

*Desis in the House: South Asian American Theatre and the Politics of
Belonging*

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Belonging

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This dissertation attempts to update the traditional understanding of what constitutes American theatre by bringing into focus works by South Asian American playwrights addressing the racialization of *desis* - a large and diverse community of people with origins in South Asia - who have, after the events of 9/11, become questionable citizen subjects in the United States. I examine the various ways in which the plays under consideration represent the negotiation of South Asian American identity in its quest to establish belonging on the American nation-space. I look at scripts and productions to explore responses to the performance of the American *desi* subject's precarious belonging in a national space that sees them variously as cultural others or even threats. These plays put the spotlight on techniques of othering as mediated by the structures of class, gender and sexuality, and religion, but they also have certain universal qualities that offer an affective staged realization of the imagined community that is America today - an ethnoracial conglomerate that transcends the conventional white/black racial binary. These plays, moreover, take ownership of and expand the representation of South Asian-origin characters in American popular culture beyond such stock types

as the cab driver, the terrorist or the computer nerd. Finally, they forecast the future of the American stage and the direction that American theatre must necessarily take in order to account for the growing diversity of the lives it reflects and shapes.

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Dipanjan, whose friendship and accomplished nagging led to the completion of this project, and whose untiring pursuit of knowledge inspires my own.

1.0 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 PREFACE

This dissertation¹ arises out of my own struggles with identity and belonging in my country of migration – the United States of America. I arrived in Pittsburgh from Kolkata, India in Fall 2009 to begin my doctoral work at the University of Pittsburgh’s Department of Theatre Arts. Almost immediately upon arrival, my felt difference thousands of miles from what I had thus far called “home” began to shape my personal identity. Before I arrived in the US, I could identify as: woman, journalist, actor, theatre scholar. Once in the US, certain identifying categories that I had never explicitly acknowledged or thought about while I lived in India became immediately apparent. In India, I was, in addition to markers I have just mentioned, also: middle-class, part of the Hindu religious majority (despite no special interest in this particular membership), Indian national. Five years of American living later, even more identifying markers have been added to my sense of selfhood: alien immigrant, graduate student, brown, *not* Hispanic, Asian Indian,

¹ My dissertation title, “*Desis in the House*” shares the phrase with Sunaina Maira’s book of the same name, although I arrived at it on my own.

South Asian, minority. With it has come the awareness of how politically charged each of these identity categories are for an ethnoracial minority such as myself. My dissertation on South Asian American theatre arises out of an old habit of turning to the theatre to understand my own self.

1.2 PROJECT BRIEF

It is my hope that this dissertation contributes to the field in the following ways: primarily, it is the first lengthy analysis of the dramatic representation of concerns with identity and belonging of the South Asian American subject. Secondly, it is an exploration of contemporary American plays that updates traditional understandings of what constitutes American theatre. These plays, mainly written by second-generation South Asian-origin Americans and mainly produced between 1998 and the present time, put bodies and characters on stage that revise the perception of the American subject (and, with regard to staging, the American body). They focus on issues of racialization and minoritization of a diverse and large community of people who have, after 9/11, become questionable citizen subjects. My analysis of these plays in the chapters to follow offers a fresh perspective to the stories being told on stage about American people.

Identity becomes a necessary focus of this dissertation, and it is arguably also the most difficult concern to grapple with in any study of South Asian Americans or, as they often call themselves - *desis*. I use the term '*desi*' advisedly in my

dissertation title, and it needs a few words of explanation, as it is a loaded word that has been appropriated by (many, though not all) South Asian Americans. *Desi* is a Hindi term for a South Asian native, but has been adopted by the South Asian American community as a convenient label that brings peoples of varying originary locations as well as differing ethnic cultures within the Indian subcontinent together under a rubric that shows their difference from other ethnoracial minorities within the US.² In that sense, the term *desi* is much closer to being inclusive and homogeneous³ as the broad construct of a South Asian American identity, in that it creates a sense of identity that transcends the differences of, say, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Indian origins.⁴ It is also a way to appropriate the consistent marking of South Asian Americans as other-than American and reflects this reality of racial identity construction for the subjects of this dissertation.

I group the plays in this dissertation according to three different structural approaches through which they address identity-construction and problems of belonging among the South Asian American community: in Chapter 2, I deal with plays concerning forms of racialization that vary based on **social class**; how **gender**

² The root word ‘des’ in Hindi can variously mean nation/country/land/region/territory/home.

³ I must concede that the usage of a Hindi term to label subjects with cultural roots in countries of the Indian subcontinent where Hindi is not an official language does propagate the hegemony of India as representing all of South Asia, in the process erasing cultural nuances that differentiate the countries of the Indian subcontinent from each other. I take heart, however, in the fact that the majority of South Asian American popular cultural works in circulation are by artistes who are of Indian origin. The writers among them are writing about subjects who are the same, which is unsurprising considering the vast majority of South Asian Americans of Indian origin. *Desi* is very much a term in usage among this group. My chapter 4, on Pakistani- and Bangladeshi-origin American playwrights and subjects offers diversity in voices within the dissertation, and I have not used the term *desi* to denote the subjects who make up the content of that chapter because I do not feel ethically empowered to assign this label to them.

⁴ The term has less resonance among people of Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan origin.

and sexuality shape *desi* identity within a transnational cultural scope forms the crux of plays in Chapter 3; Chapter 4 discusses plays that speak to the greater **onus on the South Asian American Muslim to perform national belonging** in a post-9/11 world. In every case, however, the plays engage with multiple other discourses. For instance, the issue of who belongs authentically to which culture is confronted in Madhuri Shekar's *A Nice Indian Boy* where the Caucasian protagonist identifies himself unquestioningly as Indian. Plays such as Anuvab Pal's *Chaos Theory*, Aditi Brennan Kapil's *Brahman/i*, and Nandita Shenoy's *Lyme Park: An Austonian Romance of an Indian Nature* variously consider whether the South Asian American must necessarily always be an identity in flux⁵. Nearly all the plays I cover ask what it takes for an American *desi* to *become* American – to actually be seen as belonging as an equal member of American society.

My criteria for choosing these plays are twofold⁶: first, I picked plays for this dissertation based on whether they have received professional production – with the exception of the two plays by Nandita Shenoy, which received one full production each (alongside several readings and workshops), the other plays in this project have all been produced several times across the United States, and sometimes internationally. Second, I picked plays that, while being written by American

⁵ This is a noteworthy consideration, given that the countries that make up South Asia today were in themselves reconstitutions following the effects of colonialism and empire. I discuss this in my history section (1.3) in a little bit.

⁶ There is also a burgeoning group of Indian-origin playwrights writing original work in regional Indian languages, and those plays get produced in small community theatre settings or, more frequently, as part of the celebration during religious festivals organized by diasporic South Asians across the country. That body of work is too niche for me to write on, but it certainly bears mention.

playwrights of South Asian descent⁷, also focus on subjects who are South Asian Americans, or at the very least, of South Asian-origin and resident in America.

While these criteria serve to narrow the field and help me focus on plays that specifically tackle different approaches to the *desi* problem of belonging, they do eliminate some powerful writing by South Asian American playwrights such as Rajiv Joseph (of part-Indian ancestry), whose contribution to modern American theatre is indisputable. Until his 2015 play, *Guards At The Taj*, Joseph was not writing about South Asian subjects, and I suspect he cares little for categorization as a South Asian American playwright. Nonetheless, his plays (until *Guards*, which premiered long after my own project had been mapped out) do not concern the narrative that emerges from the interaction between the American nation and the South Asian diaspora in America and thus he is a significant exclusion in my survey of South Asian American theatre.

Although this theatre in its English-language form is undoubtedly in its infancy – the first professional productions having happened in the late-Nineties – it is growing in viewership and circulation very rapidly, as the number of *desis* migrating to the US rises and more second-generation *desis* grow up in an America that, in the current climate of the War on Terror, questions their standing in their country of birth. Moreover, some of this writing originates from writers whose own place of belonging must necessarily transcend the idea of the nation as a

⁷ Anuvab Pal is an exception. He is an Indian national who lives in Mumbai but frequently travels to the US for his dramatic and stand-up comedy work. The transnational scope of his investment in American theatre is shared by another playwright in my thesis: Madhuri Shekar is based out of Los Angeles, but like Pal travels frequently between India and the US, staging her work in both countries.

geographically bound territory. I cover one such playwright – Indian-Bulgarian-American Aditi Brennan Kapil – in one of my chapters, but I will mention here another writer who will not feature in this dissertation but whom the American theatre world will invariably take note of in the coming years (if it hasn't already). Dipika Guha was born in Calcutta and raised in India, the UK and Russia. She finished an MFA in Playwriting from the Yale School of Drama in 2011, under the mentorship of Paula Vogel. Her prolific output of plays circulates theatre circuits across the US, but has mainly premiered in cosmopolitan cities like New York and San Francisco. She has had commissioned work produced by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the Satori Group in Seattle, Barnard College in Columbia University and the University of South Carolina, among others. Her writing powerfully conveys the spatiotemporal instability of diasporic identity (although it is not specifically concerned with diaspora), and her plays have universal scope. Guha introduces elements of magic realism to her dramatic narrative – her characters often inhabit undefined worlds where conventions of time and place are deliberately defied in an attempt to dissolve such identity-forming structures as history, memory and nationality. Such disjuncture occurs on the bodies of her characters – the ballerina with an artificial spine (*Mechanics of Love*, 2016), the Don Juan figure who has no concept of memory (*Mechanics of Love*), the woman who ages overnight in anticipation of her first meeting with her fiancé (*The Betrothed*, 2014), Herculine Barbin, the nineteenth century intersex person who meets modern-day American teenager Lola in *Herculine and Lola* (2015) etc. Magic,

myth and fables propel Guha's stories and she uses the transformative powers of the stage to imagine a world where truths are multiple, as are the contours of individual subjectivity. Boundaries are fluid in this world, where the present, past and future coexist and the living world commingles with the afterworld. Unfortunately, her plays don't feature in my dissertation because my primary concern has always been to see *desi* bodies tackling *desi* concerns with belonging on the American stage (and why this should matter to the American community at large), and Guha's scope is far wider than that. She is, however, a rich resource for a lengthier project on South Asian American theatre.

In that same vein, let me disclose right away other significant eliminations that bear mention as other South Asian American playwrights represent the *desi* body on stage. Bina Sharif (*Afghan Woman, Democracy in Islam*, both produced in 2002), Fawzia Afzal-Khan (*Jihad Against Violence: A One-Act Play*⁸) and Rohina Malik (*Unveiled*, 2011) are a few Pakistani-origin American playwrights who address the politics of perception surrounding the Muslim woman's hijab or burqa. Wajahat Ali's *The Domestic Crusaders* depicts a Muslim American family spanning three generations, dismantling common perceptions around what the Muslim American subject's politics and ideology might look like. Sharif, Malik and Ali's plays have all been performed at cosmopolitan venues in Chicago and New York, and Sharif's repertoire has been discussed in analyses of South Asian American literature such as Rajini Srikanth's illuminating book *The World Next Door: South*

⁸ The play first appeared in publication in *The Drama Review* in 2010, but it has been workshopped and revised since, and the 2015 version is titled *Jihad Against Violence: Oh ISIS Up Yours!*.

Asian American Literature and the Idea of America, which was a starting point for my own research.

The repertoire of plays written by Muslim American playwrights of South Asian-origin in the aftermath of 9/11 is rich enough to have its own dissertation. I have confined myself to an in-depth analysis of two plays directly dealing with this instead. One reason for this is the constraints of time and space that would not allow me to fairly write about all these plays taking into account the multiple levels of meaning each of them straddle. The second reason is that I have picked plays for this dissertation that offer the possibility of multiracial casting⁹, and that more accurately convey the reality of demography and community relationships in America. I do this in the hope that this takes them away from being categorized as “ethnic drama” and reflects more potently that they are the new face of American theatre. The two plays I focus on in my Chapter 4 in lieu of all this aforementioned work both incorporate diversity in casting. Another important exclusion is Ayad Akhtar’s latest play, *The Invisible Hand*, which premiered while this dissertation was being written, and is another sharp production that exposes the nexus between globalization, racialization and the forces of capital that foster both individual greed and large-scale terrorism. In a different dissertation, all these plays would feature prominently in undermining and reconceiving the common misperception about the Muslim subject in the world today.

⁹ The only two exceptions to this are *Sakina’s Restaurant*, which is meant to be a solo performance, and *Marrying Nandini*, which I include nonetheless for its contribution to reinventing the arranged marriage tradition.

My survey of South Asian American theatre covers a brief time period, from the late-1990s till present day. The subjects of these plays are immigrants and children of immigrants who arrived in the swathe of post-1965 high-skilled and family reunification policies. As mentioned before, this theatre is certainly a new formation on the American stage, but it is one that is quickly gaining prominence. Ayad Akhtar's Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Disgraced* in 2013, and its subsequent success on Broadway, is certain to throw the spotlight on this formation and I hope for my dissertation to be a lead-in for future scholars of this drama. The main centers for this theatrical formation continue to be cosmopolitan cities with a sizeable South Asian-origin population but in nearly all cases these shows are targeted to a diverse demographic, and not just reliant on South Asian-origin viewership. Most of the plays I write about have had premiere performances in New York, Chicago or San Francisco, but in cases like *Brahman/i*, theatre companies in cities like Boston and Pittsburgh have picked them up. Sometimes this theatre has travelled across the pond, such as with *Disgraced* and *Sakina's Restaurant*, which have had shows in London. Anuvab Pal's *Chaos Theory* has enjoyed over 250 performances – mostly in India, but also in Singapore, Dubai and Bahrain, besides New York and California.

There is a sizable South Asian diaspora comprising legal immigrant aliens who live, work, or study in the US, and many of them engage in community socialization through the medium of theatre – performing in or staging plays exported from their country of origin, often in a regional language, but sometimes

also in English.¹⁰ However, this theatrical activity, a lot of which occurs during festivals and large community events that may or may not be religious (eg: Diwali, Bengali New Year), is not a focus of my dissertation. While this theatre is vibrant and active, I want to focus on English-language theatre that emerges out of the South Asian American population in the United States. It is to be noted also that there is theatre in vernacular regional languages that is emerging out of South Asian America (e.g.: Sudipta Bhawmik is writing plays in Bengali out of New Jersey that have been performed in the US as well as in India). Again, this theatre does not feature in my dissertation, not for its lack of value, but more simply because the English-language theatre has greater reach among audiences, and therefore greater potential in terms of stage life.

My subjects then, are those South Asians who have become naturalized citizens of America or who acquired citizenship at birth. In either case, their South Asianness cannot be separated from their Americanness, irrespective of whether they immigrated to America or were born here. The fact that their identity may be mapped along transnational axes is certainly a contributing factor to their plays: Aasif Mandvi was born in India and raised in England before migrating to Florida in his teens. Aditi Brennan Kapil is of Indian and Bulgarian ancestry and was raised in Sweden, and she acknowledges her Indian heritage in her writing. Ayad Akhtar, while born and raised in the US, clearly harkens to his Pakistani origins in his work. Madhuri Shekar and Anuvab Pal are both truly transnational in that they

¹⁰ Again, this is truer for the Indian community than for other South Asian diasporic formations.

divide their time between India and the US, producing work in both countries. These playwrights' existence is situated within a diasporic context that is connected to a point of origin mapped in South Asia (though that connection, in individual instances, may or may not be tenuous). I hope to eventually argue that the homeland-diaspora binary jeopardizes notions of belonging and affects perceptions around who has a greater right toward claims of Americanness.

1.3 DEMOGRAPHICS AND A BRIEF HISTORY OF ARRIVAL

According to a 2010 report released by the United States Census Bureau¹¹, the “Asian-alone” population in the United States grew faster than any other racial group between 2000 and 2010, growing more than four times faster than the total US population.¹² As of April 1, 2010, 17.3 million people in the United States identified as Asian, either alone or in combination with another race. The US Office of Management and Budget identifies “Asian” as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia or the Indian subcontinent, including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan,

¹¹ A comprehensive report may be found at www.census.gov. I referred specifically to the census brief mapping the Asian population: <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-11.pdf>. The website, *Sepia Mutiny*, which is a cultural interest blog chronicling issues germane to the South Asian diaspora in America has some interesting commentary on the 2010 Census, including a deconstruction of racial categories in the census. For a consolidation of their census posts, please follow the link: <http://sepiautiny.com/blog/tag/census/>

¹² I borrow the phrase “Asian alone” from the Census report, where persons who identified as belonging to one race only (in this instance, any race belonging to the Asian continent) were referred to as the *race alone* population. Persons who identified with more than one Asian racial subcategory (e.g.: Asian Indian and Bangladeshi) were still classified under Asian alone.

the Philippine Islands, Thailand and Vietnam.” While this is a broad continental definition of the Asian race, the 2010 Census form provided individual category heads for Asian Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and Filipino. All other Asian racial subcategories were clubbed under the category “Other Asian”. The report tells us that of the total 17.3 million people of Asian origin in the US, 19% identified as Asian Indians. That’s close to 3.3 million people who identified as being of Indian origin alone, not including those who were Indian in combination with another race or ethnicity.¹³ My dissertation covers the theatre of the diasporic communities that fall under the broader region of South Asia. I cover theatre that has been performed in states with the highest concentration of South Asian populations – such as New York (which has over 313,000 people identifying as Asian Indian) and California (with over 528,000 identifying as Asian Indian). South Asian American theatre thrives in New York City, Chicago and in the San Francisco Bay Area – all cosmopolitan centers with a diverse population demographic. In fact, a majority of the plays I cover emerge out of the South Asian American theatre scene in New York City.

South Asia, as an umbrella term to describe the peoples of this region, is problematic in itself, because the fact of clubbing diverse groups of people from six

¹³ Slightly different numbers are to be found in a report that scrutinizes the 2010 Census more closely. In 2011, the Asian American Center for Advancing Justice compiled the 2010 Census data into a report, “A Community of Contrasts: Asian Americans in the United States: 2011” that revealed more exact numbers for the *desi* population. According to the report, the Indian population is at 3,183, 063; the Pakistani population at 409,163; Bangladeshi population at 147,300; Nepalese population at 59,490; Sri Lankan at 45,381; and Bhutanese population at 19,439. That brings the South Asian American population to 3,863,836 or close to 4 million people. The report can be found at: https://www.advancingjustice.org/sites/default/files/Community_of_Contrast.pdf

countries politically and ideologically at loggerheads with each other undermines their essential differences from one another. However, the term is a useful acknowledgment of the shared histories and languages, as well as cultural similarities between these nations. The six countries commonly categorized as South Asia are India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. In the process of selection of materials to write about the South Asian diaspora in America, it is not hard to imagine that most resources deal with South Asian Americans of Indian origin, since Indians form the largest group of South Asian migrants in America, and are also the group (within the South Asian ethnic subcategory) with the most political and economic clout.

A short note here about my decision not to hyphenate 'South Asian American': I feel that the citizen in its purest form is an unhyphenated identity, and that the possession of the hyphen in identity indicates a jolt, a break, a being this-and-that that is not the flow and coexistence of both identities (that the hyphen purports to bring together in the first place). The South Asian American carries South Asia within his American identity, both exist in fluid time - for the second-generation South Asian American at least, there is not a beginning of a South Asian identity that then flows into an American identity and therefore no need for a hyphen to indicate the primacy or even progression of one identity over another. This is not to give an unrealistic positive gloss to the notion that this specific kind of citizenship is wholly unproblematic. I concede that this unique identity formation does not come without its own struggles and even trauma - that is what the plays I

cover grapple with, the lived experiences of diasporic bodies.

Historians of diaspora have classified the history of the South Asian (but more specifically Indian) diaspora into the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ diasporas.¹⁴ The old diaspora comprised nineteenth-century indentured labor migrants who occupied spaces with other colonized migrant laborers in locations like the West Indies, Fiji, Malaysia etc. The new diaspora is primarily comprised of highly skilled workers and voluntary migrants who look to move to the epicenter of capitalism in the “first world”. Of course, it is never as simple as that. Working-class South Asian immigrants also make up a sizable portion of the service sector in such cosmopolitan cities as New York and Chicago. They are victims of exploitative labor practices and often have to (or are able to) maneuver the barely-regulated service industry to their advantage. The processes of US capital expansion in the countries of the global South and the expansion of the South Asian diaspora in the US need to be seen within each other’s context, as continuous and fluid processes affecting lives and restructuring identity over and over again.

It is important to classify the specific sort of diaspora we will be dealing with in this dissertation. Every text on the diaspora begins with its original definition - with its associations with the traumatic dispersal of the Jewish people. However,

¹⁴ Specifically, Vijay Mishra uses this form of categorization in *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (New York: Routledge, 2007). For a history of the South Asian diaspora in America, please see Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), Vijay Prashad’s chapter “Of the Origin of *Desis* and Some Principles of State Selection” in *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), and the Introduction to Susan Koshy and R. Radhakrishnan, eds., *Transnational South Asians: The Making of a Neo-Diaspora* (New York, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008).

different diasporas have always existed - most prominently the imperial diasporas that set out on colonizing missions in the global South. The South Asian diaspora in the United States may be classified as a labor diaspora - a dispersal of peoples in pursuit of work - as migrant laborers or highly skilled workers. The label 'South Asian' is one ascribed to the disparate communities of the Indian subcontinent and is not one that actually exists as a homogeneous identity category. At least, it hasn't existed since the British left the subcontinent. South Asians are relatively new entrants to America, if one considers the migration history of this country. Moreover, the nature of immigration has changed over the years with changing statutes and restrictions to immigration policy.

In 1790, a sea captain from Madras visited Salem, Massachusetts, becoming the first documented South Asian to have entered America.¹⁵ Ships' manifests record that in the early nineteenth century, Muslim traders from West Bengal were regularly travelling to the beach towns of New Jersey to sell their wares. According to Subramaniam Chandrasekhar, by 1905, five thousand Indian men had arrived in the United States.¹⁶ Female migration was severely restricted at the time. The men arrived primarily from India (including regions that later became Pakistan and Bangladesh). Despite their generic designation as "Hindoos" by immigration officers at their ports of entry, these men were most commonly Sikhs and Muslims. Anxiety about foreign immigrants from Asia led to a blanket ban on immigration from all of

¹⁵ Neilesh Bose, *Beyond Broadway and Broadway: Plays from the South Asian Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 7.

¹⁶ Subramaniam Chandrasekhar, ed., *From India to America: A Brief History of Immigration, Problems of Discrimination, Admission and Assimilation* (La Jolla, CA: Population Review, 1986).

Asia in 1917. The numbers of South Asians in the US gradually dwindled, as immigration and citizenship was forbidden. Thus, when immigration policies changed again in 1965, an entirely new crop of South Asians began coming into the US.¹⁷ As the country underwent serious economic restructuring, these highly skilled migrants were able to settle into white-collar professions and become homeowners in American suburbia. However, they were prominent non-white minorities in their surroundings, and this structural position undoubtedly shaped the South Asian American experience of that first generation of post-1965 arrivals and their children's upbringing.

Lisa Lowe writes in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* about the contradictions of Asian immigration, “which at different moments in the last century and a half of Asian entry into the United States have placed Asians ‘within’ the US nation-state, its workplaces, and its markets, yet linguistically, culturally, and racially marked Asians as ‘foreign’ and ‘outside’, the national polity”.¹⁸ Lowe defines immigrant acts as “practices constituted through dialectics of difference and disidentification”¹⁹ and *not* through sameness. These acts then exist in opposition to “the project of imagining the nation as homogeneous”²⁰ and result in the othering and Orientalizing of Asian cultures. Although Lowe is writing

¹⁷ It is worth noting that the changes to the immigration laws and the opening up of American borders coincided with the Civil Rights Movement and its renewed scrutiny of race relations in the country. I explain the sources of this migration history in my literature review a little bit later.

¹⁸ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 267.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

about an East Asian American problem of belonging, her words apply just as much to the South Asian American whose identity has historically been in flux and exposed to myriad cultural influences. In the complex history of the Indian subcontinent, the concept of national culture has always been a constantly transformative product constituted by (in my wide gloss of history) native rule followed by Mughal rule, British colonization (with Portuguese and French localized influences thrown in) and finally the partition of the country into India, Pakistan and later, Bangladesh. This has facilitated the existence of communities of people for whom redrawn borders were not unfamiliar and migration became at various points a necessity. Colonization, and the compulsory introduction of English facilitated the migration of South Asians to other British colonies and into the US: in the nineteenth century as coolies in the first swathe of South Asian global migration, and as highly skilled workers proficient in English in the second wave of immigration in the Sixties.

While I will continue to use the generic umbrella term ‘South Asian American’ throughout most of this dissertation, it is important to note the use of a variety of labels (Indian American, Pakistani American, Nepali American etc.) by individual South Asian Americans. To note this is to acknowledge the history of the Indian subcontinent – a history mired in colonialism, exile and migration – that led to the significance of these individual labels being used.²¹ How South Asian Americans view each other has this history as its reference point. When India

²¹ Bandana Purkayastha expands on this in *Negotiating Ethnicity: Second Generation South Asian Americans Traverse a Transnational World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

became independent from British rule in 1947, the country was redrawn into India and Pakistan, the former as a Hindu-majority nation-state and the latter as Muslim-majority. This political and geographical reconfiguration, that occurred along religious lines, invariably caused the traumatic exile of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims from their existing homes, as they tried to migrate and fit themselves into the country that was apparently created for them and away from the one where they were no longer welcome. Then in 1971, the vast Bengali Muslim community in Pakistan successfully agitated for linguistic and cultural autonomy and the new nation-state of Bangladesh was created. Again, this split was characterized by traumatic displacements and conflict. Then again, there were South Asian groups that migrated to the UK and to other British colonies post-Independence. There were those who had been labor migrants to Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania from the nineteenth century onwards. With growing anti-Asian sentiment in these countries, migrations of South Asian-origin peoples began to take place from these locations into the US as well post-1965. One must keep in mind that this trauma of relocation, of displacement runs deep in the history of South Asians and their American offspring, and is a contributing (and complicating) factor in how an individual South Asian American would choose to identify him or herself. In terms of racial perception also, South Asian Americans occupy a curiously liminal space – they look nothing like the typically considered ‘Asian Americans’ who are of East Asian descent, they are not considered black, and they are often confused with people of Hispanic origin.

Viet Than Nguyen expresses rightly the frustrating pursuit of bringing “Asian American” identity into cohesion:²² “[A]s Asian America has witnessed the growth of its power in the past thirty years due to a rising population and increased political organization, it has also witnessed the growth of a demographically diverse population that is also ideologically diverse due to its wide range of origins and points of entry into American society”. Even when removed from the broader (and therefore even more generically constructed) Asian American identity, under which South Asian Americans are usually grouped, South Asian American identity struggles for uniformity in definition within the confines of its geographic ties to the South Asian region, which is vastly diverse in terms of language, religion and cultural nuances. The field of South Asian American theatre enters academic discourse amid several marginalities - it is non-existent within the growing institutionalization of Asian American literary studies, and as a dramatic form it suffers yet another level of marginality as a point of academic discourse.

A reason for South Asian studies to not be coopted into Asian American studies (though it is increasingly gaining its own place) may be attributed to the fact that the history of this migration is fairly new. As I alluded to earlier, aside from pockets of immigration in the early-1900s, the majority of South Asian immigration into America occurred after the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 abolished “national origins” quotas for skilled Asians, and allowed for the immigration of spouses, minor children and parents of adult US citizens who had been

²² Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9.

naturalized²³. A flush of employment-based immigration from South Asia began with this Act. Asian American studies has historically based its explorations on the foundations of imperial ties between the US and East Asia — wars fought in Vietnam, Japan, Korea, the military occupation of the Philippines, the annexation of Hawaii. The connection between South Asia and the United States is perhaps a consequence of the latter's emergence as a global power, and the remains of British imperialism and colonial affects that played up the West as aspirational. It is troubling to me that 'South Asian' has come to be treated as a homogeneous category when in fact its homogeneity is a myth. The cultures of the nations that form the Indian subcontinent are widely varied across religion, language and political structure, among other factors. However, I recognize that the relative youth of South Asian American theatre makes it a convenient umbrella term under which to understand the theatre of the subcontinental diaspora until this drama becomes widespread enough for analyses of individual diasporas (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi etc.).

1.4 BELONGING WITHIN A TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

At the heart of my dissertation is an examination of the dramatic form as it attempts to create an understanding not only of how the South Asian American

²³ David M. Reimers, "More Liberal than we Thought: A Note on Immediate Family Member Immigrants of U.S. Citizens." *Journal of Policy History*: 25.2 (2013), 288.

community – albeit a minority community - is different from mainstream perceptions of who is an American, but also how it is the same. At a time when “brown folk” are increasingly being discriminated against for a variety of reasons, including assumptions about their religious and national affiliations and anxiety over their part in the American job market, it is cogent to examine how notions of allegiance to America and American patriotism erode identity for a diasporic subject who may not have severed ties to his or her country of origin. The specter of 9/11 hangs over my dissertation, as it does over the lives of the subjects in the plays I explore. If this community is different from other diasporic communities that have emerged out of voluntary labor migration in this country, the fact that the people of this community fall under the racial color wheel of those held responsible for 9/11 cannot be ignored. Some time ago I was a guest in the home of an Indian-origin South Asian American family in Rochester, NY. The lady of the house had been in the United States for about two decades. She came to this country after marriage and received a graduate degree here. She was a working mother raising a teenaged son. Over masala chai and donuts we chatted about our experiences of assimilation into American life. I remember most vividly her account of the day she was conferred American citizenship. Her colleagues celebrated her citizenship and decorated her cubicle at work with tiny American flags. But when I congratulated her for having the good fortune of such warm colleagues, she rued that when she prepared to remove the inconvenience of scores of paper American flags crowding her tiny cubicle, she was met with scrutiny about why she wanted to take them

down at all. It didn't seem to matter that she was the only one with miniature flags of the nation all over her workspace. This seemingly tiny incident is nevertheless pertinent to the experience of diaspora in America. It is impossible to determine whether my host's experience is unique to the South Asian American experience or whether this is common to all diasporic subjects who are naturalized into citizenship in America. I find I am unable, however, to separate her story from news reports of how South Asian immigrant businesses such as grocery stores and convenience marts were among the first to fly American flags in the aftermath of 9/11. It is not hyperbole to contend that after 9/11, South Asian Americans are expected to perform patriotism in more overt ways than ever before.

Much academic writing has focused on how the events of 9/11 were immediately framed within the context of Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory. In fact, this theory is experiencing a renaissance in the wake of the Middle East crisis and the rise of ISIS and other pockets of Islamic fundamentalist terrorist organizations. As a discourse on culture, we know that *Clash of Civilizations* posits that in a post-Cold War world, the major global conflict will be a "civilizational conflict". Huntington breaks up the civilizations of the world into Hindu, Islamic, Japanese, Western, Latin American and African. He warns that Asian civilizations are rapidly expanding in economic, military and political strength, and that the West is losing its power over the world. He predicts growing conflict in Muslim-majority countries as Islam expands its demography. He mentions all of the advantages the non-West has incurred, having benefited from

modernization (or, Westernization): “Quantitatively Westerners thus constitute a steadily decreasing minority of the world’s population. Qualitatively the balance between the West and other populations is also changing. Non-Western peoples are becoming healthier, more urban, more literate, better educated”.²⁴ However, Huntington argues that after benefiting from Western modernity, these non-Western civilizations have been able to get ahead by recognizing their own indigenous traditions. “This global process of re-indigenization is manifest broadly in the revivals of religion occurring in so many parts of the world and most notably in the cultural resurgence in Asian and Islamic countries generated in large part by their economic and demographic dynamism”.²⁵ Huntington finds that the West has decayed internally through an inability to effect this resurgence to a national culture, and he blames immigrants for this lapse: “Western culture is challenged by groups within Western societies. One such challenge comes from immigrants from other civilizations who reject assimilation and continue to adhere to and propagate the values, customs, and cultures of their home societies”.²⁶ I mention Huntington because at the time of writing, social currents in much of Euro-America follow Huntington’s most dangerous propositions. With the spread of Islamic terrorism in pockets of the West, it has become easier for right-wing policy makers to push for a conservative agenda that blames national diversity for the state’s problems. My anecdote about my hostess in Rochester is but one manifestation of Huntington’s

²⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 85.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 304.

contention about the immigrant's lack of patriotism. Predictably, these concerns come up strongly in a play like *Disgraced* where the protagonist's ruin is the result of a perceived un-Americanness.

Despite established criticism, I find value in Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation: "it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion"²⁷. Yet, this imagined community is defined by a presumed cultural homogeneity among the majority of its citizens. In order for the American nation to cohere in the preservation of some homogeneous "cultural values", (South) Asian immigrants, who strongly differ both phenotypically and culturally from the mainstream, continue to be constructed as fundamentally foreign, despite their contributions to the American national story.

The large-scale migration of South Asians to the US invariably raises the question of home and belonging. Where is home for first-generation migrants and how is it different from the idea of home for subsequent generations of Americans of South Asian origin who do not share the nostalgic ties of their parents to the country of origin? Is their American identity necessarily located in dual sites of reference, or can they completely elide the origins and culture of their previous generation? While first generation immigrants have cultural and often familial

²⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

relationships with their country of origin, subsequent generations may not have similar ties. In that event, how is home and identity constructed for these second and third generation South Asian Americans as they encounter the diversities of their own native land – the United States – and the land of their parents’ origin?

For most South Asian Americans, history occurs across transnational cultural sites - linking events and social conditions between South Asia and America. Embodying Aihwa Ong’s “flexible citizenship”, these are subjects that have heralded a fast-growing new world order, where migration, relocation and constantly changing identity positions are attractive possibilities rather than exercises in coercion. Ong refers to flexible citizenship as the practice of new diasporic technocrats and professionals who “both circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes by selecting different sites for investments, work and family relocation”²⁸. The nation-state in turn adjusts to this constant flow of labor and immigration as a way of engaging with the forces of global capitalism.

The South Asian American straddles two paradoxes of belonging: first, the South Asian diaspora is typically perceived as being amenable to and successful in adapting to the culture of the host nation, and has thus earned the status of the “model minority”. However, even this positive perception cannot make belonging attainable when one considers the South Asian-origin subject’s ethnoracial differences from the American majority, which troubles seamless assimilation. Diasporization also fosters its own paradox of belonging. When the nation is

²⁸ Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 112.

mapped as a territorially bound place, William Safran's assertion, for instance, that the diasporan can never be fully integrated into the dominant national narrative and that he might in fact pose "a serious challenge to host societies"²⁹ becomes a common response within a nationalist narrative that others the diasporic immigrant subject. Transnationalism becomes an effective approach that decenters such nationalist assertions by pointing out, as Aihwa Ong does, the "complicated accommodation, alliances and creative tensions between the nation-state and mobile capital, between diaspora and nationalism, or between the influx of immigrants and the multicultural state".³⁰ When we take the idea of the nation beyond *terroir* and begin to see it as Benedict Anderson's imagined community, the emphasis shifts to the nation as defined by human interaction. Within that understanding, these plays make the stage a space where interaction between communities fosters relationships that facilitate national belonging.³¹ Most of these plays offer the possibility for multiracial casting (*Disgraced*, *Lyme Park*, *A Nice*

²⁹ William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return", *Diaspora* 1.1 (1991), 97.

³⁰ Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 15.

³¹ Obviously, the literature on diaspora and immigrant identity is vast. In brief, my own understanding of diaspora (and in some instances, specifically the South Asian diaspora) has been informed mainly by the introductory chapters in Aihwa Ong's *Flexible Citizenship*, Koshy and Radhakrishnan's *Transnational South Asians* and Bakirathi Mani's *Aspiring to Home*. James Clifford, in his paper, "Diasporas", discusses the problems of focusing on *diasporic* identity in relation to systemic national power structures when he says that "theories and discourses that diasporize or internationalize 'minorities' can deflect attention from long-standing, structured inequalities of class and race" (313). Finally, Anupama Jain's *How to be South Asian in America* provides a comprehensive account of the literature on diasporic assimilation particularly pertaining to the South Asian diaspora in the US. Jain makes the case for mapping South Asian American identity through a transnational lens and makes the move away from seeing diasporization as being against the ideologies of the nation and national cultural identity. She focuses on ethnographic and literary/cinematic examples that show the multiple levels at which South Asian American belonging is negotiated – nationally, communally and at the level of family relationships.

Indian Boy are only three examples) and others respond to the instability of place for the South Asian American by representing it scenographically on the stage (*Chaos Theory, Barriers*). In every case, the plays demonstrate the multiple axes involved in constructing a narrative of belonging for the *desi* subject – across lines of class, religion, race-ethnicity, and gender and sexuality.

Transnationalism becomes an important conceptual tool to understand the links between the South Asian nations in which the roots of South Asian Americans lie and the America in which they are born and bred. These are links forged by history, globalization and capitalist economic processes of production and consumption. The interaction and overlap between these two disparate geographic locations and cultures is the point at which South Asian American identity formation takes place. American goods, production, public culture and knowledge systems thrive in South Asian realms, just as South Asian labor, raw materials and culture form an invisible fabric of American life – try shopping at any chain clothing store in the US for a basic example of this transnational transaction. This contact has continued for centuries, violating border restrictions and expanding and subverting colonial processes.³² The construction of South Asian American identities, then, cannot be adequately understood solely by using America as a point of reference, it must necessarily also draw from South Asia. It must look at how culture is re-constructed across national borders and how that in turn affects the

³² See Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013) and *The Sun Never Sets: South Asian Migrants in an Age of U.S. Power* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).

lives of immigrant subjects and their subsequent generations. In Chapter 3, I write on three plays dealing directly or obliquely with the typically Indian (Hindu) customs of courtship and arranged marriage that show how these customs are reconceived in an American *desi* context.

Over the years, social analysts have examined articulations of the global and local - not as contradictory and opposed impulses between capitalist forces and local cultures - but rather, as Arjun Appadurai argues, that a “global production of locality” is the product of transnational flows of goods, people and knowledge that become resources for the creation of new modern communities and “virtual neighborhoods”³³. Aihwa Ong uses the term *transnationality* to define the melding of the global and the local in contemporary sociocultural and economic processes. “*Trans* denotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something. Besides suggesting new relations between nation-states and capital, transnationality also alludes to the *transversal*, the *transactional*, the *translational*, and the *transgressive* aspects of contemporary behavior and imagination that are incited, enabled, and regulated by the changing logics of states and capitalism”³⁴. In *Chaos Theory*, which I discuss in Chapter 2, the transnational subjectivity of the protagonists is expressed via a non-linear narrative that traverses conventions of space and time by moving back and forth rapidly between India and the United States and between past and present. *Brahman/i* (discussed in

³³ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 178-99.

³⁴ Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 4.

Chapter 3) expresses the transformative nature of a transnational diasporic identity through the figure of its intersex protagonist who refuses to be trapped into fixed identity categories. In so many cases the home itself becomes a site of transnational culture – this is depicted in the set design of many of the plays I cover (*Chaos Theory*, *Marrying Nandini*, as costume in *Lyme Park*), where India, in both its colonial and postcolonial aesthetic, coexists with America. Yet, this mobility or “flexible citizenship” is bound within the contradictory disciplining by state forces that seek to categorize and differentiate on ethnic or racial grounds, for instance.

Not a lot of attention has been paid to the children of immigrant South Asians who came to the US at a young age or were born and brought up here. The plays in this dissertation address this paucity, and the dissertation in turn becomes the first lengthy study of the cultural implications of second-generation immigrant identity formation. Repeatedly, we see how the characters’ identification with their South Asian roots is in constant conflict with their American side. Tradition becomes a preserved construct for the first generation, and a constantly evolving challenge to that construct for subsequent generations. In chapter 3, I use three plays that I refer to as the “marriage triad”, which variously show how the tradition of arranged marriage changes meanings in the transnational context of South Asian America and how it has been revived and reformulated in a modern rendition as a neoliberal approach to preserve a cultural tradition hitherto seen as arcane and discriminatory that takes agency away from the couple being married off (especially the bride).

Vijay Mishra writes that an “impossible mourning” or melancholia for a loss that cannot be fully objectified dominates the center of diasporic living³⁵. The diaspora’s memory of homeland is always a place of imagination, one that cannot be accurately represented (particularly for second-generation South Asians born in America) and the ‘death’ of the homeland is an abstract loss that is hardly ever replaced by a sense of feeling welcome in the new nation-state. In *Chaos Theory*, for example, this is affected when the play opens by mourning the death of one of the characters and closes with a principal character announcing her decision to return to the homeland after 35 years in the United States.

1.5 THE *DESIAS* A RACIALIZED ENTITY

Even as the election of Barack Obama to presidency of the United States heralded discourses about postraciality, we find today that race is persistently, if not more potently used as a factor in discrimination. Critical race theorist David Theo Goldberg argues, in fact, that the election of President Obama was like a renaissance for raciality.³⁶ In an earlier work, Goldberg posits that race is integral to the formation of the modern nation-state. The racial state governs and regulates its population by categorizing them into biological and cultural racial groups

³⁵ Vijay Mishra, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 7-10.

³⁶ David T. Goldberg, *Are We All Postracial Yet* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2015).

through disciplining and policing.³⁷ Racial configuration has always been tied to religion – think of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiments in Europe – as well as to cultural differences. As religion was a common ground for community organization in the medieval age, so race has become a way of organizing modern society.

I hope this dissertation will draw attention to how we understand race relations in an America whose history has so closely been tied to the binary of Black/White relations, but which must begin to acknowledge and bring into discourse race relations that account for the widening diversity in racial demographics in this country. Juan F. Perea writes: “The most pervasive and powerful paradigm of race in the United States is the Black/White paradigm. I define this paradigm as the conception that race in America consists, either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the Black and the White. Many scholars of race reproduce this paradigm when they write and act as though *only the Black and the White races matter* for purposes of discussing race and social policy with regard to race. The mere recognition that “other people of color” exist, without careful attention to their voices, their histories and their real presence, is merely a reassertion of the Black/White paradigm” [original emphasis].³⁸ I would add to this that American public cultural discourse continues to assume whiteness as being the normative marker of Americanness. South Asian

³⁷ David T. Goldberg, *The Racial State* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 109-110.

³⁸ Juan F. Perea, “The Black/White Binary Paradigm of Race: The ‘Normal Science’ of American Racial Thought.” *California Law Review* 85 (1997): 133.

American theatre becomes a necessary intervention challenging such notions. These plays, and this dissertation, call for a more equitable racial democracy, one in which race is not discussed in terms of binaries or black/white paradigms. This is not to undermine the long history of racism against Blacks in this country, but only to recognize that racism manifests itself in other forms as well, often in ways that affect the South Asian American.

It is important, for the purposes of true racial equality, not only to see the other as being like ourselves, but also to see them as they see themselves. Fanon has talked about the “quite simple attempt to touch the other, to feel the other, to explain the other to myself”.³⁹ Racially, the South Asian-origin brown body exists at a curious remove from other bodies of color in the United States. The brown *desi* does not commingle with the brownness of the Latino/a or the blackness of the African American. For the most part, the *desi* is more economically aligned with his white counterpart, but there isn’t a cultural overlap there either, nor is there one with the East Asian American, who has more of a history of Pacific association with the US, through war (in Japan, Korea and Vietnam) or otherwise imperial encounters such as the annexation of Hawai’i. Even though *desi* labor has featured in the United States since at least the eighteenth century, this history has largely gone undocumented. The South Asian American then, is more other than all the others in America.

³⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New ed. Berkeley, Calif.; New York: Grove Press, 2008), 231.

I attempt to write this dissertation and to showcase these plays as a counter to the racializing of the South Asian in a post-9/11 world under the subhead ‘Muslim’.⁴⁰ No longer is ‘Muslim’ seen as merely a specific religious identity in the western world – news reports of South Asian Sikhs and Hindus attacked on the assumption of being Muslim are only recent examples among several.⁴¹ In fact, the prior hegemony of India as being synonymous with South Asia has been replaced with the figure of the Muslim as a homogenizing label encompassing people from South Asia as well as the Arab world. The umbrella term “Hindoo” used in late-nineteenth-century America for migrants from the Indian subcontinent⁴² has been replaced by “Muslim” as a proxy for South Asians of all religious denominations based on shared physical traits that presume them as “Muslim-looking”. This racial formation denies the full rights of citizenship to South Asians by associating these communities with terrorism. The racism inherent in this categorization is not the concept of racism that bases itself on presumed biological or phenotypic difference alone. Leith Mullings offers a helpful definition of racism as

⁴⁰ See Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University press, 2011) for a comprehensive analysis of this assertion.

⁴¹ “NYPD: Assailants Shouted ‘ISIS’ While Beating Man in the Bronx”, *Huffington Post*, January 17, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/nypd-assailants-shouted-isis-while-beating-new-york-man_569b8ccde4b0b4eb759eaadf For a discussion on the South Asian-origin figure as a newly considered racial type clubbed under the religious head of “Muslim” see Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). Rana writes that “the Muslim” has become a category that encompasses many nationalities, social and cultural practices and religious affiliations that have been collapsed according to phenotype and cultural traits to include people who are not Muslim but who “look” Muslim based on arbitrary notions of shared biological traits.

⁴² See Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013)

a relational concept. It is a set of practices, structures, beliefs, and representations that transforms certain forms of perceived differences, generally regarded as indelible and unchangeable, into inequality. It works through modes of dispossession, which have included subordination, stigmatization, exploitation, exclusion, various forms of physical violence, and sometimes genocide. Racism is maintained and perpetuated by both coercion and consent and is rationalized through paradigms of *both biology and culture*. It is, to varying degrees at specific temporal and spatial points, interwoven with other forms of inequality, particularly class, gender, sexuality, and nationality.⁴³ [emphasis mine]

Junaid Rana traces the racialization of the Muslim to the formation of “a global racial system” following the struggles for decolonization and the establishment of global capitalism. For Rana, the domestic and global War on Terror takes the figure of the Muslim beyond a religious entity into a racial one. Rana’s book, *Terrifying Muslims*, traces this racialization in a long history that connects the establishment of European capitalism and the conquest of the Americas to a racial othering of Jews and Muslims since at least the fifteenth century⁴⁴.

In brief, Rana argues that Islam became a racialized conception in the contemporary US as part of the maintenance of modern statecraft, the racial state and twenty-first century notions of empire and imperial sovereignty. Rana traces the conceptual framework of US racial formation to the contact between the Old and the New World, when European explorers reached the Western hemisphere and “discovered” indigenous people whose comportment and religious beliefs differed so much from them. He writes:

⁴³ Leith Mullings, “Interrogating Racism: Toward an Antiracist Anthropology”, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2005): 684.

⁴⁴ Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims*, 26 (Kindle edition).

In this moment, religion was defined not only in terms of broad ideologies of belief, but also as states of being in relation to cultural notions of civilization and barbarity—as the terms of inclusion and exclusion within the “family of man”. These were clearly innate and naturalized categories in which religion was regarded not just as belief but as a level of human evolution. Religion was thought of as a universal category of natural being in a hierarchy of civilizations—hence, the fervor to convert non-believers.⁴⁵

This racialization of the Native American may be traced to the relationship of religion to race in the conflict between Catholic Spain and Jews and Muslims/Moors between the late-fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, when an imperial shift was taking place that was mediated through the rift between Catholicism and Islam (and Judaism, which at the time was a minority religion whose practitioners were under the protection of the Moors). For European capitalism to expand, a religious other had to be created in the Turks and Moors. Critical race theorist Howard Winant writes in *The World is a Ghetto* that the treatment of Muslims and Jews in the fifteenth and sixteenth century expansion of European capitalism served as the paradigm for racial othering in the conquest of the Americas and the Atlantic slave trade.⁴⁶ In this understanding, then, the shifting of religious conceptions into racial conceptions has a long history and the racialization of both Muslim and non-Muslim groups (including South Asian Americans) into the figurehead of “the Muslim” is its contemporary rendition. Of course, within the American racial formation the role of Islam gets a little more complicated when one considers the history of African-

⁴⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁶ Howard Winant, *The World is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 41-42.

American conversion to Islam and the Black Muslim movements.⁴⁷ But even there, the Muslim becomes an othering categorization in the conception of America as a Christian nation.

If the racialized Muslim and Islamophobia are connected, the question about whether religious hatred is also racial hatred is automatically raised. If religion is a social practice concerned with belief, then can it be constructed as embodying a certain phenotype or biological expression? Islamophobia in this understanding becomes a response to Islam's perceived cultural and religious inferiority. But the persistent attacks on non-Muslim groups and individuals points to the impetus to assign culture to groups of people based on bodily comportment, clothing, and cultural practices. Within that context, (cultural) racism is a fluid category open to how racists imagine their object. And the racialization of Muslim as well as non-Muslim groups with origins in the Indian subcontinent under the subhead of "the Muslim" conflates racism with anti-immigrant xenophobia. "The Muslim" is then racialized as a social group and not a religious group and combined with "the immigrant" in the perpetuation of the historic disenfranchisement of communities of color through policing and racial violence.

With this in mind, in this dissertation I concentrate on the staged understanding of who the South Asian American is – how they see themselves and how America sees them. I showcase these plays as their subjects try to negotiate their place as Americans in a sociopolitical environment that indexes the American

⁴⁷ Robert Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 25.

as a white subject. Juliet Hooker, in *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*⁴⁸, writes about the historical trend of establishing whiteness in the United States as ‘normal’ and therefore, invisible in its ordinariness. Blacks and other nonwhite racial communities have responded to racial subjugation or minoritization by challenging the same. Hooker contends that in their protest and their more public racial vulnerabilities, they have made themselves more visible. She argues for the treatment of race not as cultural but as a structural formation, fundamental to the organization of society and to the development of individual identity. Hooker wants to reframe the dialogue towards an understanding of structural advantages and disadvantages between races - something that goes beyond a mere conversation about difference. She argues for making whiteness visible in order to show that racial advantages and disadvantages are endemic in the very foundations of American society. This, for her, is the first step toward a more racially equal America. Though Hooker’s race theory focuses on blacks and whites, it may be extended to include the need for greater minority group rights among other racial minorities in the US. The plays covered here offer a glimpse into the ever-growing racial diversity in the United States.

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

For my research, I have benefited from Rajini Srikanth’s *The World Next Door*:

⁴⁸ Juliet Hooker, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America. Srikanth's book focuses on South Asian writing and reception in North America following the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1980. Although she establishes that her primary subjects of analysis will be prose fiction and poetry, Srikanth's book is important for the purposes of my own research because she advocates a valuable way of doing "just readings" of texts from other cultures – by acknowledging one's limited knowledge of the culture concerned and reading as "foreigners to the text" who then engage with the histories and traumas of countries as diverse as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Trinidad etc. I appreciate the emphasis on global networks in the reading of diasporic literature and hope to draw from Srikanth's focus on the interconnectedness of the diaspora with the main.

This dissertation would not have been possible without Neilesh Bose's *Beyond Bollywood and Broadway: Plays from the South Asian Diaspora*. *Beyond Bollywood* broadened the expanse of my exposure to "American" theatre, showing me the other side of the color wheel on the American stage, where I myself belong. Bose's book points to the beginnings of a diasporic performance aesthetic that my own dissertation seeks to understand and update. *Beyond Bollywood* anthologizes plays by South Asian diasporic playwrights across the world, separating them according to geographical regions.

Junaid Rana's *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* was crucial to my understanding of the racialization of the South Asian-origin brown body under the broad category of "the Muslim". Although Rana's focus

is the Pakistani transnational working class within the global economy, he frames his discussion from the purview of cultural studies, critical race theory and ethnography. His argument about the historical relationship between religion and race in his first chapter is particularly cogent and informs my own chapter 4, on Muslim American playwrights of South Asian ancestry who are addressing contemporary issues about racial seeing of the Muslim body.

Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* offers an important foundation to my analysis of Anuvab Pal's *Chaos Theory* in the next chapter. Her understanding of nostalgia as a mourning for both a lost place and a lost time illuminates my discussion of a play that, both in terms of narrative and in the way it has been designed in production, expresses nostalgia as a particularly potent immigrant performative. I appreciate how Boym takes the analysis of nostalgia beyond its common dismissal as emotionally charged memory. I have benefited from her categorization of nostalgia as restorative or reflective nostalgia. Briefly, restorative nostalgia aims to recreate and preserve the homeland in diaspora; and reflective nostalgia, which is more cognizant of the impermanence of home (and the impossibility of homecoming), cherishes fragments of memory, individual narrative and memorial signs⁴⁹. I use Boym's categories to discuss the nature of diasporic belonging as displayed in Pal's play.

My understanding of the history of South Asian America comes from various

⁴⁹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

chapters in the following three books: Vijay Prashad's "Of the Origin of *Desis* and Some Principles of State Selection" in his book *The Karma of Brown Folk*⁵⁰ is a comprehensive history of the 'old' (pre-1965) and 'new' (post-1965 Hart-Celler Act) forms of migration that also reflects on how differing class positions shape immigrant identities differently within the American racial economy. His transnational scope in the book shows how the global economy and public cultures are interconnected, how both India and the US benefited in various ways from post-1965 immigration and, moreover, how the cultures of each country exist in the other. Susan Koshy's introduction in *Transnational South Asians: The Making of a Neo-Diaspora* offers a useful mapping of the migration of South Asians into America and raises questions about the contributions of diaspora to national formation. Bakirathi Mani's *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America*⁵¹ informs a lot of my understanding of the struggle for belonging among South Asian-origin groups. Her approach is interdisciplinary: she covers works of cinema and literature, but also uses ethnography to chart South Asian American diasporic belonging through such cultural performances as the Miss India USA beauty pageant. Valuably, Mani connects postcolonial theory to South Asian American critical discourse to examine the ways in which the history of British colonialism in South Asia informs South Asian American contemporary life. That this is a vital concern is illuminated in my own analysis of the plays in this thesis, most prominently in my discussions of

⁵⁰ Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁵¹ Bakirathi Mani, *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

Lyme Park, Brahman/i and Chaos Theory.

1.7 CHAPTER SYNOPSES

Each chapter shows how belonging is embodied differently across structures of class, gender and sexuality, and religion. But these plays also demonstrate how some of the limits to belonging are experienced across these structures.

In chapter 2, I show how belonging is compromised differently for diasporic South Asians who live on opposite ends of the class spectrum in the United States. Anuvab Pal's *Chaos Theory* is a series of reminiscences of two Indian professors at Columbia University about their student life in India and their subsequent settlement in the United States. The play displays the effects of a postcolonial upbringing and subsequent transition to diasporic living on the two main characters' lives. It references the nexus between postcolonialism and globalized, capitalist-inflected migrancy, where the postcolonial subject always already looks at the Western imperialist center to find the coordinates of his own identity, in a worldview that is the "failed replica of the modern West"⁵². At the other end of the class spectrum, Aasif Mandvi's *Sakina's Restaurant*, a one-man dramatization of the immigrant working class experience in the States is situated in New York, but the Indian-immigrant narrator's constant weaving in and out of his own narrative into that of the other characters' as he discusses the several facets (including problems

⁵² Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, 29.

and peculiarities) of the diasporic experience points to a lack/inability of “place”-ing oneself squarely within a fixed location or place of national allegiance. The narrator, Azgi, who documents his journey to the US to work in a family friend’s restaurant, contemplates his American dream, and that of the *desis* he lives and works with. These include his boss, boss’s wife and their two children, born in America. His narratorial reflections conclude that being South Asian, or of South Asian descent in America is always necessarily a juggling between identities, even for the American children of his employers, who outright want to reject their Indian origins.

Both plays evoke a notion of America as ‘space’ and not ‘place’. In conceiving of the idea of home, if ‘place’ (although increasingly a fluid concept) still retains some notion of roots and belonging, ‘space’ emphasizes fluidity but also vapidness and lack of specificity, something lacking the ability to be called home - a modern wasteland of material abundance and opportunities, that is inhospitable to the subjects in the plays. And if personal identity is “shown to have established itself through the figure of roots, roots reaching deep into the heart and past of a particular location”⁵³, then this drama shapes itself as a drama of nostalgia, preoccupied with looking back.

Migrancy becomes a recurring theme in much of this theatre – *Sakina’s Restaurant* is but one example of this. As mentioned earlier, *Chaos Theory* travels back and forth as memory of the protagonists’ time in India and the US. At the end of the play, one of the protagonists announces her decision to move back to India

⁵³ Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 98.

after 35 years in America. The heroine of *Lyme Park* travels from New York City to England, where much of the play's action occurs and she is making plans to visit India when the play concludes. India is referenced as route/root for the Caucasian protagonist adopted by an Indian American family in *A Nice Indian Boy*, and populates the narrative of *Brahman/i* as history.

The concept of migration occurs not only as the movement of peoples and cultures across geopolitical coordinates (as in the examples above), but also as a displacement of people as they negotiate complex and unfamiliar geopolitics faced as a consequence of migration (e.g.: embodied by the wide-eyed fresh-off-the-boat narrator of *Sakina's Restaurant*). This theatre comes with a sense of rootlessness that begets longing as much as loss. The characters in these plays embody an emerging identity construct that rises from within the contradictory impulses of seeking belongingness and practicing rootlessness – a tendency to avoid being constrained within the limits of one nation-state, occupying instead a fluid subject position with respect to geographic as well as ideological affiliations.

In the chapters in my dissertation, I will try to explore how the drama and its practitioners try to negotiate the struggle for home and belongingness. My hypothesis is that this search for 'place', for South Asian theatre artists, as well as the subjects of their theatre, is also a search for autonomy in the American sociopolitical landscape. As the plays will show, the artists under consideration conduct their search as a journey through postcolonialism that is in dialogue with

the forces of globalization. The diasporic subaltern finds a voice through plays that act as cultural archives of a specifically South Asian American life.

Take Nandita Shenoy's play, *Lyme Park: an Austonian Romance of an Indian Nature*, covered in Chapter 3. A reconception of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* with elements of her *Northanger Abbey*, *Lyme Park* is set in New York City and England and features a multi-racial cast of characters. *Lyme Park's* heroine, Kavita, is an American woman of Indian descent obsessed with *Pride and Prejudice*. The play moves from NYC's glitzy publishing industry to a Regency-era estate on the English countryside, and is a comedy of Kavita's search for her Mr. Darcy. It is hard to ignore the strains of postcolonial hangover in Kavita's aspirations. Although she is American by birth, Kavita seems to find little to relate to in the America she grew up in. She rejects American modernity to find escape in Regency-era England. Spatially, it is this England of faded imperial charm that becomes her escape, and here she meets the man she thinks is her Mr. Darcy – Thomas, a British graduate student and tour guide. Ultimately, though, with Thomas's deception of Kavita, England becomes a space of betrayal (arguably in a nod to India's colonial history). Kavita returns to the United States and to Henry, an American gentleman who has quietly persevered to win her heart. The theme of travel that undergirds the dramatic narrative leans towards a transnational subject position considering the fluidity that travel (and the diaspora) entails. Kavita's return finally becomes a *homecoming*, a rejection of the colonial past of her forbears and the postcolonial upbringing she must inevitably have received. There is, in Kavita's return to New

York City and her implied developing relationship with Henry, an instance of hope for fluid subject positions within a stable foundation of rootedness. In the end, however, Kavita wants to pay a visit to India, in a diasporic search for roots that once again frustrates the possibility of place-ing her identity position in a stable locality.

Shenoy's play forms part of what I call the "marriage triad" in Chapter 3, a chapter in which I hope to focus on the particular ways in which South Asian Americans negotiate gender rights in a cultural climate where clashes are inevitable between the cultural roots of their parents and those of their own. The two other plays forming the triad are Shenoy's *Marrying Nandini* and Madhuri Shekar's *A Nice Indian Boy*.

Chapter 3 also represents the conflict between first generation South Asian immigrants who later become American citizens and their South Asian American offspring with regard to ethnocultural boundaries that limit or permit their performance of gender. The plays in this chapter demonstrate the strong influence family ties have on South Asian Americans – a relationship that is dissimilar to the conventional understanding of the typical American family. As a small example of this difference, Bandana Purkayastha writes of the nuanced relationships evidenced in the variety of specific ways to address aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents depending on whether they belong on the mother or father's side. The various terms of address (which, depending on how they are suffixed can also be terms of endearment) do not have an equivalent in the English-speaking world that

adequately captures the range of closeness, love and support that these relationships encapsulate for the South Asian origin family, despite the fact that most of these relatives are scattered around the world for these *desi* families and the relationships are conducted mostly online or over regular phone conversations⁵⁴.

The ‘marriage triad’ plays in Chapter 3 both challenge and reconceive the patriarchal preservation of the Indian arranged marriage. The policing of sexuality for women and gay men as a central tenet of preserving some sort of ‘traditional Indian family value’ is covered in *Marrying Nandini* and *A Nice Indian Boy*, both plays that deal with marriage in the Indian tradition as performed in America. *Indian Boy* especially focuses on the gendered expectations around marriage and how restrictive they can be for South Asian American women in comparison with men, even when the man in question, the protagonist, is the gay son of conservative first generation Indian immigrants.⁵⁵

Always, these plays are situated within a transnational framework that complicates national belonging for their subjects. The lenses for showcasing this are myriad. The issues that the intersex Brahman/i in the play of the same name by Aditi Brennan Kapil grapples with are not those that Keshav, the gay protagonist of Madhuri Shekar’s *A Nice Indian Boy* has to contend with. Yet, in both instances these plays form cultural texts “that have a specifically transnational address even

⁵⁴ Bandana Purkayastha, *Negotiating Ethnicity: Second-Generation South Asian Americans Traverse A Transnational World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 64.

⁵⁵ Homosexuality continues to be criminalized in India.

as they are deeply rooted in the politics of the local”⁵⁶. Both these queer texts are, moreover, resistant to the transnational as well as the local cultural discourse, and in so being, they allow us to reconsider the tendency to homogenize South Asian diasporic culture in the first place. *Brahman/i* looks into India’s mythological richness for instances of transgender acceptance in an American climate that, despite claims to loftier modernity, is still unwelcoming of the transgendered. *A Nice Indian Boy* queers the heterosexual romance of Bollywood films, while also exposing the double standards of India’s most popular entertainment form and the Hindu-centric Indian culture it purports to represent.

South Asian American theatre reflects the contested site that is ‘culture’ in the formation of identity, and, for our South Asian American subjects, how it is a formation that occurs across nations and borders. The notion of finding one’s ‘place’ in a specific social environment becomes a challenge for subjects of diaspora, and the plays that follow often deal with how the principal characters struggle with, but also claim their in-betweenness as a valid cultural space. Una Chaudhuri’s coinage, ‘geopathology’ – the constant dialogue between home and homelessness – to describe modern drama as “an increasingly precise and unsentimental recognition of home *as* a discourse, replete with ideological antecedents and consequences” is particularly cogent here⁵⁷. The emerging South Asian American theatre reflects this celebration of placelessness within a discourse of betrayal and cultural clashes.

⁵⁶ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 21.

⁵⁷ Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, xiii.

Take for instance the staging of Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* – when the play opens, the audience sees the opulent and tastefully decorated interiors of the Manhattan apartment of the principal characters. By the play's end – when the Muslim protagonist has ruined his career, lost his wife and the respect of his relatives – the stage shows the same apartment in desolation, stark and empty except for haphazardly placed moving boxes that heighten the displacement felt by their owner.

In terms of national belonging, looking like the enemy can be extremely dangerous. My chapter 4, on works by South Asian American Muslim playwrights, is an exploration into the perception of the Muslim body in America today. I look at how the playwrights Ayad Akhtar and Rehana Mirza – of Pakistani and Bangladeshi descent respectively - respond to racial profiling, prejudice and Islamophobia in distinct ways in their plays, *Disgraced* and *Barriers*. Both plays focus on religious identity construction for South Asian Americans.

The United States' ongoing project of the War on Terrorism means that people who look like they could be of Middle Eastern or Pakistani descent are seen as threatening and subjected to forms of racial discrimination and hatred. This racial profiling can limit the ability of South Asian Americans from performing their ethnicity freely, as if to do so would be un-American. Mirza's *Barriers* shows a Muslim family caught in the roiling aftermath of 9/11 – both victims of the terrorist event itself and of the fearmongering about Muslims that followed. Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced* takes a different, but provocative tack. Its protagonist, Amir, a successful

New York City lawyer who rejects (and conceals) his Islamic identity and Pakistani origins grapples with the ingrained prejudices and fears inculcated through his religious and ethnic upbringing, eventually facing the disastrous consequences both of growing up as a Muslim in the US, and of doggedly opposing Islam as an adult. *Disgraced* is an important play, both personally and professionally. My own complicated feelings about the play fuelled the urge to write a dissertation on South Asian American theatre in all its various representations. And the fact that *Disgraced*, following its 2013 Pulitzer Prize, has been ranked as the most produced play in the US for the 2015-2016 season⁵⁸, makes it a major contributor to contemporary American theatre.

1.8 CONCLUSION

As the global South gains academic focus across fields for its contributions to the understanding of the economies and changing cultures of the world, global South Asians, as actors at the crossroads of the North-South sociocultural encounters, become important subjects of study. Richard Schechner points out that performance scholarship “emphasize[s] how performances mark identities, bend and remake time, adorn and reshape the body, tell stories, and provide people with the means to

⁵⁸ Diep Tran, “The Top 10 Most-Produced Plays of the 2015-2016 Season”, *American Theatre*, September 15, 2015, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2015/09/16/the-top-10-most-produced-plays-of-the-2015-16-season/>

play with the worlds they not only inhabit but to a large degree construct”.⁵⁹ In terms of American ethnic/racial history, South Asians are a fairly new formation. These plays provide a means for South Asians to both announce and claim their presence in American history, which has usually underrepresented the histories of the minorities living within its borders. In the Muslim South Asian American instance, for example, this performance becomes a form of protest of Islamophobic perceptions surrounding Muslim identity in a post-9/11 world.

Ultimately, this theatre - drawing on American as well as South Asian traditions for its content and staging practice - is polycultural, an amalgam of ‘outside’ influences and ‘inside’ interactions on the American landscape. As social practice, this is theatre that challenges preconceived notions of ethnicity, race and national belonging. My dissertation traces the contribution of this theatre of the South Asian diaspora in creating national subjecthood within America. It is my belief that my dissertation will add to a fuller understanding of American theatre history in its inclusion of the theatres of the particular ethnoracial community I have chosen. Most of the playwrights I cover are not immigrants – they were born in America to immigrant parents. But in their concern for South Asian American identity lies the deep truth about migration – that it brings about a questioning of identity and place several generations in. Their plays become narratives of both national *and* diasporic belonging. Given that such South Asian American narratives

⁵⁹ Richard Schechner, “What is Performance Studies Anyway” in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 162.

are fairly unfamiliar in American public culture, this dissertation offers the possibility for bringing these stories into circulation.

Certain disclaimers must immediately be made of this project. A focus on theatre emerging from and about people of South Asian origin is itself a wide net to cast. In doing so, often distinct identity categories get submerged – what it is to be a Bangladeshi-origin American queer subject or an Indian-origin Sikh man in post 9/11 America for instance. Moreover, this drama, for the most part, is not representative of all social classes of South Asian-origin folk in the United States. This is a cultural history expressed through drama of those South Asian American subjects who live in metropolitan America, are for the most part solidly middle to upper-middle class, and it cannot ever stand in as a holistic representation of all of South Asian America. Except for *Sakina's Restaurant*, this is not the story of blue collar South Asian America. Those histories are being written in the halls of academia, but are yet to be represented on the stage. This might raise the question of subalternity - how valid is the claim that the South Asian Americans represented in these plays are subalterns in American sociopolitics if they exist, in large part, among the upper echelons of American society? But that question brings us to the insidious ways in which race relations are conducted in this country – can racial minorities who make up a privileged economic class still face discrimination and prejudice? The plays in the chapters that follow seek to explore this question.

2.0 CHAPTER TWO: NOSTALGIA, DREAMING, AND CLASS-BASED RACIAL OTHERING IN *CHAOS THEORY* AND *SAKINA'S RESTAURANT*

*“It may be said that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our 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, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.”*⁶⁰ - Salman Rushdie

The history of labor migration of the South Asian diaspora in America is a worthy topic of research for how comprehensive, constantly expanding, and diverse it is. The South Asian labor diaspora in the United States may be considered a successor to the black slave labor force and was indicative of a turn in circumstances that promoted labor migration into America. South Asian migrant laborers populated the mining and plantation industries and filled labor shortages in the post-World

⁶⁰ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta, 1991) extracted in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *Post-colonial Studies Reader* (New York, London: Routledge, 2006), 428.

War II economies.⁶¹ South Asians have occupied a wide range of jobs as migrant labor – from indentured workers in the nineteenth century to professionals in semi-skilled and highly skilled sectors who migrated after the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965⁶². This latter group includes the large numbers of guest workers in the current technology sector who come here temporarily to work in Silicon Valley. The two plays discussed in this chapter respond to the tendency to racialize this labor, and the different ways in which these racializations are expressed based on the social class being targeted. While the highly skilled professors of Anuvab Pal’s *Chaos Theory* complain of marginalization within the western academy; Azgi, the lowly restaurant worker in Aasif Mandvi’s *Sakina’s Restaurant* tells of the obsequiousness he has to perform just to escape the hostility of the American mainstream and win acceptance. Koshy and Radhakrishnan write that “the South Asian diaspora exemplifies the modern production of the minority (in certain instances as symbolic rather than numerical minorities) in the developed and developing world”⁶³, and the plays illuminate the contexts in which such minoritization occurs.

In *The Karma of Brown Folk*, Vijay Prashad asserts that the 1965 Hart-Celler Act that facilitated the migration of skilled scientists and engineers from

⁶¹ See Introduction to Susan Koshy and R. Radhakrishnan, eds., *Transnational South Asians: The Making of a Neo-Diaspora* (New York, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁶² Also known as the Hart-Celler Act after Representative Emanuel Celler of New York who proposed it and Senator Philip Hart of Michigan who co-sponsored it. The Act abolished the quota system based on national origins that had been American immigration policy since the 1920s and replaced it with a preference system focused on immigrants’ skills and family relationships with US citizens or permanent residents.

⁶³ Koshy and Radhakrishnan, eds., *Transnational South Asians*, 4.

Asia was integral to the consolidation of the health care, defense and technology industries in the United States.⁶⁴ The facilitation of this skilled labor migration coincided with the Indian government's investment in educational infrastructure in STEM fields under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India. In the Sixties, the first graduates of premier national institutes for the sciences and engineering were confronting a socialist post-independence economy that could not always accommodate them. The migration of some of these highly trained graduates therefore links America's upholding of global dominance to India's own postcolonial initiatives toward development and modernization. The professors in *Chaos Theory* are emblematic of the transnational flow of resources between India and the United States that afforded each country's agenda for domination and development.

Chaos Theory and *Sakina's Restaurant* highlight the vast differences between the world of the highly educated transnational, indeed, "global" citizen, and that of the low-wage migrant worker. While the former are welcomed into the nation-state as a result of their better familiarity with western practices, the latter find themselves increasingly unable to fit into the nation and are often blamed for destabilizing it (migrants "stealing" jobs etc.). Their religion, lifestyle and lack of conformity to the cultural values of their country of residence become cause for suspicion and unease. Yet, for both social groups, migration to the US conforms to a narrative of possibility. The American Dream, often derided as dead in the US, lives

⁶⁴ Vijay Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 74-80.

on in the homelands of its immigrants. The two plays in this chapter disturb this imaginary of the dream, coloring it with the racializing tendencies that ‘other’ new migrants into the country and demonstrating the particular ways in which this othering occurs for *desis*⁶⁵.

These are the only two plays in this dissertation that were written prior to 9/11. Both plays nonetheless look at the multiple affronts conducted upon the South Asian-origin subject by non-state actors who perpetuate the othering mechanisms wrought by the state on the immigrant. However, as the plays show, this othering is mediated differently across class lines – for the university scholars in *Chaos Theory*, it occurs in the fetishization of Indian culture among the white Americans the principal characters encounter. In *Sakina’s Restaurant*, nearly every character in this comedy about the South Asian-origin wageworker faces some form of overt or covert discrimination, to often-hilarious effect.

Both plays also highlight the various ways in which these immigrants’ survival depends on peddling their ethnic culture and on how much or how little this culture is consumed by the American public. In *Chaos Theory*, Sunita, a professor of Indian literature and history at Columbia University, speaks with raw emotion of the state of academia in the US and how it both marginalizes and

⁶⁵ To refresh, the term *desi* means South Asian native, but it has been co-opted by the South Asian American community as a convenient label that brings peoples of various originary locations and different ethnic cultures within the Indian subcontinent together and to convey their difference from other ethnoracial minorities in the US. It should be mentioned that the term has most currency among people of Indian origin (*desi* is a Hindi word), and is rarely used by the Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan diaspora in America.

fetishizes non-Western cultures. She's arguably being especially harsh in an emotional moment, but the crux of her grudge resonates:

SUNITA: We don't teach in America anymore. It's publish or perish, some groundbreaking research, petty skirmishes amongst colleagues, schmoozing with the chair, partying with some administrator, grants for hip topics, Islam or communists or whatever the fuck is the flavor of the month. Where's the dedication to one field of study over a lifetime? Whose [*sic*] teaching the undergraduate student? Some drunken graduate student?

MUKESH: They are only undergraduates Sunita – they are not complete human beings.

SUNITA: Stop being clever and think. Think what are we doing with our time? Looking for cash by proffering up some ethnic aberration – some Guggenheim fellowship to spend a year studying tribal lunatics dancing in Rajasthan or deformed puppets in Manipur and then writing some book on it so that a bunch of New York academics can think how poetic and exotic it all is. But what do we really do with that grant money? Hang out in some big Indian city at some English club, drinking tea with the family – maybe going once to see the puppets and lunatics in some emaciated village. Is that any way to fit in to the west? Hiding our modernity? Is this what free thinking has led us to? Peddling our ethnicity to justify our jobs?⁶⁶

Sunita draws attention to the fact that too often monetary concerns determine the manner in which India/South Asia is reproduced in the western academy. Only certain kinds of grants are authorized, and it depends on how “exotic” the subject matter is and how much cultural otherness from the West it highlights.

The title of *Sakina's Restaurant* directly delivers the ethnicity being peddled in the play – the Indian restaurant where the novelty of spice levels in the food overrides the quality and subtle variety of Indian cuisine. Just as the scholars of South Asia must sell ethnic culture for their livelihood and career advancement, so the lives of the Indian-origin workers at Sakina's Restaurant depend on the

⁶⁶ Anuvab Pal, *Chaos Theory in Beyond Bollywood and Broadway*, ed. Neilesh Bose (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 65.

continued enjoyment and consumption of Indian “curry” among the American patrons who visit and compete to see how much heat they can take in their food. The American Dream for these immigrant characters is tied to mainstream America’s cultural consumption of India – intellectually in *Chaos Theory* and gastronomically in *Sakina’s*. The narrator in *Sakina’s* – the waiter, Azgi – has the same dream every night. “I am a giant tandoori chicken wearing an Armani suit. I am sitting behind the wheel of a speeding Cadillac. I have no eyes to see, no mouth to speak and I don’t know where I am going”.⁶⁷ It is a potent metaphor of the power of hope in the American Dream clashing with the powerlessness of the migrant worker.

I choose these two plays in an attempt to map the varying demographics of South Asian immigration to the US and to engage with how racialization manifests itself differently across social classes. The racial codification of difference in labor markets follows the trajectories of imperialism and colonization in creating hierarchies in such systemic structures as class, gender and sexuality, ethnicity and race. Both the plays discussed in this chapter demonstrate how much the access to belonging that comes with American citizenship is determined by race and how the very nature of the South Asian American’s diasporic, postcolonial subjectivity dictates that they are in a constant process of forming chains of contact between locations and affinities in the US and the subcontinent.

⁶⁷ Aasif Mandvi, *Sakina’s Restaurant* in *Beyond Bollywood and Broadway*, ed. Neilesh Bose (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 77.

2.1 NOSTALGIC (BE)LONGING IN *CHAOS THEORY*

Anuvab Pal's *Chaos Theory* received its first professional American production off-off-Broadway at the TBG Theatre (Pulse Ensemble Theatre, dir.: Alexa Kelly) in 2010, but it has been performed at play festivals across the US and in workshops since 2003. It has been staged in India to great acclaim as well.⁶⁸ In 2007, the play was a finalist at the BBC World Playwriting Competition. It was published in 2013 by Picador, but made it into an anthology of plays from the South Asian diaspora in 2009.⁶⁹ Pal is also a stand-up comedian and screenwriter and his film projects have been received successfully in India and within the Indian diaspora. He was born and raised in Kolkata, India and came to the United States for graduate studies. He lives in Mumbai, India but travels to the US frequently for shows.

The play chronicles the life of Mukesh Singh and Sunita Sen - humanities professors at Columbia University who moved to the United States as graduate students in the late-Sixties. The narrative weaves in and out of Sunita's New York City apartment in present time (the year 2000 in the play) and various moments in the past: scenes cover snippets from their undergraduate years at Delhi University as well as moments from the 35 years they've since spent in America. Scenes are set in different locations, charting their settlement in the US, as the two friends build a

⁶⁸ Amrutha Rao, "Chaotic Dynamics", *Times of India*, January 31, 2011, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/nri/art-culture/Chaotic-dynamics/articleshow/7396553.cms> (accessed January 27, 2015)

⁶⁹ Neilesh Bose, ed., *Beyond Bollywood and Broadway: Plays from the South Asian Diaspora* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 21-68.

life for themselves – separately, but with their paths always crossing. From showcasing the protagonists as literature students spouting Romantic poetry at Delhi University in the 1960s, the play takes audiences to Marxist performance artists in 1970s Cambridge, Massachusetts and back again to the present time in Sunita’s apartment in a non-linear progression of scenes occurring across continents and cities.

Mukesh, described as having the “manners of a very proper, very out-of-date Victorian Englishman”, is a professor of Elizabethan literature at Columbia, while Sunita teaches Indian literature there and presumably also has an appointment with the History department, where she teaches courses with names like “Indian Civilization - The Cultural Growth of the Subcontinent”⁷⁰.

Mukesh rejects his Indianness from the very beginning of the play, usually taking such pains to make a show of this rejection that he comes across as a bit of a naive fool. “Indian names are so hard to remember,” he says, when asked the name of the girl he was dancing with at the freshman welcome party on their first evening as undergraduates at Delhi University. When offered a samosa, he proffers: “I don’t indulge in native culinary experimentation”⁷¹. Like the British who left India two decades before Mukesh entered undergraduate college, he addresses his fellow Indians with the pejorative term “native”, implying that he himself is above their ilk. He goes to the extent of insisting on being called ‘Michael’ because “[i]t sounds

⁷⁰ Anuvab Pal, *Chaos Theory*, 29.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

English”⁷². Mukesh’s romantic fiction about the colonial ideal makes him a sorry figure. A testament to the enduring legacy of colonialism, he touts the same Anglo-American imperial ideology that looked upon indigenous populations as backward and uncivilized, and created the model for what still today defines the ‘modern’ and ‘liberal’. The history of British colonization in India comes back as memory and practice; it encompasses Mukesh’s life in the US, from his clothing and cultural preferences to his overt rejection of all things Indian. The nexus of colonialism and globalization in the figure of this high-skilled transnational subject exposes the problematic of diasporic belonging in a stable locality, and the play handles this via its non-linear narrative chronology. The play creates space for irony in the fact that Mukesh - the brown-skinned ‘native’ - is a professor of the English literary classics at a premier American university. Then again, his character serves as a parrot for the words and theories of a Western colonial imaginary, even as he seemingly laments the oppression of the imperial worldview: “It’s tedious to live under the constant flow of other people’s words”, he says⁷³.

Pal ensures that Sunita provides an effective counterpoint to Mukesh’s rambling dismissal of Indian culture and his unquestioning embrace of the English way. She corrects his grammar frequently and almost always beats him at the quotation game they play; yet she is as steeped in her cultural environment as one would expect of an Indian growing up in India. She essentially proves to him that he can never be English enough, despite his pretensions to being a brown sahib. On

⁷² 26.

⁷³ 41.

their first meeting, when Mukesh tells her he is from Calcutta, Sunita calls the city “Home of English refuse, Land of Victorian fossil”⁷⁴. While Sunita berates Mukesh for his colonial hangover, she emphasizes her own affinity for Indian literature, history and popular culture. Of her status as a Delhi native, Sunita says:

We like things that sound and feel Indian here, capital city, own flag, independence, vernacular language, Nehru, sitar, Mughal Empire and all that. We’ve been independent for eighteen years now but the news probably hasn’t reached Calcutta.⁷⁵

Mukesh concludes that Sunita must be a student in the English department as well, quipping that “[y]ou sound too patriotic to be studying anything else.”⁷⁶ The implication is that one’s fealty continues to be to the British despite Independence.

Mukesh is always projected as the less academically successful of the two of them - he almost never wins at the quotation game, he misquotes, makes up references and cannot clear his undergraduate exams with a high enough score to receive honors. Yet he charms his way through admission to graduate school at Harvard, while the play indicates that Sunita is the more deserving candidate in whose footsteps Mukesh aspires to follow.

I situate *Chaos Theory* as an example of what the late scholar Svetlana Boym has called “diasporic intimacy”, where “non-native, elective affinities” are sought as immigrants recognize the limitations of yearning nostalgically for a home that may be both imaginary and impossible to return to.⁷⁷ The notion of intimacy is related to

⁷⁴ 27.

⁷⁵ 28.

⁷⁶ 28.

⁷⁷ Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgia and its Discontents”, *The Hedgehog Review*, 9, no.2 (2007): 2.

the home, connected to the personal. Boym clarifies her position thus:

In the late twentieth century millions of people find themselves displaced from their places of birth, living in voluntary or involuntary exile. Their intimate experiences occur against a foreign background, where they are aware of the unfamiliar stage set whether they like it or not. Immigrants to the United States, moreover, often bring with them different traditions of social interaction, often less individualistic than those they encounter in their new surroundings. In contemporary American pop psychology one is encouraged “not to be afraid of intimacy”, with a presumption that intimate communication can and should be made in plain language. You’d have to feel at home to be intimate, “to say what you mean”. Immigrants - and many alienated natives as well - can’t help but dread this kind of plain language... Diasporic intimacy can be approached only through indirection and intimation, through stories and secrets.⁷⁸

Diasporic intimacy, then, is haunted by the ghost of the homeland, but also takes pleasure in exile and chance encounters with fellow exiles. In *Chaos Theory*, Sunita and Mukesh travel back and forth nostalgically through time and between India and the United States. Diasporic intimacy is activated through the on-stage performance of their friendship over the years, and in their always-thwarted desire to express their love for each other. The shared reminiscence of Sunita and Mukesh in moments of diasporic intimacy creates longing for a lost homeland and reflects the condition of the migrant in diaspora. The shifting locations of the play – between Delhi, Cambridge, MA and New York City reflect diasporic intimacy’s “suspicion of a single home” and its roots in “shared longing without belonging”⁷⁹.

Sunita and Mukesh engage in what I will call a “memory ritual” that, I posit, becomes a way of holding on to the lost home. But also, this ritual acts as a

⁷⁸ Svetlana Boym, “On Diasporic Intimacy: Ilya Kabakov’s Installations and Immigrant Homes”, *Critical Inquiry*, 24, no. 2 (1998): 499-500.

⁷⁹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 254.

comfortable fill-in for the emptiness of voluntary exile in the manner in which it crowds the dramatic narrative. At different times in the play, Mukesh and Sunita engage in a routine of tossing a ball back and forth while they quiz each other about the writers of famous quotations from English literature. They play this game on the night of their first meeting at Delhi University in 1965. It's revealing that despite having spent 35 years in the United States, they still choose a cricket ball to volley at each other soon after the play opens in Sunita's New York City apartment in present time. Despite its almost certain rarity in the United States, the choice of the cricket ball and the content of the quotation game is an interesting insight into the postcolonial nature of the nostalgia experienced by the two characters. While the game has migrated with them over the years since they first started playing it in India, it is noteworthy that over years of acculturation into American society and as participants in American humanities academe, it is still Shakespeare and Keats and Wordsworth who continue to feature as subjects of their quizzing and no American writer ever makes an appearance. Both the performance of the quotation game and the use of the cricket ball indicate a desire, even need, to preserve certain memories from a past time in the homeland that is in turn inflected with colonial nostalgia.

The opening scene is an immediate immersion in cultural hybridity. We find Sunita "dignified, in a sari" whereas Mukesh is dressed in an "outdated suit"⁸⁰. The set design describes Sunita's living room as containing a bar trolley set up for

⁸⁰ Anuvab Pal, *Chaos Theory*, 23.

whisky, a table with a chess board and an overwhelming amount of books everywhere. Western classical music plays in the background. There are therefore echoes of India's colonial past in their attire and cultural aesthetic and we will soon come to realize the British empire's hegemonic hold over Mukesh in the scenes to follow.

The entire play is a series of flashbacks and flash-forwards covering Sunita and Mukesh's friendship from when they were students at Delhi University, to their journey to the United States as graduate students and eventually their settling down into careers as professors in New York City. If the play is about immigrant nostalgia, the treatment of time in *Chaos Theory* demonstrates that nostalgia is, as Svetlana Boym asserts, as much about longing for another time, as it is the longing for another place. The narrative's inability to situate itself in linear time mirrors the subjectivity of its principal characters whose identity lacks a stable locality. As postcolonial subjects, their identity inhabits a geography that spans across India – both colonial and postcolonial – and the US. In her ethnography of Indian immigrants in New Jersey, Keya Ganguly posits that postcoloniality is embodied through a series of practices of memory in the form of oral narratives of immigration and through consumption of foods and cultural texts that remind the immigrants of 'home'.⁸¹ In *Chaos Theory* the embodiment of postcolonial subjectivity becomes the performance itself – from the costumes worn by the characters (Sunita's dignified sari against Mukesh's dated suit) to the memory

⁸¹ Keya Ganguly, *States of Exception: Everyday Life and Postcolonial Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

rituals performed that take them back and forth between the US and India to minor set details such as the very colonial bar trolley and the background music that shifts from western to Indian classical with a bit of Nat King Cole thrown in for good measure.

The memory ritual becomes the one constant in the lives of these migrants who, even past midlife are uncertain of the location of home. Sunita, having lived most of her life in the US, declares she will be moving back to India at the end of the play. Moreover, the repeated return to the memory ritual in the form of the quotation game signifies the importance of the pre-immigrant past in the formation of a diasporic identity. It is interesting then, that the ritual involves something inherited from the period of India's colonization - the cricket ball volleyed back and forth over a game of Shakespeare's quotes.

Mukesh is an archetype of the postcolonial immigrant - an outsider in his home country as well as his adoptive land. If the diaspora refers to a community that attempts to maintain its ties to the homeland and acts as a collective body in the adopted land, then Mukesh is an anomaly, for he was an outlier in India as the brown sahib figure and is a curious rarity in the US as the brown scholar of Renaissance literature. However, he typifies the diasporan in terms of the construction of his identity being a product of cultural discourse, history and power. As Stuart Hall has written (of Black Caribbean identity) - cultural identity is a "positioning" that is situated in politics and does not emerge out of some sort of

universal origin⁸².

Pierre Nora suggests in his landmark article, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire” that memorial sites or *lieux de memoire* are established institutionally when the *milieux de memoire* or environments of memory fade. Cultural memory is then preserved in the *lieux* or designated memorial sites, and Nora gives examples of these as monuments, museums etc. He writes also, “the quest for memory is the search for one’s history”⁸³. For Nora, history is a constant mourning for what is lost. Significantly, *Chaos Theory* begins with mourning – Sunita and Mukesh are gathered on the fifth anniversary of her husband’s death. In the play, the stage itself becomes a *lieu de memoire* where Mukesh and Sunita enact the chaotic framing of their identity as they chart their progress from India to the United States.

Svetlana Boym writes: “The nostalgic is never a native, but rather a displaced person who mediates between the local and the universal.”⁸⁴ She locates the etymological roots of the word ‘nostalgia’ in the Greek words *nostos*, meaning “return home” and *algia*, meaning “longing”. Boym distinguishes between two types of nostalgia – the restorative and the reflective. Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and tries to recreate the lost home. It imagines an idealized home and, while it appears to long for a particular place, the yearning is in fact for a different time.

⁸² Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” in J. Rutherford, ed., *Community, Culture, Difference* (London, UK: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 226.

⁸³ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire”, *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 13.

⁸⁴ Svetlana Boym, “Nostalgia and its Discontents”, *The Hedgehog Review*, 9, no.2 (2007): 7.

This framework fits within the setting of Mukesh and Sunita's past in India as idealized moments that are infused with happiness and autonomy – for instance, their own witty repartee or their hazing of Amit, a freshman at Delhi University, who will turn out to be Sunita's future husband. Scenes looking back on America are chaotic and recall serious life events – the scene at the Cambridge bookshop where Sunita informs Mukesh that she was seeing Amit and would be moving to New York to be with him, a pregnant Sunita going into labor at midnight without Amit by her side, Mukesh's divorce. While the framework I have outlined does fit most of the play, there's a scene with Sunita and Mukesh on the steps of the library at Harvard when they were graduate students that mirrors their flirtatious dialogic jousting at Delhi University. Yet, even this scene, where Mukesh and Sunita discuss expressions of love in Western literature, becomes an expression of Boym's diasporic intimacy. In their inability to directly profess their love for each other, Sunita and Mukesh display the "precarious affection – no less deep, yet aware of its transience"⁸⁵ - of the immigrant who longs to belong and also shares with his fellow migrants the furtive pleasures of emigration.

Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, focuses on *algia* or the longing itself and tries to delay the homecoming.⁸⁶ *Algia* is universal, in that the longing is shared, yet, the paradox of nostalgia lies in the inability to transform this longing into a reparative belonging borne out of mutual empathy, understanding and national community. While *algia* (longing) is shared, *nostos* (return home) divides.

⁸⁵ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 254.

⁸⁶ Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia and its Discontents", 8.

Reflective nostalgia is capable of inhabiting more than one place at a time and occupying different time zones; it shatters the stability of place and thrives on fragments of memory.

In *Chaos Theory* the stage becomes the nostalgic space – Nora’s *lieux de memoire* or memorial site – with the idealized home melding into the actual home as scenes shift between India and USA. In its latest production (October 2015) by the San Francisco Bay Area theatre company EnActe Arts, the projection designer David Murakami created a backdrop for digital projection that resembled strewn pages from a book. The set by Reshma Dave followed the same theme of texts in disarray and comprised furniture and props made out of used books. The few set details such as Sunita’s living room furniture were rearranged to show different locations (for instance, Mukesh’s Boston apartment), which were in turn also projected symbolically on the backdrop, along with the year in which a particular scene was taking place. The projection design, in essence, became an extension of the set design with the express purpose of establishing place and time.⁸⁷ The narrative of these migrants’ lives was being written on stage – as much on the bodies of the characters in the live performance as in the backdrop resembling sheaves of paper. The design detail of strewn pages of yellowing paper emphasizes a looking back to the past and a narrative of discord that reflects the torn, non-linear,

⁸⁷ Projection designer David Murakami mentions in an interview, “The piece jumps around quite a bit, so projections are being used to ground the audience in the chaotic memories of the two protagonists.” Quoted in Megan V. Winslow, “LAH Resident’s *Chaos Theory*: Performance Benefits Charity”, *losaltosonline.com*, October 7, 2015, <http://www.losaltosonline.com/news/sections/community/177-features/51300-lah-resident-s-chaos-theory-performance-benefits-charity>

haphazard dramatic narrative. It is noteworthy that the digital projections for this production of the play hint at the locale, but are more in keeping with the playwright's directive about specific location details. For instance, Pal writes that Mukesh and Sunita's first meeting occurs in the garden of the dean's house at the freshers' welcome party at Delhi University, so the backdrop for the scene projects the photograph of a garden bench with an artfully placed cushion in a typically Indian print surrounded by plants. The play's premiere production in New York, by Pulse Ensemble Theatre had a much more basic set, but even that included projections to depict the quickly changing locale. In Pulse Ensemble's case, though, projections were more directly emblematic of the cities they represented – for example, Delhi scenes were set against the backdrop of a projected image of the capital city landmark, the Red Fort.

Both restorative and reflective nostalgia exert their powerful hold on the lives of Sunita and Mukesh. The recreation/restoration of India in Sunita's decision to wear a sari at home or for special occasions⁸⁸, her cultivation of an ear for Indian classical music and her ultimate decision to return to India are all expressions of restorative nostalgia. The memory ritual of the quotation volley, of course, is another constant that offers the possibility of recreating a lost home through diasporic intimacy. Mukesh's reflective nostalgia expresses itself in his overt disdain for all things Indian even though it is those things that he turns to in

⁸⁸ Neither of the two productions of *Chaos Theory* I discuss has Sunita in a sari, presumably in a directorial decision that accommodates the need for quick scene and costume changes in a play with such frequent spatiotemporal shifts.

private moments of despair, and his bitter warnings to Sunita that the land she wishes to return to will be nothing like the one she left 35 years ago. The non-linear narrative development of the play itself is an exercise in reflective nostalgia, with fragments of memory populating the present time for Sunita and Mukesh.

Then again, Boym specifies that restorative and reflective nostalgia are not absolute binaries, and that there is potential for overlap of both kinds of nostalgia in the immigrant experience. The EnActe Arts production conveyed this by keeping the set details the same across scenes, only rearranging set pieces and using digital projection to show the difference in time and place. Pulse Ensemble's production divided the stage into two on a set by Zhanna Gurvich that put scenes in present time in Sunita's apartment on stage left and all the other flashback scenes on stage right. One reviewer found this staging choice jarring because transitions from one part of the set to the other, with costume changes, took up a lot of time and slowed the pace of the play.⁸⁹ It is interesting that the latest Bay Area production set the stage as an ongoing expression of restorative nostalgia (with the main stage set rearranged to depict different locales which were reinforced in the projection design) so the memories of home coexist with the present time in Sunita's New York City flat. On the other hand, the New York premiere appears to have effected reflective nostalgia by offering flashback scenes as dissonance, separate from the contemporary reality of Sunita and Mukesh's life.

Both New Delhi and New York City, where most of the scenes are set, are

⁸⁹ Martin Denton, "*Chaos Theory*", nytheatre.com, March 28, 2010, <http://www.nytheatre.com/Review/martin-denton-2010-5-28-chaos-theory>

locations with long histories of migration that are hubs for a confluence of cultures. In moving scenes between these two locations, the play highlights the transnational affiliations of its characters. Moreover, sometimes India spills over into America and vice versa – despite his purported hatred of Indian popular culture, when Mukesh is depressed after his divorce, Sunita catches him listening to Kishore Kumar, who sang some of the most popular songs in Indian films in the Sixties and Seventies. At Delhi University, Mukesh and Sunita dance to Nat King Cole and discover Elvis and the Beatles in India right alongside America through the radio. As they part ways temporarily on their last day of college in Delhi, they raise their bottles of Coca-Cola to a toast. The playwright juxtaposes important events in American history with the important milestones in Sunita and Mukesh’s life. For instance, Sunita’s first child is born on the night of John Lennon’s assassination – a radio clip of the breaking news plays in the background as Mukesh and Sunita are driving to the hospital. The O.J. Simpson trial unfolds on television as Sunita prepares for her son’s birthday party at home. Mukesh ruefully watches his ex-wife on TV as a broadcast news journalist talking about President Reagan’s second term in office.⁹⁰ But British literature, especially Shakespeare, never leaves them and always manages to come up in their conversations. Mukesh uses Beatrice and Benedict in *Much Ado About Nothing* to weakly convey that a “love out of words – the purest form, not of bodies and sweat like nowadays but of two minds, ideas

⁹⁰ Since the set design for neither the Enacte nor the Pulse Ensemble Theatre productions featured a television set, one might assume that this was conveyed through audio clips in the background. There is also no evidence that either production projected moving images onto their respective backdrops, thus making an even stronger case for the use of audio clips.

playing with each other”⁹¹ is akin to what he and Sunita share. Mukesh’s inability to articulate his love for Sunita presents itself in myriad circumlocutions. The two discuss unspoken love in literature on the steps of Harvard’s Widener Library as graduate students, Mukesh rues having to read and cite other people’s words for his education, and sometimes wonders whether his own words have any value. His ineloquence becomes a metaphor for the postcolonial subject – he has been taught the value of the words of the Elizabethans and Romantics he researches but not his own. Always, there appears in him a doubt about the validity of his own opinion, which he conceals by clinging to British literature more fervently. The voicelessness and lack of belonging of the migrant in mainstream society is symbolized in Mukesh’s inability to ever tell Sunita that they belong with each other.

The frustrations of teaching literature to privileged undergraduates is staged in a scene where Mukesh and Sunita teach Blake and Tagore respectively in parallel classrooms and are met with equal amounts of disinterest from their American students. The EnActe Arts production sets the scene against the backdrop of the photograph of a lecture room projected on the screen behind the live action. The complexity of being a brown person teaching English literature at a premier American university is brought up when we’re told that Mukesh has not made full professor after years of teaching at Columbia. While the openness of an academy that sees an Indian scholar as being capable of advanced knowledge of Elizabethan classics is acknowledged, the inherent prejudice in a developing curriculum in the

⁹¹ Anuvab Pal, *Chaos Theory*, 40.

Western academy is brought to bear when Sunita reminds Mukesh that colleagues focusing on postcoloniality have been promoted while he languishes for teaching a subject dear to him, but one without much cache. Mukesh is a novelty who refuses to sell his identity as a postcolonial subject, and has suffered for it. “The model Indian is wrapped in myth and magical realism”, he says, hinting at the prevalence of Orientalizing stereotypes that are ‘cool’ subjects of study in the contemporary academy. Sunita’s decision to leave and return to India is borne of a desire to escape such fetishization of world cultures, even though her own subjects of interest – Indian literature and subaltern theory – are well in tune with the demands of the academy.

A scene set in a Cambridge, MA bookshop in 1975 introduces us to Sunita and Mukesh’s partners – Amit and Elizabeth. Amit and Sunita met at a rally of the Harvard Communist Club (he enters wearing a “Mao jacket”), and Elizabeth is Mukesh’s student. Elizabeth – who is Irish-American but stands in for the archetype of the culturally narrow-minded white westerner – mouths clichés about Calcutta, Mukesh’s birthplace, as a city of starving children who run naked on its streets. She is a bit of a cliché herself – presented as a country hick from Oklahoma whose American English Sunita often corrects, and who freely admits to being attracted to Mukesh because of his British affectations. “You all Indians know this stuff in English, which words sound nice next to the other, that sort of thing,”⁹² she says, reminding the audience of the particular condition that qualified Sunita and

⁹² Ibid., 49.

Mukesh for a professional life in the US in the first place – their engagement with English is deeper than that of native speakers.

The audience soon realizes that it is Amit's book reading that they're all attending. In an incredible bit of playwriting, Amit, a Marxist studying philosophy at Harvard is also revealed as a celebrated author who writes under the pen name Gotham Holkar. So celebrated is he as a "postcolonial writer" that he has been awarded and has rejected a Booker and a Commonwealth Prize for his debut novel. His latest novel, titled *The Breasts of India or Have We Been Sucked?* is a clear jibe by the playwright at the fervor with which postcolonial writing attacks empire. Its ridiculous plot point involves a British General being burnt to death in a vat of chicken tikka masala after having stolen the Kohinoor diamond. Amit and his writing offer a satirical rendition of the overzealous postcolonial intellectual whose rejection of empire is counteracted by their enjoyment of social status as elites in both the (neo-)empire and the postcolonial home state. Amit embodies the paradox of the postcolonial intellectual who claims to write on behalf of the subaltern and marginalized, but in doing so, also profits from such writing. The performance poetry Gotham Holkar recites at the bookshop is an anti-colonial tirade that is almost incoherent except for how angry it sounds (it is free with expletives). It has all the buzzwords – nation, slave, mother, rape – and seems to hint at the oncoming saffronization of India by right-wing Hindu political groups but it is primarily a manifesto against colonialism. Holkar's extreme anger toward imperialists is offset by the irony of his assumed pseudonym – he insists on being called Gotham after

his love for New York City, where he is about to move. The double standards are clear – this is a person who profits from inciting anger about the effects of empire, yet he chooses to dwell in the heart of the new empire in the postcolonial world. In fact, Amit’s communism is even more of a farce given his choice of New York City – a financial center of the world – as a future home. Both the earnest, anti-colonial Amit and the thoroughly neocolonial, foppish Mukesh present different aspects of the middle-class, privileged postcolonial. They are elites whose ideological positions are mediated through class and who have, in different ways benefited from postcoloniality: Mukesh by embracing the colonial, and Amit by critiquing it.

Mukesh and Sunita’s unfulfilled love for each other becomes a metaphor for the diasporic condition – always each other’s constant, they nevertheless lived at the margins of each other’s lives, much like the diasporic immigrant is situated at the margins of the mainstream. At various points in the play, both talk of looking for a ‘constant’, for some sort of order to their lives: “Amid the chaos – a pattern – a constant – a constant is important”⁹³. It is a telling point about the condition of the diasporic subject whose search for a stable locality is always frustrated by dual affiliations of culture, geography and social existence.

Chaos Theory was staged in 2003 at the Artwallah Festival in Los Angeles - an annual arts festival “showcasing dance, film, literature, music, spoken word, theater, and visual arts works rooted in the South Asian diaspora”.⁹⁴ It has had over 250 performances across the world, most of them in India and neighboring

⁹³ Anuvab Pal, *Chaos Theory*, 42.

⁹⁴ Description taken from the Experience LA website: <http://www.expericela.com/destinations/2020>

countries through a touring production by one of India's most famous contemporary theatre houses – Rage Theatre Company. It bears mention that the October 2015 production by EnActe Arts also served the local community by donating part of the proceeds from ticket sales to MAITRI, a Bay Area non-profit that assists local South Asian families grappling with domestic violence, abuse or even cultural alienation following migration. Although Pal specified that Sunita and Mukesh age during the course of the play, in its latest production by EnActe Arts, different actors portray Sunita and Mukesh as college students in Delhi.⁹⁵ The America years are portrayed in a manner that (based on reviews⁹⁶) worked in production, but sounds comedic in description: Puneet, the actor playing Mukesh has a shaved head and, to depict his younger self in America (as a graduate student in Cambridge or proposing to Elizabeth in flashback scenes, for instance), he wears a Seventies-Elvis-style wig. At the play's 2010 US premiere show by Pulse Ensemble Theatre, the roles of Sunita and Mukesh were taken on by Rita Wolf and Ranjit Chowdhry respectively (Sorab Wadia subbed for Chowdhry for part of the run), with minor costume details used to depict the difference in locale and time – Sunita changes shawls, Mukesh wears a different hat or scarf etc. As discussed earlier, the set design and staging choices back up the depiction of time passing with projected backdrops and blocking choices that keep flashback scenes separate from the action in present time. Pulse Ensemble's set design was also more realistic, although, the exaggeration of India

⁹⁵ Emma Blanco, “*Chaos Theory*”, *India Currents* 29.7, October 2015, 77.

⁹⁶ Archana Asthana, “Strong Feelings, Strong Individuals But No Solution”, *India Post*, November 3, 2015, <http://www.indiapost.com/strong-feelings-strong-individuals-but-no-solution/>

in the details goes beyond anything Pal stipulated in the play. Sunita's apartment is overrun with rugs, drapes and cushions in the paisley prints so typical of Kashmiri shawls and carpets. One of the two armchairs used for most of the action in the show is upholstered in an ikat print and the other one has a paisley throw draped over it. Even the frame of the set – panels, walls and different levels meant to connote steps – is wallpapered in a floral-vegetable motif that was typical to the Mughal design seen in, for instance, the decorations on the Taj Mahal. One has to wonder whether the set design takes the play into the realm of fringe ethnic drama, reducing the transnational affect of the play's occupation of multiple geographic and cultural spaces. In that sense, EnActe's abstract set captures the essence of Pal's note that the apartment should be overrun with books by having the set design accommodate this theme with the backdrop, furniture and props made of used books stacked together.



Figure 1. Rita Wolf and Sorab Wadia in Pulse Ensemble Theatre's *Chaos Theory*. Photo credit: Justyn Richardson.



Figure 2. Rita Wolf and Sorab Wadia in Pulse Ensemble Theatre's *Chaos Theory*. Photo credit: Justyn Richardson.

The difference between the premiere production and EnActe's latest staging portrays different approaches to understanding diasporic identity, through the characters of Sunita and Mukesh as well as scenographically. While Pal's original intent was to have the same actors play these characters through the 35 years chronicled in the play, having different actors play Sunita and Mukesh in India and then in the US offers a way of seeing them as transformed by the myriad cultural, social and political processes of migration with the violence implicit in each and becomes a performance of Boym's reflective nostalgia which both mourns the lost home and despairs at the thought of seeking it out. EnActe's casting decision becomes an embodied response to the changes wrought in the struggle to belong that the playscript doesn't always accommodate. Although Sunita and Mukesh

speak of this conflict of cultural placement, the fact that their personalities don't really change much during the 35 years covered in the play points to their class position that affords them easier adaptability in the American environment and greater social acceptance within it. Of course, having different actors play young Sunita and Mukesh does away with the problem of staging the play's temporal volatility and the actors' need to constantly switch from young to old and back again. Martin Denton's review⁹⁷ of the Pulse Ensemble show demonstrates that the problem of ageing becomes a problem of staging as actors need time for costume changes to effect the shifts in time, which in turn affects the pace of the play. At the same time, showing the same actors ageing through time like Pulse Ensemble did arguably is a more realistic embodiment of the diasporic condition – these are people influenced as much by the homeland past as they are by their present circumstances in their place of emigration.

By shifting their national allegiances away from America – towards England or India – Mukesh and Sunita demonstrate that the popular narrative of immigrant assimilation is no longer a concern in an increasingly mobile world. *Chaos Theory*, moreover, demonstrates how Indian diasporic identity emerges out of the effects of colonization. Sandhya Shukla writes that “[u]nderscoring relationships to British rule frames the cultures of Indians abroad historically and also embeds them in a global framework”.⁹⁸ Mukesh and Sunita demonstrate how British colonization is

⁹⁷ Martin Denton, “*Chaos Theory*”, nytheatre.com

⁹⁸ Sandhya Shukla, *India Abroad: Diasporic Cultures of Postwar America and England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 16.

one frame within which the modern Indian – including the diasporic modern – has been constructed. As they throw the cricket ball back and forth during the memory ritual, Mukesh and Sunita circle each other, lobbing quotations from the great English classics at one another. Their performance becomes an embodied expression of Boym’s diasporic intimacy – a performance of nostalgia that is both personal memory harking to a happy moment in their past, and also collective memory in its evocation of the history of colonialism on which their migrant subjectivity is built. Orbiting each other on a stage that represents past and present, India and America, in one single space, Sunita and Mukesh become emblems of the transnational migrant in search of national community.

2.2 *SAKINA’S RESTAURANT* AND THE (AMERICAN) DREAM OF BELONGING

Aasif Mandvi’s Obie-award-winning one-man show premiered off-Broadway at the American Place Theatre in 1998 (dir.: Kim Hughes), following several workshop performances in New York. Scheduled to run from June to August 1998, the play and Mandvi’s performance in it were so popular that it had an extended run until January 1999.⁹⁹ It has since received stagings in Chicago, Los Angeles, Toronto and London, and Mandvi reprised his role in 2009 at the Soho Playhouse in New York

⁹⁹ Jatender S. Heer, “The Performers of Little India: Endearing Immigrant Drama”, *Little India* 9.2, February 28, 1999.

City. The play was the inspiration for the film, *Today's Special*, for which Mandvi co-wrote the screenplay and also played the lead, sharing screen space with such stalwart South Asian actors as Madhur Jaffrey and Naseeruddin Shah. Both the play and the film received critical acclaim, and we know that Mandvi has since shot to fame for his role as a correspondent at the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and his subsequent stage, television and film commitments. Born in Mumbai, India and raised first in Bradford, England and subsequently in Tampa, Florida, Mandvi has become one of the foremost South Asian American writer-actors in American entertainment¹⁰⁰.

Anita Gates calls the play “funny and endearing” in the *Times*’ review of the 1998 off-Broadway production¹⁰¹, and praises Mandvi’s performance in particular. Mandvi uses minimal props to switch characters, playing six characters in all – Azgi the narrator who comes to work at a family-run Indian restaurant in the East Village in Manhattan; Hakim, the frazzled and overworked owner of the restaurant; Farrida, Hakim’s wife whose homesickness and loss is expressed through frequent tirades against her husband; Sakina, Hakim and Farrida’s America-born daughter caught between cultures; Samir, Hakim and Farida’s America-born son who hates India; and, Ali, a Muslim pre-med student and Sakina’s fiancé, whose anxiety over

¹⁰⁰ And it is remarkable how many of these writer-actors there are – most prominent among them being Aziz Ansari and Mindy Kaling. The fact that these artists are writing roles for people of South Asian descent, and also performing these roles themselves reflects a need to fill in gaps in representation, or even to take ownership of steering representation of South Asian-origin peoples on TV away from stock types such as the terrorist, the cab driver or the scientist.

¹⁰¹ Anita Gates, “Theatre Review: Azgi and Ali’s Excellent Adventure”, *New York Times*, July 1, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/mem/theater/treview.html?res=9a05e6d9103ff932a35754c0a96e958260> (accessed October 15, 2015)

his career and his virginity overrides his piety and brings him to visit a prostitute named Angel. With a drape of a pink scarf over his shoulder, Azgi becomes Farrida in a sari; Mandvi mimes the attempt to tie a necktie in vain to depict the harrowed Hakim; he primps and preens in front of a mirror wearing a hair band to become Sakina; a tray held just so turns him back into Azgi the waiter. Reviewers have lauded Mandvi's seamless transition between scenes and characters, calling the piece "technically and physically ambitious".¹⁰² The American Place Theatre production offered minimal stage design – with a few tacky seats portraying the economical design aesthetic of the typical family-run Indian restaurant. Indian ragas provided musical interludes during scene transitions, and harkened to the ambient music often played at restaurants in India.¹⁰³

The opening scene sets up a depiction of the typical working-class immigrant's emigration. Azgi describes leaving for America from his small Indian village, and how the entire village shows up to bid him farewell. Like so many South Asian migrants to the US before him, this is his first time on an airplane. Azgi speaks of how Mr. Hakim – a man whose relationship to him is never explained, but who is ostensibly a fellow villager who has achieved the American Dream by opening an Indian restaurant in New York City – has offered to sponsor him if he works as a waiter at his restaurant in the East Village. Azgi begins his monologue by "practic[ing his] introduction" to affect the obsequious fervor of the

¹⁰² Jasmyn Singh Mann, "Chasing Dreams at *Sakina's Restaurant*: Writer Actor Aasif Mandvi on Coming to America", *India Currents*, 13.1, April 30, 1999 (accessed October 15, 2015).

¹⁰³ Robert L. Daniels, "Review: *Sakina's Restaurant*", *Variety*, July 27, 1998, <http://variety.com/1998/film/reviews/sakina-s-restaurant-1200454289/> (accessed October 15, 2015)

fresh-off-the-boat migrant: “Hello, my name is Azgi. I like Hamburger, Baseball and Mr. Bob Dylan.”¹⁰⁴ Reviews in the *New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Chicago Reader* all describe Mandvi’s depiction of Azgi as “wide-eyed”, creating the affect of the newly arrived migrant overwhelmed by the chaos of New York City.¹⁰⁵

The isolation of the newly arrived immigrant is mimed as Azgi leaves the crowds of well-wishers in his village to land in New York City where passersby give him the cold shoulder and he is promptly robbed. The notion of a settled immigrant or naturalized citizen agreeing to ‘sponsor’ or take financial responsibility for the arrival and stay of a fresh migrant forms a common arrival story for many working-class immigrants from South Asia to the United States. Not much research has been done, however, on the violence underlying this narrative of migration. Often, the sponsored migrants live in dismal shared habitation arrangements and they have to work menial jobs under the supervision of their sponsors to make ends meet. *Sakina’s Restaurant* attempts to address this violence through humor, in a play that Mandvi has called “a drama with comedic moments”¹⁰⁶. Azgi demonstrates how transnational labor is a financial necessity among certain economic sections of society in the South Asian region. While this working-class labor is limited in the potentials it affords in the US, it is a step toward social mobility in the homeland –

¹⁰⁴ Aasif Mandvi, *Sakina’s Restaurant* in *Beyond Bollywood and Broadway: Plays from the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. Neilesh Bose (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 70.

¹⁰⁵ Anita Gates, “Theatre Review: Azgi and Ali’s Excellent Adventure”, *New York Times* http://www.nytimes.com/mem/theater/treview.html?login=email&res=9a05e6d9103ff932a35754c0a96e958260&_r=0, Lyn Gardner, “*Sakina’s Restaurant*”, *The Guardian*, November 25, 2001, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2001/nov/26/theatre.artsfeatures> and Jack Helbig, “*Sakina’s Restaurant*”, *Chicago Reader*, <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/sakinas-restaurant/Content?oid=898777>

¹⁰⁶ Jasmyan Singh Mann, “Chasing Dreams at *Sakina’s Restaurant*”.

a way to get closer toward the middle class. However, this upward mobility comes at deep emotional costs to the migrant laborer. In an example that demonstrates this, the overworked Azgi gets into a tussle with the cook, Abdul (presumably also a migrant), over wrong orders and cold food in a fraught exchange that exposes the competitive and overwrought nature of immigrant workers who are daily pitted against each other in a fight for survival.

Mandvi takes certain stock characters – the lonely housewife, the overworked low-wage migrant laborer, the perennially stressed businessman, the typical American teenager – and gives them an Indian flavor to express the uniquely *desi* experience of American life. There is a universal quality to each of their struggles even though it is located in the particulars of being *desi*. That one actor embodies all these various characters shows that life occurs at the margins of mainstream America as much for the migrants Azgi, Hakim and Farrida who come from a different culture and speak in accented English, as it does for the thoroughly American Sakina and her brother. From a visual perspective, having one actor play all the characters in a 90-minute show allows the audience time to forge a deeper connection to the actor and his craft. The glowing reviews of the play seem to imply such intimate affect. Anita Gates, reviewing for the *New York Times*, calls the play “a wonderful one-man show” and writes that “The strength of the show is that it works in every tone it assumes: comic, grave, wistful, angry.”¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the

¹⁰⁷ Anita Gates, “Theatre Review: Azgi and Ali’s Excellent Adventure”, *New York Times*
http://www.nytimes.com/mem/theater/treview.html?login=email&res=9a05e6d9103ff932a35754c0a96e958260&_r=0

narrative keeps returning to Azgi who becomes the storyteller, directly addressing the audience and drawing them into the lives of these characters. Of his characters, Mandvi has said in an interview that he hopes Indians “will feel pride in seeing themselves represented” and that Americans will “realize there’s more to the person than the stereotype. And I hope most Americans would be able to relate to the universality of the Indian’s experience as an immigrant – what it’s like to be isolated in a new land.”¹⁰⁸ Mandvi’s performance becomes what Jill Dolan has called an evocation of a utopian performative: “Through practicing identity in performance, and by creating various structures of feeling, a different kind of cultural fluency might be learned, one that begins to offer a fleeting glimpse of humankind united around common difference.”¹⁰⁹

Farrida, Hakim’s wife and Sakina’s mother, embodies the double marginalization of the female migrant who emigrates after marriage and is locked into a social environment completely alien to her. Having left familial networks behind in India, Farrida spends her days in domestic isolation, looking after her family and ruing a past when her dreams of becoming an Indian classical dancer were still alive. As she rolls out *chapatis* (Indian bread) with the mechanical repetition of a practiced hand, she reiterates to Hakim her constant grudge about

¹⁰⁸ Simi Horwitz, “Aasif Mandvi Curries Favor in *Sakina’s Restaurant*”, backstage.com, February 21, 2001, <http://www.backstage.com/news/face-to-face-aasif-mandvi-curries-favor-in-sakinas-restaurant/>

¹⁰⁹ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 88. Dolan describes a utopian performative as “moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense” (5). In essence, the utopian performative creates an “affective vision of how the world might be better”.

the gendered nature of the American Dream: “I gave up everything for you. For your dream, America! Land of opportunity! For you, *yes*. For my baby, *yes*. For me, *no*. No opportunity” (original emphases).¹¹⁰ The claustrophobia of the immigrant housewife is heightened when Farrida recalls the freedoms she enjoyed back in India, where she had the means and the social network to go to the movies or to spend a day at the museum. Her yearning for the unconstrained life she’s left behind is symbolized in the dance *mudra*¹¹¹ she teaches Hakim – a movement signifying a bird flying.

In the figure of Hakim is the embodiment of the dual pulls of the South Asian migrant – hailed often as a model minority but othered even in the assignment of that category. In a memorable scene lauded by critics, Mandvi plays Hakim on his cellphone taking reservations for a presumably white patron named Bob while simultaneously chastising Sakina for her American teenager ways. The rapid changes in the modulation of his voice – from excessively courteous hospitality for the regular customer to exasperated rage for Sakina – demonstrates the constant juggle between personalities for the typical migrant as they negotiate life on American soil. There is also a point made about the superfluity of American small talk, which gives the impression of camaraderie without fostering any real connections. After the cursory exchange of greetings and social niceties, it is implied that Bob, on the other end of the line, informs Hakim that his family will be at the restaurant that evening celebrating their son’s high school graduation. But after

¹¹⁰ Aasif Mandvi, *Sakina’s Restaurant*, 75.

¹¹¹ Hand gesture, part of Indian classical dance vocabulary.

Hakim congratulates Bob and tries to share his own pride over Sakina's graduation, he is cut short because Bob is too busy to listen. The power relations are evident in lines of communication between the American-origin Bob and Hakim, making the latter always subordinate to the former. The *New York Times* review alludes to this scene as an example of "what an amazing actor [Mr. Mandvi] is, conveying the emotional complexity of shifting gears" as he moves from a harrowed father in the midst of a tirade to gracious restaurant host.

Sakina's dilemma of belonging presents itself in the conflict of fidelities to the culture she was born into and that of the environment she grew up in. She wants to go to her high school prom but is forbidden because Hakim is too resistant to the free mixing in American high schools. He is quick to point out that she will "*never* be an American girl" (original emphasis) and warns that every time she goes out with an American boy, she will be put in her place for her ethnicity.¹¹² Hakim is proved right soon after when Sakina berates her (presumably) white ex-boyfriend, Tom, for dating a racist schoolmate who uses the word "nigger" freely and had even used it to address Sakina. Tom tells her that he has corrected this current flame by informing her that Sakina was not black, and that she was, in fact, Iranian. The multiple layers of racism involved in this simple exchange expose the difficulty of belonging for subjects such as Sakina. Tom reproduces the American exceptionalist narrative that conflates all non-western cultures as one. But alongside this ignorance is the racism that incorrectly profiles Sakina first as black and then as

¹¹² *Sakina's Restaurant*, 79.

non-American. Her ethnic origin becomes more important than her rightful citizenship as an American, and even then, she is profiled as belonging to an ethnicity that is not hers. This insecurity about her place in American society translates into Sakina's insecurity in her relationship with Tom and she agrees to an arranged marriage with Ali, a man of her parents' choosing. However, the conservatism of her traditional marriage is offset by the lavish bachelorette party she insists upon, one where she hires a stripper just to grievously offend Hakim. For Sakina and her little brother Samir, identity is a construction of parallel subjectivities shaped by notions of what constitutes India and what America. These notions in turn are moderated by social, class and racial positioning in either country for the siblings. Samir hates India because he has to share his video games and Nintendo toys with his Indian cousins who lack access to them. Moreover, his particular grudge against the country lies in a cancelled trip to Disneyland when the family had to go to India instead after his grandmother died. Thus, Samir's consumption of American public culture is compromised by his cousins' desire for the same and it is also in competition with his parents' responsibilities in their homeland.

Sakina's groom, Ali, becomes a vital figure to give a human face to the racialization of South Asian-origin people under such umbrella terms as "model minority" or, post-9/11, as "Muslim". Ali, a medical student and devout Muslim, is both, but he displays the complexity of trying to live up to the expectations implicit in his assigned categories. Pulled thin under the strain of making his parents proud

by becoming a doctor, Ali finds himself tailing a prostitute the night before his medical school exams. He is deeply ashamed for his stalking and explains to her with apology that he has been following her because she looks like Karen, the batchmate he is in love with. He then confesses to the prostitute, Angel, that he is betrothed to Sakina. Ali is a flurry of words, trying to convince himself more than anyone else that his arranged marriage is the right decision and that Karen “would never accept Indian culture, she would never understand the importance of an Islamic way of life, she would probably want to have pre-marital sex which is something that as a Muslim I could never do.”¹¹³ Ali is well aware of the double standards implicit in this heart-to-heart with a prostitute but the exchange humanizes the figure of the model minority as well as that of the faithful Muslim – showing that even they can fall from imposed pedestals. Ali goes on to avail himself of Angel’s services despite being wracked with guilt the whole time. Mandvi creates powerful dramatic embodiment of this guilt and the struggle to follow the dictates of religion when he shows Ali talking about how he cannot have sex outside of marriage while miming pelvic thrusts to show people who do have sex. His sexual desire is clear even as his words speak of abstinence. Ali’s dilemma of belonging, then, becomes a quest for autonomy while juggling the twin aspirations of model minority and Muslim. On stage, Mandvi expresses this dilemma through Ali’s increasing anxiety about both his impending exams and his marriage to Sakina and, as he reaches orgasm, his voice rises to a desperate scream, wondering if

¹¹³ 86.

perhaps he will not have to marry Sakina if he fails medical school and telling himself that he would love to defy his parents even though they will call him a “disappointment” after he has failed to either marry their choice of bride or become a doctor. In the moment of sexual fulfillment, Ali is able to shed the façade of both model minority and Muslim and just be an individual with his own needs and frustrations.

In addition to the minor prop details outlined earlier, Mandvi uses speech patterns to his advantage in distinguishing between the various characters he plays. His writing conveys the particular English spoken by Indians, where sometimes sentences are direct translations from the vernacular, which sound a little off to a non-Indian English speaker. Code-mixing becomes common, as evidenced by Farrida and Hakim adding Gujarati phrases to their English conversations. Modulating the difference in rhythms of speech of the American Sakina from her immigrant parents or Azgi offers a gentle but notable demonstration that what it means to be *desi* varies across generations and is dependent on points of origin. Reviews applaud Mandvi’s versatility, and describe his transformation from character to character as being done “with chameleon-like ease”.¹¹⁴

The play ends with Azgi ruefully mourning the impossibility of achieving the American Dream. At the beginning of the play, Azgi had promised his mother that he would send her postcards every day, “from the top of the Empire State Building”

¹¹⁴ Simi Horwitz, “Aasif Mandvi Curries Favor in *Sakina’s Restaurant*”, backstage.com, February 21, 2001, <http://www.backstage.com/news/face-to-face-aasif-mandvi-curries-favor-in-sakinas-restaurant/>

and “the bottom of the Grand Canyon”, from every new place he experiences in America. At the play’s closing, Azgi is dutifully attending to the promise of correspondence but he writes: “What happened to the top of the Empire State Building? What happened to the bottom of the Grand Canyon? How did all my adventures and romances end up on other people’s postcards?”¹¹⁵ The final monologue closing the play is a fable about the river stone. Azgi tells of a young boy who found a beautiful stone by a stream. He threw the stone into the water, believing that, as it sparkled beneath the sunlight, it would turn into a diamond. But as soon as the stone hit the water, it began to get away from the young boy, tossing and turning with the currents as it went. It joined thousands of other stones that make the same journey down the stream and get washed ashore. The boy searched frantically for his stone among the thousands that washed up but he could not find it. After years he realized he would never find the stone because he never really knew what it looked like. The fable is a potent metaphor for the difficulty of finding autonomy for the migrant who is constantly struggling against others like himself to strive for the opportunities that brought him to America in the first place. It also expresses powerfully that the American Dream may not be the diamond the migrant worker is always searching and hoping for and that in fact, it is an unknowable and unattainable ideal whose shape can only be guessed at.

¹¹⁵ Aasif Mandvi, *Sakina’s Restaurant*, 90.

2.3 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have used diasporic nostalgia and the pursuit of the American Dream to frame my discussion of the *desi* subjects in the two plays I cover. I convey that nostalgia shapes a diasporic subjectivity whose mourning for the home is heightened by the realization that there can be no return – that ‘home’ is an idealized imaginary, a transnational instability. I have also looked at the imaginary of the American Dream, which brings many migrant workers into this country without always illuminating the violations implicit in the pursuit of the dream.

Both *Chaos Theory* and *Sakina’s Restaurant* rupture the assimilationist narrative normally assigned to stories about immigrants in the United States. They reveal the fallacy of equating citizenship with belonging to the nation-state, exposing the racial nature by which who belongs as ‘American’ is determined.

Sakina’s Restaurant is a play that undercuts the hegemony of the South Asian diasporic narrative of upward mobility that is covered in the works of South Asian American writers such as Jhumpa Lahiri who primarily focus on the lives of middle-class high-skilled professionals living the suburban American life.

Chaos Theory expresses a process of immigrant acculturation where integration into the mainstream culture is slightly more straightforward compared to the lower-class migrant worker figure in *Sakina’s*. There is no mention in the play that the racialized experience of Sunita and Mukesh in the United States is fraught with the post-9/11 prejudices that threaten the safety of the South Asian American body. If anything, the bias hinges toward Indophilia, as evidenced in

Elizabeth's hero-worship of Gotham Holkar. Ethnographic research on the South Asian American community reflects that class determines exposure to racial prejudice. Presumably, the professors at Columbia University move in more diverse, liberal circles than the waiter, Azgi, or his boss. Yet neither professional success nor upward mobility makes any of these characters any less susceptible to racialized distinctions and othering tactics. In *Chaos Theory*, the racialization of the principal characters shows itself in the ways that both the western academy and non-academic subjects fetishize India. In *Sakina's Restaurant*, racialization occurs on multiple levels and in multiple locations – for Indian-origin Azgi, Hakim and Farrida it manifests itself in social isolation and the urgent need for “model”, compliant behavior in the presence of American subjects. For Hakim and Farrida's children, the racialization occurs in their inability to present themselves as being American to their white or black American cohorts. For Sakina's little brother, Samir, racialization occurs in India, where he stands in as the emblem of American cultural excess and capital and has to succumb to his Indian cousins' desire to access this excess via his video games and toys.

Both plays speak to the complex processes involved in the formation of migrant identities in the diaspora that responds as much to the forces of postcolonialism as to transnational flows of labor and goods in a globalized world. The plays address how socioeconomic class affects racialization of the South Asian-origin subject, but conclude that this racialization has elements of prejudice and stereotyping that cut across class in an attempt to marginalize the *desi*.

3.0 CHAPTER 3: MARRIAGE, LOVE & (BE)LONGING IN SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN THEATRE

In this chapter I focus on plays that demonstrate how South Asian Americans negotiate issues of gender and sexuality and how it affects belonging on the American national space. In terms of South Asian-origin women's migration into America, for instance, there is an assumption that women's experiences with dislocation and acculturation are identical to those of men. In fact, migration for many South Asian-origin women was mediated through the process of marriage and family, and marriage becomes a very specific cultural event in which to both resist total acculturation into Americana as well as a means of holding on to the customs and practices still prevalent in the homeland. Marriage is a central performance event that shows the transnational nature of the *desi* subject's existence. After the revised immigration policy of 1965, women of South Asian origin were largely coming into the United States as the wives, mothers, daughters or sisters of the men who had come before them. Three of the plays in this chapter make up what I call the 'marriage triad' in this dissertation. The fourth play, *Brahman/i*, queers the discourse of belonging and citizenship through its intersex eponymous protagonist. The marriage triad is formed by two plays written by Nandita Shenoy – *Lyme Park: An Austonian Romance of an Indian Nature* (2011) and *Marrying Nandini* (2007), and Madhuri Shekar's *A Nice Indian Boy* (2014). I pick these plays specifically

because they address for the first time on the American stage a common preoccupation with Indian culture in the West – the culturally nuanced practices and structures of the Indian marriage, especially the Indian arranged marriage. Indian marriage, and the ritualized splendor of the Indian wedding have been covered extensively in popular culture by the South Asian global diaspora. New York-based director Mira Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), which won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and was nominated for the Golden Globe Award for Best Foreign Film deals exclusively with the spectacle and family politics surrounding the Indian marriage.¹¹⁶ South Asian American novelists such as Bharati Mukherjee (*Wife*, 1975), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (*Arranged Marriage*, 1996) and, more recently, Pulitzer winner Jhumpa Lahiri (*The Namesake*, 2003) have written about first generation Indian immigrant wives’ experiences in America as traumatic and isolating, as they are left to assimilate without much of a support system – not allowed to work on dependent visas, and financially and emotionally reliant on husbands who were themselves trying hard to fit into the American mainstream. These plays, on the other hand, focus on a more cohesive melding of tradition and modernity, as the second-generation protagonists navigate American dating and marriage on a surer footing. Moreover, they provide a dramatic representation of a topic that generates considerable curiosity among popular culture consumers in the west.

¹¹⁶ I only list *Monsoon Wedding* because Mira Nair is a South Asian *American* director. South Asian-origin directors such as Deepa Mehta and Gurinder Chaddha have also represented the diverse complexities surrounding the Indian marriage in internationally acclaimed films, but they operate from Canada and the UK respectively.

All three plays happen to dwell on Indian Hindu families and are written by female playwrights. They deal primarily with marriage¹¹⁷ among the contemporary *desi* community and have been written and developed after 2007, with premiere productions occurring after 2010. They form the harbinger to a very new sensibility towards marriage and conjugality that deviates from the more traditional customs and expectations around Indian marriage and the role of the wife as represented in diasporic fiction by Indian writers in English. Their transnationality is evoked in the manner in which they meld traditional Indian cultural values with the hypermodern realities of the digital age.

The fact that all the plays in this chapter have been written by American women of South Asian origin bears mention, since it points to a growing body of women of hybrid, diasporic identities creating theatre for the American stage. Nandita Shenoy, who scripted both *Lyme Park* and *Marrying Nandini* is “a writer-actor-director living in New York City”¹¹⁸ whose plays have been workshopped and produced across the US, including at the Kennedy Centre (Washington D.C.), Asian American Writers’ Workshop (New York) and East West Players (Los Angeles), among others. A Yale University graduate, she is on various committees of theatre that include but are not limited to promoting South Asian arts in the US. Madhuri Shekar, who wrote *A Nice Indian Boy*, is based out of Los Angeles, was born in the San Francisco Bay Area and grew up in Chennai, India. She has several

¹¹⁷ *Lyme Park*, which I write about first, deals with marriage obliquely and focuses more on the search for a marital partner.

¹¹⁸ Playwright biography at <http://ma-yitheatre.org/labbies/nandita-shenoy/>

playwriting awards and fellowships under her belt, an MFA from the University of Southern California and shuttles back and forth between India and the US, workshopping her plays in both countries. Aditi Brennan Kapil (*Brahman/i*), is of Bulgarian and Indian descent, grew up in Sweden and resides in Minneapolis. All three writers bring a uniquely modern, global perspective to their plays - their hybrid identities mirroring that of the subjects they write of.

It will serve the purpose of the first part of this chapter well to first outline certain customs leading up to marriage that are practiced by South Asian Americans. For most professional Indians who first come to the US, finding a marriage partner from within one's own community becomes an important factor. A good indicator of these preferences can be sourced from the marriage advertisements placed in the classifieds of diasporic newspapers, and on matrimonial websites targeted toward South Asian-origin people. Most of these advertisements make clear a preference toward endogamy – a desire to marry within the caste, religion and native tongue. While it is true that these preferences are far more relaxed among subsequent generations who were born in the US and have greater access from an earlier age to the American way of being, endogamy is not a totally inconsequential factor in the partner choices of many America-born *desis* even today, primarily due to having grown up in an atmosphere where preserving family networks was always considered of utmost importance. We will see this demonstrated in Shenoy's *Marrying Nandini* as well as Shekar's *A Nice Indian Boy*. Nowadays, it is not at all uncommon to have matrimonial sites

dedicated to particular religions, castes, sub-castes and even geographical originary points for South Asian-origin peoples to find mates. Moreover, since the 1990s, marriage fairs have sprung up across the States for South Asian immigrants, offering not just matchmaking services but also stalls for bridal wear, jewelry and wedding planning.

The (Hindu) Indian wedding ritual of *vidaai* or bidding farewell to the daughter as she leaves her paternal home to join her husband's family is analogous to the journey of the immigrant from homeland to foreign waters. In fact, many *vidaai* songs will talk of how the *babul* or father's home is now a foreign land, and it is the lover's house that has become home.¹¹⁹ The *vidaai* song traditionally depicts the new bride leaving her father's house, with all the traditional values and morality she has been taught, in order to bring this culture and preserve these traditions in her new home, which she will usually share with her in-laws along with her husband. The immigrant mirrors this striving toward preservation of homeland culture when they make the journey to the adoptive land. Then again, the Indian case is a little different in the traditional Hindu stigma attributed to the crossing of the *kalapaani* or black waters of the oceans to reach the foreign land. The Hindu was traditionally considered to have lost his caste when he crossed over, and though such notions are no longer given much credence, the stigma of leaving the homeland remains. The marriage triad plays offer an effective counter-narrative

¹¹⁹ “*Ban gaya pardes ghar janam kaa*” says one such famous *vidaai* song, from one of the biggest grossing Hindi films of all-time, *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*. It translates as “the home of my birth is now a foreign land”.

to the narrative of traditionalism propounded by Indian popular culture in its depiction of the diaspora as a space where traditional values must always fight a fast-losing battle with the corrupting influence of western modernity.

These plays are set against a history of South Asian migration to the United States that corresponds to a parallel history of marriage practices for South Asian migrants who, contrary to assimilative tendencies, not only did not marry outside of their race, they mostly chose not to marry outside their own caste networks. The transnational ties to the homeland in the history of marriage among South Asian-origin peoples in the US transcends nationalism and focuses on particular sub-communities and castes in most instances.¹²⁰ However, the plays in the marriage triad herald a new wave of acculturation that sees beyond such ethnic group affinities toward a more multicultural approach to racial inclusion in partner selection for subsequent generations of South Asian Americans.

Two of the plays I consider – *A Nice Indian Boy* and *Brahman/i* – offer a queering of the South Asian American community that complicates the heteronormative framework of diasporas, particularly the diasporas that were formed post-1965 Immigration and Nationality Act whose main premise was ‘family reunification’. Even within the United States, *Brahman/i*, whose protagonist is an intersex person, troubles the dominance of queer discourse that focuses primarily on gays and lesbians. In a climate where India still criminalizes the practice of non-heteronormative sexuality as deviant, it is noteworthy that these plays have been

¹²⁰ See Farha Ternikar, “To Arrange or Not: Marriage Trends in the South Asian American Community”, *Ethnic Studies Review* 31.2 (2008): 153.

received successfully among the South Asian diaspora in America. The plays' success in the diaspora arguably celebrates discourse in support of queer identity that is suppressed or meets with resistance in India. In fact, given that Madhuri Shekar, who wrote *A Nice Indian Boy* works both in India and the US, it is worthy of mention that the play has received two professional productions in Los Angeles and Chicago and is about to be staged in the Bay Area, but it has not been produced anywhere in India. This is not for lack of interest in Shekar's work, because she has been profiled in mainstream Indian media outlets as a promising young playwright representing India in the US.¹²¹ Theatre houses have picked up *Brahman/i* across the US, including About Face Theatre in Chicago, which prides itself on showcasing LGBTQA¹²² arts; and Quantum Theatre in Pittsburgh, which showcases new plays in non-traditional settings. The fact that the play has been successful and widely produced on the mainstream American stage speaks to its power to extend its scope beyond South Asian American issues toward concerns that are identifiable across social categories.

Do these plays complicate the traditional immigrant narrative in the US about the immigrant's path from tradition to modernity via assimilation? How 'modern' are these new marriage customs that the marriage triad plays consider?

¹²¹ Chaya Babu, "This *Desi* Playwright is Making Waves in the US", *rediff.com*, March 26, 2014, <http://www.rediff.com/getahead/slide-show/slide-show-1-achievers-rare-breed-madhuri-shekar-is-an-indian-playwright-in-the-us/20140326.htm> (Accessed February 10, 2015). Also, Anusha Parthasarathy, "Life's All About Drama", *The Hindu*, January 1, 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/lifes-all-about-drama/article5526372.ece> (Accessed February 10, 2015)

¹²² Lesbian, gay, transgender, queer and ally.

While these plays reinforce certain stereotypes about South Asian women and how tied up their freedoms are to their cultures of patriarchy, they also offer a new way of staging an alternate reality of South Asian gender and sexuality. These plays moreover offer an insight into the politics of the family as it is mapped on the South Asian American domestic sphere.

3.1 PRIDE AND RACIAL PREJUDICE IN *LYME PARK: AN AUSTONIAN ROMANCE OF AN INDIAN NATURE*

Nandita Shenoy's *Lyme Park* received its premiere production at the Round House Theatre in Silver Spring, MD in 2011. It is, broadly, a reworking of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* – and not the first time that such an endeavor has been attempted by an artiste of the South Asian diaspora. Gurinder Chaddha, the British film-maker of Indian origin, based her popular film *Bride and Prejudice* on Austen's novel, Indianizing it with the inclusion of an arranged marriage plot and the Elizabeth Bennet figure's opposition to it. In Shenoy's play, Elizabeth Bennet is rendered as Kavita, in her mid-30s and of Indian descent. She works as a children's book editor in New York City but the audience learns little about her life before the events of the play. Kavita is described as “quirky and high strung”¹²³ and her obsession with *Pride and Prejudice* is made blatant as soon as the play opens: she's watching the BBC version of the film and can easily quote dialogues verbatim.

¹²³ Nandita Shenoy, *Lyme Park: An Austonian Romance of an Indian Nature* (playwright's copy, 2011), 1.

Kavita and her best friend, Violet, are about to embark on a trip to England to do the “Elizabeth Bennet tour of the Peak District” - a last hurrah for the pregnant Violet before she settles into motherhood. The play goes on to chronicle Kavita’s adventures in England on a trip that parallels the romantic trysts of her favorite heroine. Kavita meets and falls in love with a man whom she thinks might be her Mr. Darcy, but things go awry in circumstances that are colored by race. She returns to New York City, heartbroken, and determined to take a trip to India but not before Violet’s reliable and understanding friend, Henry, offers Kavita a possibility for romance at the play’s conclusion.

The contours of postcolonial influence are drawn up immediately in Kavita’s obsession with Austen’s England – a somewhat uncommon preoccupation among most Americans, though one that is far more visible in the commonwealth countries where British literature gets more primacy than even indigenous writing in English on school and university syllabi. *Lyme Park* is a metaphor of postcoloniality told through the figure of Kavita and her obsession with Victorian romance – very obviously a result of a colonially inflected taste for literature.

Lyme Park reflects how South Asian diasporic identity construction is complicated by forces of colonialism in the way that Shenoy reconceives Jane Austen’s oeuvre in the play. Shenoy announces her intentions by subtitled the play “An Austonian Romance of an Indian Nature” but India does not form an explicit setting in *Lyme Park* except at the very end when Kavita announces her decision to travel to the country. Kavita is of Indian-origin, but thoroughly American in terms

of lifestyle and citizenship. Yet, the “Indian nature” is a postcolonial shade over the play, harking to her ethnic identity, complicating Kavita’s acceptance into British society and coexisting with Kavita’s preoccupation with British literature. *Lyme Park* is an homage to Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* and *Pride and Prejudice*, in that the character of Kavita is much like Catherine, the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, whose obsession with Gothic novels mirrors Kavita’s obsession with *Pride and Prejudice*. The dramatic development of the play is a reconception of *Pride and Prejudice* in the sense that Kavita’s romantic engagements mirror that of Elizabeth Bennet. The character tropes of the strong, independent but also hopelessly romantic heroine; the dark but alluring suitor of loose morals, and the lonesome but stable and morally grounded hero are Austen staples after whom the characters in *Lyme Park* are fashioned. This metanarrative is expressed with the “Lyme Park” in the title of the play – a reference to the mansion used to depict Mr. Darcy’s Pemberley estate in the BBC film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. The play’s concern with place and displacement in its shifting locations between America, England and (referentially) India draw attention to a particularly postcolonial crisis of identity, especially in relation to self and place. The play muddies the assertion that pan-ethnic subjects born in America can be comfortably American in outlook.

Violet sets Kavita up with her writer friend Henry in New York City right before the two girlfriends take the trip to England. When Kavita informs him she will be attending Regency balls in costume as part of her Jane Austen tour of England, he asks, “Don’t you think that’s a little weird? You know, dressing up like

an English person?"¹²⁴. The implication is perhaps that Kavita's anglophilia undermines her own particular heritage. She quickly brings the frame of reference to home turf, though, when she mentions that attending a ball in period costume is no weirder than the American tradition of Halloween. Shenoy writes in the playwright's note that Henry can be of any race as long as he is neither white nor South Asian, and he was played by a black actor in the premiere production in Maryland. The casting choice gives greater resonance to Henry's question – as an African-American he is well aware of the narrative of passing and its attendant traumas.

By making some of the classics of Victorian romance literature relevant to modern American times via adaptation and literary reference, Shenoy acquiesces to her heroine's colonial heritage, but one that Kavita acknowledges on her own terms. At one point Kavita says that she prefers to have Henry email her instead of calling to ask her out because she would like to test his command of English, even though Henry is a professional writer. "The ability to use the English language properly is very important to me. It's a sign of whether the person has succumbed to total cultural devolution or not," she says¹²⁵. It is an interesting comment from a subject who is unique in her position as both postcolonial (through her Indian origin) and neo-imperial (as an American citizen). Though her parents may have had to appropriate the English language through forces of colonization and later, immigration, always conscious of their position as subordinate (second language)

¹²⁴ Nandita Shenoy, *Lyme Park*, 12.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

speakers of English, Kavita is a ‘native’ speaker for whom English does not carry a colonial stigma. Instead, she is more concerned with protecting the purity of the language, as it were, in a curiously imperial stance. Yet, it must also be noted that the spirit she wishes to convey through language is deeply situated in the history of British literature. Her own emotions are caught up in her obsession to make her life akin to that of the heroine of her favorite novel, *Pride and Prejudice*.

The play makes an important point about marginality and the difficulty of locating a ‘centre’ for the South Asian American subject. Kavita, at different points in the play shifts her positionality from centre to margin. She appears to have appropriated the American disdain for Asian-made goods sold in the US when she remarks on Henry’s Banana Republic attire choices and praises Regency-era furniture made by English artisans in the same breath. For Kavita, the proposed trip to India becomes a rite of passage, a return to some kind of ancestral identity - a return from the centre to the margins. It is in these slippages between centre and margin that her postcolonial South Asian American identity is given structure.

The very mobile nature of the play, its shifting geography between New York and the English countryside, points to the transnational nature of its heroine’s identity – a transnationalism that acknowledges its links to the colonial origins of Kavita’s lineage. Kavita’s decision to go to India is significant – it is a country she has only briefly known on her trips with her parents for whom it was home before they crossed over to America. Although Kavita speaks of visiting the “motherland”, her plans involve a tour of the palaces of Rajasthan – a very popular itinerary found

in foreign guidebooks like the one she's reading when she makes her decision. She tells Henry of wanting to discover her roots, but is unable to search beyond the foreign traveler's vision of India. The play seems to ask whether a diasporic subject like Kavita can ever really seek her roots in the motherland of her parents, and raises the question of where the motherland really is for the South Asian American. Although Kavita, an independent second generation South Asian American is empowered by her own transnational mobility, she continues to question her place between borders.

Lyme Park is not without flaws – Kavita is an unconvincing heroine, her obsession with Jane Austen borders on something that might require psychiatric intervention. She categorizes everyone she meets as one or other of Austen's characters, and tries to fit her life into one that would match that of an Austen heroine. The constant references to Austen's novels as a way to establish that *Lyme Park* is as much an homage as it is a modern rendition of Austen's main themes gets tiresome quickly. However, the play's strengths lie in the ways in which it can relate certain themes or moments in an Austen novel to Kavita's own life - Mrs. Bennet's frenzy about finding suitors for her daughters in *Pride & Prejudice* mirrors that of many South Asian-origin parents, for whom matchmaking is part of being a good parent. Kavita reminds Violet, her best friend and travel companion in England, "Remember the last time I went to India, my uncle had a different bachelor come to tea every day for a week? It was humiliating enough having these guys come around to take a look at me. And then when the trip ended and I wasn't

engaged, everyone looked so sad”¹²⁶. The pressure to get married has followed Kavita on her family trips to India, and marginalizes her central position as a first-world citizen of an advanced, western country. As an Indian-origin person, her status as a single woman in her thirties undermines her professional success and all other accomplishments. It is interesting that Shenoy ties this to similar Victorian assessments of women’s worth – making one both critical of these practices as well as cognizant that they affect women just as much in western countries as they do in ‘developing nations’.

Shenoy turns orientalism on its head in the manner in which England is fetishized in Kavita’s mind as a space of desire. Her attraction for the loutish Englishman, Thomas, who mistreats her but also provides an access to the idealized “Austonian romance” she seeks is an embodiment of this misplaced nostalgia for an imagined space of belonging. It is notable that Shenoy subtitles her play “An Austonian Romance of an Indian nature” – curiously, America, where the majority of characters including Kavita live, does not feature in the equation. Without actually specifying as much, Shenoy seems to imply that Kavita’s homeland is inhospitable to her quest for love. Yet, the ‘authentic’ experience of England which seems so familiar to her is heavily staged and far from authentic. After Kavita and Violet have traveled to England for the Jane Austen tour, they meet the Caucasian Englishman Thomas, who guides the tour and embodies the dark, seductive hero of the Austen romances. Kavita is immediately taken with him, and he asks to

¹²⁶ Ibid., 23.

accompany her to the Jane Austen Ball, a costume gala that replicates the dance and revelry of similar balls during Austen's time. True to the nature of the Austonian romance, Henry also shows up to this event, on the pretext of covering it for a magazine article. The Jane Austen Ball, where all these characters, across races and solidly situated in modern times come together in costume to act like white British aristocracy troubles racialized modes of seeing and the perception that only certain races have the privilege and access to certain lifestyles. At the same time, the ball in itself is an artifice, a recreated relic of past practices that were necessarily exclusionary. It is telling that Thomas' mother, Mrs Dale, exoticizes Kavita as the "Asian princess" and complains that Thomas might have warned her his date was "coffee-colored"¹²⁷. Kavita's gown, made especially for her in India is remarked upon as garish and Kavita becomes an object of ridicule for the elderly English lady, whose modes of racial seeing immediately cast Kavita as an other and a misfit in this especially English setting. Racial seeing comes up several times in the scene at the ball, most prominently in the visual effect of seeing a brown woman of American citizenship attired in a gown styled after the fashion of Regency-era ball gowns but made with bright and rich fabrics typical to India. The costume then becomes an affective symbol of the postcolonial diasporic condition – Kavita, an American, carries upon her body the influence of both India as her cultural origin and England in the colonial influence it has had on India.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 63.

The English setting of the costume gala is staged particularly with tourism in mind, and therefore attracts people of all ethnicities and races from all over the world. When Henry tells Kavita that a lot of people would have a hard time seeing her as Elizabeth Bennet because she was brown, she curiously tells him, “I do not like that term. I’m Indian.”¹²⁸ This is an odd thing to say, since Kavita is actually an American, though of Indian origin, but it is telling of the kind of dissociation that is so common to the South Asian American subjectivity. Despite her Americanness, Kavita feels accountable for the Indian part of her, and at the end of the play she’s planning a trip to India to connect with “my people” as she says. It is almost as if the ball – where she can now pay to access belonging – stands in for the belongingness she lacks in her American life. However, even with the transnational neoliberal access she enjoys to entertain her own particular colonial fantasy of living a life that parallels Elizabeth Bennet’s, Kavita’s (not specifically articulated) dreams of meeting a Mr. Darcy in England are dashed when she recognizes how the rigid codes of racial acceptance do not allow her access to the English romantic life. Although she rejects Henry’s reminder about her brownness, it is the color of her skin that leads Thomas’ mother, Mrs. Dale, to be condescending to her. Kavita is humiliated at the ball when Mrs. Dale calls her a slut and soon comes to realize that Thomas– a graduate student for more than 11 years living with his mother – is no Mr. Darcy, that he might in fact, want to be with her solely for free access to New York City. The moment of realization becomes a reminder of the muddied space of

¹²⁸ 72.

race and neoliberal access that is so poignant to the largely economically successful South Asian American community: Kavita's paradox of identity lies in situating her brownness, which does not qualify her for acceptance into white British society, against her professional success and access to American capital.

One of the strengths of *Lyme Park* lies in its diverse, multiracial cast of characters. Shenoy makes specific racial choices that reflect the reality of contemporary America. Kavita is of Indian descent and Violet of "open ethnicity", Henry, as mentioned, must be of open ethnicity but neither white nor South Asian. Thomas and his mother are not racially identified but stipulated as being British. Considering the number of readings and workshop performances the play received before its first production in Maryland, it is a worthy exercise in creative collaboration among artists of a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, and reflects the reality of the American racial demographic far better than the American stage conventionally has. The Hegira's Maryland premiere of the play at Round House Theatre cast black actors Maryam Fatima Foye and Julian Elijah Martinez to play Violet and Henry respectively. Indian American actor Lynette Rathnam played Kavita and Nick Greek played the white Britisher Thomas.¹²⁹ Race immediately becomes a point of focus in the play, especially when the audience finds the two black friends expressing concern for Kavita's obsession with an idealized model of white femininity in her desire to emulate her favorite fictional heroine. The play seems to suggest that the two persons of color who have in their blood a history

¹²⁹ Hunter Styles, "Lyme Park", *DC Theater Scene*, January 13, 2011, <http://dctheatrescene.com/2011/01/13/lyme-park/>

of racial oppression are the only ones who can foresee the futility of looking to white femininity as an aspiration – something that the brown heroine of *Lyme Park*, whose racial history in America is shorter and less mired in oppression has not yet worked out for herself. The sole available review of the production, by Hunter Styles, makes the point that Kavita’s obsession with Jane Austen’s heroine is an escape from the constant disappointment that is her modern life in America. Taken further, the disappointment – evidently made clear by Rathnam in the production – may be a symptom of diasporic discontent with the inability to fit into the world the diasporic subject inhabits. In a play that is shaped otherwise as a run-of-the-mill romantic comedy, the inclusion of issues of racial seeing brings new life to the American stage in its representation of the true demographic make-up of the country today.

3.2 *MARRYING NANDINI* AND THE ARRANGED MARRIAGE PLOT

When the lights go up on this one-act play, the audience sees the mother of the eponymous character at the dining table, simultaneously fixing dinner, poring through the classifieds of *India Abroad* – a popular magazine of the Indian diaspora – and trying to set up a profile for Nandini on a dating site online. This is a family that is as Indian as it is American. The dinner table is strewn with Indian magazines and cookbooks, but offstage Nandini’s father (neither parents are ever named in the play) enjoys an episode of Rachel Ray. It turns out Nandini has

conceded (in a very offhand way) to have her parents find her a match because her cousin, seven years her junior, is getting married. Apparently, the cousin's parents found her a groom, in the Indian manner of arranging marriages, and the girl is very happy with her fiancé. Nandini's matchmaking, though, will take a very modern turn – in the opening scene her parents are navigating the murky world of the dating site, match.com, to set up a profile for her. Shenoy reflects on the new age of Indian arranged marriages with this turn. Generations ago, the arranged marriage involved a meeting of families and no more than a cursory glimpse exchanged between the bride and groom before they got married. The marriage was a coming together of families, and a material transaction where the bride's family would often send a mutually agreed-upon dowry with their daughter to her marital home. Giving or taking dowry became illegal in India in 1961, after a surge in dowry-related harassment and deaths among new brides. The tradition of arranging marriages has also grown far more relaxed in subsequent generations. The norm today is for parents on either side to introduce their children to each other and let the man and woman independently decide whether they would like to get married after a courtship period, thus giving rise to the phenomenon of the “arranged love marriage” – a partnership based on friendship and love that also meets with parental approval.

The parents in *Marrying Nandini* subvert the stereotype about insular Indian immigrant families who resist identifying with the culture of their adopted land, choosing instead to unerringly conform to the culture of the homeland. These

Indian-origin parents are well-versed in American popular culture (they're avid fans of Dr. Phil and Rachel Ray). They seem to be very open to Nandini entering the convoluted world of online dating. In many ways they are a far cry away from popular Hindi film depictions of the NRI (non-resident Indian) parent policing their daughter's sexuality in order to preserve Indian culture and to protect her from the tainting influence of permissive Western sexuality. At the same time, the play makes a commentary on the messy sexual politics of online dating and the exhausting and lonely quest to find a partner in today's busy, connected-yet-disconnected world.

Tellingly, the first question on the questionnaire on match.com asks about preferred body type, emphasizing how physical attributes trump all else in this superficial online dating world. Hilarity ensues when the parents quarrel over what kind of body Nandini might prefer in a potential partner. Some stereotypes that abide in India come to the fore, with the mother contending that good-looking boys are self-centered (a cliché typically attributed to women the world over). But the clash with traditionalism and insularity becomes prominent despite the parents' non-typically progressive views – the mother is firm that the ethnicity of the date should be East Indian, and that he should especially not be a *gorah* (white) or black man. The father offers the more liberal counterpoint in his lack of concern for racial or ethnic particulars, and voices the opinion that Nandini might not care either. But gradually all the anxieties about marriage in the Indian diaspora come out in the open, although the tone is always light-hearted and comedic. The self-imposed

diasporic burden of preserving a Hindu Indian identity on American soil is played out while the parents fill out the paperwork to get their absent daughter on the dating site. Interestingly, while the patriarch usually voices these concerns about preserving Indianness, here it is the mother who seems more anxious about the importance of endogamy. While certain criteria are relaxed, others are reinforced: the boy need not be Konkani, that is, from the coastal region of India that the parents are from, but he should be Brahmin, the high caste that their daughter belongs to. There is mention of how Nandini's US citizenship would make her attractive to prospective grooms in India, hinting at the dark history of green card marriages where Indian-American men married girls from India for the dowry only to abandon or otherwise abuse and exploit them once they reached the US. The immigrant stereotype of favoring proper education and a good job goes into the profile description for Nandini, when they iterate that the prospective suitor must be educated and salaried. The play takes immigrant assimilation to its hilarious extreme with this depiction of Indian-origin parents trying to find a date for their American daughter in the same way that their own parents found a life partner for them – through social networking – the only difference being the amount of digital technology involved in this case. The choice of an online dating site to find a suitable groom is comedic because while match.com may be a site where individuals go to seek lasting relationships it is also one that can facilitate casual sexual encounters. In choosing this very untraditional approach to finding a match for Nandini, the parents attempt to keep up with the times, but the audience is let in

on the joke from the beginning that the endeavor is doomed to fail because they are completely clueless about navigating the complex world of the American dating website. It also speaks to the anxieties and social pressures faced within the small Indian-American communities to marry someone who would uphold the vague imaginary that is “Indian tradition”. The pressure to marry in one’s twenties, as is common in India, also competes with the pace of life and career-building in the US. The mother complains about a friend making sarcastic comments about Nandini having bought her own 1-bedroom apartment, alluding to how a single woman like Nandini would hardly need more room. She rues the pity with which the community looks at her successful, beautiful daughter simply because she is unmarried and childless at 32. The absent Nandini embodies the contradictions of the Indian American woman, caught between competing notions of cultural purity and modernity. The very fact of her not having a voice or even a presence in the decisions being made about her life points to the continuing struggle for gender equality that South Asian American women face from within their own community. The play ends on a shaky note of hope, though, with the parents being shown as sharing the “conversation, companionship and marriage” that they hope to find for their daughter. Theirs was an arranged marriage, and they have lived happily with each other for 35 years. Some of the stigma associated with loveless arranged marriages is undercut in the pleasant relationship Nandini’s parents share. However, the uncertainty the mother and father feel about being able to find a suitable groom for Nandini points to a grudging willingness to see that certain

traditions may need to be reconsidered for modern South Asian American children. The play thus both challenges as well as appropriates through selective compliance traditional patriarchal gender norms and practices related to marriage.

Marrying Nandini received two productions – the first at the Green Light One Act Festival in Los Angeles in 2007, and the second at the A-Squared Theatre in Chicago in 2012. While the former is an independent theatre showcasing new works by women playwrights, the latter is an exclusively Asian American theatre company. Although these are fringe theatres, it is telling that such niche spaces exist to encourage new play development and diverse perspectives on contemporary American theatre. Both productions featured Indian American actors in the principal roles. Unfortunately, no reviews or production images were available of either production.

3.3 MAPPING THE MODERN FAMILY IN *A NICE INDIAN BOY*

The third play in the marriage triad, Madhuri Shekar's *A Nice Indian Boy* (2014) is a romantic comedy styled after popular musicals emerging out of Bollywood, the Indian film industry based in Mumbai. Bollywood is a major driver of culture in India: its films, mostly in Hindi with snippets of other regional languages featured in the songs, has far-reaching influences across the country, not least determined by an immensely successful distribution model where new films travel to the remotest parts of the country, even villages with little running water or electricity. For the

most part, Bollywood's accessibility in its current form is owed to its non-threatening, non-critical demonstration of a globalized Indian modernity that offers a sort of 'Bombay dream' to the have-nots and an affirmation of the full life to the haves.¹³⁰ Moreover, Bollywood has global appeal, in terms of its popularity among viewers in the Middle East, in Russia and in parts of Africa, not to mention the global South Asian diaspora. The uniquely hybrid form of dance featured in its musicals has crossed borders and we see Bollywood dance fitness classes in workout studios across the US these days.

A Nice Indian Boy revolves around the lovers, Naveen and Keshav, who lock eyes for the first time while praying at a Hindu temple in Livermore, CA. They bond over their love of Hindi films, particularly the blockbuster *Dilwaale Dulhaniya Le Jaayenge* (usually referred to by the abbreviation DDLJ), and eventually move in together. Trouble ensues when Naveen takes Keshav to meet his parents, Archit and Megha, and announce their engagement.¹³¹ Naveen's homosexuality has been an unspoken but implied point of tension in the family. Moreover, Keshav, adopted by an Indian-origin family in California after spending much of his childhood in foster homes, is Caucasian. While Naveen's parents had only just begun to come around to accepting their son's sexuality, marrying interracially was strictly

¹³⁰ This is not to say that complex, thought-provoking films don't emerge out of the Bollywood milieu. In fact, more such films are being made, specifically targeted to India's growing educated middle-classes who pay large sums of money to enjoy these films at sprawling multiplex cinemas across Indian cities.

¹³¹ It should be noted that while same-sex marriage became legalized nationwide in the United States only on June 26, 2015, it has been legal in California since June 16, 2008. The passage of Proposition 8 – a state constitutional amendment barring such marriages - halted licenses being issued for same-sex unions between November, 2008 and June, 2013, after which the US Supreme Court overturned Prop 8 as being unconstitutional.

prohibited. Matters are further complicated by Keshav's self-identification as Indian and his deep involvement in Hindu culture and Indian popular entertainment. In a sub-plot, Megha and Archit's opposition to marrying outside their race is depicted through the failing marriage of their daughter, Arundhathi, who was pressured by her parents into agreeing to an arranged marriage after they forbade her from marrying her white lover. Megha and Archit set her up instead with an Indian-origin American boy of their choosing, whom Arundhathi married after a brief courtship. This narrative thread is offset by Naveen's own desire for a traditional Indian marriage – one that his sister had wished to but not been allowed to reject – and his interest in following the (heterosexual) code of Indian marriage wherein the prospective marriage partner must first be accepted into the fold of the family before the union can be sanctified. Shekar creates a space for the queer diasporic restructuring of the codes of traditional Indian marriage in the dramatic unfolding of the plot, when Naveen introduces his gay, Caucasian partner to his family and makes known his desire for a Hindu marriage, complete with a priest and the typical Indian wedding fanfare.

The play is set up as a staged tribute to the archetypal Bollywood musical. In particular, the play sets itself as a queer homage to the longest-running Bollywood film of all time - *Dilwaale Dulhaniya Le Jaayenge* ('The Braveheart Shall Win The Bride', 1995). The film's songs, some of the most famous in Bollywood history, play in the background at key points of the drama, and Keshav and Naveen even sing the lovers' song from the film to each other. The fact that the play references DDLJ

so often, without quite explaining the film's plot points or significance in Indian popular culture arguably attests to Shekar writing for a primarily South Asian-origin audience; however, the presence of a Caucasian protagonist conveys the desire to take the play beyond the confines of ethnic drama.

The immigrant narrative of assimilation plays out in several scenes: Keshav chides Naveen for giving an Anglicized name to Starbucks baristas instead of his actual name – he refers to himself as Nick – in a moment sure to be recognized by all *desis* exasperated by the western mutilation of their names. The immigrant striving for success is commented on when the audience learns that Naveen was coerced into relinquishing his dream of becoming an artist for a more failsafe career as an engineer. Then again, the diaspora becomes a space for overturning age-old prejudices and patriarchal expectations: when Archit serves Naveen dinner, the latter comments on how whenever he would visit an Indian household as a child, he'd find the women doing the cooking and serving, but not in his own home where the family patriarch took on these tasks.

The play opens at the Hindu temple, with Keshav chanting an invocation to Lord Ganesha. This opening recalls the custom of sanctifying a marriage by praying to Ganesha as well as the classical Indian theatrical practice of beginning a play by invoking the gods to bless the performance. Visually, having a white man in traditional Indian garb chant a Sanskrit *shloka*¹³² when the stage lights come on is a powerful immersion into the ethnoracial muddling that will follow in the play. In

¹³² Sanskrit word meaning 'verse' or 'chant' (noun).

Scene 2, Naveen tells Keshav on their date, “I want to get married one day. With my family there. And a *pujari*¹³³. Have the *baraat*¹³⁴, do the seven steps around the fire, the whole thing.”¹³⁵ Naveen’s desire for a traditional marriage with a religious ceremony reconfigures the space of marriage into one that admits non-heteronormative unions as equally valid. Moreover, that America-born Naveen would desire such traditional marriage rites signals a modern approach to tradition that no longer sees it as oppressive. When Scene 3 opens in Archit and Megha’s Bay Area living room as they wait to meet Keshav for the first time, they’re watching the film *Milk* – about the gay rights activist Harvey Milk in San Francisco in the Sixties – in an attempt to understand their son’s sexuality. The parents are not shown as wholly liberal, they appear to take homosexuality with a large dose of incredulity – Megha asks of the film: “Are there really so many gays in San Francisco? That too back in the 60’s [*sic*]? I mean I know there are many gays now, but in this movie it is like – everyone is a [*sic*] gay. Even the women are lesbians. Just randomly Sean Penn will talk to some fellow on the subway means they both know they are gay, how?”¹³⁶ Yet, even in her naiveté, Megha knows that “It’s not just something you can change your mind about”¹³⁷. Endearingly, even before Archit and Megha have met Keshav, who is an orphan, they discuss speaking with any living relative he might have in the typical fashion of meeting the family before the

¹³³ Hindi word meaning ‘priest’.

¹³⁴ Hindi word meaning ‘groom’s wedding party’.

¹³⁵ Madhuri Shekar, *A Nice Indian Boy* (script provided by playwright’s agent, 2014), 11.

¹³⁶ Madhuri Shekar, *A Nice Indian Boy*, 12.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

prospective couple is blessed for marriage. Their sentiments disorganize the narrative about the acceptance of homosexuality as being the prerogative of the western liberal. Then again, given that homosexuality is criminalized in India it raises the question about whether Shekar – a transnational playwright moving between India and the US – is trying to make diaspora (and the diasporic stage) the site for the Indian homosexual to take centre stage and become a part of the narrative of both family, and, taken broadly, the nation-state.

Interestingly, it is the Caucasian Keshav who takes to his Indianness more unproblematically than Naveen. Naveen's imbibing of the culture of his parents comes with questions and a keen awareness of how different it is from his immediate American environment. He is deeply cynical of Bollywood films, for one. Like most modern practicing Hindus, he modifies some of Hinduism's many and ostentatious rites – for instance, while he is religious enough to visit the temple, he does not submit to the elaborate prostration before elders and deities to seek their blessing that is part of an archaic Hindu dictate. It is Keshav who creates “imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind”, as Salman Rushdie calls the diasporic fantasy. His attempt at reclamation of a lost past is an attempt to connect with his deceased adoptive parents, who were of Indian origin. The character of Keshav troubles the concept of an “authentic” or immutable culture, and shows how it is in fact a dynamic, fluid and complex thing. Keshav was not born with an exposure to India – his biological parents were white Americans and his foster homes before he got to his Indian family were also all American families several generations in. His

connection to his adoptive parents' homeland is mediated through the Bollywood film, which in turn creates a sense of solidarity across heterogeneous South Asian-origin groups of varied regional, cultural and linguistic differences. The India conceived by the Bollywood musical is in itself an imagined construction, full of bright contradictions. It is largely Hindu, North Indian, but its shining stars are Muslim (e.g.: Shahrukh Khan, as of 2014 the richest actor in the world, after Jerry Seinfeld);¹³⁸ its contemporary iteration comprises mainly thoroughly globalized characters who have corporate connections in the first world and the economic wherewithal to access it freely, it promotes traditional Indian values¹³⁹ but flouts conservatism equally with racy dance songs called "item numbers".¹⁴⁰ Yet, this is an India where same-sex desire continues to be unthinkable for most of the nation. For this reason, Shekar's adoption of DDLJ – the quintessential Bollywood tale of lovers who unite despite parental and traditional displeasure – as a soundtrack and constant referral point throughout this play about an interracial gay couple is noteworthy.

¹³⁸ Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "Bollywood Superstar Shah Rukh Khan Named World's Second Richest Actor", *The Guardian*, May 21, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/may/21/bollywood-shah-rukh-khan-actor>

¹³⁹ M. Madhava Prasad in *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) cites the censorship code of the Central Board of Film Censors in India, which prohibits "excessively passionate love scenes, indelicate sexual situations and scenes suggestive of immorality" (88).

¹⁴⁰ The item number will usually feature a well-known film actress in a cameo appearance - it is typically sensual, devoid of the Hindu moralizing that may well be a part of the film the song belongs to. In many instances the item number cannot be contextualized within the film, but exists as a catchy song that markets the film to its potential audience before release.

The play gives an insight into the prevalence (indeed, relevance) of the Bollywood film to Indian diasporic culture, and is an homage to DDLJ, even as it reimagines it from a queer perspective that would, even today, not be accepted uncompromisingly into the Indian mainstream. It will serve well the discussion of the play to first briefly provide a commentary on DDLJ, to identify points of commonality between the play and the film. Both *A Nice Indian Boy* and DDLJ deal with the conflict between individual desire and familial expectations and traditions in the choice of a partner. Both of them also focus on the retention of an Indian identity in a transnational location. DDLJ is, notably, one of the first and most successful Bollywood films whose protagonists are diasporic Indians, based out of London. The lovers in the film, Raj and Simran, are second-generation British Indians who meet on a European vacation and have a pan-European courtship. Trouble ensues because Simran's father has arranged her marriage to his best friend's son, a man she has never met before, who lives in Punjab, India. The film traces the reunion of the lovers in Punjab and their acceptance into the family following several dramatic twists and turns. DDLJ is the first iteration of the problems faced by first-generation Indian immigrants in adjusting to life in the UK, and their children, who grow up as seeped in British culture as they are in the Indian culture they experience at home and among their parents' social circle. The film lays great emphasis on a key factor of being Indian abroad – the maintenance of Indianness through 'Indian family values'. Part of this family value is parents effectively policing their children's choice of partner in order to preserve these same

values by arranging marriages for their children to equals within the community. This happens in DDLJ, with Simran's (ultimately unrealized) arranged marriage to Kuljeet, the son of her father's childhood friend in Punjab. This is also reflected in *A Nice Indian Boy* in Naveen's sister Arundhathi's marriage to Manish, which was arranged by her parents but in its modern rendition, where families introduce the prospective couple to each other and let them decide for themselves. The anxiety about preserving family values through marriage is reflected in Naveen's parents' staunch refusal to let Arundhathi marry anyone of non-Indian origin, and is repeated in their utter shock when Naveen brings home a white boyfriend.

Religious ritual is an important identifying marker of Indianness in both the play and the film. In order to convince her father that she will be safe and morally upstanding on her Europe trip with friends, Simran performs a *puja*¹⁴¹ at the family shrine before daybreak, dressed in a sari and chanting Sanskrit mantras, making sure her father has noticed. Her piety confirms to her traditional father that he has raised his daughter with the correct Indian values. In the play, Naveen and Keshav meet at a Hindu temple – presumably both have imbibed and willingly perform the religious practice picked up from their respective parents. In a queering of this preservation of religious rituals, however, the play mentions that these gay lovers also want to get married at the Hindu temple where they first met – a practice that continues to be unacceptable in reality.

¹⁴¹ Prayer ritual or act of worship. The word has roots in Sanskrit.

In DDLJ, a brief moment of female sexual agency is undercut by presumed male self-control masquerading as Indian high moral value, when Simran gets drunk (not for pleasure, merely to keep herself warm from the bone-chilling cold in Switzerland, the film implies) and expresses desire for Raj. This expression of desire happens in song, as the hero and heroine traverse the beautiful locales of Switzerland – ending up in a swimming pool – with Simran in hot pursuit of Raj. The song is over-the-top in typical Bollywood fashion, but the expression of female desire is rare and might be empowering if the audience weren't sure whether the song actually occurs within the realm of fantasy, as many songs in Hindi films are wont to do. In the morning, Simran wakes up in Raj's hotel room in his clothes and Raj gives her the impression that they have had sex, only to reveal to her when she is in tears of regret that nothing happened actually between them – he would never undermine an 'Indian woman's honor' and that he knows what *izzat* (honor) means to the Indian woman. It is the man, then, who upholds the strictures about Indian sexuality by exercising self-control. By doing so, of course, Simran's brief moment of feminine sexual agency is elided. In Shekar's play, Naveen's sister Arundhathi comes to represent that sacrifice of female agency to uphold family honor – she marries someone of her parents' choosing, even as a successful, career-oriented, independent Indian American woman. Neither is her decision to leave her unhappy marriage met with approval or anything beyond mild sympathy from her father. Mostly, Archit and Megha behave as though their daughter is wholly overreacting to the unhappiness in her marriage. It is a stark portrayal of the double standards

that exist in Indian culture that have crossed the oceans into the immigrant Indian home.

In *A Nice Indian Boy*, the queer space offers the empowerment and agency that was not allowed to the heterosexual lovers in DDLJ. Keshav and Naveen kiss in public, they cohabit outside of marriage but they also reconcile these non-traditional behaviors with the more traditional Hindu religiousness and emphasis on the approval of their elders. *A Nice Indian Boy*, then, becomes a means for the queer diasporic lovers to imagine themselves into the heterosexual space of the Bollywood romance, modeled on the film DDLJ – a space that does not exist for or otherwise acknowledge them. In both the play and the film, it is imperative for the lovers to receive parental consent to be happy. So although the queering of DDLJ in *Indian Boy* gives more sexual and individual freedom to the lead characters, there remains the traditional emphasis on family ties. *Indian Boy*, like DDLJ, questions the enforcement of patriarchal authority in the choice of a partner – Archit and Megha may have arranged Arundhathi's marriage to an Indian-origin boy of their choosing – but the two main lovers take control of their own fates. Instead of passively complying with Archit's refusal to accept him as part of the family, Keshav brings his future father-in-law over to his side by confronting him on his own. However, their need for the blessings of their parents merely reaffirms the emphasis on preserving Indian cultural values. *Indian Boy*, then, presents marriage as what Marian Aguiar has called “a site that produces a transnational subject of

globalization through a discourse of constraint as well as through a discourse of choice.”¹⁴²

There is of course a more complex aspect to *Indian Boy*, something that is not germane to the film it constantly references – that is the component of race that playwright Madhuri Shekar introduces to the play. While Archit and Megha – traditional Indian parents – are just coming around to understanding their son’s homosexuality, they are introduced to his white boyfriend, a man who is more Indian than their own Indian American son. Throughout the play we see the constant bewilderment that greets Keshav in the presence of Indian-origin people as they look upon his easy adoption of Indian culture as some sort of fetish, instead of seeing it as a product of the environment he grew up in. Shekar appears to be making a point about the racism and stereotyping that people of color (and of South Asian origin) are subjected to as they attempt to assimilate into American society, only she inverts this racism and effects it upon the body of a white man. Just as some second-generation, American-born South Asian-origin people are looked upon as not fully American, here Keshav, the American-born white man is refused as authentically Indian, despite his deep engagement with and adherence to Indian culture. It is interesting that Naveen’s transgression in the eyes of his parents is not that he has brought home a male lover, but that he has brought home one who is white.

¹⁴² Marian Aguiar, “Arranged Marriage: Cultural Regeneration in Transnational South Asian Popular Culture”, *Cultural Critique* 84.84 (Spring 2013), 181+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. February 9, 2016.

Keshav's own positionality as a white American who identifies as Indian is wholly complex and brings into perspective the notion of visibility and what I will call "ethnocultural passing" in a multiracial, multiethnic America. While his Indianness is met with cynicism by 'authentic' Indians, one cannot help but wonder that Keshav's own strong claims to this adopted ethnicity are possible because he is Caucasian and enjoys a certain cultural power in America that a brown person ordinarily does not. He can stake a claim to a minority ethnicity predominantly by virtue of having the privilege of majority rights. When I use the term 'passing' to describe Keshav's immersion in Indianness – his assertion, in fact, that he is Indian – I do so advisedly, while drawing upon the history and narrative of racial passing. Elaine K. Ginsberg writes, "[Passing] is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties. Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing. Finally, passing is about specularities: the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen."¹⁴³ In this sense, Keshav does not 'pass' for Indian because his race belies such a possibility. However, his ethnocultural performance of what he considers to be the essence of Indianness suggests a desire and attempt to pass as Indian, despite the "specularity" that indicates otherwise. The anxiety induced by Keshav's trying to elide race in claiming Indianness only highlights the anxiety that accompanies the brown South Asian American subject as he tries to negotiate a

¹⁴³ Elaine K. Ginsberg, ed., *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 2.

place of belonging within the American nation-state. Keshav's negotiation of his identity in a cultural milieu that has no space to accommodate the complications of his being both white and Indian mirrors the South Asian American's dilemma of being both South Asian and American. Arguably, this dilemma – rendered in comic tones in the play – resonates with the *desi* audience of *A Nice Indian Boy*. During the meeting with Naveen's parents, Keshav goes out of his way to establish his Indianness, but in doing so, performs the spectacle of an imaginary, culturally pristine India that the Indians in the room are unable to identify with. He offers to serve tea to the family, in the manner of the (archaic) arranged marriage custom where the prospective bride serves tea to the groom's family when they first come to see her so they may gauge whether she will be a good homemaker. Keshav, in an exaggerated gesture of respect, bows low to each member of the family before offering them their cup, and is surprised when Arundhathi laughs at him for doing so. In his mind, this is the proper way of serving tea respectfully in India, and it certainly might have been at one point, but Keshav appears resolutely unaware of India's cultural modernity. Shekar writes in her playwright's note that Keshav is in his early-30s. Since he mentions having lost his Indian parents ten years before the play begins, and also that he came to be adopted by them after passing through several foster care situations, one can assume that he did not get a lot of time to spend with them and that the India of his mind is shaped more by America or the West than it is by India. The contradictions are clear when he speaks of his sole visit to the country after his parents' death:

After they died, I went to India for the first time. Took a photography gig – I told myself it was for the job, but really... it was like... I was returning home, even though I'd never been. Maybe in a past life? I motorbiked to Kanyakumari, slept in a safe house in Kashmir, made the best friends of my life in Bombay, smoked hash with mendicants in Rishikesh.

Naveen smiles politely

You ever get high on the banks of the Ganga while the Kumbh Mela¹⁴⁴ goes on around you? It was the closest I've ever been to enlightenment. And death.¹⁴⁵

This is the exotic India of travel guidebooks – the one with wild untapped landscapes, *swamis* and hallucinogens. Naveen's response in the stage direction arguably echoes the eye-rolls of the *desis* in the audience. In his experience of India, Keshav reiterates the romanticized narrative of the country as an ancient Hindu civilization seemingly untouched by forces of globalization or economic progress.

The idea of passing as closely related to visibility – one passes successfully only when one looks like the identity one is attempting to pass as – becomes a focal point in establishing South Asian American identity and the struggle for belongingness. If American identity is caught within a white/black racial binary, then it is inevitable that the *desi* citizen's sense of belonging is compromised. Then again, Keshav demonstrates the constructed nature of ethnoracial identity when he deliberately chooses his ethnic Indian identity over a generic white racial identity.

¹⁴⁴ In brief, this is a festival where *sadhus* or Hindu ascetics and pilgrims from all over India gather to take a holy dip in the river Ganga (or its tributaries) in one of four sites where the Lord Vishnu is considered to have dropped the *amrita* (elixir of immortality) while transporting it in a *kumbha* (pot). There are fairs and a variety of attendant religious activity, devotional singing etc. before the ritual bathing takes place. Often, the pilgrimage to the holy site of the *mela* (festival) is made by foot, with pilgrims traveling thousands of miles over several days. The *mela* is a significant Hindu festival, attended by over 100 million pilgrims and tourists at last count.

¹⁴⁵ Madhuri Shekar, *A Nice Indian Boy*, 8.

“You just hate it that I’m more Indian than you”, he tells Naveen¹⁴⁶, in the scene succeeding the disastrous meeting with Archit and Megha. That scene ended with Keshav abruptly leaving after he had been caught smoking a joint in the bathroom to quell his anxiety about not being accepted by Naveen’s parents, who had not known prior to meeting him that he was white. So comprehensive yet so completely inadequate is Keshav’s knowledge of Indian cultural history that he tries to justify his smoking up by reminding the Indians in the room that the ancient Hindu philosophical tome – the Soma Veda – was written by sages under the influence. In Keshav’s claim to Indianness is a telling bit that demonstrates the ultimate failure of ethnocultural passing. However, Shekar does infuse this ethnocultural passing narrative and the concurrent awkwardness with visibility involved in seeing a white man identifying wholly and unproblematically with an Indian ethnic heritage by showing at the end of the play that Keshav brings his own perspective to the idea of being Indian as a white American. He is an avid cook, like his Indian future father-in-law, but unlike Archit, he does not adhere to stringent regulations about the methods and ingredients of authentic Indian cooking. He brings his own perspective, gathered from years of experimenting in the kitchen, to provide his unique take on Indian food, paying no lip service to authenticity and focusing instead on innovation. “Fusion is where the excitement lies,” Keshav tells Archit. “I mean, Indian food as we know it is only because of the influence of the Mughals,

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 48.

and their Persian spices,”¹⁴⁷. This plea for the acknowledgment of multiple influences on a culture continues the theme of inclusiveness and acceptance mouthed through the figure of the othered white character. It creates the space for the diasporic South Asian American to stake a claim to both South Asia and America without being alienated by the discourse of authenticity.

The diaspora as a space for the co-existence of India and America in transnational fluidity is evident throughout the play. The first-generation immigrant parents converse in English with a smattering of Hindi and Marathi thrown in. The snacks being prepared for the tea are Indian, but in a reversal of conservative gender roles, it is Archit who does the cooking. Megha mentions performing *pujas* online to their temple in Bombay to pray for a child for Arundhathi – reflecting not only on a specific performance of diaspora, but also on how the homeland capitalizes on diasporic nostalgia and the transnational flow of money. India is performed in gestures of blessing – the elaborate prostration before elders to seek their blessing, Megha waving her hand and cracking her knuckles around Arundhathi’s head to ward off evil spirits. It is performed scenographically, with a sculpture of Lord Ganesha presiding over the affairs within the play, as well as blessing the play by being a constant presence on set in a nod to the practice in traditional Indian theatre of having the image of a deity on stage.

Our desire to compartmentalize, to label people according to race, gender, sexuality, nationality etc. is a desire to exert control over our own understanding of

¹⁴⁷ 86.

their difference from or similarity to us. In creating a character that completely messes up our preconceived notions of both whiteness and Indianness, Shekar seems to point to the impossibility of perceiving race and/or ethnicity at face value alone, especially in a multiracial and multiethnic contemporary America. Moreover, she queers the discourse of Hindu mythology in a call for more inclusiveness about different races/ethnicities/sexualities. In the reconciliation scene at the temple, Keshav informs Naveen that Lord Ganesha in his South Indian rendition never got married despite his mother's pleas, telling her he would only get married to a woman as beautiful as she was, and no such woman was to be found. Naveen and Keshav comment on how this might be a good excuse to stave off getting married and that it might have been an excuse they would have used on their own mothers at a different time. The implication is that they might have tried to get out of an arranged heterosexual union in this manner. Taken forward, then, the play devises Ganesha – a half-man, half-elephant bachelor god – as an emblem of queerness, something that contradicts his status as the presiding god of Hindu marriage. The play makes references to other Indian gods who queer the discourse of heteronormativity in Indian culture and thereby contradict the Indian state's criminalization of homosexuality as deviant and alien to the country.



Figure 3. East West Players' *A Nice Indian Boy*. Christian Durso (Keshav) and Andy Gala (Naveen). Photo credit: Michael Lamont.

The *Chicago Tribune* reviewed *A Nice Indian Boy's* 2015 Chicago production by Rasaka Theatre, calling it a “warmhearted if occasionally thin play”. The reviewer, Kerry Reid, writes “The great strength of *A Nice Indian Boy* is in its honest, off-hand dialogue that reveals the multiple fault lines in the relationships, whether tackling the subject of immigrant parents vs. assimilated children in a liberal enclave, or born-to-the-culture Naveen vs. white Keshav.”¹⁴⁸ Directed by Anna C. Bahow with set design by Carolyn Voss, Reid comments on its various renditions of Ganesha. A golden statue, a Cubist-painting and a black and white

¹⁴⁸ Kerry Reid, “Review: *A Nice Indian Boy* by Rasaka Theatre”, *Chicago Tribune*, February 21, 2015, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/reviews/ct-ent-0216-indian-boy-review-20150221-story.html>

sketch of Ganesha all adorn the set at various times, symbolizing the different but equally valid renditions with which to approach worship. The implication about greater tolerance of widely varying approaches to identity formation is conceived well scenographically. The play's premiere production in Los Angeles by the East West Players in 2014 was also well-received, but the *LA Times* echoed the *Tribune's* sentiment that certain plot points and character stories could use further development. The actor playing the mother, Megha (Rachna Khatau) was particularly commended as "scene-stealing", but while the acting was received favorably, the review mentioned the play being performed almost like a sitcom for the stage.¹⁴⁹ Interestingly, a reviewer of the Chicago production commends the cast for delivering "performances mirroring honest responses to honest questions with never a hint of sitcom caricature".¹⁵⁰ While neither review explicitly mentions it, one might wonder if the 'honesty' that the reviewers of the Chicago production commend is an appreciation of the lack of hamming devices such as the pronounced Indian accent or even the exaggerated melodramatic acting that is a not uncommon performance praxis in the Bollywood film. However, the Rasaka production in Chicago seemed to want to create an Indian affect that mimics the India of Keshav's mind – a reviewer describes the design of the lobby for the production as "travelogue-like... gorgeously decorated with ceremonial chairs, lush Indian fabrics,

¹⁴⁹ David C. Nichols, "Review: Rooting for *A Nice Indian Boy* at East West Players", *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 2014, <http://articles.latimes.com/2014/mar/07/entertainment/la-et-cm-review-a-nice-indian-boy-at-east-west-players-20140305>

¹⁵⁰ Mary Shen Barnidge, "Theatre Review: *A Nice Indian Boy*", *Windy City Times*, February 18, 2015, <http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/lgbt/THEATER-REVIEW-A-Nice-Indian-Boy/50564.html>

and souvenirs of the subcontinent.”¹⁵¹ That audience members were also provided with a helpful glossary of Indian terms and a summary of the mythology of Ganesha suggests that the audience demographic was decidedly diverse, but one has to wonder whether the focus was on this being an ethnic play rather than an American play that highlights the diversity of the American stage. As a multi-racially cast production, this is a play that provides an encouraging prediction of the future of play development of new American drama.

3.4 *BRAHMAN/I* AND THE QUEER DISCOURSE OF DIASPORA

Aditi Brennan Kapil is a playwright-actress-director of Bulgarian and Indian descent who grew up in Sweden before moving to the United States and working out of Minneapolis. *Brahman/i: A One-Hijra Standup Comedy Show* (2013) is part of her Displaced Hindu Gods trilogy that includes the plays, *The Chronicles of Kalki* and *Shiv*. The trilogy premiered in repertory at Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis in October 2013 to a plethora of year-end honors. It places the trinity of Hindu gods – Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver) and Shiva (the destroyer) in contemporary American settings as second-generation immigrant characters,

¹⁵¹ Lawrence Bommer, “Chicago Theatre Review: *A Nice Indian Boy* (Rasaka Theatre Company at Victory Gardens Theatre)”, *Stage and Cinema*, February 13, 2015, <http://www.stageandcinema.com/2015/02/13/a-nice-indian-boy-rasaka/>

troubling traditional depictions of these gods, mixing up gender¹⁵² in representing their various avatars and placing them in situations that throw light on different aspects of fitting into American society. *Brahman/i* focuses on the concept of *brahman*, drawn from Hindu philosophy (specifically the ancient philosophical texts – the Upanishads), which assumes that all living things are elements of a single, universal being (*brahman*) and that this state of *brahman* may be achieved through meditation. *Brahman* is the cosmic spirit, it is genderless and omnipotent, and is often described as “*neti neti*” meaning “not this, not this” or that which defies definition. In resisting definition, *brahman* is a state of thusness, broken down into the very essence of a thing, defying all inclinations towards categorization.

The play, *Brahman/i*, is structured as a stand-up comedy show performed by the eponymous character with musical accompaniment from J, a white musician of middling proficiency. Almost immediately, the audience (who are involuntary participants in the play by virtue of being the receptors of Brahman/i’s comedy; s/he addresses them directly) is witness to a curious assimilative gesture unfolding on stage. Here is an intersex person – known as a *hijra* in India – performing a quintessential form of American popular entertainment, the stand-up comedy, while talking about cultural and gender identity as an intersex person of color in the United States. The playwright stipulates that Brahman/i appears as Brahman – adopting a male gender identity - in part 1 of the play, as Brahmani – of female gender identity - in part 2, and as Brahman/i – or asserting a dual gender identity

¹⁵² Most Hindu gods have avatars that cover the entire gender spectrum and sometimes even take on animal forms.

in the final part. While the play looks to the past, delving into the heart of Indian (Hindu) mythology in the figure of Brahman/i the hijra, it is located squarely in present time, and the setting is a comedy club, indicating somewhere in the western world. Brahman/i grew up in Athens, Georgia, so their¹⁵³ experiences are specifically American but set within the context of an immigrant upbringing. It is, then, a transnational play, much like its subject.

Brahman/i's transition occurs on stage. We are told that s/he was born intersex, that is, possessing both male and female genital characteristics. The content of the stand-up routine focuses on Brahman/i's life in the United States and their gradual gender transformation. Brennan Kapil is tapping into her Indian roots by invoking the hijras or intersex/transgendered in India and their contribution to Hindu mythology and present function in Indian society. Hindu mythology abounds in the figure of the intersex god who carries within them both masculine and feminine essence. One of the avatars of Shiva is of the Ardhanarishwara (meaning 'half-woman god'); there are stories in the epics where heroes sometimes disguise themselves as eunuchs for safety. Arguably the most famous story about the hijras is in the *Ramayana*. When Rama sets out on his 14-year exile, a group of loyal subjects follows him into the forest. In order to dissuade them from sharing his suffering, he offers the command that all men and women of

¹⁵³ Since Brahman/i does not identify as either male or female by the play's conclusion, I shall use the gender-neutral non-binary *singular they* pronoun to address them. See R.L.G., "Johnson: Singular They", *Prospero: The Economist Blog*, February 19, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2014/02/pronouns>. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual Resource Center at UC Davis also provides a helpful list: <http://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/pronouns.html>

his kingdom should return to Ayodhya and not mourn his absence. When he returns from exile 14 years later, Rama finds that the hijras – being neither man nor woman – have dutifully waited for him at the spot where he bid everyone to stop following him into exile. Pleased with their devotion, Rama grants them the boon of being able to confer blessings upon people on auspicious occasions. To date, the principal role of hijras – otherwise heavily marginalized in Indian society – is to attend important ceremonies such as marriages and births to bless those present. They are considered to bring good luck on such occasions.

Brahman/i draws upon the concept of *brahman*, of resisting categorization, to resolutely defy boundaries of identity but, having done so, to also own the spotlight and the attention of the audience with great self-assurance and wit. The ultimate outsider, Brahman/i still manages to carve a space for themselves in a mainstream society bent on ascribing categories and forming judgments based on those assigned categories. Brahman/i's queerness becomes a metaphor for transformation and acceptance across institutions that are not just limited to sexuality but which record a resistance to the 'norm' in defining nation, citizenship, gender and sexuality. It is a call for more inclusivity, and an evocation of the ways in which the queer South Asian American imagines new ways of belonging beyond heteronormative nationalist discourses.

The propensity toward framing 'home' in most discourses of diasporic or immigrant belonging is disoriented in the queer world of *Brahman/i*. When Brahman talks of his first attempt at wearing a sari as Brahmani and being bullied

by his cousin Ashok and Ashok's two blond friends (both named Jeremy), he brings into focus the gendered violence of the sphere of home that becomes an added disorienting factor in the quest for a stable identity that subjects of the diaspora must necessarily grapple with. Moreover, home itself is a foreign land for Brahman/i – deliberately and carefully decorated in imitation Victorian and Regency furniture to reflect a nostalgia for British rule, a culture that the American Brahman/i would not be familiar with but one that was probably ingrained in their Indian-immigrant parents as their closest understanding of a Western life. Then again, home is rife with possibility because it is here that Brahman/i's Auntie educates them about their gender choices, and it is here that Brahmani first chooses to perform her femininity by dressing up in a sari.

Brahmani's transition from male to female gender (depicted as both a choice and a physiological transformation – Brahmani begins growing breasts) in the second part of the play precedes her acceptance into the mainstream and the fulfillment of her relationship with J, who appears on stage with her as her musical accompanist. J embraces her without enforcing upon her a choice of gender or sexuality. We see this in the final third of the play when Brahman/i returns to their intersex identity, having chosen first to perform masculinity, then to perform femininity and finally rejecting both as inadequate to their holistic experience as an individual. In the articulation of their state of *brahman* as a fluid sexuality and gender identity, Brahman/i finds the autonomy s/he did not have during the gender-confused years of their adolescence. Enmeshed within the discourse of sexuality and

queerness, the play seems to make a point about the acceptance of otherness as a racial as well as queer prerogative. It is notable that we learn at the very end of the play that J was one of the Jeremies – Ashok’s two blond cohorts who would ridicule Brahman/i’s difference – but his change of heart reflects a desire to erase an intolerant past. On the other hand, Brahman/i’s own desire for acceptance does not trump their defiance of a past rife with discrimination – s/he is openly and harshly vengeful of Jeremy, before finally giving in to his absolute embrace of their choices at the play’s conclusion. Brahman/i’s racialized queer body becomes “a historical archive for both individuals and communities, one that is excavated through the very act of desiring the racial Other”¹⁵⁴, depicted in the conclusion when J and Brahman/i’s relationship is revealed.

The stand-up comedy mode of the play allows Brahman/i the autonomy that they lacked in their life while growing up. By setting the stage so that only Brahman/i gets to speak, the silencing of the queer diasporic subject is subverted. Moreover, stand-up comedy becomes a more accessible approach to a discussion of the complex issues of race, gender and sexuality that the play grapples with, always in the context of diasporic living. The stand-up stage is often used to address and publicly engage with the stereotyping of minorities and to reach a fuller understanding of the margins through the easily palatable medium of humor. Brahman/i uses comedy to comment on the social realities of choices for non-white persons by showcasing false choices and unattainable social equality in the form of,

¹⁵⁴ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 1.

for instance, the quandary of an intersex person being urged by their doctor to pick one from the “several choices” in gender they have. In other ways too, Brahman/i undoes the archetypal discourse of diaspora: as Gayatri Gopinath writes in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* “all too often diasporas are narrativized through the bonds of relationality between men”¹⁵⁵. *Brahman/i* disturbs the heteronormative discourse of diaspora in the principal character’s resolute resistance to be constrained by fixed gender and/or sexual categories. Brahman/i’s gender transition within the play is rooted in trauma. Brahman recalls that when his football friends realized he was growing breasts, they taunted him mercilessly. The stand-up routine becomes Brahman/i’s testimony that offers both therapeutic respite from trauma as well as an intervention on imposed systems of meaning that privilege certain discourses over others (heteronormative over queer, mainstream over diasporic etc.).

The resolution of Brahman/i’s gender-confusion becomes a metaphor for immigrant autonomy when his Auntie tells him, “It’s like India. First you must know who you are. Next you must take ownership of who you are. And finally, you must build nuclear warheads so no one ever thinks they can fuck with you again”¹⁵⁶. It’s a gloss of history, but is not far from the South Asian immigrant’s drive for professional excellence or even the typical immigrant’s careful preservation of his culture in a foreign land. The Auntie talks of how Brahman/i is at a threshold (in Sanskrit, meaning of the word ‘delhi’), existing between genders but, she says, a

¹⁵⁵ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, 5.

¹⁵⁶ Aditi Brennan Kapil, *Brahman/i: A One-Hijra Stand-up Comedy Show* (playwright’s copy, 2014), 48.

threshold can be a wonderful place because a light placed on it illuminates both the inside and the outside. Again, the implicit comparison with the immigrant situation is evident, with immigrants providing the valuable perspective of the outsider to the mainstream but also contributing to altering the mainstream with their presence. Along the way, the figure of Auntie becomes a stand-in for the immigrant Indian sensibility, and Brahman/i presents her in the stand-up with great humor. She is a straight-shooting woman who is not shy about voicing her criticism about certain American ways. Her take on the American schooling system's wariness about ranking students is expressed in a manner almost any South Asian-origin person can identify with:

Everyone is not a winner, this I have to explain to my children every bloody day when I pick them up from these American schools and every bloody one of them is wearing a sticker that says 'I AM #1!'

All 35 of them!

And I am saying "Do you realize that is a mathematical impossibility? You cannot all be #1, someone has to be #2, someone else has to be #3, and so on down to the very last child in this school who will have the distinction of being the Loser at #35! We are Indian! We have an innate grasp of mathematical concepts, and a hard earned colonized nation's understanding of what it means to be a loser, and now that we live in America where the winners are, I will not let preschool take away what his father and I worked so hard for!"¹⁵⁷

It is a poignant point about the double standards in an American system that focuses on equality while also supporting systemic structures that facilitate deep inequality and othering. On a lighter note, this bit echoes the bewilderment of any first-generation (middle-class) Indian immigrant when confronted by the teaching

¹⁵⁷ Aditi Brennan Kapil, *Brahman/i*, 13.

pedagogy employed in American schools, which is vastly different from the epic academic competition and focus on lecture-based learning that continues to be the norm in most Indian schools today.

Gopinath writes that “queer desires, bodies and subjectivities become dense sites of meaning in the production and reproduction of notions of “culture”, “tradition”, and communal belonging both in South Asia and in the diaspora”¹⁵⁸. Brahman/i’s memories oppose the traditional diasporic discourse about lost origins by highlighting the violence and trauma of diaspora – a violence and trauma that occurred upon Brahman’s body, and that the playwright situates in the harsh environment of a typical American school. Brahman evokes history to show how desire is intertwined with the politics of belonging when he jokes about how the sexually explicit stone relics of the Khajuraho temple in India depicted voyeurs looking into scenes of vivid sexual activity, and comments that these sculptures are centuries old, showing how outsiders have always been an integral part of every culture.

Brahman/i’s transgendered identity becomes a metaphor for the diasporic subject – s/he is not either man or woman, but both, only choosing to perform one gender over another at different points in life, much like the diasporic immigrant might choose to emphasize their ethnic origins at one time or their American upbringing on another. The transgendered subject defies the “symbolic coding of the

¹⁵⁸ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 2.

nation” as a woman¹⁵⁹. V. Spike Peterson has written that political identities of nationalism are tied to heterosexism and a heteropatriarchal ordering of society that privileges the masculine while undermining the feminine and transgendered. Brahman/i’s queerness disrupts normative codes of behavior and identity – in a metaphor for how the diasporic citizen also questions who makes up the demographic norm of a nation. Brahman/i stands defiantly outside the social code that determines heterosexism as the key to nationalistic engagement that promotes the preservation of legacy. In part 2 of the play, Brahmani’s transformation into a heterosexual woman appears to cohere with the normalization of heteropatriarchy as the basis of a functioning modern nation-state, but it is quickly overturned and the lasting image is of a gender-neutral performer, expressed in all productions through costume that blends the typically masculine (jeans and leather jacket, biker boots) with the typically feminine (earrings, stole that doubles as a skirt for the Chicago production, nail polish for Quantum’s show). Brennan Kapil makes the case for a smooth assimilation into the mainstream for Brahman/i when she makes the artistic choice to have Jeremy – who had formerly made fun of Brahman-in-transition – fall in love with Brahman/i. There appears to be the acting out of an immigrant fantasy of wholesome assimilation and acceptance into mainstream citizenship in the way that Kapil presents Jeremy’s unwavering reception of Brahman/i’s gender-fluidity from his former position of intolerance of their intersex identity when they were both in school as children. Brahman/i’s control over the

¹⁵⁹ V. Spike Peterson, “The Intended and Unintended Queering of States/Nations”, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 13.1 (2013), 62.

stage, their audience and their lover present an alternative to the queer diasporic space as being defined by alienation and trauma.



Figure 4. Fawzia Mirza in About Face Theatre's *Brahman/i*. Photo credit: Michael Brosilow.

Brahman/i has had several productions across the US, premiering in Minnesota (Mixed Blood Theatre, 2013) and traveling to Chicago (About Face Theatre & Silk Road Rising Theatre co-production, 2014), Boston (Company One Theatre, 2014) and Pittsburgh (Quantum Theatre, 2015), among other venues. In

Pittsburgh, the show became an immersive experience; with the theatre becoming converted into a comedy club and audience members being served Indian beer/masala chai along with Indian snacks. It is interesting that while in Pittsburgh the principal character was played by a South Asian-descent male actor (Sanjiv Jhaveri), in Chicago, the role was donned by another South Asian-origin but this time female actor (Fawzia Mirza). The play becomes an invitation to experiment with casting without restrictions on gender. I draw upon the Chicago and Pittsburgh performances because they have received more press coverage and also because they are two productions that were recorded and clips are available for viewing online. Most of the reviews of both productions were positive, although some critics pointed out that the play tries to cover far too much ground in its 90-minute format. Most reviews speak of the breathless pace of the play and the breadth of topics it explores – from gender and sexuality to bullying in schools and the impact of colonialism. While Sanjiv Jhaveri describes his character as being “mercurial”¹⁶⁰ in the Pittsburgh production, a reviewer for the Chicago production calls Fawzia Mirza’s performance “commanding and at-times fierce”¹⁶¹, pointing to the high-energy histrionics required to do a solo turn on stage depicting various characters over the course of the play. Wendy Arons comments after having seen the Pittsburgh production, that the “at times knee-slappingly hilarious standup

¹⁶⁰ Brandon Gertz, “Becoming Brahmani/i”, *Quantum Theatre*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.quantumtheatre.com/becoming-brahmani/>

¹⁶¹ “Review: *Brahmani/i: A One-Hijra Stand-up Comedy Show*/ About Face Theatre and Silk Road Rising”, *newcitystage.com*, last modified April 6, 2014, <http://www.newcitystage.com/2014/04/06/review-brahmani-a-one-hijra-stand-up-comedy-showabout-face-theatre-and-silk-road-rising/>

routine... invites us to spend time, and empathize deeply, with someone who has been marginalized by otherness.”¹⁶² Arons notes, additionally, that a lot of *Brahman/i*’s humor is self-deprecating and directed at themselves, which has the effect of winning over the audience to their side. Both Mirza and Jhaveri affect the typical Indian accent to get some of their laughs, however, which is disappointing for resorting to stereotypes in a play that resolutely tries to smash them.

Brahman/i offers up the parallel in complexity between the ways that bodies inhabit sexes and genders and how bodies inhabit sociopolitical, racial or ethnic identity in society. The invisibility of transgender/intersex people mirrors the invisibility of the immigrant citizen in a culture that is resistant to difference. Just as the social realm that produces gender oversimplifies it by creating solely a binary possibility, so does it underplay the complexity of racial and ethnic hierarchy and rights to belonging. In *Brahman/i*’s achievement of the state of *brahman* – of a resistance to being categorized as this or that concrete entity – lies the embodiment of the diasporic immigrant subject, an entity that is a constant construct and that transcends fixed categories.

Brahman/i’s initial confusion about their gender identity mirrors the confusion about national belonging that is so characteristic of the brown subject whose identity is located within colonial discourse but always trying to get away from it, in a peculiar contradiction that is so much a part of diasporic living. This is

¹⁶² Wendy Arons, “*Mr Joy* at City Theatre and *Brahman/i* at Quantum Theatre”, *The Pittsburgh Tatler*, February 3, 2015, <https://wendyaronson.wordpress.com/2015/02/03/mr-joy-at-city-theatre-and-brahmani-at-quantum-theatre/>

reflected at the very beginning of the play, when Brahman speaks of his first memory of home as reflecting his mother's obsession with buying rugs with especially British names such as "Windswept Heathcliff Viridian"¹⁶³. "In our house, India had colonized England. In our defense we were taking excellent care of it," says Brahman¹⁶⁴, of his mother's propensity for English-sounding furniture and her habit of covering said furniture with a tarp in order to preserve it.

Brahman takes to stand-up comedy in an attempt to "turn the cruel laughter of my peers into a profitable venture"¹⁶⁵, and he brings to mind the function of comedy as a way to combat social prejudice – black humor, and the rise of Muslim comedians after 9/11 are only two of several examples that come to mind.

The instability of the idea of "motherland" for the second-generation diasporan American, is mimicked in Brahman/i's gender fluidity. The concept of the nation as gendered into 'motherland' for *terroir* with the nation's men as its protectors is an age-old symbolic system of meaning that creates inequities in power that leads to such systemic inequalities as regulating women's bodies and instituting patriarchy as the overarching social order. Inhabiting both genders, Brahman/i creates the possibility for a queer diasporic space that – in their relationship with Jeremy – becomes an indicator that otherness need not threaten the national space.

¹⁶³ Aditi Brennan Kapil, *Brahman/i*, 1.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

3.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has dealt with the variety of ways in which contemporary South Asian American playwrights are contending with issues surrounding gender and sexuality in the American diasporic space. The two plays by Nandita Shenoy – *Lyme Park* and *Marrying Nandini* - talk of intergenerational differences and how they affect the modern Indian American woman’s quest for love, marriage and stable relationships. Both *Marrying Nandini* and *A Nice Indian Boy* dramatize the immigrant Indian parent’s concern with endogamy. While these plays are not restricted to the South Asian American *female* subject, they are a good representation of the treatment of gender (and of women) in the context of diasporic identity formation and a quest for autonomy. How are these women playwrights addressing issues of feminist praxis within the framework of multicultural/global/ethnic minority identity categories? The marriage plays are an important subversion of the cultural stereotype of the subjugated South Asian (-origin) woman who is coerced into an arranged marriage with a man she barely knows.¹⁶⁶ This in turn plays up the stereotype of the chauvinistic South Asian (-origin) male who harbors no concern for the individual autonomy of his marital partner. Bandana Purkayastha writes that “gender inequality and lack of support for independence and freedom, are supposed to be the mark of the South Asian

¹⁶⁶ Even though the character Arundhathi in *A Nice Indian Boy* concedes to an arranged marriage, the play indicates that she did fall in love with her fiancé before agreeing to marry him, and that the issue in her unhappy marriage is the pressure to conform to a western notion of sustained romance in wedlock.

Americans' foreignness."¹⁶⁷ These plays offer a strong challenge to this diminishing stereotype.

Both *Marrying Nandini* and *A Nice Indian Boy* change the narrative of the Indian arranged marriage as an inherently oppressive custom and offer a new rendition that is more compatible with a globalized, liberal subjectivity. The very contradiction they propose – that one might *choose* to have an arranged marriage offers a fresh understanding of the tradition and one that is transnational in its compatibility with how the tradition is changing in India as well. *Marrying Nandini* demonstrates how technology has expanded the choices available to those seeking arranged marriages, in the process melding tradition with modernity in a scope that has global reach. Of course, *Nandini* also demonstrates how female agency continues to be compromised in this typically Indian approach to finding a mate – it is still Nandini's parents who decide whom she chooses. Lest western audiences understand this as the archetypal Indian-origin attitude toward women, *Lyme Park* undoes such misperceptions by depicting a heroine who makes her own choices, imbued though they are with the effects of colonization. *A Nice Indian Boy* offers an alternative to the ritualized and religious space of Hindu Indian marriage as being an exclusive site of heterosexual union. *Nandini* and *Indian Boy* also illuminate a very typically Indian narrative of the dueling conflicts between familial duties and personal desire and *Indian Boy* comes to the satisfactory modern negotiation of the romantic coupling that is ultimately blessed by the family. *Brahman/i* and *Indian*

¹⁶⁷ Bandana Purkayastha, *Negotiating Ethnicity: Second-Generation South Asian Americans Traverse A Transnational World* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 40.

Boy moreover, resituate the discourse of queerness and homosexuality as exclusively Anglo-American – a presumption long propagated by the Hindu nationalist political factions in India that continue to criminalize, even deny, queerness.

The plays turn the racial prejudice typically effected upon *desi* bodies onto the white characters. In *Brahman/i*, the protagonist's first bullies are two blond boys, both named Jeremy – a plot choice that seems to hint at the homogeneity of white prejudice on persons of color but at the same time it is a move that makes white characters the target of cross-race identification bias usually directed at Asians with the most common point of prejudice being to say that all Asians look alike. In *Indian Boy*, the prejudice against the white character is very much a part of the dramatic development of the play. In *Lyme Park*, the only specifically white characters – Thomas and his mother – become figureheads of racial bias, but in their characterization as embodiments of racial privilege, there seems to be a deliberate attempt at creating archetypes that demonstrate the violence of racial prejudice.

Both Kavita in *Lyme Park* and Keshav in *A Nice Indian Boy* question the discourse of an “authentic identity”, thereby challenging assumptions about race, identity and belonging as bound within the perimeter of a nation. In either case, the specifics of their imbibing an English Victorian affect or an Indian one point to the possibilities of transnational mobility that make real the desire for belonging to cultures not original to them. At the same time they demonstrate the contours of

racism, where the racial subject's physical presence visually disrupts the geopolitical spaces occupied by the dominant culture.

Racial seeing becomes a recurring theme in the plays as their principal subjects negotiate identity in an atmosphere of rigid boundaries regarding who may pass as 'native' or who is seen as belonging to the nation-state as an equal citizen. *Brahman/i* demonstrates that passing can move beyond racial terms to address issues of gender and sexuality, and the plays suggest also that the bipolarity of seeing race in America as a Black/White binary elides changing racial demographics critical to the contemporary American nation-state. Finally, these plays promote multiracial casting practices and the writers have been especially cognizant of opportunities on the stage that reflect the demographic of the American people more closely.

4.0 CHAPTER FOUR: *BARRIERS, DISGRACED* AND THE PERILS OF MUSLIM AMERICAN IDENTITY

Is there a greater onus on the Muslim American to perform national belonging post-9/11? In this chapter I focus on two plays that address this question in diverse and complicated ways, both responding to Muslim identity in the South Asian American context. Rehana Mirza's *Barriers* was written in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks and first performed off-Broadway at the Here Arts Center, in 2002. *Disgraced*, by Ayad Akhtar, premiered at the American Theatre Company in Chicago in 2012, and won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2013. While *Barriers* situates its narrative squarely within the events of 9/11, with its main characters directly affected by the terror attack, *Disgraced* places its action about 10 years later, yet the specter of 9/11 hangs heavily upon the play. *Barriers* speaks of a failed narrative of immigrant assimilation. *Disgraced*, in addition, offers the immigrant figure as a resistant subject.

Both plays record instances of direct and metaphorical violence on immigrant life – something that undoes the myth of immigrant success stories as being wholly uncomplicated achievements of the American Dream. The bearded Muslim fanatic and the “oppressed” Muslim woman in a burqa are common images disseminated in

the media, presenting the Muslim subject always as a problem, or a threat to Western ideals of democracy and freedom. In his book, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora*, Junaid Rana writes of the consolidation of a Muslim racial formation post-9/11, where people of Arab and South Asian origin came to be combined into the racial figure of “the Muslim”. In the continuing environment of the War on Terror, the Muslim world is often construed as a single geopolitical mass, eliding differences in culture and regional variances of people of Islamic faith. “This racial scheme mobilizes a logic based on essentializing phenotypic attributes such as skin color, along with notions of religious comportment, dress and cultural practice,” writes Rana.¹⁶⁸

Time and again, cultural markers such as body, behavior and dress have come to be regarded, in the Muslim case, not as symbols of yet more cultural diversity on the American landscape but rather as signs of a more dangerous, threatening backwardness in ideologies and lifestyles. A myth of civilizational difference between Islam and the West has emerged, which sets up the former as primitive and backward and utterly resistant to Western modernity. Often, this myth has been supported by scholarly discussions of a “clash of civilizations” such as Samuel Huntington’s book of the same name. This mythology has been expressed

¹⁶⁸ Junaid Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 94. Although Rana’s main concern in the book is Pakistani migrant workers in the US post 9/11, he uses racialization of the Muslim as a key approach to frame his argument. Rana understands racialization in the Muslim context as a generalization that conceives of a vastly different and widely dispersed global Muslim population as a single entity, a “race” that posits a threat to Euro-American national security. His chapter 1, “Islam and Racism” is particularly compelling for the manner in which it lays out the relationship between religion and race and discusses how anti-Muslim racism came to be constructed historically as a response to the perceived threat to “White Christian” supremacy.

as a fear of Muslims as threats to national security – leading up to such governmental interventions as the War on Terror. Then again, at first glance, the evidence backing up this myth is overwhelming. The Taliban in Afghanistan, the rise of ISIS, Muslims protesting the publishing of cartoons portraying Muhammad, the Salman Rushdie affair – the list is long and keeps increasing. However, it is important to look at this stereotyping of Muslim identity in the context of religious and political history and not solely through the lens of terrorism.

A handful of Muslim American theatre artists are addressing this mythology of fear created around Muslim personhood (and by personhood I mean to draw attention both to Muslim identity and to Muslim bodies). Rohina Malik's critically acclaimed one-woman show, *Unveiled*, and *The Domestic Crusaders* by Wajahat Ali¹⁶⁹ are only two "9/11 plays" among a slew of responses by performers of South Asian descent that tackle the experience of being Muslim at a time when the reality of terrorism has gotten to be equated with a mythology around Islam. Other

¹⁶⁹ Malik's play debuted in 2009 and focuses on the lives of five Muslim women – four in America and one in the UK - who wear the veil in the aftermath of 9/11. The play challenges western perceptions about the *hijab* and discusses the persecution felt by Muslim women in a post-9/11 world. In an interview with *Huffington Post*, Malik was quick to point to the racialization of the Muslim: "I was inspired by the current climate of hate towards Muslims. And not just Muslims, but also towards the Sikh community, the Hindu community, because Islamophobia is so based on ignorance and ignorant assumptions about a group of people that often it is not Muslims who are the only ones to suffer".

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/10/03/rohina-malik-unveiled_n_4039062.html

Wajahat Ali's *The Domestic Crusaders* premiered off-Broadway at the Nuyorican Poets' Café in 2009. It focuses on a day in the life of a Pakistani-American family post-9/11.

Muslim-American artists grapple with questions of belonging, sometimes using comedy as a medium of expression.¹⁷⁰

There are numerous lenses through which to approach the resolute tendency to “other” the Muslim body, going so far as to see it as a threat. One such approach is through science. Behavioural psychologists and cognitive neuroscientists have ventured into the exploration of the role of emotions in ethnic violence.¹⁷¹ The premise of this literature is that there is a cognitive bias that works within members of a group against members that do not belong to the group. Conversely, there is a tendency towards an “in-group” bias favoring members within the same group. How one identifies oneself as belonging to a particular group depends on certain category prototypes that are similar across members of that group.¹⁷² Trust and cooperation is extended to fellow in-group members as a fundamental survival strategy.¹⁷³ In an article that provides a comprehensive survey of the more significant research on cognitive bias among social groups, Hewstone et al. write, “The extension of trust, positive regard, cooperation and empathy to in-group, but not out-group, members is an initial form of discrimination, based solely on in-group

¹⁷⁰ *The Muslims Are Coming!* (2013), a documentary by comedians Negin Farsad and Dean Obeidallah, about Muslim American comedians who combat Islamophobia with comedy routines is a useful archive of this phenomenon.

¹⁷¹ See Roger Dale Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Also, Miles Hewstone, Mark Rubin, and Hazel Willis, “Intergroup Bias,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 53.1 (2002): 575-604.

¹⁷² See K.J. Reynolds, J. C. Turner, and S. A. Haslam. “When are We Better than Them and They Worse than Us? A Closer Look at Social Discrimination in Positive and Negative Domains,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78.1 (2000): 64-80. Categories determining social group formation are varied across race, religion, politics, social class etc.

¹⁷³ See Marilynn B. Brewer, “Ingroup Identification and Intergroup Conflict: When Does Ingroup Love Become Outgroup Hate?” in *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction*, ed. R. Ashmore, L. Jussim, D. Wilder (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

favoritism, which must be distinguished from bias that entails an active component of aggression and out-group derogation.”¹⁷⁴ Emotions aroused in *specific* encounters with members of an out-group can color the in-group’s response to the entire out-group. Threat is one factor that triggers these reactions.¹⁷⁵ Threat has been interpreted in different ways in the different social-psychological approaches to understanding intergroup bias.¹⁷⁶ Often, it presents itself as a potential loss of privileges and in those circumstances, people have been found to protect themselves from the source of the threat by using hostility. If these groups were contextualized in racial terms, then the white race in America may easily be considered the in-group. The eminent sociologist Herbert Blumer posited that the essential condition for the emergence of racial prejudice is the fear that the out-group or minority group is threatening or will threaten the sociopolitical position of the in-group.¹⁷⁷ It does not matter whether the threat is real or perceived. In the current climate of terror then, the racialization of the Muslim construes them as threats to the white Euro-American in-group. I don’t want to delve too deeply into the morass of scientific

¹⁷⁴ Miles Hewstone, Mark Rubin, and Hazel Willis, “Intergroup Bias,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 53.1 (2002): 578.

¹⁷⁵ See *ibid.* for a vast bibliography of behavioral psychology and cognitive neuroscientific research in this field.

¹⁷⁶ Some of these theories are social identity theory, optimal distinctiveness theory, social dominance theory etc. See Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict,” in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. W.G. Austin, S. Worchel (Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979), pp. 33-47. Also Geoffrey J. Leonardelli and Marilyn B. Brewer, 2001 “Minority and Majority Discrimination: When and Why,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 37.4 (2001): 468-485; Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁷⁷ Herbert Blumer, “Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position”, *The Pacific Sociological Review*, 1.1 (1958) quoted in Judith E. Rosenstein, “Individual Threat, Group Threat, and Racial Policy: Exploring the Relationship between Threat and Racial Attitudes.” *Social Science Research* 37.4 (2008): 1132.

research that may potentially be uncovered in the broad area of inter-group prejudice. Suffice to say that the findings I have recorded above are reflections of intergroup bias in its relatively milder form, and that inter-group conflicts of a large-scale religious or ethnic tone are more complex phenomena than the papers I cite here are studying. However, intergroup bias remains a fundamental way into social-psychological analyses of larger scale intergroup conflict, and for that, it must not be ignored.

4.1 *BARRIERS*: IN THE HAUNTED LANDSCAPE OF 9/11

Rehana Mirza was in New York City on the day of the attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre. In an interview, she recalls the moments of panic and xenophobia that set in among New Yorkers soon after. As she rushed through the city trying to get to her sister, she heard passersby screaming, “F---ing foreigners! You’re the cause of all this.”¹⁷⁸ In the days that followed, attacks on Muslims reached a frenzy, and Mirza’s family had to barricade themselves from the mayhem outside. During that time, someone pinned the flier of a missing South Asian woman to her door, with holes burnt into the eyes and mouth with a cigarette butt. Mirza wrote *Barriers* in an attempt to understand that moment when Muslim Americans suddenly became less than American. They were seen rather as

¹⁷⁸ Lavina Melwani, “Rehana Lew Mirza’s *Barriers*, Post 9/11”, *Lassi with Lavina*, September 4, 2011, http://www.lassiwithlavina.com/24_7_talkischeap/rehana-lew-mirzas-barriers-post-911/html

perpetrators of violence against the American people and were victimized on the basis of that xenophobic assumption. Mirza turns the iconography of the burnt poster threateningly pinned to her door into a symbol of the double victimization of Muslims after 9/11. Khalil, the father in *Barriers*, holds out a similar flier with his son, Nabhil's picture on it, with the eyes and mouth burnt out (end of Act I). Nabhil had died in the WTC attacks, and the family had distributed fliers with his photograph in order to gather information about him when he went missing on 9/11. But not even in death would he escape the legacy of terrorism that every Muslim body is mired in by virtue of certain framing stereotypes in the media and politics. Those identifying markers on his face that signified his brownness were enough for him to be construed as a threat.

Barriers was first produced at the Here Arts Center in New York City approximately one year from the events of 9/11. It has since been performed across the US, from San Francisco and Los Angeles to cities across the East Coast. At its center is the interracial Abbas family, based in New Jersey. The mother, Naima, of East Asian origin, changed her name and converted to Islam after marriage to Khalil, a Pakistani immigrant. Their children, Nabhil (the oldest), Sunima (an art student at NYU) and Shehriar (a high school student) were all born and raised in the United States. The play begins four months after 9/11. Sunima finally musters up the courage to come home and tell her parents of her intention to marry Roger, an art professor of Caucasian descent. But when she gets there, she finds that the idea of home as a familiar and safe place has broken down completely in the days

following 9/11. Her younger brother, Shehriar (affectionately called Shehry), has stopped going to school following the violent beating up of a Muslim classmate by fellow students. Her father is hardly ever home, and her mother suspects an affair. This already tense family atmosphere is interspersed with the continuous ringing of the family landline. *Barriers* opens with this sound and the ringing becomes a persistent, invasive soundtrack as the play progresses. There is silence at the other end of the phone, and in later scenes, two social workers inform the family of prank calls being made to harass Muslim residents.

The violence perpetrated upon the South Asian community soon after the events of September 11 finds its way into *Barriers* at the very outset. When the play opens, Naima is responding to one among the endless barrage of prank calls. This image is juxtaposed with Shehriar watching the news where yet another Muslim schoolboy has been assaulted in a targeted attack against Muslims. When Naima comes into the TV room, though, she only wants to watch her Bollywood movie. When Shehriar expresses exasperation at the extravagances and assaults to reason that are sometimes part of the Bollywood movie-watching experience, Naima responds that Shehry is almost obligated to like a Hindi film, since it is “part of [his] heritage”¹⁷⁹. Naima’s consuming obsession with Bollywood is a first-generation immigrant’s typical engagement with the homeland culture. Problematically, though, this is the culture Naima has married into; she appears to have completely

¹⁷⁹ Ironically, Hindi films are cultural products emerging from India, and not Pakistan, which would be where Shehriar’s ‘roots’ are, from his father’s side. This is yet another instance of the conflation of countries on the Indian subcontinent under the political and pedagogically convenient category “South Asian”.

obfuscated her own Chinese heritage. Juxtaposed with this is Shehriar's first generation Muslim American anxiety about the dangers of his racial identity so soon after the attacks. He needs to watch the news because subjects of the racial attacks look like him. The opening sequence in *Barriers* expresses these various immigrant anxieties through a comic exchange between mother and son as they keep grabbing the remote from one another and changing channels. We also come to know, with the background of the Muslim school student's assault, that Shehry has stopped attending high school since the September 11 attacks.

The figure of Naima becomes symbolic of the archetypal diasporic subject – she has crossed the border and journeyed through a marked change in identity, one that involved converting to Islam, and adopting the customs and traditions that come with this new identity. Mirza indicates that Naima is a name given to her post-conversion, but we are never told what her birth name was. Yet, in other ways, Naima is hardly the archetypal diasporan. She shares none of the diasporan's preoccupation with such things as heritage and tradition – she has outright rejected her own Chinese past. Her children mention that she gave up wearing 'western' attire like miniskirts in favor of the traditional Muslim garb of the headscarf. In Naima, we find the embodiment of the limitations of diasporic belonging in its micro-form. Though her marriage into a different culture (and religion) demanded a certain appropriation of the customs of her adoptive culture, the enthusiastic adoption of those cultural traits did not increase her level of belongingness to that culture in the eyes of the cultural originaries within her family. Her relationship

with Khalil is strained, and her children do not share her obsession with Indian cinema (a popular pastime among Pakistanis and in the South Asian global diaspora). Her own assimilation into her family is as incomplete and overwrought as her family's is to post-9/11 American society.

The climate of fear that permeates even the homespace for Muslims after 9/11, and the pointlessness of self-congratulatory efforts made by well-meaning non-Muslims to proclaim their tolerant views comes in the form of Jeff and Chris from the Discrimination Relief Organization. Jeff and Chris are volunteers at the aforementioned non-profit, set up to help Muslims go about their daily lives while protecting them from racially induced attacks. While the intentions of these Good Samaritans who truly existed post-9/11 is laudable, the play raises the question about whether these acts of kindness do not in fact continue to confine Muslims in their own homes and facilitate their victimization. In a climate where to go out is to expose oneself to attack, being given the option to stay safe at home is not freeing.

The play takes us through each of the members of the household and their own unique ways of dealing with the pain of having suddenly lost a loved one, while at the same time having to deal with being clubbed in with the perpetrators of the crime to which they themselves fell victim. Khalil has a hard time letting Sunima leave his sight – he wants to keep what remains of his family close to him and protected. Sunima deals with her grief by pushing it aside – the play indicates she has not been home since 9/11. Shehriar, as mentioned earlier – has quit school and the outside world to avoid inevitable racial stereotyping.

The perception around the Muslim body becomes a point of concern in an exchange between Sunima and Shehry, where the latter draws attention to the Western gaze upon the Muslim and how it is constructed differently based upon gender:

Sunima: Last I saw, I wasn't on International's Most Wanted.
Shehriar: But people who look like you are.
Sunima: Those thugs don't look like me.
Shehriar: But to others we all look the same.
Sunima: I'm missing the required masculine genitalia.
Shehriar: Is that why you've never dated a South Asian?
Sunima: Because I'm missing male genitalia?
Shehriar: Because you think all us thugs look the same?
Sunima: You're the one who -
Shehriar: Because we all look like thugs to you? We're beneath your hoity-toity Western education.¹⁸⁰

It should be said that *Barriers* does feel a bit like a work-in-progress. A lot of the writing is “on the nose” and there are lapses in character development that hinder credibility. There are some ridiculous statements, such as when Sunima says her preference for men who weren’t of South Asian-origin was partly due to an unwillingness to be with someone who “looks and makes me feel as if I’m kissing my brother”¹⁸¹. The above extract, however, makes a pretty direct attack on how racial profiling occurs differently along gender lines – Muslim women constructed as ‘oppressed’ and Muslim men as ‘oppressors’ or “thugs” and such. Bruce Weber of *The New York Times* writes in his review of *Barriers*, “Ms. Mirza still has some distance to travel as a writer of dialogues and as a creator of singular characters....

¹⁸⁰ Rehana Mirza, *Barriers* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2004), 32-33.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 34. Troublingly, it does not appear to Mirza that she is endorsing the common racial slur about all Asians looking the same with this statement.

Barriers overall has the unfortunate tone of an educational film that might be shown at a sensitivity workshop”. The review does not dispute the importance of staging the play, however, writing that, “If the play’s idea is to make a plaintive case on behalf of a community, it is a deserving case, a deserving plaint. You leave the theater sympathetic to fellow Americans who don’t feel much fellowship at the moment.”¹⁸²

It is hard to understand how or why Naima totally sacrifices her East Asian heritage at the altar of the Pakistani Muslim life she has married into but does not fully understand. There is an indication that Naima embodies the hopelessly postcolonial subject – her ties to homeland and mother tongue are scant, and she knows little of her adopted tongue (Urdu) and the attendant customs involved in ‘performing’ Islam. The notion of ‘performing’ religion comes up repeatedly in the play – when Khalil talks about his drinking:

Ten dollars for a shot of tequila. So I can think, maybe I can protect my family by doing what G-d says is *haram*. That if I renounce this religion, he will spare what little I have left. That if I drink this, again and again, they cannot hate us, because the Muslim part of me will have drowned in this sin.¹⁸³

Naima, like many Muslim women, chooses to perform her Islamic identity by donning the hijab when she goes out. But she is heckled and constantly asked to clarify her country of origin. Every time she is asked about her East Asian origin, Naima insists on her allegiance to Pakistan, eliding both her Chinese heritage and

¹⁸² Bruce Weber, “Muslims Feeling Dagger Eyes”, *New York Times*, September 13, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/13/arts/theater/13BARR.html>

¹⁸³ Rehana Mirza, *Barriers*, 68.

her American citizenship. Asian American Studies scholar, Sunaina Maira, calls such acts of defiance “dissenting citizenship: an engagement with the nation-state that is based on a critique of its power and rhetoric”¹⁸⁴. Naima’s hijab and her claim to be from Pakistan, when the play provides no evidence of any actual allegiance on her part to that country, is a moment of courage in a tense climate. Shehriar, the youngest, actively tries not to perform his religion – not even leaving his home for fear that some action of his might give him away. He carries a terrible secret with him – a last voicemail from his dead brother on the morning of the attacks, promising he would come home the following weekend. Shehriar carries his grief in that recording which comes back to haunt him in snippets throughout the play. Limited by his Muslim identity, unable to perform as just another American student, Shehriar inadvertently protests the impositions made upon his personal identity by ironically appropriating the very stereotypes about Muslim terrorists – he procures a weapon. In the penultimate scene of Act 2, he points a gun at Roger, Sunima’s fiancé, in a moment of anger after Roger calls him a no-good school dropout. The white stranger (Shehriar has never met Roger prior to this scene) ascribing identity to him based on surface assumptions becomes an example within the home of the larger prejudices affecting Muslims outside. However, the implication always is that Shehriar got the gun only to use it on himself, and he does in fact turn it on himself when the lights black out in Act 2 Scene 3.

¹⁸⁴ Sunaina Maira, “Citizenship and Dissent: South Asian Muslim Youth in the US after 9/11”, *South Asian Popular Culture* 8.1 (2010): 34-35.

Mirza provides insight into the inner working of the Muslim family as its members try to regain the belongingness lost to the Muslim immigrant/citizen after 9/11. Khalil's drinking is attributed to his treatment at his workplace: "You know, every day I sit at my desk. I smile at everyone who tiptoes around me like I have explosives tied to my back," he says. Of taking to drink, he says, "No one can name a Muslim who is seen only drinking, never praying."¹⁸⁵ There is a moment in the play, where Khalil has laid out his prayer mat and is conducting his prayers when the figure of Nabhil walks in, as memory. It is an interesting moment because father and son strike up a conversation that any American father and son might have had – they discuss women, sexual attraction and Khalil describes how he had first seen Naima at a nightclub. It is a moment that undercuts much of the discourse about Muslims that paints them as religious fanatics who stand against all that is modern and Western.

The question of disgrace comes up in this play as well. At the end of Act I, the circumstances of Nabhil's death are finally revealed to the audience when Khalil brings out the defaced flier with Nabhil's eyes and mouth burnt out in it. His words to Sunima offer a revealing commentary on the Muslim condition after the attacks:

They burn holes. They burn holes in his eyes... His mouth. My son. *Mera beta*. And they do this. I don't know why. Maybe because when they read a Muslim name, they don't want to see kind eyes staring back at them. Maybe because when they see this brownness, they only remember how to hate. You remember, though. You remember, you tell me, Papa, I will put fliers all over the city, with his picture, with the word 'Missing' so they will know to look for him, to bring him home to us... And your friend would even help you. It was Roger, right? That friend? But even as you and your American boyfriend walk

¹⁸⁵ Rehana Mirza, *Barriers*, 68.

by his picture and light your silly candles, when your back is turned they disgrace him, they take your candles and they burn holes into my son... NO eyes. NO mouth. It's just paper, but... They burned holes into him.¹⁸⁶

It is the first time the audience is informed that Nabhil was last seen at the World Trade Center and that, four months later, his body was still missing. This is a family, like many other families of victims to the attack, who did not so much as get to lay their dead in burial. Their grief has no scope for closure. Worse, they have not been allowed to grieve with dignity – perceived as perpetrators and not victims to the outside world. The last line: “They burn holes into him,” indicates the double victimization – angry racists may have burnt holes into Nabhil’s picture, but it is the fanatic Muslim terrorists who have burnt holes into his actual body.

The final scene of the play occurs in a series of flashbacks and flash-forwards that take place simultaneously in different zones of the stage, occupied by clusters of the play’s characters. Khalil and Naima are on their porch downstage, Shehry is standing next to his sister and her fiancé but moves further upstage into his own spot as the scene progresses, Sunima and Roger are in the TV room and Nabhil is getting dressed for work in his own room in New York City on the morning of September 11. The constant ringing of the phone in present time has stopped, we are told power and telephone lines have been cut during the intense thunderstorm outside. The radio blares assurances that blasts heard from an explosion at a Con Edison plant transpired from natural causes and *not* another terrorist attack, indicating the still frayed nerves of a country on edge. Inside the home, it is dark

¹⁸⁶ *Barriers*, 49.

and quiet for a brief moment, as family members remember their dead son or brother, Nabhil. The play ends with Nabhil in his room, in the moment that he sends his last voicemail to Shehry as he gets dressed to go to work at the World Trade Center on September 11. It is the voicemail that has played in fits and starts throughout the play – never proceeding beyond the first friendly, “Hey Shehriar, it’s Nabhil”. Throughout the play, this voicemail has clung to Shehry, an inarticulable moment of rupture that he is unable to either confront or let go of. In the final moment of the play, Shehry flips open his phone in present time as Nabhil, in a different zone on stage and in time, also gets his phone to make his last call. This final remnant of the dead and unburied Nabhil is a generic voicemail to his younger brother, informing him that he would be home for the weekend. The simplicity of the message cuts through the darkness surrounding the bulk of the stage, as the audience is brought into that frozen time of Nabhil’s last connection with his family. Moreover, knowing that his body was never recovered, this last recording of his voice promising presence (in the form of a homecoming) acts as a testimony to the lost voices – and bodies – of all those who died on 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror. Ending the repetitive dissonance brought about by the snippets of the recorded voicemail in prior sections of the play, Mirza seems to imply a laying to rest of the memory of Nabhil by finally completing a reconstruction of the voicemail – a symbolic gesture that will have to do when there is no body to mourn or lay to rest. It also seems like a coming-to-terms with the tragedy that has occurred, without letting the fear of reprisal – expressed as chaotic repetition throughout the

play, whether of the prank calls or of the voicemail – take over the mourning of the dead. However, Nabhil’s inability to “be home” destabilizes the home space for these Muslim Americans. In an atmosphere of terror where they are both victims of the fundamentalist actors of their faith as well as the racial prejudices of their fellow citizens, the safety and belongingness that comes with the notion of home becomes unattainable.

After its first performance at Here Arts Center in New York in 2002, *Barriers* was revived in the same space for the tenth anniversary of the attacks in 2011. Reviews for both off-off-Broadway productions dwell on the “cluttered and too often vague”¹⁸⁷ script but all speak of the importance of staging such a play in the “current anti-Muslim hysteria in the West”¹⁸⁸. Sadly, the reviews are wholly inadequate themselves, barely illuminating anything about the staging of the productions or the performances and/or audience response. Given the location of New York City, and the fact that some of the reviews span from mainstream media outlets such as the *New York Times* to the *Brown Girl Magazine* (an online publication tailored to South Asian women in the diaspora), it can be gauged that the audience for *Barriers* was cosmopolitan, although Mirza was perhaps writing to create greater understanding about the racialization of the Muslim among non-Muslim Americans in her audience.

¹⁸⁷ Jonathan Mandell, “*Barriers*: Off-off-Broadway Review,” *Backstage Magazine*, September 9, 2011, <http://www.backstage.com/review/ny-theater/off-off-broadway/barriers/>

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

4.2 *DISGRACED* AND THE THEATRE OF CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Disgraced, written by Ayad Akhtar, premiered at the American Theatre Company in Chicago in early 2012. It was produced at the Lincoln Centre Theatre in New York in October 2012 where it enjoyed a successful run and favorable reviews. At the time that Ayad Akhtar won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2013, the play was preparing for a run on London's West End. In a sense, *Disgraced* is what Patrice Rankine calls a "theater of civil disobedience" which engages artistically with classical dramatic form (such as is outlined in Aristotle's *Poetics*) but also confronts racial and moral oppression in ways that parallel the process of nonviolent resistance in the political sphere.¹⁸⁹ If civil disobedience is a response to unjust laws and attitudes being imposed upon a specific group of people, the theater of civil disobedience is an embodied engagement that opens up the audience to existent (if sometimes latent) prejudices. *Disgraced* does not offer ready resolutions, but does open the playing field to the existence of multiple ways in which to perform Muslimness, and to be identified as Muslim.

Disgraced is set in the Upper East Side apartment shared by corporate lawyer Amir Kapoor and his artist wife, Emily. Amir was born to parents who were themselves born in undivided India before Partition, but who grew up in the region that later became Pakistan. Raised as a Muslim, he rejects his religion in favor of

¹⁸⁹ See Patrice Rankine, "Introduction: Civil Disobedience as Resistance to Tradition and Performance" in his book *Aristotle and Black Drama: A Theater of Civil Disobedience* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2013), 1-24.

what he sees as “intelligence”¹⁹⁰ – he recalls an incident in his youth when his mother threatened to “break [his] bones”¹⁹¹ after she found him exchanging love notes with a Jewish classmate named Rivka. “You will end up with a Jew over my dead body”, she asserted and spat on his face so he would never forget. Amir recalls with disgust that the next day *he* spat on Rivka’s face because she was Jewish, although at the time he didn’t quite know what these religious differences entailed. The religious hatred thrust upon him by his mother – one that he barely understood as a young boy – leads him to reject Islam as an adult. “I think it’s ... a backward way of thinking. And being,” he says¹⁹². Emily, in contrast, embraces Islam, soaking in its cultural and artistic forms. Her artwork is influenced by the Islamic tiling tradition and she questions the neglect of Islamic art by a Western canon that has submerged itself so completely in the history and forms of Greek and Roman art. Two events during the course of the play lead Amir to confront his Muslim heritage, and bring to the fore the crises in identity that being Muslim in America entails in a post-9/11 social climate. When the Imam of a prominent area mosque is arrested on charges of collecting money to support terrorist groups, Amir’s nephew Hussein urges Amir to step in and help. Against his will, and under pressure from Emily to stand up for justice, Amir visits the Imam and is misrepresented in the *New York Times* as being the Imam’s lawyer. Soon after, his position at the law firm where he is due for partnership becomes jeopardized, with a junior colleague coming in to

¹⁹⁰ Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced: A Play* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013), 17.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹² 52.

question him about his past. It is revealed that Amir had changed his surname¹⁹³ and lied that his parents were from India, when, in fact, they grew up in Pakistan. Very quickly, Amir's credibility comes into question at the workplace, and the play segues into the big second half.

A dinner party thrown by Amir and Emily for their friends Jory and Isaac becomes the climactic point of conflict in the play. Jory, an African-American, and Amir are colleagues, and her (Jewish) husband, Isaac, is a curator at the Whitney Museum who is helping Emily exhibit her artwork. The topic of Islam comes up during dinner, and Amir becomes increasingly incensed at Isaac's defense of Islam based on certain artists and poets who have been adopted by the Western canon as representative of some abstract "spiritual tradition", as Isaac puts it. "Let me guess. You're reading Rumi," Amir wryly comments¹⁹⁴. For Amir, only the Quran matters in Islam. And the Quran is a 1500-year old book with precepts written for "desert people" that reads "like one very long hate mail letter to humanity", according to Amir¹⁹⁵. It's a startling rejection of Islam that brings up some of the most common myths about the religion that circulate in the media today. Except, this time, it comes from the mouth of an 'insider'. Mahmood Mamdani observed that after 9/11, "President Bush moved to distinguish between "good Muslims" and "bad Muslims"... "[B]ad Muslims" were clearly responsible for terrorism. At the same time, the president seemed to assure Americans that "good Muslims"... would

¹⁹³ The Kapoor surname is generally ascribed to persons of Hindu or Sikh ancestry.

¹⁹⁴ Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced*, 52.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

undoubtedly support “us” in a war against “them”... But... unless proved to be good, every Muslim was presumed to be “bad”¹⁹⁶. Presumably, based on Mamdani’s analysis of the dichotomous modes of expressing national allegiance for Muslims, Amir belongs to the category of the “good Muslim” who outright rejects his religion, seeing it as boorish and backward. Yet, in the eyes of his employers, the act of hiding his Muslim heritage undermines Amir’s “good Muslim” loyalties to the nation-state. The principal partner at the law firm, a man who had been a father figure to Amir, rejects his partnership plea, calling him “duplicitous”¹⁹⁷ for not disclosing his Pakistani roots. The *Times*’ quote, linking him to an arrested Imam seals the deal, and Jory gets the partnership at the firm. But Akhtar’s characterization of his protagonist troubles the “good Muslim / bad Muslim” binary at the individual level when Amir’s response to the revelation about being passed on for the partnership along with the other revelation about Emily’s affair with Isaac brings to the fore suppressed instincts from what he had earlier termed the “Muslim psyche”. Recalling the incident with the Jewish girl Rivka in his childhood, Amir spits in Isaac’s face, and soon after hits Emily, which harks back to a previous discussion about how the Quran mandates that disobedient wives be punished. When his practice of “good citizenship” is shattered for one tiny misrepresentation in his personal records, it would seem that Amir reverts to being the archetypal “bad Muslim” he has denounced. This is the enraged Muslim with the beard and

¹⁹⁶ Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, The Cold War and the Roots of Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 15.

¹⁹⁷ Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced*, 73.

kufi hat that makes up the archetype of “Muslim” in most of the mainstream media today. The most provocative lines in the play are uttered by Amir in an exchange at the dinner party about 9/11, when he admits to feeling pride about the attacks. Again, the “good Muslim” / “bad Muslim” dichotomy is proved to be untenable. Here is a Muslim who subscribes to Western notions about Islam’s backwardness but who tacitly refuses the propagation of an “us vs. them” political agenda between the West and the Muslim world. If anything, he celebrates the underdog, even when their methods are as horrific as 9/11.

Isaac: Did you feel pride on September 11th?

Amir (*with hesitation*): If I’m honest, yes. I was horrified by it, okay?
Absolutely horrified.

Emily: You don’t really mean that, Amir.

Jory: Pride about what? About the towers coming down? About people getting killed?

Amir: That we were finally winning.

Jory: We?

Amir: Yeah.... I guess I forgot... which we I was.

Jory: You’re an American...”¹⁹⁸

This brief, incensed exchange encapsulates the crisis of identity faced by the Muslim subject in America today. The Muslim body is required to demonstrate national belonging over and above such identity-forming factors as practicing one’s faith. Moreover, Amir’s response points to the conflation of Islam with a political stance against modernity that is so pervasive in writings about “Islamic fundamentalism”. It is crucial to bear in mind that identities change in response to politics. It is historically inaccurate to equate every shade of Islam with political Islam, or with religious fundamentalism on a misplaced assumption that the

¹⁹⁸ 63-64.

practice of Islam is unchanging across the world and that Muslims share some sort of transnational solidarity with each other. Amir seems to make the statement that when one's practice of one's religion is conflated with a movement against freedom and national belonging, it is merely human to rise to the defense of the right to practice that faith. It is ironic that Jory reminds Amir that he is American, since it is precisely Amir's perception as being un-American, and a Pakistani to boot that wins her the partnership that was to go to him.

In her review of the 2014 Broadway production of the play at Lyceum Theatre, Alexis Soloski writes for *The Guardian*: "Does Ayad Akhtar sleep with a copy of Aristotle's *Poetics* clutched tight to his chest?"¹⁹⁹ Amir cuts the figure of the classical tragic hero in his barely concealed self-loathing under his expensive shirts and upper-class Western lifestyle aspirations. His outburst in the above exchange betrays the long-suffering ethnoracism that has brought him to this point. In the fashion of a modern-day Greek tragedy, Amir's past has not left him behind, despite his best intentions.

Amir's vocal defiance is so startlingly unexpected; it comes as a deliberate act of civil disobedience in response to perceived injustice. Amir has previously mentioned how he himself approaches TSA agents at the airport for a full-body pat-down. It is a direct challenge to such TSA tactics as "behavior detection", which uses potential flyers' body language and engages them in conversation to determine

¹⁹⁹ Alexis Soloski, "Disgraced review: A Stirring Greek Tragedy That'll Put You Off Dinner Parties for Life", *The Guardian*, October 24, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/oct/24/disgraced-review-broadway-greek-tragedy> (Accessed February 8, 2015)

whether they might be threats²⁰⁰. Often, these tactics – which involve behavior detection officers observing passengers for “alarming” behavior – descend into exercises in racial profiling. The implication seems to be that the more invisible and unremarkable an individual can make himself in the security check line, the more exempt he will be from being singled out for additional security checks. Amir’s civil disobedience is performed in the deliberate act of drawing attention to himself by going up to the officers and choosing to expose himself to more rigorous security procedures. His action preempts the scrutiny that men who look like him are inevitably subjected to at the airport. The “pride” seems to stem from this place of undeserved scrutiny that mirrors the imperialist scrutiny of Western powers over the less-developed world. Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin make a strong point in their book, *Framing Muslims*, about how all nation-states that come into being as liberal democracies undergo a process of historical violence, be it in the form of civil war, acts of secession or ethnic conflict. Then again, it is the nation-state that determines the difference between “legitimate”, state-sanctioned violence and illegitimate violence. “The ability to delineate the difference between so-called legitimate violence carried out by the state and acts of terror means that the official discourses always depict the violence of outside agencies or the dispossessed as irrational and without context. This then excuses the wholly reactive violence of the state in pursuing and suppressing such violence. In this view, the liberal democratic

²⁰⁰ Joe Sharkey, “T.S.A. Experiments with Behavior Screening,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/08/business/tsa-experiments-with-behavior-screening.html?_r=0 (accessed February 8, 2015).

state is always vulnerable to attack from less scrupulous groups from “outside”²⁰¹. From this perspective, the attacks, vile in every sense, were an attack on empire and imperialist structures, with consequences suffered globally.

If Amir’s crisis of identity manifests itself in violence directed at Isaac and Emily, Akhtar takes care that this is not the only face of Islam we see. There is also Amir’s nephew, Hussein, who was born in Pakistan but grew up in the US. We see him as a typical American youth with his ironic t-shirt and skinny jeans and sneakers. Hussein appears to be a practicing Muslim who goes to mosque and is involved in the life of the *desi* Muslim community. His crisis of identity manifests itself in a manner similar to Amir’s in that when we see him at the beginning of the play, he is experimenting with a new, ‘American’ name – he wants to be known as Abe Jensen, a name so gratingly ‘American’ it doesn’t escape the ridicule of his uncle (and the audience). “You know how much easier things are for me since I changed my name?” he reasons²⁰². Naming becomes an important recurring theme in the play. If the practice of naming is a signifier of associations to a certain local and/or ethnic identity, then the choice to change one’s name signals a desire to shed one sort of identity in favor of another, which may or may not be fuelled by a need for assimilation. Amir has changed his surname from the clearly Muslim Abdullah to Kapoor, a common Punjabi surname associated with a person of Indian origin. He has gone so far as to change his social security in order to obliterate an upbringing

²⁰¹ Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation After 9/11* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 35.

²⁰² Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced*, 13.

by Pakistani parents who were evidently practicing Muslims. Yet, at the end of the play, it is the young Abe who realizes that one cannot shed one's heritage, one's essential ethnic identity in the quest for assimilation. He goes back to his given Muslim name, Hussein.

Akhtar appears also to be making an important point about the movement to “rescue” Islam both from its extreme mainstream representations as well as from its radical face by well-meaning, but non-regional scholars and activists. Both Emily and Isaac belong to the group of Western liberal elite who rush to a defense of Islam with the verve of those not quite educated about the nature of Islam in practice and politics. In doing so, they fall into the very trap of reductive Orientalism that they are trying to undermine. When Isaac makes the oft-repeated liberal intellectual point about the problem being Islamo-fascism and not Islam, and also the other common defense in favor of Islam about how there are many women who *choose* to wear the veil, Amir is quick to point out that reading some literature by Western scholars does not make one an insider into the nature of Islam. An incident with a waiter behaving rudely with Amir inspires Emily to express her outrage through art. She chooses Velázquez's *Portrait of Juan de Pareja* as her starting point, and draws a portrait of Amir, keeping the same palette and composition as Velázquez's original. For Emily, the painting was prompted by the way the waiter had “looked” at Amir, “Not seeing you. Not seeing who you really are”²⁰³. Through the portrait she wishes to bring out Amir's commanding presence, much as Velázquez had

²⁰³ Ibid., 7.

painted his assistant with the same bold stance as some of his paintings of royalty. Problematically, though, Juan de Pareja was Velázquez's (freed) slave, as Amir repeatedly points out. *Disgraced* opens with this little sequence, immediately drawing focus on the politics of perception, or, in another sense, of the Western gaze. Emily, who is a white, Western subject in an advanced liberal democracy, has the privilege to both assign labels such as "slave" but also to elide these labels, as she chooses to do in this instant, calling Juan de Pareja Velázquez's "assistant". Amir's South Asian Americanness, on the other hand, lacks the undiluted Caucasian-ness that has for so long come to be associated with the notion of an "American"/ "Western" identity. He can therefore neither assign labels like slave, nor enjoy the right to protest those assigned to him. Ultimately, he is still the Moor being brought to prominence by a white overlord. Likewise, when labels such as "terrorist" are assigned to peoples or organizations, it is important to understand who is empowered to do that labeling.

Disgraced also draws attention to the representation of the South Asian body on stage. At a time when 'multicultural' and 'colorblind' casting practices are bringing more actors of color to the theatrical stage, *Disgraced* troubles the complacency that may arise from having made (what is often considered to be) the politically progressive choice to showcase actors of color on the mainstream stage. Brown actors, though increasingly more visible in mainstream American entertainment, are cast most prominently in either of two 'brown stereotypes' – the terrorist (e.g. a variety of national security threats in shows like *24*) or the over-

achieving geeky doctor or engineer (e.g. the astrophysicist character ‘Rajesh Koothrapali’ in *Big Bang Theory*). The practice of stereotyping itself is an exercise of power – putting the other, the unfamiliar, into a boxed set of characteristic traits that show them as inferior has been a common imperialistic practice throughout colonial history. Both the off-Broadway and Broadway productions of *Disgraced* featured actors of South Asian-origin in the main role. Aasif Mandvi played Amir in the Lincoln Centre Theatre production in 2012. Hari Dhillon took over for the Broadway and West End productions.



Figure 5. Thumbnail of Aasif Mandvi as Amir Kapoor in the Lincoln Center production of *Disgraced*, at the Claire Tow Theatre, New York. Sara Krulwich for The New York Times, Dec 17, 2012. For full image, please visit <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/18/theater/aasif-mandvi-beyond-the-daily-show.html>

When the lights come on in the first scene of *Disgraced*, the audience sees a half-dressed brown man (Amir) being painted by a blonde, white woman (Emily, played by Heidi Armbruster in the Lincoln Centre production and Gretchen Moll in the Broadway staging). Amir is in “an Italian suit jacket, a crisp collared shirt, but only boxers underneath”²⁰⁴ and he is the model for Emily’s reworking of Velázquez’s *Portrait of Juan de Pareja*. I wish to dwell briefly on the context of the original artwork for perspective on how it becomes significant in *Disgraced*. Diego Velázquez painted *Portrait of Juan de Pareja* in Rome in 1650, when the Spanish artist was touring Italy to collect artwork for the Spanish royal family. Juan de Pareja was Velázquez’s slave and assistant at the artist’s studio. Akhtar’s choice of this particular painting is remarkable for the considerations of racial identity it throws up. Juan de Pareja became a free man in 1654, but was a slave at the time Velázquez was painting him.

²⁰⁴ 6.

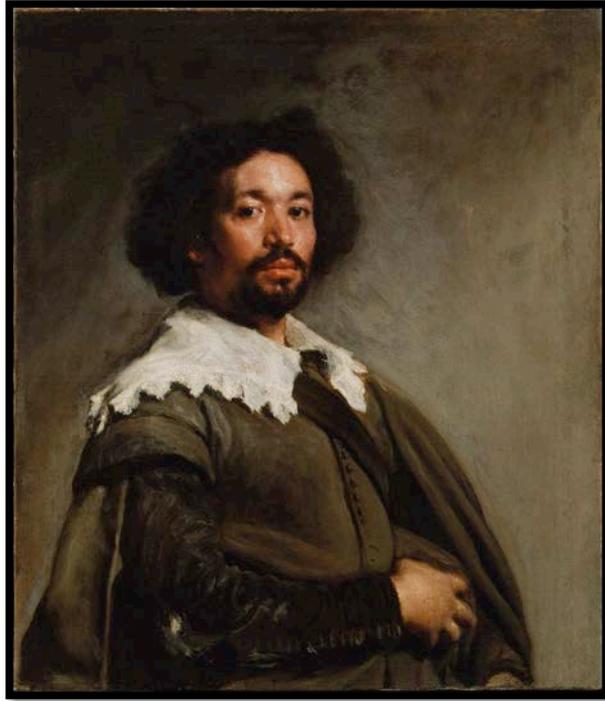


Figure 6. *Portrait of Juan de Pareja* by Diego Velázquez, 1650. Oil on canvas. Stored at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Digital image sourced from Artstor.

The eighteenth century art critic, Antonio Palomino, writes in his biography of Velázquez that the painting, which was exhibited at the Pantheon in Rome in 1650, was “generally applauded by all the painters from different countries, who said that the other pictures in the show were art but this alone was ‘truth’”²⁰⁵. Indeed, Velázquez appears to have captured a spirit of quiet defiance wrought in the face and demeanor of his subject. This is all the more credible when we consider that Juan de Pareja had picked up skills of painting from his master and was applying himself toward creations of his own. In *Juan de Pareja*, the slave returns his master’s gaze, almost challenging the helplessness of his position as servant and

²⁰⁵ Quoted in Terence Clarke, “The Soul of Juan de Pareja”, *Huffington Post*, July 5, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/terence-clarke/juan-de-pareja-velazquez_b_3260421.html (Accessed February 8, 2015).

subject. There is a quiet resistance to the Eurocentric fetishization of racial others and/or inferiors in Juan's steady glance and his head held high. It is perhaps noteworthy that Velázquez *allowed* Juan this power in capturing it on canvas, though it has historically not been the prerogative of the powerful in colonial and racial discourse to represent minorities in such a light.

Now, consider the ambience in which *Disgraced* opens. This is an upscale apartment on New York's Upper East Side, with high ceilings, a terrace and all the works that signify upper-class living. We are seeing a colored man dressed sharply from the torso up, and barely from the waist down. Being painted by his white spouse, lounged on their plush couch. There are several things to consider here. First, that the presence of a brown man on the American main stage is an uncommon one. Second, that the body, as a site of knowledge, is inscribed with history and memory. Social constructs of meaning assigned to the body, taken to the extreme, account for instances of racism and profiling. Emily's re-presenting of Velázquez's original painting of his slave with her South Asian-origin husband as subject was prompted by an instance of racist behavior by a waiter at a restaurant the couple was at before the play begins. Ostensibly, her painting is an attempt to give back to Amir the power taken away from him by the waiter's racist behavior. What Emily sees as racism, though, Amir prefers to sanitize as "plain, old-fashioned prejudice". Yet, he is more sensitive to Emily's re-drawing of a *slave* – as he repeatedly points out – in his fashion. Having overcome the class bias that comes with racism, Amir is resistant to fall back into the historically subjugated category

of 'slave'. As a member of the upper class with more purchasing power than the waiter, he could easily tell the latter off for his rude behavior. But there is a permanence to being rendered as a subjugated subject in art, even though its intentions may be to restore power that had been taken away in a prior racially charged situation. Moreover, the racial "passing" into American culture, performed in Amir's American accent and Caucasian wife, is muddled when we fall straight into Orientalist drawings of the vulnerable, exposed other as soon as the play opens. Emily points Amir to the nuances and complexities of Velázquez's painting, but all Amir sees is that he's being rendered on canvas as "a slave". One draws associations with the kinds of minority roles typically assigned to actors of color, especially to Asian American actors on the American stage. The very fact that seeing an actor of South Asian origin (and brown skin) on the mainstream American stage is an anomaly points to the different socio-political spaces occupied by (South) Asian Americans from their white or black counterparts. Ayad Akhtar draws greater attention to the vulnerability of actors of color who find themselves cast in limited ways by immediately showing the fetishization of this brown man the moment the play opens. It is Emily who turns her Western gaze on Amir, not giving him a chance to even fully clothe himself in her enthusiasm to render him into art.

Juliet Hooker, in *Race and the Politics of Solidarity*, writes about the embodied and visual character of race, which "operate[s] through visual markers on

the body”.²⁰⁶ As a “visible identity”, race precludes that human beings have developed certain racialized modes of seeing and ascribing meaning. Again, the embodied and visual register of race also marks out boundaries of who belong as equals and who are other. As Richard Rorty has said, “our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as ‘one of us’”²⁰⁷. In a racialized world, then, it is difficult to “see” the other as “one of us”. Hooker contends that the less noticed aspect of racial segregation is that the spatial distance also leads to a sort of moral distance. She suggests that the ways of racial seeing need to be altered in order to see the other as they see *themselves*, and not just as *other*. However, she contends that the social fact of race shapes the practice of solidarity²⁰⁸ and poses a challenge to the achievement of racial justice. The practice of solidarity is crucially dependent on who we see as our equals and whose pain or suffering does not seem to affect us. Racial seeing can be impenetrable to empathy, and does not permeate color lines to envision any sort of shared political ideals or obligations. Emily points to this inability to “see” racial difference without passing moral judgment when she recalls the incident at the restaurant with the waiter:

²⁰⁶ Juliet Hooker, *Race and the Politics of Solidarity* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), page 5, quoting Linda Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender and the Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 6.

²⁰⁷ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 191.

²⁰⁸ According to Hooker: “Political solidarity refers to reciprocal relations of trust and obligation established between members of a political community that are necessary in order for long-term egalitarian political projects to flourish.” (4) The achievement of this solidarity in the face of difference is a recurring concern in global democratic polities today. It’s a chicken-and-egg problem, really – racial injustice and inequality is an obstacle to the development of political solidarity, which in turn contributes to the absence of racial justice.

A man, a waiter, looking at you. Not seeing you. Not seeing who you really are. Not until you started to deal with him. And the deftness with which you did that. You made him see that gap. Between what he was assuming about you, and what you really are.²⁰⁹

Ironically, Emily appears to be muddling the issue of racism with classism. While Amir was being discriminated against for the color of his skin, Emily seems to think the appropriate put-down for racist behavior is elitist behavior. That it does not resolve either forms of discrimination does not strike her, perhaps because she is the recipient of privilege in both these discriminatory social structures. Her portraiture of Amir makes even more sense in this light – Emily is one of those liberals who, arguably, takes colorblindness to a point where race becomes devalued. Inadvertently, Amir as the subject of her *Study After Velázquez's Moor*, in his stupendously expensive bespoke Charvet shirt and suit, continues to question his place at the table.

If race is a visible marker on the body, then clothing may be seen as a camouflage for such embodied difference. We see attire being used as a mode of racial passing when Amir's nephew Hussein (aka the hyper-American Abe Jensen) is introduced to the play. He enters dressed in “a hoodie, skinny jeans, and high tops” and is “as American as American gets”²¹⁰. But *Disgraced* gradually shows the failure of such staged efforts at racial passing. By the end of the play Abe has changed his name back to Hussein, and though he continues to dress ‘American’, he

²⁰⁹ Ayad Akhtar, *Disgraced*, 7.

²¹⁰ *Disgraced*, 12.

now wears a *kufi* hat common to followers of Islam, as an acknowledgment of his faith and perhaps his roots.

Every attempt at racial passing is futile for both Amir and Hussein. To even call their attempt at trying to belong in mainstream American society as racial passing is problematic, I acknowledge, but I wish to allude again to the racialization of the figure of the Muslim in the current sociopolitical climate. When I designate Amir and Hussein's actions as racial passing, I wish to take the vocabulary of racialization and use it to show them as trying to pass for the "not-Muslim" – a figure arguably just as fictive as the homogenized, racialized figure of the Muslim. Amir vocally opposes Islam at various points in the play, but still shows glimpses that the historic persecution of Muslims across the world affects him. Why did Amir, a highly educated man raised in a Western society, a person perfectly capable of identifying regressive attitudes and actions promoted by religion, devolve into the very person he had thus far purported to hate and reject? The answer may lie in the politics of racial passing and, what Elaine K. Ginsberg calls the "fictions of identity" created by the act of passing. Time and again, literatures of passing have shown how it is seen as a cultural transgression and therefore must inevitably fail. Ginsberg identifies that the term 'passing', when used in the context of race, implies that "an individual crossed or passed through a racial line or boundary – indeed *trespassed* – to assume a new identity, escaping the subordination and oppression

accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other”²¹¹. Ginsberg, however, uses this definition in trying to explain the passing of interracial blacks who “pass” as white in a very embodied way. The assumption was, historically, that for passing to be successful, an element of duplicity would have to be involved. Amir’s erasure of his former identity as a first generation Muslim American child of Pakistani parents is a deliberate act of protest against imposed racial categories and subjugating mechanisms. He takes on a Hindu name, but has no investment in Hinduism beyond the relative safety it provides from prejudiced racial meaning-making. In Amir’s case, though, the duplicity involved in hiding his Muslim origins is hardly enough to camouflage his very obvious racial otherness.

The play draws stark attention to the fact that racism in America is not a white vs. black binary and operates in more complex ways when Amir, upon hearing that he has been passed up for the partnership at the law firm in favor of his colleague Jory, who is black, exclaims:

You have any idea how much of myself I’ve poured into that place? That closet at the end of the hall? Where they keep the cleaning supplies? That was my first office! Yours had a view of the fucking park!.... I *still* leave the office after you do! You think you’re the nigger here? I’m the nigger!! Me!!²¹²

Again and again the conflict of ways of seeing and being seen comes up in the play. When Isaac remarks obliquely that Emily’s Islamic-art-inspired paintings might constitute orientalism, Emily responds, nobly but with naiveté:

²¹¹ Elaine K. Ginsberg, *Passing and The Fictions of Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 3.

²¹² *Disgraced*, 72.

We've all gotten way too wrapped up in the politics. The way we talk about things. We've forgotten to look at things for what they are. ... We draw on the Greeks, on the Romans... - we should be drawing on the Islamic tradition as well. Islam is part of who we are."²¹³

The dinner party becomes a mockery of the liberal Western elite. Repeatedly, the two people most interested in showcasing the beautiful and “sacred” in Islam – Emily and Isaac – turn out to be the ones most oblivious to how they utilize their privilege and suppress existent racism. Throughout the dinner party Amir has been provocative about his views on Islam, and when he finds out Isaac and Emily are having an affair, he spits on Isaac. Isaac, in a complete turnaround from his prior open-mindedness, equates Amir’s disgusting expression of personal rage with his Islamic faith. “There’s a reason they call you people animals”, he says²¹⁴, using the same racial stereotypes about Islam that he had thus far been protesting.

In the final scene, it is implied that Emily no longer looks to Islamic art for inspiration. She calls her previous work naive, and an attempt to understand Amir’s background through forms acceptable to her. The dark side of this acceptability is, of course, the fact that Amir talks about Islam condoning domestic abuse and proceeds to do the same himself. Through Amir’s tragic flaw, the play confronts the contradictions in every religion, and how they affect the individual in the formation of his identity. That Amir had thus far eschewed his religion – seeing only its bad – and tried his best to assimilate into an amorphous ‘American’ way of life becomes especially troubling when his utter failure to give up that religion

²¹³ Ibid., 31.

²¹⁴ 73.

expresses itself in violence, in what the stage directions describe as “the discharge of a lifetime of discreetly building resentment”²¹⁵.

In *Disgraced*, the home becomes the site of memory. When the concluding scene in the play opens, the audience is still reeling from the tempestuous dinner party and its consequent revelations about Emily and Isaac’s affair that preceded Amir’s brutally attacking Emily. When the lights come up, the previously immaculate apartment is laid bare, a mess of cluttered boxes and emptiness. I want to go to Una Chaudhuri’s coinage, “geopathology”, that identifies “the problem of place – and place *as problem* – [that] informs realist drama deeply, appearing as a series of ruptures and displacement in various orders of location”²¹⁶. In this geopathic paradigm, identity negotiates this problem of place, and, as Chaudhuri evaluates, overcomes this problem in certain heroic moments, through an embrace of exile. At the beginning of Scene 4, Amir has ruined his marriage through an act of violence, he has ruined his career in an effort to shield it from racial profiling, and finally, he has ruined any prospect of home – he does not belong anywhere now. It only remains that he pack up his bags and leave the elegant Upper East Side flat that had thus far been a symbol of his success as a racial “model minority”. The barrenness of the flat offers an emblem of the placelessness of this new Amir, a man who has come to terms with his darkest, most flawed side, but also understood better that in this present moment in his life, there is no place called home.

²¹⁵ 75.

²¹⁶ Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 55.

Interestingly, the play begins with Amir being rendered into art (exotic, Orientalizing art) by his white American wife, and ends with him contemplating this same art, this Western way of looking at him that has brought him to the point of placelessness. The play in no way tries to make a hero out of Amir – he is deeply fallible, almost animal in some of his instincts – he spits at his guest, physically assaults the woman he loves very much. It is as though the playwright throws his protagonist into the most archetypal Islamophobic tropes that abound today. There is the obvious political valence of a colored man unleashing his pent-up anger and resentment upon the figure of the white woman, and there is even more obviously the critique that it is exactly this trope that has appeared in numerous works of art and literature as part of the colonizing mission. Akhtar leaves his audience to draw their own conclusions about Amir – it is almost as if the more important point is to paint Amir as human and fallible with the largest, most dramatic strokes of the brush. In Amir, we find the classical, Aristotelian tragic hero who makes an error of judgment that changes his fate. Aristotelian mimesis shows a relationship of representation between the work of art and its viewers, and there is the sense that Amir’s moral environment is shared by that of the audience – cosmopolitan attendees in multicultural cities like New York and London. But Amir’s “civil disobedience” expresses itself in the deeply provocative opinions he airs to this cosmopolis of multiracial attendees.²¹⁷ His illogic – that Islam is a religion of boors – arguably mirrors the illogic of many in the audience.

²¹⁷ Although the reviews don’t speak to the demographic make-up of the audience in either the off-

Although not much information is available about the audience demographic in these venues of production, it is safe to assume that the audience at the Broadway and West End shows comprised visitors from all over the world. Broadway League's survey of audiences for the 2012-2013 season notes that tourists, 21% of whom were from outside the US, bought 70% of the 8.52 million tickets sold. The theatregoers were overwhelmingly Caucasian (nearly 80%) and on average were in their forties and relatively more affluent compared to the general United States population. *Disgraced* is a little different though, in that the rarity of finding a South Asian American voice on the mainstream American stage brought in more *desi* theatregoers than is normally seen on Broadway. I have noticed this of all New York productions I attended of the three plays Akhtar has written so far.

Akhtar has criticized the reactions of the Muslim community to his novels and plays. In an interview with *The Economist*, Akhtar speaks to how "the reaction in the Muslim community [to his works] has hurt [his] enthusiasm". He says:

It's like I'm writing for my people and they don't want to pay any attention.

And so, that's the real story, in a way, of my work: the way it's caught between two audiences. And how the tension in the way in which all of the works I'm involved in are servicing two audiences that are often not overlapping. And you know I think that's something that over time, as this community becomes more and more polyglot and more deeply rooted in Western experience, that audience will build. And then the critics of my work will be the young artists who feel I got it wrong. And they will start to

Broadway, Broadway or West End productions of the play, the venues themselves lend a notion of the cosmopolitan nature of the audience. Moreover, having myself attended both the off-Broadway Lincoln Centre show as well as the Broadway production, I can attest to a wide demographic range – although still majority white – being represented in the audience.

respond in new ways and then we'll begin to have a rich process of dialogue. But right now that's not what's happening.²¹⁸

As is evident from the quote above, some responses²¹⁹ to the play express disappointment that Amir embodies every stereotype about the aggressive, backward Muslim that abounds in the media and cultural discourse today. Despite its Pulitzer Prize and financial success,²²⁰ the play's principal detractors in the Muslim American community are critical of what they deem to be an unfair, even irresponsible, representation of the Muslim American. For me, the play's effectiveness lies precisely in this overt representation of the Muslim as the anti-hero in a play that is composed entirely of racial prototypes: the four main characters are brown Muslim male, white American female, African-American female and Jewish American male. Aside from the brilliance of the play in sparking deeply polarized conversations about Muslim identity and representation, I would argue that it is also a play that, for all the multiple discourses it engages, is a sweeping metaphor for the global political condition today, condensed into one upper-class-intellectual dinner party and its aftermath. The violence – in words and action – depicted in the play is tied to a political history that chronicles the cultural

²¹⁸ J.C.T., "Q&A: Ayhad [sic] Akhtar," *The Economist*, September 3, 2015,

<http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2015/09/american-literature> (Accessed February 8, 2015)

²¹⁹ Madani Younis, "The Personal is Political in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*", *American Theatre*, October 30, 2014, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2014/10/30/the-personal-is-political-in-ayad-akhtars-disgraced/> Also, Fawzia Afzal-Khan, Neilesh Bose and Jamil Khoury, "A Contrarian View: Race, Representation and Islamophobia in Ayad Akhtar's *Disgraced*", *silkroadrising.org*, November 17, 2015, <http://www.silkroadrising.org/news/a-contrarian-view-race-representation-and-islamophobia-in-ayad-akhtars-disgraced#ref2>

²²⁰ Diep Tran, "The Top 10 Most-Produced Plays of the 2015-2016 Season", *American Theatre*, September 15, 2015, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2015/09/16/the-top-10-most-produced-plays-of-the-2015-16-season/>

violence induced by global capital, the trauma of displaced postcolonial identities, the gendered violence of religion, and the violence that is a response to a long and storied history of persecution. Much has been said of Amir's physical violence upon the body of his white wife, and how this perhaps plays to the circulation of negative stereotypes about the backward Muslim given to tribal instincts of aggression. Akhtar himself appears to throw the narrative in that direction. However, the subtleties of the play demand a close reading where every character is given to similar violence(s) – Jewish Isaac, spouting liberal secularism, ends up calling Amir and “[his] people animals”; Emily ‘enslaves’ Amir in her artistic rendition of him; Jory, the African-American and perhaps the most grounded and sympathetic character in the play nonetheless seems to support Amir's dismissal from their law firm. Given personal and political history, it is perhaps worth considering whether Amir's abuse of Emily – horrifying, in every sense condemnable – is *violence* in and of itself, or a *counter-violence* to perceived institutional violence wrought upon the Muslim body.

Disgraced undoes the common mythology propounded about a “unified Muslim world” that has allegedly come together following various political incidents such as, say, Palestinian suffering under Israeli occupation, the Iraq war, 9/11, the war in Afghanistan etc. This assumption about the Muslim world undermines the disparate and diverse Muslim communities of the world. Islamic identities have emerged out of historical processes in which foreign hands have often played a key role – Western support of oppressive radical Islamic regimes, funding and training

of militants, colonialism are just some examples. Ultimately, it is young Hussein that delivers the final word about myth-making of the Islamic world:

For three hundred years they've been coming to our part of the world. Taking our land, drawing new borders, replacing our laws, making us want to be like them. Look like them. Marry their women. They disgraced us. They disgraced us. And then they pretend they don't understand the rage we've got?

4.3 CONCLUSION

In *Land/scape/theater*, Elinor Fuchs writes, “Every dramatic world is conditioned by a landscape imaginary, a “deep” surround suggested to the mind that extends far beyond the onstage environment reflected in the dramatic text and its scenographic representation”²²¹. This perspectival landscape helps shape the environment of the play, and connects the reader to a deeper world within the play, that exists at a larger scope from what they see onstage. In both the plays under discussion, the ravages of the September 11 attacks exist as constant ties to the present world of the plays. *Barriers* is set only four months after the attacks, and *Disgraced* ten years later, but the landscape of 9/11 comes back in both plays – as memory (*Barriers*) or as scenography (*Disgraced*). The dead son, Nabhil, comes to each of the family members in *Barriers*, always as an unfinished memory, until we are told that he died at the World Trade Center but his body was never found. The spatial

²²¹ Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri, eds., *Land/scape/theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2002), 30.

ties to the site of the attacks are expressed through Nabhil's attempt to reach out to his brother, a half-spoken "Hey Shehriar" that is repeated as voiceover through the course of the play, expressed in the form of a phone message that Nabhil left before heading off to work at WTC on the morning of the attacks. Until the very end of *Barriers*, the uncertainty of what happened to Nabhil acts as a constant memory for the audience of that traumatic moment of the terrorist attacks. It culminates finally, when we realize even more horrifically, that the Abbas family was never allowed to lay their dead to rest. The appearance of Nabhil as a shaky, traumatic memory of 9/11 offers an alternate history of Muslim investment and response to the attacks. It is juxtaposed with the scenographic representation of Muslim trauma in the racist backlash that happened soon after the event of terrorism. This family, mired in their own grief, is shut in their own homes, because outside there are people hurting Muslim school students and mauling Muslim women who wear the hijab. There is no respite even at home – constant prank calls oppress the family at all hours. The figure of Nabhil is dimly lit in the background, as the family goes about performing their daily rituals – praying, watching television, talking on the phone. He appears differently to each member of the family, going from room to room as the entire house is enveloped in the tragic memory of the day of the attacks. Though the play is set specifically in the Abbas home, at all times it connects itself to the larger landscape of loss, trauma and desolation at the site of the 9/11 attacks, through the haunting figure of Nabhil who represents the

hollowed out landscape of loss both within the home as well as outside, in the temporal setting of *Barriers*.

For the subjects of these plays, religious identity exists at cross-purposes with their national identity as Americans – an ironic phenomenon given the currents of liberal multiculturalism that pervade American cultural discourse. Ultimately, both *Barriers* and *Disgraced* make a point about whose America this is. Who is American enough to belong to the United States? What determines Americanness? Both plays return to the figure of home – and the breakdown of the notion of home as a place of belonging – to answer this question. In *Barriers*, home becomes a safe haven away from the racist violence of the outside world. Yet, from the very outset of the play, it becomes clear that the notion of the home as a place of stability and belonging is a false one for this Muslim immigrant family. The prejudices of the outside world become increasingly intrusive, as the crescendo of prank calls made to harass Muslim families in the area rises to the point of becoming an invasion upon living.

In *Disgraced*, the home becomes a symbol of the fracture in identity creation experienced by Amir during the course of the play, and it reflects this fracture in the way the set changes in the long final scene. When the play opens, we see Amir and Emily’s plush Upper East Side apartment, tastefully upholstered and decorated with art that reflects Emily’s forays into reimagining Islamic art. At the end of the play, though, most of the furniture and the art are gone, symbolizing the failure of Amir’s marriage, as well as the understanding that the idea of “home” as a place of

belonging that he had clung to was really just a myth in the United States. Amir's identity is ultimately inextricably bound to a religious identity he has spent his whole life discarding; a religious identity, moreover, that has become synonymous with a *lack* of belonging, even a *traitorous* lack of belonging. In the last scene, where the elegantly designed upscale Manhattan apartment is reduced to a mess of moving boxes and general disorder, once again the violence of the landscape of 9/11 is brought to bear. Amir's fear at disclosing his Muslim surname has had him denounced as untrustworthy, "duplicitious" and he has not only been denied the promotion he deserves, he has been unceremoniously fired from his job. His mere presence at the trial of a suspected Muslim cleric makes him a suspect by association. These are not heinous crimes of their own accord, but they are if you are Muslim in the non-Muslim world today, the play seems to say. Every Muslim's fate in America is determined by the originary moment when the planes hit the twin towers. Every Muslim has been re-created, and in the exact opposite way than Amir had intended by re-creating his own identity into that of one who has renounced Islam.

Once again, both these plays demonstrate how the performance of belonging is tenuous for certain groups on the American political landscape. The two plays approach the performance of 'Americanness' in diverse ways, but in both cases, it is made clear that the opportunity to express dissent is limited and/or immediately to be quelled in the case of Muslims in the current climate of terrorism and surveillance in the United States.

In late 2013, ABC's hidden-camera series *What Would You Do* featured an episode on Islamophobia and Muslim racial profiling by installing actors at a deli in upstate New York. One actor played a Muslim cashier, while another played out the archetypal white bigot stereotype who urged actual patrons at the deli to demand not to be served by a 'Muslim terrorist'. The episode shows many customers physically repulsed by the second actor's racist remarks, while yet others made their anger at his behavior evidently clear by asking him to leave the deli and themselves apologizing to the 'Muslim' character for their fellow racial cohort's appalling behavior. The show also features one man who mutters his approval of the white character's bigotry. But the overarching message is clearly that not all white Americans are racial and religious bigots. This message reaches its climax in the figure of an army soldier in uniform who walks into the deli and categorically insists that the racist character leave immediately. "[The Muslim cashier] has a choice to practice his religion anywhere. That's the reason I wear the uniform, so anyone can live free in this country," says the soldier, to vehement nods from other patrons at the deli.²²² It's a beautiful and hopeful moment, a patriotic celebration of the diverse, multicultural nation. The two plays presented here, however, show how those beautiful moments are undercut by a realization of the unjust political and racial structures existent in the United States. They draw out the conversation

²²² Yasmine Hafiz, "American Soldier Responds to Anti-Muslim Comments In An Incredible Way on 'What Would You Do?' (VIDEO)". The Huffington Post. thehuffingtonpost.com, 11 Sept. 2013. Web.

about the racial experience in America to include non-black colored groups and expose their audience to realities that prompt further thought and perhaps, action.

5.0 CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION: DECENTERING THE NATIONAL NARRATIVE OF BELONGING

What's a South Asian American play? What does it look like? How is it different from the rest of Asian American theatre, or the rest of American theatre? I am reminded of a quote by the American playwright and director, George C. Wolfe, about his play, *The Colored Museum*: "People kept asking for a 'black' play. I kept asking, 'What's a 'black' play? Four walls, a couch and a mama?' I can't live within those old definitions."²²³ Neither does South Asian American theatre. Its aesthetic is informed by the particular social conditions of its main actors – a social condition that reflects the particular situatedness of the South Asian American within mainstream American polity – a liminal space of constant negotiations with identity.

In a climate of racial intolerance, at a time when the United States faces an urgent need to revisit the hard-won successes of the Civil Rights Movement and its emphasis on cultural pluralism, these plays serve as cultural tools to understand

²²³ George C. Wolfe, "Colored Museum is Author's Exorcism", *New York Times*, 6 November 1986, 85, quoted in Harry J. Elam, "Making History", *Theatre Survey*, 45.2 (2004), 219-225.

this country's fastest-growing racial minority and all that it endures in its unique construction of an American identity.

I have framed this dissertation as an analysis of South Asian American theatre as a staged representation of concerns with belonging confronted by American *desi* subjects. In Chapter 2, I approach this problem of belonging within the framework of diasporic nostalgia and the pursuit of the American Dream. In Chapter 3, I tackle plays that demonstrate how South Asian Americans negotiate issues of gender and sexuality and how it affects belonging on the American national space. I do this by looking at plays that rework the culturally nuanced practice of the Indian marriage and also those that act as queer metaphors for the narrative of diasporic belonging. I use Chapter 4 to discuss plays set in the landscape of 9/11 that demonstrate how the performance of Muslim religious identity conflicts with the national narrative of belonging.

There is no state-sponsored agenda to determine what constitutes American national identity. The United States does not have an "official" language or religion, and any racial prejudice underlined by law has been amended since the Civil Rights movement. This democratic attribute is often undermined in everyday life, however, with anti-immigrant and anti-minority sentiment rising in the country. These plays offer an understanding of one such targeted minority group and, in doing so, decenter the normative white Christian narrative of national belonging.

As long as American national security risks (as well as those of various countries across the world) continue to be evaluated along religious/ethnic origin

lines, the autonomy and liberty of South Asian Americans to see themselves as belonging freely to the American polity will remain complicated. Moreover, as *Disgraced* expresses, the South Asian American's affiliation to his religion becomes central to his identity, irrespective of whether he has any especial interest in managing this part of his identity. As long as religion-based marginalization continues in America, the South Asian American must remain unable to effectively belong.

The act of putting these bodies and these stories on stage is a reclamation of a rarely archived history of South Asian settlement in America. It is staking a place in American history of citizens who are not always recognized as being part of the state. The embodiment of these narratives makes up for their absence in American history while also acknowledging that identity in the diaspora does not always fit into a nationalist framework of what it means to belong as a citizen.

In practice, South Asian American theatre is young, vibrant and rapidly growing in viewership. The South Asian American theatre community, much like their East Asian counterparts, is fairly close-knit; comprised of interconnected networks of artists who often collaborate, sometimes even belonging to the same company or writers' collaborative. New York's 10-time Obie Award-winning Ma-Yi Theatre Company's Writers' Lab is an example of a platform for Asian American playwrights – of both South and East Asian origin – to come together and create original works for the stage. East West Players in Los Angeles has an equally influential David Henry Hwang Writer's Institute that serves the same function.

There are theatre companies such as Silk Road Rising in Chicago which produces plays that concern hard-hitting issues among the Asian American and Middle Eastern American communities. Pangea World Theatre in Minneapolis, Minnesota was one of the first American theatre companies founded by a person of South Asian origin (Dipankar Mukherjee) and does plays with a focus on diaspora, though not necessarily the South Asian diaspora. Pangea is committed to promoting diversity education through theatre and has hosted conferences on South Asian (American) theatre. Its Diverse Stages Education Initiative works towards spreading awareness about diversity issues, and they celebrated their twentieth anniversary in 2015. San Francisco's EnActe Arts showcases South Asian American plays and artists and serves a community function by often organizing benefit performances where proceeds go to local non-profits. A direction forward for this dissertation might be to look at the work of these theatre companies and examine how they have created a business model that successfully manages to showcase original theatre that puts non-normative racial bodies on stage and brings focus on issues affecting communities of color. Who goes to these shows? How are these plays marketed? What were the landmark productions of these companies?

Similar other omissions made in my own research offer up opportunities for future research. I have decided not to write about the continuing tradition of South Asian university groups doing theatre as part of cultural events such as India Night/International Night etc. For instance, Columbia University, Princeton University, Stanford University and UC-Berkeley are a few among several

universities that have dedicated South Asian American student bodies with their own musical and theatrical groups that often do original drama.

South Asian American actors and challenges they face with casting is also an uncharted territory worth looking into. Of his role in *Disgraced*, Aasif Mandvi has said: “whether you are in Hollywood or whether you are in New York, it’s very rare to find a role that has this much sophistication and nuance.”²²⁴ Elsewhere, he talks about the paucity of roles for brown actors, and how even these limited roles changed in the aftermath of 9/11: “On September 10th, I was going in for taxi drivers and snake charmers, but on September 11th, I was going in for terrorists. Suddenly it was all terrorists, terrorists, terrorists, terrorists.”²²⁵ Simply looking at how *desi* actors are placed within American popular entertainment would be a valuable inroad into examining the politics of belonging for this community.

I conclude this dissertation at a time when the American nation prepares for the possibility of a race-baiting, immigrant-hating demagogue to lead the nation. Presidential-hopeful Donald Trump’s conspiracy-theory-ridden rhetoric against Mexicans, Muslims and other minorities emblemizes the politics of national belonging and requires a review of the modes in which the nation is imagined. I contend that these plays provide a necessary intervention for such polarizing and prejudiced narratives.

²²⁴ Jesse McKinley, “This is America Now”, *New York Times*, December 17, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/18/theater/aasif-mandvi-beyond-the-daily-show.html>

²²⁵ Budd Mishkin, “One on 1 Profile: Actor Aasif Mandvi Grapples with his Identity in Show Business.” *Time Warner Cable News NY1*, April 20, 2015, <http://www.ny1.com/nyc/all-boroughs/one-on-1/2015/01/20/one-on-1-profile--aasif-mandvi.html>

If the theatre is a cultural product that reflects and represents (and perhaps, shapes) social processes, then this theatre undermines the notion that diaspora is merely an imitation or recreation of the homeland in the country of immigration. As a representation of the people, ideologies and processes of cultural living, this theatre contributes to an understanding of America as it is today. From the perspective of performance, the American stage continues to be racially partisan. The stage continues to be dominated by white bodies, with a growing prevalence of black bodies. My scholarship provides an opportunity to broaden the scope of “American theatre” as it is understood today, by recognizing and widening the landscape in which that theatre is being practiced. To deny the importance of this emerging theatre community is also to be blind to the millions of Americans whose lives this theatre reflects.

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