombay are often illegal growths, at perennial risk of demolition to make way for more commercially profitable and legally sanctioned spaces like apartment complexes and malls. Nikita Patel reports in The Guardian that as per a “controversial slum rehabilitation policy” in Bombay, “developers can snap up land for commercial development in exchange for building free houses for slum dwellers…the common complaint by the poor and powerless is that the government, corrupt politicians and developers are colluding to grab their land and short-change the slum-dweller.”44 A similar binary between power and the lack of it characterizes Viraf and Maya’s brief relationship. After their fleeting moment of passion, Viraf instructs Maya to literally “wash” away all evidence of their encounter. He tells Maya:

What I want to say is, I’ll forgive you for what happened. Provided it never happens again. And provided you never tell anybody what you did. Because poor Dinaz, if she ever found out, God, it would kill her. She’d never forgive you. You understand? She would see it as the biggest betrayal of her trust in you. And with the pregnancy and all, I can’t risk anything happening to her. Remember, the

44 More on the slum rehabilitation policy: “Slum residents are only entitled to free housing if they have lived in the area to be cleared since before 1995, or, in some cases before 2000, which is a huge stumbling block for state government officials who say they want to make Mumbai slum free. This caveat means almost 70% of slum dwellers in the city are ineligible for a free home and would probably end up in slums elsewhere. So far only 100,000 homes have been built under the scheme in the last 12 years – and 35% of those rehoused have returned to slums because maintenance costs are too steep in their new accommodation. Around 1.2m homes are needed to house the city's slum dwellers” (The Guardian 11 Friday 2011).
Dubash family has been nothing but good to you and your grandma. They’ve treated you like their very own, sent you to a good college. You have a bright future ahead of you. Now don’t let this one incident ruin your life. (279).

Viraf behaves as if the onus of the misstep is on Maya – she is the one who deserves “forgiveness.” He also warns her that if she tells people about their fling, he would deny everything, and that there is a stronger chance of people believing him instead of her.

Viraaf uses his position as her employer to his advantage, reminding her of her debt of gratitude to the Dubash family and playing on her insecurities. He also presses for Maya’s abortion, aware that if Dinah found out about his illegitimate child, his marriage would collapse. Like the slums that have to make way for the more plush constructions in the city of use to the moneyed real estate developers, Maya’s child has to die so that Dinaz’s can thrive.

Bombay is empowering and disempowering, generating in turn both hope and despair. If the slums or Maya’s college or the hospital where Bhima sees Pooja for the last time are crowded, noisy and socially stratified spaces, threatening to obscure Bhima’s identity, the city’s beaches allow her quiet moments of introspection and subsequently, renewal. Rashmi Varma observes that:

Even as the representational space of the city contains Bhima’s everyday life, its mind-numbing tedium, it also registers dissonance in the ways in which the city also enables her to eke out some “free” time, time that Bhima spends at the beach, alone or with her family in happier times or later with her grand-daughter Maya.
Thus both kinds of times co-exist not only in the elite world of its prosperous inhabitants, but in the world of the subaltern as well in the city’ (Verma152). The beach, thus, is an egalitarian space, easily accessible to the “prosperous” and the “subaltern,” its open spaces inspiring communication and confidence. Beaches are conceptualized as “liminal, inbetween place[s], neither land nor sea, where normal social conventions need not apply” (Morgan and Pritchard 127). As Kevin Meethan points out, they are “rarely inhabited but often used” (70), “a space of play to some and a place of work to others,” (70) offer scope for “loneliness and solitude” (70) as well as boisterous play, and are also places of “transgression where inhibitions can be shed” (70). The shedding of inhibitions is evident in the figure of the conservatively-dressed Muslim woman Sera sees on the beach, who nevertheless walks hand-in-hand with her husband; she inspires Sera to drop her own inhibitions and reach out to Feroz, eliciting some reciprocal emotion from him in the process. The beach stands testimony to happier times in Bhima’s life, to moments spent in play with her then able-bodied husband and their two children, to the city’s ability to give to its people. As a place of work, it attracts the Afghan balloon seller whose transnational journey parallels Bhima’s movement from the village to the city. The open spaces of the beach also contrast with the claustrophobia of the slums and it is here that Bhima and Maya rediscover their old bonds of love and companionship, sorely tried by Maya’s pregnancy. The city, thus, is Maya’s solace as well as shame.

While the novel’s cityscape offers us two contrasting universes with their individual lives, contrary to expectation Sera is no less a prisoner of her circumstances
than Bhima. Bhima’s mobility is also set off by her employer’s lack of it, despite the latter’s social and economic privileges. Bhima can leave the slums behind her, enter the home of her wealthy employer and nurture dreams of her granddaughter escaping the squalor and poverty of their circumstances. Sera, on the other hand, with all the advantages of class and money, has no place outside her home to go to. As a victim of domestic abuse, the home that she builds with her husband proves to be a sham, in a situation that is reminiscent of Sarita and Manohar’s marriage in Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds*. For her, the city is claustrophobic; despite her class privileges, she experiences the city as not-liberating.

Sera suffers frequent physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband and mother-in-law. Like Manohar, Feroz is prone to schizophrenia, which manifests itself in irrational fits of jealousy and suspicion regarding his younger and attractive wife, which often find vent in uncontrollable and violent displays of rage. Like Maya who is forced to hide her shame in her small room, Sera has to hide the scars of this violence under her long-sleeved dresses. And like Nishta in *The World We Found*, Sera is a victim of surveillance where her jailer is her tyrannical mother-in-law Banu. Despite the fact that there were just four of them in their apartment, Sera finds her privacy compromised by the silently watchful and intrusive presence of her mother-in-law: “[S]he had truly believed that Banu had three extra eyes bored into the back of her head. No matter how discreetly she and Feroz tried to argue about something, no matter how low Sera tried to keep her voice during one of their fights, Banu always seemed to know exactly what transpired in their room” (47). Feroz’s loyalties lie more with his mother than his wife.
and when Sera lets her husband in on her suspicions that Banu spies on her, Feroz refuses to believe her, accusing her instead of being “hysterical” and “paranoid” (47). So strong is Banu’s hold on Sera’s life that much later in the novel when the older woman is reduced to a vegetative state - a combination of age and deteriorating health - Sera still feels “uneasy” (48) in her presence, despite Banu’s “helpless, paralyzed state” (48):

“There are too many ghosts in here, and despite the ghostly, half-dead remains of the paralyzed old woman lying on the bed in front of Sera, the dead she most remembers and mourns is the young woman who lies buried in this house” (48).

The novel focuses on the city’s capacity for bringing together women (and men) from diverse classes and religions in bonds that potentially revise hierarchical relationships. The city’s inherent ability to create coalitions across class and religion can be found in the unlikely partnership between Sera and Bhima as well as in Bhima’s temporary friendship with the young Muslim Hyder she meets at the hospital where Pooja and her husband Raju are being treated.

The novel subverts the expectations of class and privilege in the encounters between Bhima and Sera. Incidentally, most of the story is filtered through Bhima’s consciousness. Rashmi Varma points out that “even as the novel’s ideological milieu seems resiliently bourgeois, it boldly delves into and deftly constructs the consciousness of its subaltern protagonist to whom the story belongs as a whole. Thus narratorially at least the novel seeks to undo the class asymmetry of the archetypal servant/mistress story” (152). The “class asymmetry of the archetypal servant/mistress story” that Verma references is also undermined through the mutual dependence of the two women. In an
interview in *Mumbai Mirror*, Umrigar comments on the unusual bond between domestic helps and their female employers that she had observed in her formative years in India and chose to depict in the current novel: “When I was growing up in India I was always fascinated by the closeness shared between mistresses of households and the servants who worked for them…it seemed like a very rich, emotionally complicated relationship – women who were linked by working side by side daily, often sharing the bonds of gender but whose lives were also divided by issues of class.” Brutalized by her husband and alienated by her mother-in-law, Sera derives some comfort from the sympathetic presence of her father-in-law, Freddy, and more importantly Bhima. It is Bhima who is privy to her shameful secret, Bhima who tends to her private wounds, healing her not only physically but also emotionally. In a remarkable episode in the story, Bhima tries to heal Sera’s battered body, following a particularly brutal display of violence on Feroz’s part: “Although Bhima’s thin but strong hands were only massaging her arm, Sera felt her whole body sigh. She felt life beginning to stir in her veins and couldn’t tell if this new, welcome feeling was from the oil or the simple comfort of having another human being touch her in friendliness and caring” (109).

The novel describes this contact between the two women in homosocial, even homoerotic terms, with Sera’s observation that Bhima had “somehow penetrated her body deeper than Feroz ever had” (110). Bhima’s role in Sera’s life seems to be that of part-parent, part-partner -- their encounters have a strong tactile component that momentarily dodges the class difference. Bhima nurses Sera back to physical and emotional health, offering counsel that should have come from her own kin, advising her
not to put up with the violence and to break the silence surrounding her abuse: “You are trying to cover up your shame, bai, I know…but it is not your shame. It is Feroz Seth’s shame, not yours” (111). Like Sarita in *The Dark Holds no Terrors*, Sera finds no refuge in her natal home; home and family fail to shield her from her husband’s beatings. Here her class proves to be a curse. She struggles to communicate to her sophisticated and mild-mannered mother that she is a victim of domestic violence. Her mother’s well-meaning words of advice fall short given the reality she is confronted with – the darker side of human nature that her upbringing had sheltered her from. Despite Gopal’s want of education, it is Feroz who is given to unwieldy displays of rage and a total lack of control over his emotions. Bhima’s answer to Sera’s question if Gopal never beat her is telling: “Beat me? Arre, if that fool touched me once, I would do some jadoo (magic) on him and turn his hands into pillars of wood…No, bai…my Gopal is not like the other mens (novelist’s usage). He would sooner cut his hands off than hurt me” (111). Bhima’s response demonstrates her greater control over her situation compared to her more moneyed and educated employer. While Gopal does eventually prove to be “like other men” and hit Bhima, this is a Gopal hardened by circumstances, lunging at Bhima in retaliation after she humiliates and emasculates him in front of his friends by beating him with her broom.

On her part, Sera assumes the role of Bhima’s mentor, partially taking on the responsibilities that Gopal had abdicated. It is Sera who is struck by seven-year-old Maya’s quick intelligence and decides that she is “worthy of a life different from what her grandmother could give her. And that she, Sera, would assume responsibility for
Maya’s education” (44). Sera is also Bhima’s teacher, gently weaning her away from her naïve prejudices about Muslims. Bhima had “grown up like so many others, believing that Muslims were about to overrun India, that it was their intention to acquire gold-silver until they owned the country and chased all the Hindus out” (308). Sera dispels her misconceptions, gently explaining how the divisive policies of the white colonizers had bred tension between the two religious groups, currently kept alive by vested political interests so that Bhima stops “hating the Muslims and started hating the politicians instead” (308). When she is at the hospital, attending to a dying Pooja, Bhima responds to offers of help from Hyder, the Muslim young man she happens to meet there, which probably would not have been possible without Sera’s “decolonizing” of her mind, to borrow a term from the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Ngugi, of course, is talking about language here --- his choice of his native Gikuyu language to speak and write in, as opposed to the more elite English, as a mark of his resistance to the colonizer’s language and the colonizer’s stories. I use Ngugi’s term to suggest that Sera initiates a similar decolonization of Bhima’s mind by helping her resist the propagandist and divisive discourse of the right-wing political parties in Bombay.

Indeed Bhima and Sera’s relationship deviates from the script of “deference and maternalism” that, according to Judith Rollins, regulates the behavior of domestic workers and their employees. Rhacel Salazar Parrenas builds on Judith Rollins’s idea in her work on migrant Filipina domestic workers in Los Angeles and Rome: “Domestic workers must act with deference – they cannot talk to but must be spoken to by employers, they must engage in ‘ingratiating behavior,’ and they must perform tasks in a
lively manner…Concomitantly, employers validate their higher social status through maternalism, acting ‘protective’ and ‘nurturing’ to the ‘childlike’ domestic worker” (170). Parrenas adds that this script “perpetuates nonegalitarian relations in domestic work by confirming the superiority of employers” (170). However Bhima, we realize, is not restricted by any deference when it comes to frankly airing her views on something as personal to Sera as her marriage. Also, she is often protector and nurturer to her vulnerable mistress.

But while this contact between men and women from diametrically different stratas of society that the city facilitates may chip away at traditional class-bound prejudices, it is not powerful enough to erode them completely. This is evident throughout the novel. Despite their friendship and their willingness to share each other’s emotional burdens, the “space between” Sera and Bhima is always carefully preserved: they sip their tea together in “companionable silence” but “as usual, Sera sits on a chair at the table while Bhima squats on her haunches on the floor nearby” (26). Sera, silently guilty, is reluctant to let Bhima use her furniture or her crockery, in an example of what Rollins categorizes as “spatial deference” or “the unequal rights of the domestic and the employer to the space around the other’s body and the controlling of the domestic’s use of house space” (quoted in Parrenas 165). Parrenas elaborates that “the access of domestic workers to household space is usually far more contained than for the rest of the family” (165) and this spatial inequity indicates the domestic worker’s inferior social status. The spatial segregations that Bhima is subjected to are rooted in class; they are
“manifestations of how class issues have polarized people in India and how those polarizations have gotten codified into traditions” (Umrigar 9).45

Bhima’s presence is paradoxically nourishing and contaminating. Sera battles a very physical distaste toward Bhima ostensibly because of her contact with the slums and dirt: “the thought of Bhima sitting on her furniture repulses her [Sera]…the same way she had tensed the day she caught her daughter, then fifteen, giving Bhima an affectionate hug” (29); she has to “suppress the urge to order her daughter to go wash her hands” (29). Varma observes that the intimacy between the two women “does not however mitigate Sera’s physical revulsion towards Bhima’s slum living that taints not only Bhima’s body and the spaces that surround it, but also threatens to contaminate Sera’s own pristine existence” (153). Verma’s use of the word “pristine” recalls Phyllis Palmer’s work on the relationship between white middle-class housewives and their domestic servants in post-World War I U.S; Palmer contends that the domestic servants were necessary to the existence of these housewives not only to keep their houses clean and ordered, but also to deflect from them all associations with dirt – physical, moral and sexual -- and help sustain their images as “pure women residing in pristine homes” (137). According to Palmer: “Until almost midcentury, servants continued to take the greatest burden from middle-class women and to be the primary women associated with dirt. By having an

45 “I don’t think this is a book about caste at all. Rather, it’s a book about class divisions… in that sense, it’s not so different from the American South fifty years ago, when the black maid always had to enter from the back door and took all her meals in the kitchen. I was doing a book reading in California earlier this year when a woman who grew up on the Upper West Side in New York said the book reminded her of how her family treated the nanny who had raised her. So these strange, dehumanizing traditions are not unique to India” (“A Conversation with Thrity Umrigar”9).
‘other’ in her home, the middle class woman not only got work done, but also her pristine identity affirmed” (147). I suggest that Bhima’s presence in Sera’s home works in similar ways. Despite the intimacy between the two women, she is the “other” in Sera’s home, and Sera’s aggressive linking of Bhima with dirt perhaps also helps sustain her “pristine identity” (Palmer) and superiority vis-à-vis Bhima.

It is also useful to consider Bhima’s service in the context of “affective labor” or the “labor of care,” a contemporary manifestation of migrant labor. Sandro Mezzadra locates a “semantic shift from domestic work to caretaking labor” (1) and suggests that “‘care,’ in the meaning of an attention which is rooted in a certain kind of sociability and is therefore given for free, is increasingly becoming something rare, unusual. Only something rare, indeed, needs to be purchased on the market and is therefore bound to be commoditized” (1). Bhima’s “care” for Sara is already complicated, commodified at the same time that it is voluntarily given.

Finally it is primarily the class difference that shatters Bhima’s dreams. When she finds out that it is the charming and well-liked Viraf who has seduced and impregnated her granddaughter, she is devastated, but resolves to keep it a secret from Sera as she is aware it would break her heart. However she lets Viraf know that she is aware of his misstep and Viraf, now racked with guilt and apprehension, plots to have Bhima thrown out of the house on concocted charges of theft. Bhima is forced to reveal the truth about Maya’s illegitimate child to Sera, but Sera throws her weight behind her son-in-law, choosing to believe his account of the events over Bhima’s, and terminating Bhima’s employment and throwing her out of the house. This is perhaps the strongest
manifestation of the “space” between the two women in the novel. Closely linked to Bhima’s expulsion is also her expression of rage in the presence of Viraf and Sera; as Marciniak points out, the migrant or immigrant can lay no claim to rage and it is in fact a taboo: “The transgressive force of immigrant rage lies in the often unspoken presupposition that those marked as aliens have no right to be angry, not publicly anyway” (Marciniak 340). Despite the close friendship between the two women, Bhima is still the outsider in Sera’s home and in the city; she is the one who is marked as an “alien. When Bhima, shocked at Viraf’s lies, has an emotional and angry outburst, daring him to call the police and have her arrested on trumped-up charges, Sera corrects her: “‘Bhima,’ Sera hisses, her face white with fury. ‘Control yourself. Have you gone mad, talking in this low-class way? Don’t forget who you’re talking to’” (301). Sera is more upset about Bhima forgetting her place, talking “low-class” to her upper-class employers rather than the more serious accusation she has leveled at Viraf.

In an interview with Mumbai Tehelka, Umrigar comments on the ending of her novel: “I think any other ending to this book would have been untrue. Sadly, the dictates of class and class differences are too powerful. Indeed, the space between them cannot be bridged despite the best of intentions--despite even something akin to love that the two women have for each other.” Sera chooses her daughter’s happiness over Bhima and ejects her from her home and her life. Bhima makes her way back to the slums – she is back where she had begun, her mobility proving to be an illusion.

At the same time, the city does not allow Bhima to give up. In an Indian Express interview, Umrigar states that what she likes most about Bombay is the tenacity of its
inhabitants: “The rag pickers, the ear wax removers, the old women who make a living selling four cabbages a day. Just the sheer gumption, the creative energy it takes to make a living, to keep a foothold in the city. This is my personal definition of courage and bravery.” A motley cast of characters who fight to “keep a foothold in the city” frame and define Bhima’s journey, including the balloon seller from Afghanistan, whose transnational migration holds a mirror to Bhima’s own local migration from India’s rural heartland to the city. In the end it is the memories of this Pathan who had “empty-handed…built a world” (314) that inspire Bhima to cut her losses and move on.

In an essay written after the horrific riots of 1992-93, Umrigar pays her tribute to the incredible possibilities for renewal that Bombay holds: “And yet, no death is final. America may have mastered the art of reinvention. However, India still is the master of reincarnation. And so Bombay reincarnates itself daily. Like a weed that refuses to die, like a wily child that refuses to cry ‘Uncle,’ Bombay staggers to its feet over and over again. The riots have lowered the voices of Bombayites. But they have not silenced them. It is impossible to bomb this city into submission.” Bhima embodies this spirit of robust survival, this ability to “stagger” to her feet even after the multiple blows that life has dealt her. In the final poignant moments in the novel, as she prepares herself for another battle, Bhima draws on the city once again for hope and strength. The novel concludes with a montage of life in the city – “the impoverished nut vendors and the woman selling six cauliflowers a day, the hollow-eyed slum dwellers and the chubby-cheeked residents of nearby skyscrapers, the office workers spilling out of the trains at Churchgate and the young children boarding creaky buses” (320) – before closing in on the lives of people
known most intimately to her – Sera, Viraf, Banu and more importantly Maya, to put her life in perspective and make her realize that she is not alone in her struggles. “Umrigar’s narrative,” says Varma, “also ends in hope that is displaced on to a young woman” (154). The young woman in question is Maya; unlike Gopal, who chooses to retrace his steps to the village with his male child for a crutch, Bhima stays back and soldiers on for her sake and for Maya’s.

The Invisible City in Roots and Shadows

Shashi Deshpande’s novel Roots and Shadows (1983) — by her own admission, the one she felt most “distant” from – is set in a rural community. The heroine Indu returns to her natal home in Moregaon, a village in the Indian state of Maharashtra, from Bombay/Mumbai, where she lives with her husband Jayant. The return of the female protagonist is a familiar trope in Deshpande’s novels, as evident in my discussion of The Dark Holds No Terrors and That Long Silence. In all of these novels, the heroines retrace their steps from the city to their old homes, either in the suburbs or villages, and these entries allow them the time and necessary distance from their present circumstances to introspect and emerge with increased self-knowledge. Here Indu returns to see her ailing grand-aunt, the family matriarch, Akka, after a period of estrangement following her marriage to Jayant without the family sanction --- a situation that anticipates Sarita and Manohar’s marriage in The Dark Holds no Terrors. Though the story is not located

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46 In an interview with Deepa Ganesh in The Hindu, Deshpande acknowledges this possibility of evolution in her protagonists: “Change means nothing, unless it’s mutual. But it is still positive, because it’s possible for you to change further. Change, therefore, is a constant, and hence self-awareness. The only final thing is death.”
in Bombay, the city is very much a presence, functioning as an invisible reference point for Indu as she observes the events in the family home leading to and following Akka’s death. In an interview to the *Indian Express*, Deshpande says “That time has to be viewed as one continuous whole, that it is not divided into segments, is a factor that makes itself felt each time I am telling a story…I think that the present contains not just the past but also the future” (4). Indu echoes her creator’s sentiments when she says, “This had been happening to me since my return, the past and the present telescoping into one another, so that I did not quite know where I was.” Told in the first person, the novel is a mix of memory and observation. Indu is both insider and outsider, a part of the family yet poised precariously on its fringes. Her exposure to the city and urban life helps her review and differently appreciate the relationships and institutions that had been integral parts of her childhood in the village.

The traditional Indian joint family—more commonly seen in rural than in urban India—is a focal point of this novel. The advantages of this “dense network of family ties,” to quote Arnab Chakladhar, are thrown into relief by Indu’s life following her flight to the city. The elaborate diagram of a family tree, which introduces its many characters, precedes the chapters. Talking about the role of the family in Deshpande’s work, Arnab Chakladar says: “Deshpande’s protagonists cannot be understood outside the context of their families, and likewise their path to true selfhood passes through the project of rebuilding their relationships with their families. Thus in all these novels Deshpande

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47 “The family tree,” notes Jasbir Jain, “is provided by Deshpande herself to make the reader’s task easier as the various aunts, uncles and cousins descend upon the house first to attend the last rites of Akka and later to attend Mini’s wedding” (35).
often drops us into a bewildering multi-generational network of family members and relatives” (85). Indu’s family is an example of such a “bewildering multi-generational network,” whose connections and relationships emerge more clearly as the novel progresses. The novel opens with Mini’s impending marriage and Akka’s recent demise, two events that necessitate the influx of family members that further complicates this web of relationships. Indu’s return allows her to realize the unique support provided by her large family, with Akka at the helm of affairs, to its members. The family offers a roof over their heads to unmarried, vulnerable daughters like Atya, who would have found it hard to fend for herself without a spouse or a source of income. Atya, in turn, is a kind of communal mother, bringing up her brothers’ children with the love and concern she would have showed her own, and that was possible only because of the sense of community or collective responsibility that the joint family fostered: “A person belonged to the whole family. Your brother’s daughter was yours, his son-in-law yours as well” (4). It also ensures a secure upbringing for Indu, semi-orphaned owing to the early loss of her mother and the unhelpful presence of a distracted and escapist young father. Weddings and funerals are occasions for the family members to congregate and put up a united front, despite the fissures. As Indu observes: “And yet, since coming for the wedding, I had seen the concept of the family taking shape, living, in front of my eyes. It had struck me how suddenly, if only momentarily, we had become an entity, a family, united by a strong bond, a common loyalty.”

Besides the immediate family members bound to one another by ties of blood, the institution provides for distant elderly relatives like Old Uncle, a schoolteacher “who
retired early due to bad health and came to live with the family as a poor dependent” and his grandson Naren. Old Uncle grows into an indispensable part of the family, so much so that his death leaves a void in Indu’s life: “His going left an unbelievable gap in our midst…when he died, it was as if one of the pillars of our house had gone down.” Then there are other dependents like the domestic help Vitthal, whom the family takes upon itself to educate – Indu uses the money that Akka leaves her to help set him up in life. And though Indu walks out of her extended family to marry Jayant, she is unable to resist its hold on her, responding immediately to its summons or sticking religiously to habits acquired over her childhood, leading Jayant to remark that its taboos had followed her to her urban home. Chakladar observes that, “Apart from demanding the reader’s careful attention, what Deshpande accomplishes with this complicated structure is to make her reader literally confront the dense network of family ties that bind traditional Hindu society in general and her protagonists in particular” (85). In contrast, her initial experience in her hostel in Bombay is that of intense isolation: “How could I reveal to him [Naren] that the loneliness of hostel life was to me a savage cruelty that tore me to shreds?” The friends she makes are no more than social contacts. Unlike Akka and Atya who are invested in Mini’s future, her concerns are more individual and acquisitive: “Shall we buy an ambassador? Or a Fiat? Shall we go in for a house? Or a trip abroad? Shall we buy a carpet or a new painting for the drawing room?”

However, it does seem as if it is Indu’s isolated life in the city that also makes her sensitive to the existence of heterogeneity in the collective whole – “this large amorphous group of people with conflicting interests…a family like ours now…it has no meaning.”
The older generation is steadfast in its loyalty to the communal structure of the joint family and is significantly affected by its loss. As her uncle Kaka says, “The family, it’s all right to sneer at it. But tell me, what have you got to put in its place? What will you have in its stead? It gives us a background, an anchor, something to hold on to.” In contrast, the younger members seem to welcome its absence. The novel ends with the selling of the ancestral house, the consequent dispersal of the family and the house making way for a hotel, long-standing familial ties replaced by the short-lived sense of community provided by the hotel. “It is significant,” writes Jasbir Jain, “that the house is going to be replaced by a hotel – a place where people don’t belong and stay temporarily while in transit” (41). Atya moves in with Indu briefly and is overwhelmed by the experience of urbanity: “The traffic on the roads, to the spotless kitchen inside, seemed to frighten her.” For her, the move to the city is nothing short of an uprooting. For Indu, on the other hand, the decision to sell the house is liberating: “the house had been a trap too, binding me to a past I had to move away from. Now I felt clean, as if I had cut away all the unnecessary edges off myself.” Chakladar argues that Deshpande’s women “come home not just to take their places in the larger family drama but also to literally inherit their places in their homes and by extension in the family” (86). In this case, Indu inherits her place in the family – symbolized by her legacy of the house – but accepts it with qualification. Owing to her exposure to the city, she is better able to balance the needs of the individual with that of the family, as evident in her support of Mini’s marriage, which is a communal decision, and her funding Vitthal’s education, in recognition of his membership in the family or clan. Sharad, one of the hitherto incompetent sons, takes
immediately to the new hospitality business, surprising the family with his interest and aptitude, hinting at the potential for branching out that lay within the family itself. The city moves in on the village. To quote Jain again, “It [the novel] does mark the dispersal of a joint family, but it goes on to show social change as the movement takes place from villages to urban areas and economic forces shift” (38).

Indu’s relocation to the city also allows her and by extension, the readers, to understand her rural home as a paradoxical space of freedom and constraint, mobility and immobility, and this is most apparent in the role that women play in the novel. Indu does not identify with the women in her family at all. She says: “It was not that I had moved away both in space and time. It was more as if, at the moment of my leaving, something had snapped, so that I had nothing to do at all with the girl who had once, like these girls, stood there.” Returning, she encounters the roles of womanhood that would have been hers had she stayed on. “Families,” writes Jain, “act like traps in more than one way; they define gender roles through tradition, disapproval or ridicule; they also encourage and shelter parasites, they destroy freedom.” The women in Indu’s family conform to the roles that tradition and patriarchy define for them as wives, mothers, aunts and sisters – “a woman’s life, they had told me, contained no choices,” says Indu, “and all my life, especially in this house, I had seen the truth of this. The women had no choice but to submit, to accept.” Atya, the unmarried aunt, spends the greater part of her life bringing up her many brothers’ children and moves in with her niece as her dependent once the house is sold. Mini falls in with the family’s will and submits to marrying a man its senior members pick for her. However within the patriarchal script there are subtle
interventions -- the women are no longer just passive followers and victims of tradition. While Mini accepts the prospect of her marriage with a man the family has chosen for her, she does so with “a grace and composure that spoke eloquently of [that] inner strength,” which contrasts rather favorably with Indu’s own confusion regarding her marriage to a man she had fallen in love with. Mini is sharp enough to sense Indu and her old friend Naren’s clandestine relationship, but in a show of solidarity, does not sit in judgment on her or disclose Indu’s secret to the rest of the family. Sumitra-atya, another aunt, defies expectations to voice her displeasure regarding the family’s intervention in Mini’s marriage – she suggests that Mini be allowed to pick her own husband. Kaka is visibly affected by the demolition of the ancestral house and the dispersal of the family, but his wife accepts her changed reality gracefully. Says Indu, “Unlike Kaka, however, she reveals nothing. She is in full control of reality. She is, I now realize, one of the strong ones.”

At a first glance, Akka is the stereotypical family matriarch. To quote from the novel: “Since the day Akka had come back, a rich childless widow to her brother’s house, she had maintained an absolute control over her brother’s children. Kaka, even after becoming a grandfather, could be reduced to a red-faced stuttering schoolboy by Akka’s venomous tongue.” Akka’s role is consistent with that of the matriarch in the traditional Indian joint family, as defined by the critic Malashri Lal: “correspondingly, the senior-most woman of the household, unless a widow, is responsible for the major domestic organization. Her duties are vast: from managing the finances of housekeeping, supervising the education of the children and attending the sick to moderating family
disputes and settling ruffled nerves” (13). Here too there is a revision in the traditional
script as Akka is a widow but empowered in spite of it. Despite her sharp tongue and
controlling behavior, Akka is a source of support to the other women in the family and
they sincerely mourn her loss. It is also significant that Akka overlooks all the men in the
family to name Indu as her sole inheritor. One would have to agree with Jain when she
says, “The fact that a woman has been chosen over all the possible male heirs is also
symbolic of the shift in gender roles. Indu’s homecoming is essential for her own growth;
the legacy is the tribute of one strong woman to another” (37). Despite her disapproval of
Indu’s decision to defect to the city and marry a man of her choice, Akka grudgingly
respects the younger woman’s independent spirit and acknowledges it in her bequest,
perhaps in an indirect salute to the potential of the city and its values adopted by Indu. In
her essay titled “In First Person” Deshpande writes about this unexpected development in
her novel: “And there is still today the enormous satisfaction of having given Indu, a
woman, both money and power. A kind of wish-fulfilment, I always think” (“In First
Person” 12-13).

While the city is a space that Indu escapes to in pursuit of freedom from her
family, the novel brings this freedom into question as well. While Bombay allows Indu
the opportunity to be economically independent and look for a life that is not simply
defined by marriage, she realizes that her chosen profession comes with its own set of
constraints. Indu is a journalist, very like her creator whose writing career began as a
trainee journalist with an Indian magazine called The Onlooker, who is forced to tailor
her articles according to the demands of her male editor and other influential clients; here
the novel anticipates Jaya’s dilemma in *That Long Silence*. Like Indu, Jaya too is confronted with the problem of having to choose between what she wants to publish - the story of her grandmother, widowed at thirteen, harassed by rituals and practices reserved for Hindu widows earlier -- and what the magazine editors want her to write. “Appa’s story,” as she calls her piece, is rejected as “middle class stuff, women’s problems” (*That Long Silence* 146) and Jaya settles down to writing, in her own words, “light humorous pieces about the travails of a middle-class housewife. Nothing serious…oh no, nothing serious” (*That Long Silence* 149) under the pseudonym Seeta. Eventually, Jaya abandons this literary avatar in favor of her own voice. Amrita Bhalla observes that “The first step towards self-realization is Jaya’s rejection of Seeta when she stops writing about her” (43). Like Jaya, Indu too eventually quits her job, deciding to “give” herself to writing instead, rejecting the constraints her editors impose on her in the quest for her own voice.

Urban life also comes with its other traps and compulsions, the necessity to conform to certain social standards. Indu tells Naren: “We belong to the smart young set…fresh flowers in the house every day. Can you believe it, Naren, I’ve gone and done a course in flower arrangement? The best places, whether you go out to eat or to cut your hair. Freshly laundered clothes twice a day. Clothes…yes, we have to keep up with the latest trends.” One is compelled to pay lip service to social and global issues, “We discuss intelligently, even solemnly, the problems of unemployment, poverty, corruption, family planning. We scorn the corrupt, we despise the ignorant, we hate the wicked…And our hearts bleed, Naren, for Vietnam, for the blacks, for the Harijans…” However Indu’s chaffs against this armchair activism, fully aware that what everyone
genuinely cares for is “our own precious walled-in lives” in contrast to the interest in communal well-being demonstrated by her family.

Ironically, it is in her old ancestral house and not Bombay that Indu finds a kindred spirit. Marriage with Jayant, with whom presumably she has more in common with than her relatives, does not yield the kind of companionship she had always longed for. Again, this anticipates an important trope in Deshpande’s later work, including That Long Silence – the lack of complete communication and understanding between partners in an apparently happy marriage. In an interview with Sue Dickman, Deshpande comments on the potential for silence and misunderstanding in the relationship between man and woman, as lovers or spouses: “We [women] do find the other sex mysterious to some extent. So many of their things we don’t understand. You may be very close to your friend or husband or lover or whatever but at the same time there is always that element of the unknown” (Dickman). In her relationship with Jayant, Indu perhaps comes up against this “element of the unknown” that she cannot fathom; Jayant appears to feel the same, as the following exchange demonstrates:

“You don’t know me, you know nothing about me,” I had once charged him in anger.

And he, revealing a frightening perspicacity, had said, “I know as much of you as you allow me to know.”
Indu is drawn into a passionate affair with her childhood friend, Naren, whom she reunites with in her natal home, and I conjecture that this is due to the lack of fulfilment in her married life. The affair is aborted by Naren’s sudden death. Here it is worth alluding to the fact that Deshpande does not shy away from capturing in detail Indu and Naren’s sexual intimacy. Deshpande might have almost been writing in response to Malashri Lal’s contention that Indian writers in English have a middle-class queasiness about describing the functions and responses of the body. Lal says:

[Yet] it is amazing how the physical dimensions are systematically eliminated. In several narrative sequences in Indian English fiction, children are born but sexual union is never described, family feuds occur without show of bloodshed, suicides take place without reference to morbidity, a father dies while potential inheritors look askance at one another but the sickroom has no stench of disease. Such withholding of description of body activity can only be attributed to the middle-class inhibitions of the writing-women. (15)

Deshpande’s writing demonstrates no such middle-class inhibitions, whether it is in her description of Naren and Indu’s lovemaking or the puffed feet on Akka’s dead body or

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48 Not unlike the death of the siblings Tom and Maggie in George Eliot’s 1860 novel, *Mill on the Floss*, Naren’s death serves as a *deux ex machine*, taking out the possibility of plot complications that might explore the consequences of the Indu-Naren relationship in Indu’s own life and facilitating her return to Jayant. I would like to thank Dr. Amritjit Singh for pointing out the analogy.

49 In “Masks and Disguises,” Deshpande writes: “Undoubtedly, the most difficult thing for women to talk about in public, to write about, is sex, specially their own sexual beings. This is one area women are not supposed to venture into. In fact, they were not supposed to have any sexuality, they were the purely passive partners. But sex is as much part of
even in Indu’s quick recall of violation in her childhood by an older relative, recognizing
the sexual abuse that takes place within, and inspite of, the supposedly protective ambit
of the Indian family.

Conclusion

To conclude, the representation of Bombay’s materiality in *The Space between Us*
sharply contrasts with its shadowy evocation in *Roots and Shadows*, framed by nostalgia
for an older way of life. In her introduction to *Women Writers and the City*, Susan Merill
Squier observes that, “what emerges in examining women writers’ vision of the city is
that whether city experiences are pleasurable or painful depends, in large part, on whether
it allows them access to creativity and autonomy” (4). Despite the difference in the way
the city is projected in either novel, the protagonists are united by a similar quest for
some kind of agency and autonomy in the city. And while crossing the physical border
between the city and village can prove to be liberating, both novels also sound a note of
cautions against extravagant celebration, underlining the contradiction that cities can
present to women – its opportunities as well as its risks and constraints – thus
contributing to the precariousness of female mobility.

women’s lives, as troubling a part of their lives, as it is of men’s; yet it had to remain
both unspoken and unacknowledged. And accompanied by guilt if one even thought of it”
(*Writing from the Margin* 191).
CONCLUSION

As far as writing in English is concerned, not one of the Indian literary A-list actually lives in India, except Arundhati Roy… it is not just that the diaspora tail is wagging the Indian dog. As far as the A-list is concerned, the diaspora tail is the dog.
- William Dalrymple, “The Lost Subcontinent”

My initial plan, outlined in my prospectus, was “a comparative study between literature by South Asian American women writers and women writers in South Asian countries.” At the back of my mind, among other things, was the skeptical response of the writers in the homeland to the diasporic writers, as evident in the following comments of Namita Gokhale on the diasporic writer Kiran Desai in the Sunday magazine: “Kiran Desai typifies a tendency of contemporary Indo-Anglian writing, of the author as a glib tourist guide of an alien sensibility rather than an introspective insider chronicling the life, and times he or she lives in.” My aim, vaguely stated, as I look back now, was “to explore the ambivalence” of the terms “global” and “local” in the context of the work of these two groups of writers: those at home in India and those in the diaspora, especially in the U.S. In retrospect, I find my prospectus fairly dispersed, even a bit blurry. However in the course of writing various chapters I did identify certain contact points between these two groups of writers signaled by concepts such as exile, alienation, mobility, and home/homelessness. In the process of actually writing the dissertation, I have been able to bring these contact points under the unifying narrative framework of female mobility.

In my dissertation I argue that a common thread between women writers in the homeland and in the diaspora is their common interest in female mobility and the challenges confronting female mobility in different spaces. My four chapters correspond
to four different modes of mobility – the phenomenon of global migration as well as mobility in the natal and marital home, in the nation-space and in the city. Home exists as a common metaphor for the divergent spaces that I explore. Chapter I delineates the challenges confronting immigrant Indian women as they travel from India to the U.S. and attempt to set up home on unfamiliar terrain. Chapter II teases out the latent violence in the domestic space that the first chapter hints at ---- the family emerges as both protective and oppressive of women. Chapter III employs novels with male voices to explore mobility as a gendered phenomenon against the background of national crises. The final chapter looks at female mobility as manifested through internal migration to the city and its impact on female subjectivity.

As I thought through the authors and their texts I chose for my study and developed my dissertation through writing its various pieces, my dissertation evolved differently from the goals I had charted out in my prospectus. For reasons that are still not entirely clear to me, I chose primarily Indian writers for inclusion in my discussion. Should I attribute this choice to my familiarity, even intimacy with the social and historical milieu of the novels I picked for my work? For example, I am quite familiar with the parental obsession with fair complexion for Indian women that Deshpande and Hariharan write about in their work or the happy chaos of a rural Indian wedding that Deshpande describes in *Roots and Shadows*. I was not sure if I was equally sensitized to issues raised by South Asian novelists in Pakistan or Sri Lanka or Bangladesh, against a background I could only access at second hand through books or other media. I also had to leave out the work of the *bhasha* writers or writers writing in different regional Indian
languages like Assamese, Bengali and Hindi, that I had originally planned to include. I did not want to risk picking up one or two women writers writing in regional languages and holding them up as somehow representative of all bhasha writing. I was cautious since this is my first extended writing project and I hope I can be braver in future.

In my conclusion, I return to the fraught relationship between the two groups of writers, diasporic Indian writers and writers writing at home – that I had gestured to in my introductory chapter. In her essay, “When the East is a Career: The Question of Exoticism in Indian Anglophone Literature” Nivedita Majumdar writes, “Indian Anglophone writers share a sense that their reception in India has been less than adequate…Recognition and acceptance in the West co-exists with a mixed response back home, where Anglophone writers do receive some praise but are also routinely treated with a dose of suspicion if not hostility” (1). When one leaves one’s homeland, one is always suspect. In her essay on the location of the foreigner in Roman Polanski’s film The Tenant, Katarzyna Marciniak points out how the “discriminatory logic of exile locks the stranger in a location of impossibility” (Alienhood 124). I shift her focus to suggest that the logic of exile also locks the diasporic writer in a similar location of impossibility, positioned between the hostility of his or her counterparts at home for “abandoning” his homeland on the one hand, and his non-acceptance or provisional acceptance in his new place on the other.

The Indian Anglophone writers have to contend with the charges of exoticism and of “inauthentic” representation leveled against their work by critics as well as their counterparts writing in the local languages. In her oft-quoted essay, “The Anxiety of
Indianness,” well-known Indian critic Meenakshi Mukherjee makes a strong case for viewing Anglophone Indian writing as exotic and spells out the reasons behind it.

Mukherjee argues that writers like R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao betrayed “an anxiety of Indianness” or an anxiety to signal their Indianness to the reading public primarily because they wrote in the colonial language. Their eagerness to compensate for the “alienness/elitism of their language” (Mukherjee) resulted in their selection of all too obvious themes and literary devices that announced their indigenous roots. This, in turn, led to homogenized national narratives or exotic constructions of the nation.

The battle over authenticity in representation between homeland and the diasporic writers has been aggravated by the attention the diasporic writers seem to corner in the global publishing market. More recently, in an interview to *The Hindu*, Shashi Deshpande talked about the fatal lure of the global market for writers in English:

> With huge global markets and so much money at stake, it [Indian Writing in English] has become frighteningly powerful. The problem with Indian Writing in English is that writing in English enables a book to enter the world market. And agents/publishers have their own idea of what an “Indian novel” should be; to be published, writers have to toe the line. I heard an Australian writer say… her book was judged by a question: where are the kangaroos? For us, it would be: where are the elephants? Young writers will try to provide the elephants because they need to be published.

According to Majumdar, these “elephants” are the “reductive constructions of India … evident in the works of contemporary expatriate writers such as Bharati Mukherjee and
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, in which images of their lost homeland rely heavily on easy and available constructs of India” (12).

Diasporic writers have strongly retaliated to charges of exoticism and of the flat and one-dimensional representation of India in their work, Rushdie leading the pack with his impassioned endorsement of “imaginary homelands,” which I discuss in my introduction. Vikram Chandra, author of *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* and *Love and Longing in Bombay*, came down heavily on Mukherjee and other critics of diasporic writing in an article “The Cult of Authenticity” published in *The Boston Review*. According to Chandra: “If you write in English, and are improperly contaminated by the West, if you’ve traveled across the Black Waters, and lost your caste, then the ‘real India’ is by definition beyond your grasp.” Chandra, like many other diasporic writers, takes strong umbrage to the idea implicit in the “authenticity” criticism that the “real India” is somehow only available to writers writing from locations in India, preferably in local languages instead of English. Nalini Iyer argues for the need to differentiate between Indian Anglophone writers and writers from the diaspora, claiming that the diasporic writers’ work should be “understood within the historical and cultural realities of migration to North America post-1965” (4). Replying to criticism of her writing as “inauthentic and pandering to the West,” Divakaruni says that while her realistic fiction is “authentic and close to the life of Bengali women as I have known it” her magical books like *Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams* “need to be looked at differently. They inhabit the world of the tale and are fantastic in nature” (*Other Tongues* 99).
These debates provide a compelling space to destabilize if not plainly debunk the idea of authenticity rooted in the “purity” of the nation and the purity of its citizenry\textsuperscript{50}. This circles back to the logic of impossibility – these diasporic writers are judged based on this fraught notion of authenticity, as if there could indeed be such a thing as authentic Indianness or authentic Americanness. This kind of authentic national belonging leads to exclusion and marginality of certain groups and in extreme cases, might lead to ethnic cleansing, as Trinh T. Minh ha alerts us:

Identity as understood in the context of a certain ideology of dominance has long been a notion that relies on the concept of an essential, authentic core that remains hidden to one’s consciousness and that requires the elimination of all that is considered foreign or not true to the self, that is to say, not-I, Other…the search for an identity is therefore, usually a search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original, authentic self, often situated within a process of elimination of all that is considered other, superfluous, fake, corrupted or Westernized. (929)

This idea of authenticity and the corresponding urgency to eliminate the not-I can lead to violence of the nation – a possibility that Umrigar explores so poignantly in \textit{The World We Found}.

Writing the dissertation has also enabled me to probe the charges of exoticism\textsuperscript{51} against writers of the diaspora. I have discussed in Chapter I how Bharati Mukherjee’s

\textsuperscript{50} I would like to thank Dr Katarzyna Marciniak for pointing out this important idea.

\textsuperscript{51} According to Nivedita Majumdar, “Exoticism has a dual aspect: an identification with a marginal group and the lack of engagement with the political and economic life of the group. It usually translates then into familiarity with certain everyday aspects of cultural life, such as food, clothes, music and religious rites” (4).
*Wife* shows up the troubling effects of global migration on the psyche of her female protagonist. In *Jasmine*, a repressive, superstitious and violent India is set against a liberatory West; its protagonist is free to change locations and identities at will. However in *Wife*, Dimple simply trades one prison for another by migrating to the West. What is also common to Bharati Mukherjee and a homeland writer like Deshpande is the focus in their texts on the crisis of masculinity. Manohar in Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds* suffers from fears of emasculation, following Sarita’s growing repute as a “lady” doctor and her development of an identity separate from his. In Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*, Mohan, forced to go underground because of a misstep at work, experiences bouts of insecurity and makes infantile demands on his wife’s attention as a result. Mukherjee locates a similar moment of masculine anxiety in *Wife* in the initial days of Amit’s unemployment following their migration, when, in Dimple’s eyes, Amit seems to shed his authority. Both Deshpande and Mukherjee write about the importance of “work” to a man in the social construction of masculinity.

One can of course see where charges of “inauthenticity” or a “pandering to the West” leveled against Divakaruni arise from. Divakaruni only appears to be skimming the surface of life in Calcutta’s Chinatown when we compare her representation to the one found in a book like Kwai-yun Li’s *The Palm Leaf Fan and Other Stories*. Li writes about a Chinatown vibrant with detail: fish ponds contaminated by tanneries, houses half-submerged by monsoon rains, schools run by fearsome nuns who teach classes in their tennis-court-sized living rooms, and that house both Bengali and Bengali Chinese students, and marriage decisions negotiated literally across the street – concrete details
that are not to be found in Divakaruni’s *One Amazing Thing*. While the characters in Divakaruni’s novel prefer India to the U.S. and plan on moving there, it is an India consistent with the West’s favorite representation of the country as a space of healing and spiritual sustenance. For example, Mrs. Pritchett longs to go to India to escape her over-privileged life which is bereft of emotional nourishment. Cameron wants to go to India to meet his foster daughter Seva (meaning service) to shake off a curse plaguing him. Yet in Cameron’s story Divakaruni comes as close as possible to a critique of structural and institutional racism; Cameron’s story provides an interesting counterpoint to Pritchett’s story. Though Pritchett is economically and socially marginalized, it is still possible for him to find a family to adopt him and enable him to rise well above his miserable, poverty-stricken childhood. For Cameron, on the other hand, there is no way out of the ghetto.

Through her memorializing of the Sino-Indian war of 1962, Divakaruni’s *One Amazing Thing* also offers a critique of the nation-state and its homogenizing, exclusionary practices. The novel portrays the sinophobia in India following the war, in focus recently because of a novel in the vernacular – Rita Chowdhury’s hard-hitting novel in Assamese *Makam*, coincidentally published in the same year as Divakaruni’s novel. *Makam* (*The Golden Horse*) also tells the ill-fated love story of Melin, a Chinese girl and an Assamese boy, against the backdrop of the Sino-Indian war and the forced deportation of Chinese Assamese back to China.\(^{52}\) There is something common to all the

\(^{52}\) The British brought the Chinese to India to work as laborers in the tea plantations. During the 1962 war, the Chinese, now thoroughly assimilated, came under suspicion because of their origins. About fifteen hundred Assamese Chinese in Makum, a small
members of the motley group that assemble in the visa office in *One Amazing Thing*. They are all united by a shared sense of loss and deprivation – be it Tariq, who finds his family ruined and his identity under threat following the Twin Towers Explosion, or Cameron whose life is emblematic of the limited opportunities available to the inner-city blacks or for that matter, even Uma, the privileged first-generation American whose family is in shambles with her parents on verge of a separation. Divakaruni’s ability to handle diverse and complicated situations with empathy and compassion buffers any charges of exoticism against her.

Umrigar is the least talked about of all the writers in my dissertation which is surprising considering she is perhaps the least “exotic.” Also given Umrigar’s interest in the political and social issues of the homeland, she merits a more detailed critical scrutiny. One does not know what to attribute her comparative invisibility in critical circles to. Maybe critics have not caught up with Umrigar’s writing, but it is a matter of both surprise and regret, because Umrigar picks up issues that are relevant to the times that we live in. She bears “the double cross of knowledge and responsibility” that Amritjit Singh attributes to “many self-conscious diasporic individuals” (“Afterword” 157). These individuals are in a unique position because of their ability to be equally critical of their adoptive homelands as well as their originary homes. They regard their “originary homelands with a sharply critical affection instead of nostalgia, guilt or
misplaced patriotism” (Singh 157). Though writing from her perch in the U.S., about a city she obviously adores, Umrigar’s representation demonstrates a remarkable deftness in modulating both “guilt” and “nostalgia.”

The “borders” dividing Indian writers at home and abroad are formidable, as the debate over exoticism, representation and “authenticity” suggests. Yet there is no denying that when it comes to exploring issues of marginality, liminality and mobility for women, there are also striking similarities between these two groups. Clearly the diasporic writers can never rid themselves of India – in fact recent cultural production in the diaspora shows an increasing return to the homeland as a setting for their work as exemplified in Lahiri’s Lowland and Divakaruni’s Oleander Girl. Borders divide, but as Singh and Schmidt remind us, they also “connect.” Studying the work of diasporic and homeland women writers together has the potential of conveying a composite and complex portrait of South Asian female subjectivities, something that could militate against what Spivak referred to as the “ferocious standardizing benevolence of U.S. and Western European human scientific radicalism” (294).
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