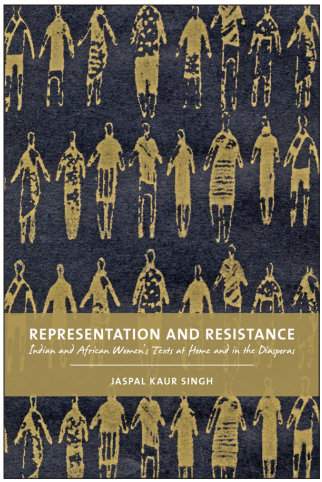

REPRESENTATION AND RESISTANCE: INDIAN AND AFRICAN WOMEN'S TEXTS AT HOME AND IN THE DIASPORAS

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10

Transnationalism and the Politics of Representation in the Texts of Meena Alexander, Gurinder Chadha, Zainab Ali, and Samina Ali

PART ONE: EXILE, MEMORY, AND TRAUMA IN MEENA ALEXANDER'S TEXTS

How does Meena Alexander construct an American identity for herself through her fragmented, traumatized diasporic consciousness and "postcolonial memory" (*Shock* 1)? She attempts to write about women who are not only mad, but who through madness rewrite themselves in maddening diasporic and transnational spaces produced by violence through "global modernity" (Arif Dirlik). She doesn't write only about women who jumped into wells to drown; the women she attempts to write about are the "well jumped women" – women with "saris swept up shamelessly, high above the ankles, high above the knees, women well jumping: jumping over wells," (*Shock* 206), even if the Western audience only wants to hear about "palm trees and back waters" (206) of Kerala. Yet, Alexander

is finally unsuccessful in negotiating the First World academic and privileged territories in order to bring "well jumping women" to the Western audience, for she falls into the trap of fetishizing "oppressed Third World Women" for a Western audience, leading to repetition compulsion and to voyeurism.

Alexander's *Manhattan Music* examines cultural border crossing and diasporic experience, commenting on interracial relationships and marriage and ideas of cultural and national belongings. In her autobiographical novel, *Fault Lines*, Alexander writes: "I am a woman cracked by multiple migrations. Uprooted so many times I can connect nothing with nothing" (2). Alexander, a poet and a novelist, was born in Allahabad, India, has lived in Sudan and England, and now lives in the United States. In *The Shock of Arrival*, she writes, "The shock of arrival is multifold – what was borne in the mind is jarred, tossed into new shapes, an exciting exfoliation of the senses.… What the immigrant must work with is what she must invent in order to live" (3). This shock shows that the questions of race, ethnicity, gender, and nationality are all arbitrary signs to be contested and revised, so that one can reconstruct one's subjectivity anew.

Alexander reclaims the memory of oppressed "Third World Women" to reconstruct her subjectivity anew in the First World. Is that memory "heteropathic" or "idiopathic" (Silverman 185), and what does that mean? In "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs," Marianne Hirsch elaborates on Kaja Silverman's terms by explaining that in "heteropathic" identification, the remembering subject identifies with the victim at a distance, whereas in "idiopathic" identification, it identifies overappropriately, where "distances disappears, creating too available, too easy an access to [a] particular past," thereby creating an "appetite for alterity" (408). The artist who remembers the painful events in the lives of victims must "resist appropriation and incorporation, resist annihilating the distance between self and other, the otherness of others" (Hirsch 407), otherwise, due to the "appetite for alterity" and "overappropriation," the remembering subject will construct itself as a "surrogate victim" (Hirsch 414).

Alexander's poetry shows her fragmentation in interesting ways. For example, in "Alphabets of Flesh," the poet writes: "My back against the barbed wire/snagged and coiled to belly height.… Slow accoutrements of habits/and of speech/the lust of grief/the savagery of waste/flicker and burn.… Come ferocious alphabets of flesh/splinter and raze my page/that out of dumb/and bleeding part of me/I may claim my heritage

… to cacophony" (*Shock* 15). Postcolonial poets such as Alexander use Bhabha's hybridized "Third Space" to reconstruct and re-turn to "claim [their] heritage" after the trauma of alienation. While analyzing Cesaire's poetry, for example, Michael Dash asserts that "he re-enacts the need to reintegrate the exiled subject in the lost body [and] imagines the journey of the disembodied subject across the estranging waters and the eventual reintegration of the body with the *pays natal*" (332). Dash suggests that for the subject to be reintegrated, it must first "overcome the initial revulsion … [and] must radically redefine notions of time, space, beauty and power before return becomes possible, and must strip away all illusions … empty consciousness of all pretensions" (332). Male writers have used "verbal muscularity" for the "spiritual awakening expressed in images of revitalized physicality" (334). To feel whole, to be reintegrated, to be "fulfilled is a *ceaseless* task of the psyche," claim Petersen and Rutherford (189).

Alexander, too, explores the "liberatory space" found through nationalism in the Global South as well as in the diaspora in order to question, reconstruct, and reinscribe the "mutilated and dismembered" female body (Dash 334), not only of her own but also of many oppressed "Third World" women. However, Alexander's attempt at reintegration appears incomplete as she seems unable to overcome her revulsion for her disembodied self. For reanimation of the castrated and dismembered male body, poets use the liberatory space found in revolutionary movements. For Alexander, diasporic cultural spaces created by border crossings are used to rewrite herself. How far can we take intertextuality in terms of writing on the "mutilated" body of the displaced and alienated subject? This question is particularly important for the diasporic writer, such as Alexander, who by her own testimony was never wrenched from her home but crossed the ocean out of choice. How is it that this artist who belongs to the "diaspora of hope" uses the words of subjects who belong to the "diaspora of despair" and "terror" (Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* 6)?

Alexander argues that the female Indian body, after nationalism, had to "bear the pitiful burden of repressed desire and the pain of withdrawn sexuality" (*Shock* 182). Here, of course, Alexander gestures toward the "new women" of nationalist discourse. All the repressed sexuality of women in India is in Alexander's memory, for she says, "The voice that is other grows great. It bursts through the body. It sings. The world that [women writers] wrote from is not far from me. I bear it within. It becomes part of the memory I need for knowledge of this new world, part of a migrant

music" (*Shock* 192). Alexander's idiopathic identification with the sexually repressed and oppressed collective female Indian bodies constructs for us a pastiche of the Indian woman body, be it in India or the diaspora, as she rewrites herself anew in the new world through "projection … [and] over-appropriation" (Hirsch 411) at the expense of the real victims of oppression in the U.S. nation-states and in other postcolonial spaces. While her images are powerful and she shows that rewriting and reimagining can occur through violence and the Foucauldian limit experience, she does not belong to Appadurai's "diaspora of despair" as she would like her audiences to believe. I argue that because of her privileged background the author is unable to "address the concerns of women around the world in the historical particularity of their relationship to multiple patriarchies as well as to international economic hegemonies" (Grewal and Kaplan 17).

Let us explore some examples of Alexander's "idiopathic identification" and her easy construction of a *pays natal* that for many Indians, born in Burma (Myanmar), or Uganda, or what is now Pakistan, for example, was brutally wrenched from them. In the *Shock of Arrival*, Alexander calls "history a mad, mad joke" (119). She is a person of the diaspora of hope, in Appadurai's terms, as "[she] did not leave [her] motherland because of terror or political repression. [She] was not torn away from [her] ancestral home by armed militants" (*Shock* 116). Instead, her story is that her well-educated and well-to-do father wanted to teach in another country, "far away … across an ocean and a sea … a country in North Africa" (*Shock* 116).

Brought up in a well-to-do Syrian Christian family in Kerala, Alexander recalls her childhood of plenitude even though traumas of sexual abuse are hinted at, yet repressed. When she was four or five, her father took the family to Sudan, where she grew up, and at the young age of thirteen, attended the University of Khartoum. Eventually, she studied in England at the University of Nottingham for her Ph.D. She taught at Delhi University, Central Institute of Hyderabad, Hyderabad University. Now, she is a professor at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Yet despite of all these possibilities, she writes,

> What might it mean to look at myself straight, see myself? … My voice splintered in my ears into a cacophony: whispering cadences, shouts, moans, the quick delight of bodily pleasure,

> all rising up as if the condition of being fractured had freed the selves jammed into my skin, multiple beings locked into the journeys of one body. (1)

So how does her splintered body write herself back into wholeness? What are her traumas, besides going through multiple migrations? Her repressed sexual abuse by her grandfather (Alexander, *Fault Lines* 302) splintered her sexuality, but her fragmented identity, which she claims is due to her multiple migrations, and which she "sutures" back with the "thread of memory," seems flawed, constructed as it is for First World voyeurism. For in spite of belonging to the diaspora of hope, she continues to ask, "am I a creature with no home, no nation? And if so, what new genus could I possibly be" (*Shock* 116)? What genus, exactly? And what of people who are part of these diasporic sensibilities, who for one reason or another, whether they acknowledge it or not, are interpellated due to "modernity at large" (Appadurai) belonging to the diaspora of hope, and yet appropriate idioms of the diasporas of despair, or sorrow? Do these three dwell in separate spaces, or do these spaces collide, intermingle, and cross-fertilize?

In spite of the awareness that no one forced her out of India, in Alexander's fragmented psyche, "Words [recoil] back into a vacant space … [which is a] place of waste, dingy detritus of a life uncared for, no images to offer it hospitality" (*Shock* 116). As a woman, this fragmentation has led her toward "tale telling" where she has to "unlearn the fixed positioning she was taught" (*Shock* 117). Unlearning takes place in many parts of the world that she travels to. Alexander cites the tipsy houses that she dwells in, "houses to be born in, houses to die in, houses to make love in wet, sticky sheets, houses with the pallor of dove's wings, houses fragrant as cloves and cinnamon ground together," yet she is unable to name any of the houses as empowering, for "her tongue has grown thick" (*Shock* 119). This thickness occurs due to the suffering she witnesses. In Sudan, the acrid smell of tear gas invades her shivering body. In England, she writes a thesis about memory, "while [her] mind cuts loose from her body and circles empty space" (*Shock* 120). In Palghat, in her ancestral home, she "becomes mute," wrapped in "reams of paper" and shit (*Shock* 120). In New York, where her house is "split through, a fault in the ground where she stands, [her] soul is auctioned off," and this split and fragmented

psyche, looking for its home, calms down through the remembered road between "Tiruvella and Kozhencheri," and the feeling of home this road provides (*Shock* 121). The alienated subject remembers an idealized space for reconstruction.

Still, whenever she crosses a border, she dies a little (*Shock* 93), and out of this death, a new life emerges, "tearing up the old skin" toward a new consciousness (*Shock* 93), which includes a desiring sexualized subject. Alexander states that when the body turns into a "brutal instrument" in the "surreal theater of cruelty that fractures identities, [leading] to the sudden eruptions of sexual desire [and] small explosions of pleasure, the second language of violence serves to force into visibility the longing for love" (*Shock* 86). The body becomes the site for cruelty, the site of passion and longing and the site for sexuality. When the body sinks into nothingness, into a void, it forces "us back into the fraught compact between body and language," and it is only "in the teeth of violence that we can speak the unstable truths of our bodies" (*Shock* 78). Alexander interchanges the meaning of the body and the soul, as she sees woman as "prisoner of her sex" (*Shock* 67), like her imaginary "mad" aunt Chinna (*Shock* 52).

The new consciousness born of violence leads Alexander into marrying a White American man and moving to the United States of America and eventually making it to the Ivory Tower in New York. Here, in this new space, eruptive and volatile, she can name herself and even her sexuality anew. She states, "And the possibilities for female expressivity becomes multifarious, even verging on the explosive" (*Shock* 83). She must translate herself anew in these conflicted spaces. Sexuality or the lack of it becomes the trope of modernity and cultural belonging for her. Even though in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault envisions a space for "bodies and pleasures" that go beyond "sex desire," he laments that for the modern person, "truth" is inscribed in the body and soul and can only be recovered "through sex" (155). Each person, argues Foucault, must pass through sex "in order to have access to his own intelligibly (since it is simultaneously the hidden element and the productive principle of sense), to the totality of the body (since it is a real and menaced part of it, and symbolically constitutes the whole), [and] to his identity (since it joins to the force of an impulse the singularity of history" (155–56). He adds that while in earlier times it was love that the West discovered and deployed,

> [bestowing] on it a value high enough to make death acceptable … nowadays, it is sex that claims this equivalence, the highest of all. And while the deployment of sexuality permits the techniques of power to invest life, the fictitious point in sex, itself marked by that deployment, exerts enough charm on everyone for them to accept hearing the grumble of death within it. (156)

Examples of such investments in sexuality, even through the "grumble of death within" the subject as it comes into words, are abundantly present in Alexander's texts.

In America, Alexander sees modern and sexualized subjects who reclaim their bodies, sexualities, and souls as "the [women] who [were] permitted everything" (*Manhattan Music* 2) and compares them to the "Third World" women "whose veins were etched with centuries of arranged marriages, dark blue blood pouring through" (4). For example, Sandhya, the protagonist of *Manhattan Music*, could point to a "plot of land bounded by granite walls and name ancestors who had owned land for generations.… Then too, she remembered the cemeteries where her grandparents were buried, the houses that held them, the rites under which they were married" (*Manhattan* 4). Draupati, the hybridized and diasporic subject, permitted everything, must bring Sandhya, the oppressed Indian women, into her sexuality and identity as defined by her Westernized intellectual self.

Fault Lines is full of references to the suffering masses and oppressed "Third World" women, with their arranged marriages and abusive husbands, and the romanticized space of plenitude which is Tiruvella. And while the author herself roams the earth as if it belongs to her – "Allahabad, Tiruvella, Kozencheri, Pune, Khartoum, Cairo, Beirut, Jerusalem, Dubai, London, New York, Minneapolis, Saint Paul, New Delhi, Trivandrum," she claims to be suffering the trauma of exile and its consequent fragmentation, while trying to rewrite herself back into a whole through memory. She calls herself "a nowhere creature," who has no "home, no fixed address, no shelter" (30). When she left India, she writes: "My life shattered into little bits and pieces. In my dreams, I am haunted by thoughts of a homeland I will never find. So I have turned my lines into a different aesthetic, one that I build up out of all the stuff around me, improvising as

I go along" (27). She is an improviser, she can rewrite herself anew, from fragments to wholeness, from nothing – "a woman cracked by multiple migrations [who] can connect nothing to nothing" (2) – to all the privileges of the First World!

Alexander's prose is full of descriptions of places she has travelled to, the well-known people she's met along the way; it is also liberally peppered with vignettes of the suffering masses and oppressed women for whom she suffers. But first, her own pain is reflected in comments in her Khartoum journal that she provides as witness to the misery she went through: "If you want me to live as a woman, why educate me?" "Why not kill me if you want to dictate my life?" "God, why teach me to write?" (*Fault* 208). She suggests that these lines are not really aimed at God, but at her mother. "The fault," she writes, "lay in the tension I felt between the claims of my intelligence – what my father had taught me to honor, what allowed me to live my life – and the requirements of a femininity my mother had been born and bred in. Essential to the latter is an arranged marriage" (*Fault* 102). While it would appear that she finds, as an educated woman in Sudan attending co-ed parties, meeting boys, and sensing her sexual desires, that the idea of arranged marriages might not appeal to her, in actuality she finds fault with the very institution of arranged marriages. In fact, she admits to her mother, "Amma, those dreams of an arranged marriage almost destroyed me" (*Fault* 208). She cannot understand why her mother settled for one. Even her imaginary maternal grandmother had married a "man of her choice" (*Fault* 208)! She asks her mother bluntly, "So how did you feel when your own marriage was arranged" (*Fault* 206)? She seems to indicate that she married David Lelyveld to escape such a fate. In between the narrative, we read about bride burning:

> As adult women we were facing the reality of women in arranged marriages – housewives and government workers, college lecturers and doctors, all young women married in accordance with their parents' wishes – who were being burnt to death when their families of origin could not meet the demands of extra dowry. An exploding stove here, a burst can of kerosene there, matches that mysteriously caught flame when held to a dupatta or a pallu. (*Fault* 209)

While such crimes as dowry deaths are a vital issue and need to be addressed, her conflation of arranged marriages with crimes against women suggests that if arranged marriages were to be replaced with "love" marriages or marriages of choice, crimes against women would disappear. Additionally, when such crimes are explained away as a "Punjabi thing" by her mother, and not much to do with poverty or the scramble for material goods in the social climbing milieu of New India, Alexander persists in her exposé of the oppressed "Third World" women: "In your days," she states, "there were women wells. Women jumping into wells" (*Fault* 209), pregnant and unmarried women jumping into wells à la Maxine Hong Kingston's "No Name Woman" in *The Woman Warrior*.

In Khartoum, she thinks about the possibility of marrying the rich Samir and being driven around in a car, living in the large house in Khartoum North, and as other married Sudanese women do, she would indulge in shopping trips to

> Alexandria and Beirut for slippers and cosmetics, even Rome and Paris every now and then; I could have the sweet-scented halava run over my legs and arms ripping off the small hairs, so my skin felt as smooth as a newborn baby; I could place cotton balls with rose attar or Chanel No. 5 on my skin. (*Fault* 134)

But something gives her pause: "But what would become of me, my mind, myself?" Positing the "traditional" lifestyle of married Sudanese women as mindless, and in order to escape the "web of traditional life" in India, she chooses an exhilarating life of "adventure" – "go to England, young woman, they all said. Then you can return to India" (*Fault* 135).

As a woman of the diaspora, what can she do to empower herself? She can "make herself up, and this," she says, "is enticement, the exhilaration, the compulsive energy of America. But only up to a point. And the point, the sticking point," she continues, is her "dark female body" (*Fault* 202). This dark female body is yet again conflated with the dark female bodies of oppressed women in the "Third World", those who are cliterodectomized in Sudan, the bodies that jumped into wells in Kerala, the Punjabi women who are burned for dowry, even the women picking up "shards of glass" in the aftermath of the 1973 flood in Pune: "women picking up bottles, wire, paper, anything but stones, to recycle them for a few paise,

this with the right hand while the left scrounged around for scraps of food that might have been thrown out of the houses nearby: rice, dal, chapattis, half-cooked vegetables" (144). Her idiopathic identification and "appetite for alterity" enters her body, making her a surrogate victim. She writes, "Seeing all this, I could not eat and grew very thin" (144). External violence resonates with internal violence, leading to irruptions, allowing the narrator to construct a history through identification, but not "at-a-distance" (Silverman 185). In the United States, her fragmentation and exile come in forms such as the dirty subway system and the homeless man wandering the cold night air in Manhattan – her identifications with the "Third World" in the First World. "My life was so torn up into bits and pieces of the actual that depended on the poems, irruptions of the imaginary to make an internal history for me" (125). In this new history, Alexander is the surrogate, oppressed "Third World" woman, who, through her own individual endeavour, has liberated herself from oppression.

The reception and consumption of such texts in the Global North has been the subject of an ongoing critique within postcolonial studies, particularly in this era of global capitalism. Dirlik argues that the intellectual brain drain from the Global South to North is the outcome of global capitalism, although the "beneficiaries" conceal their class privileges by appropriating subaltern sensibilities and locations" (581). Alexander's voice becomes a metonym for the oppressed and marginalized Indians and Indian women in India as well as in the United States of America, thus eliding her many privileges. She was part of the First World in the Third World, and plays the part of the Third World in the First World.

Dirlik elaborates upon the common cultures of such people who share in privileges, regardless of where they are located:

> The globe has become as jumbled up spatially as the ideology of progress has temporally. Third Worlds have appeared in the First World and First Worlds in Third. New diasporas have relocated the Self there and the Other here, and consequently borders and boundaries have been confounded. And the flow of culture has been at once homogenizing and hydrogenising: some groups share in a common global culture regardless of locations even as they are alienated from the cultures of the hinterlands. (Dirlik 581)

As a postcolonial artist and intellectual who teaches at an elite institution in the United States of America, Alexander's claim to marginality is troubling. "To put it bluntly," states Dirlik, "postcoloniality is designed … to cover up origins of postcolonial intellectuals in a global capitalism of which they are not so much victims as beneficiaries" (Dirlik 581). Allowing writers such as Alexander space within the West and particularly within the American Academy actually reinforces Eurocentricism, and "for this hegemony to be sustained, its boundaries must be rendered more porous in order to absorb alternative cultural possibilities that might otherwise serve as sources of destructive oppositions" (Dirlik 582). Hence space is created for the likes of Alexander, who, while seemingly critiquing colonial and neocolonial power structures, are actually helping in reinforcing them.

Rey Chow critiques the postcolonial intelligentsia writing about the "oppressed third world woman," suggesting that when we write and discuss such oppression, we need to "unmask ourselves through a scrupulous declaration of self-interest," because our acts are "tied less to the oppressed women in [Third World] communities 'back home' than to our own careers in the West" (603). Can Alexander face up to her "truthful relationship to those 'objects of study' behind which [she] can easily hide" (Chow 603)? She is a voyeur, posing simultaneously as a "fellow victim," and as "self-appointed [custodian]" (605). Says Chow, "It is necessary to write against the lure of diaspora: Any attempt to deal with 'women' or the 'oppressed classes' in the 'third world' that does not at the same time come to terms with the historical conditions of its own articulation is bound to repeat the exploitativeness that used to and still characterizes most 'exchanges' between 'West' and 'East.'" (605).

Because of her "idiopathic identification," distances seem to disappear; within this desire, past and present, self and other, East and West, appear to merge. Because of Alexander's "overappropriate identification" with the other, distances disappear, creating a too available and easy access. In such a scenario, she is unable to work through her sexual abuse and racial oppression and only ends up displacing and "acting out" the trauma through her rhetoric of otherness, which leads to retraumatizing – for example, her nervous breakdown in England (*Fault* 141) – due to her lack of self-reflexivity and critical distance from the Other. When one lacks critical distance from the Other, one represses what is real and turns instead to idealization (Silverman 74–75). Alexander's glorification of her

"choices" – her marriage to David Lelyveld, her writing, her work, and so forth, allows for "libidinal" affirmation of what is culturally accepted due to the "normative nature of [her] unconscious idealization" (Silverman 75). She tells her mother she married David so that she could come home (*Fault* 208). Idiopathic identification allows for such affirmation. Although Alexander does not "depoliticize" the relationships of self and other, of First World exploitation and Third World oppression, she "[masks] the pleasure" (JanMohamed, "The Economy of the Manichean Allegory" 23) she derives from her position in the Western academy, and indeed in the Global North.

Thus, I argue that in Alexander's text, alterity is fetishized (JanMohamed, "The Economy" 20) as she is unable to keep the distance from the oppressed and fetishized objects she gazes at and interweaves into her own history. She ends up "acting out," rather than "working through" her trauma of sexual abuse, exile, and alienation (Hirsch 414). Throughout this reading, I have shown Alexander's "appetite for alterity" (Silverman 188) wherein she is unable to separate the pain of the Other from her own, and in her overidentification, her attempted critical analysis of neocolonialism and neo-imperialism are rendered ineffective.

I suggest that Alexander's fractured gaze becomes complicit with the West's desire for its Other as she lives in the First World and functions "not only as [native] but spokespersons for 'native' (and I add native women) in the 'third world'" (Chow 589). This is because in the Western academy, many intellectuals of colour achieve a particular status due to their positions "as cultural workers/brokers in diaspora" (Chow 589). Such intellectuals and writers take their "'raw materials' from the suffering of the oppressed," and become "exotic minors" (Chow 601).

In addition, because Alexander is unable to identify at a distance with the oppressed and suffering Third World people and women, her appetite for alterity, which assumes a sympathetic cast, only manages to exploit the fetishized Other. The discussion of the oppressed Third World women in the First World academy is "tied less to the oppressed women in [Indian] communities 'back home' than [the Indian] intellectual careers in the West" (Chow 603).

Thus, to be truly critical, Alexander must "retroactively" read Indian women to "painstakingly reverse the processes through which [she has] arrogated to [herself] what does not belong to [her], or displaced onto another what [she] did not want to recognize in [herself]" (Silverman

118). Otherwise, she will end up repeating the scenario of oppression, and acting out. "Such a re-viewing can have only a very limited efficacy … it is a necessary step in the coming of the subject into an ethical or nonviolent relation to the other" (Silverman 3). Alexander is unable to acquire that distance from India and is unable to "respect the otherness of the [Third World] bodies" (Silverman 2) and hence her gaze simply confirms "dominant values" of Western desires. She must consciously acknowledge that she is the agent of representation; otherwise, her ideals of marriage and love, of freedom and choice, oppression and liberation "congeal into a tyrannizing [exoticizing] essence" (Silverman 2). In spite of moments of critique of colonialism, neocolonialism and globalization, her representations and her position as a Western intellectual allow her to continue to exploit the marginalized and fetishized Others due to her positionality, which destabilizes and subverts the political possibilities of *The Shock of Arrival* and *Fault Lines*. If Alexander declares her self-interest in her representations of the oppressed Third World woman, if she "unmasks" herself, will her texts be rendered any less problematic and voyeuristic? Chow claims that

> Such declaration does not clean our hands, but it prevents the continuance of a tendency, rather strong among "third world" intellectuals in diaspora as well as researchers of non-Western cultures in "first world" nations, to sentimentalize precisely those day-to-day realities from which they are distanced. (603)

Such distances lead either to idealization or to re-remembering, the outcomes of which are "competing narratives" of "'development' or 'underdevelopment' – one of celebration, [and] the other of crisis" (Gikandi 609). Additionally, and ultimately, as postcolonial intelligentsia and artists in the West, what we, as women of colour "can do without is the illusion that, through privileged speech, [we are] helping the wretched of the earth" (Chow 605).

PART TWO:
POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN GURINDER CHADHA'S *BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM*, ZAINAB ALI'S "MADRAS ON RAINY DAYS," AND SAMINA ALI'S *MADRAS ON RAINY DAYS*

In this section, I will examine Gurinder Chadha's film *Bend it Like Beckham*, Samina Ali's novel *Madras on Rainy Days* and Zainab Ali's short story "Madras on Rainy Days" in order to provide the trajectory of hybridized identity constructions and representations of Indian womanhood in diaspora spaces of the Global North. While in these texts, traditional notions of "oppressive" arranged marriages vie with ideas of love and sexuality, where the latter is posited as liberation and choice, neocolonial and racist contexts are either ignored or elided, thereby creating monolithic ideas of oppressive Indian patriarchal structures and their cultural practices. Are "counter hegemonic representations" possible in these texts, or are they impossible, framed as they are by "developmental narratives" and "liberal humanist discourses within both India and the diaspora" (Gopinath 140)?

Let us examine Samina Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days*, revised completely after her illness when she went into a coma during childbirth, reflected in the fragmented quality of the narrative as well as the protagonist. Additionally, and more importantly, her attempts to recover ideas of identity formation and representations, particularly of the passive and feminized Indians of her short stories and essay, published more than a decade earlier than the novel, are noted; however, the thrust of my argument is that her attempts are ultimately unsuccessful as the fragmented narratives expose the protagonist's split psyche, leading to contradictions within the texts.

After she recovered from her coma, Ali admits "I did not remember writing the book. I could have simply gone to a bookstore and picked out any book … that's how foreign the book was to me.… It was not mine. I could not put my name on it" (qtd. in Hughes, *Poets and Writers* 46). This title appeared as a short story in the anthology *Our Feet Walk the Sky* (1993) when she published as Zainab Fatima Ali. Her short essay "Becoming the Agents of Our Destiny," appearing in the same anthology, provides the autobiographical elements which are incorporated in *Madras on Rainy Days*. In her essay, Ali writes about the terror of not belonging to America, which led her to reinvent and to lie: "This terror forced me to

overcompensate – to lie – in order to express universality in customs and practices" (*Our Feet* 239).

In the novel, the hybridized nature of Layla's psyche and identity is ever present: "Stitch my tongue together, stitch my body together, the two women jostling inside the one frame no longer tearing the skin by the seams" (80). Carolyn Hughes asserts that the novel is about "Layla, a first generation Muslim Indo-American woman, who bristles under the constraints of an arranged marriage" (46). Layla, as her own arranged marriage to an Indian Muslim man approaches, ruminates about her aunt's arranged marriage and her wedding night ritual of the "two-by-two white sheet that would give more validity to this union than her wedding necklace or their vows" (*Madras* 3) – a blood-soaked proof of virginity and sexual consummation. "The next morning, [her uncle] hung the red-spotted cloth on the clothesline and it fluttered in the wind for all to see, a white flag of her surrender and his victory" (*Madras* 3).

In the short story, American-raised Samena, who, "forced by arranged marriage to become intimate" with Mohsin, "recoils from this stranger" and "was repulsed by him, and [her] repulsion was so strong [she] was unable to surrender to Allah's will for [their] union.… That night, [she] could not submit to Allah's will nor to her husband" (156). Later, we learn that he "hopelessly [pants] over [her] until three in the morning, rolling off [her] stomach" only to be woken by her mother-in-law at six in the morning to do the washing with "rocks and brittle soap … alongside black cockroaches" (158). Both husbands (of the novel and short story) are unable to consummate the marriage, Mohsin, in spite of his intense efforts, and Sameer, because he is *repelled* by Layla's body, due, as we finally find out, to his being homosexual.

In both cases, an Alim is involved, touching the bride in intimate places to help the couple consummate their marriage. In the short story, however, Samena doesn't want the Alim to heal her because, feeling nervous, she is uncomfortable with his presence. "For some reasons, my mind allowed me to feel comfortable in a crowd of drunken men at the First Avenue bar in Chicago, but not while alone with one Muslim holy man" (157). In the novel, the Alim asks to be alone with Layla, touching her breasts, thighs and other intimate places, but she seems to think that it will be ultimately helpful. However, in her earlier short story, the Alim asks Samena: "Can you undo your pants?" and "Spread your legs a little, please" (159). Finally, she feels "his hand lightly caress [her] vagina" (159),

his "kurta [becoming] wet with sweat" (159). As he is about to leave, the Alim "set his arm on my shoulders and smiled. 'What a shame about your husband. You're such a pretty, pretty girl.' He bent down, and kissed the side of my mouth as his hand cupped my right breast" (160). Eventually, her husband and the Alim leave the room, with [her] husband's arm around the Alim's wet back, portending the gay relationship Layla's husband has with his "friend" Naveed in the novel.

While the novel attempts to move beyond the earlier binary representations, it betrays many moments of such binary Manichaeism (JanMohamed, "Economy" 18). For example, India is still a place of demons and devils. Layla thinks, "Something about India, its collapse of walls between spiritual and the material, the mundane and the profane, made anything possible. Even devils. Especially devils" (45). The narrator is always aware of her Western and Westernized reader, explicating every cultural practice, especially regarding sexuality – "Men did that here, openly caressed one another, and no one was sure what those touches really meant, not even the men themselves … or their brides-to-be" (8). And because in India, Islam does not sanction homosexuality, states Layla, Sameer wants to escape to the liberal West: "America's freedom, from religious riots and curfew, from tainted water and hiring practices, and from whatever personal demons each was escaping" (223) appears liberating. That this myth is deconstructed after every racist moment and the murders which abounded and abound after 9/11 (which is not to say that racism has not occurred on a daily basis for most of the minorities in the United States even before the terrorist attacks) seems clear, yet such unproblematic representations of the "Promised Land" litter postcolonial "feminist" literature.

In the short story "Daddy," Ali creates a character very similar to that of Layla in *Madras*, who, when she sees her father treating her mother like "his whore," admits that she will never accept such treatment from a man, saying, "perhaps it's because I grew up in America where it's unacceptable. No, I admit, it may be more acceptable for Hydrabadi Muslims, like Amee" (*Our Feet* 9). And Amee, Layla's mother in the novel, is seen as shrill, gaudy, and one-dimensional (67–68), as is Chadha's Mrs. Bambra in *Bend it Like Beckham*. States Layla, "My mother's flashy sari and jewels [are] glowing more brightly than the wedding lights," exposing "the loose flesh of her belly" (85); in another part, she appears like an "angel," standing alone in her "ethereal splendor," praying to Allah (73). Her mother is never real to the diasporic subject, and like herself, she is just another

"[woman] brought up knowing we would be sold, and looking forward to it" (230).

Labelling an arranged marriage a "Pagan ritual of sacrifice" (246), she eventually leaves her husband and her in-laws, but has nowhere to go. "Where will these streets lead me?" she muses as the novel ends. Empowerment for the diasporic Indian woman comes from leaving the home space and Indian cultural practices, replicating the "binarist logic and representations of early Third World Feminists' modernist agenda" (Shohat 12).

Leaving the "oppressive" home space is also reflected in *Bend It Like Beckham*, and even though Chadha touches upon the neocolonial component in critiquing what is considered male domination in postcolonial and transnational women's texts, her attempts, too, ultimately lead to failure, as I discuss in the remainder of this chapter. The director tries to show a complex set of oppressions operating in Jasminder's father's seemingly harsh behaviour toward his daughter's ambition to play soccer – he explains that he faced racism and rejection as a Black man and an immigrant from Kenya – and therefore, his earlier, seemingly unreasonable, actions in denying his daughter permission to play football ultimately make sense. However, such moments, too, seem forced and inserted, for the resolution of the film belies Bambra's sentiments.

The model of empowerment that Chadha provides throughout the film is limited, in that it involves a "white man [and women] saving a brown woman from a brown man" (Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 120). Jasminder is persuaded by her white friend, Juliette, to try out for football, and ultimately, it is the white coach who persuades her to follow her dreams and desires; he also becomes her love interest. Jasminder's mother, Sukhi, too, is rendered voiceless and oppressive, only interested in teaching her daughter how to make "round, round *chappatis*" and "*alu gobi*," and even though she appears as a fierce and strong Punjabi woman, she is shown as the castrator of her seemingly meek husband, who can only speak out against her after getting "Dutch courage" by consuming whiskey. Sukhi, the hysterical Indian woman, yelling and shrieking, becomes a marker of Indian womanhood and culture, obviously to be avoided at all costs!

Thus, Westernization couched in terms of choice will bring freedom and happiness to Jasminder, while the *alu gobi* will bring spiritual and cultural sustenance! In this era of global capitalism, U.S. Orientalists view India, according to Prasad, as "pure fantasy," and to get away from

materialism, they cultivate their souls through an "engagement with this thing called India" (20), and certain forms of exotic cultural enthusiasms, such as the resurgent popularity of yoga and Indian fashion and films in the past decade, attest to such claims.

In all these films and texts, the Indian household is constructed as oppressive for the next generation, while Indianness is fetishized in the form of colourful Indian weddings. Racism and neocolonialism are elided, and the audience is only sympathetic to the modern subject. In *Bend It*, for example, when Jasminder is mistakenly perceived by the would-be in-laws of her sister as kissing an English boy on the streets of London, Sukhi's sense of communal belonging, which is extremely important for Indians in a racist country, is threatened. She explains how transgressive women bring shame upon their families, who are then ostracized from the community. Yet, because Sukhi is seen as a stereotypical and traditional Indian woman, the Western audience's sympathy is with Jasminder.

Thus, even though artists and writers may try to provide nuanced portrayals of oppression, they do not "warn us to examine the limits and pitfalls of easy sympathy" (Kumar 193). Such easy sympathy by the Western audience ignores and represses the appalling "complicity between oppressive, dominant forces" in India and the West (Kumar 190). While Chadha attempts to show English households as equally oppressive for English girls by representing Juliette's bumbling mother, she actually comes across as a likeable character, as compared to Sukhi.

And while some of the oppressions of patriarchal structures are uncovered, such as Jasminder's "mate" Tony's closeted homosexuality, it becomes just a fetishized moment for displacing the anxieties and conflicts of discursive constructions of identities within the First World diaspora for postcolonial subjects (Gopinath, "Local Sites" 159). While Jasminder's father looks the monster of racism in the eye, and calls it by name, it is the enforced resolution, where Jasminder leaves the oppressive Indian community for more liberal climes in the United States, with the promise of romantic love that the narrative gestures toward, that is ultimately troubling. The fact that this film was a hit in the West shows the too easy acceptance of such commodified and fetishized versions of oppression and Indianness constantly being circulated.

Regarding the diaspora in the West, Dirlik agues that for Eurocentricism and its "cultural hegemony to be sustained, its boundaries must be rendered more porous in order to absorb alternative cultural possibilities

that might otherwise serve as sources of destructive oppositions" ("Postcolonial Aura" 582). The boundaries are rendered porous by so-called postcolonial artists, writers, and intellectuals representing the "soul," tormented or otherwise, for the West to consume, comfortable in their "knowledge" of themselves as superior. These artists, "beneficiaries" of "global capital," are then commodifying victimhood and oppression for a Western neo-Oreintalist audience.

Chadha and Ali are unable to write "against the lure of diaspora" because they are "made to speak uniformly as minors and women to the West," reinforcing the hegemony of the centre, and are unable to "break alliance with this kind of official sponsorship of 'minority discourse'" (Chow 599). Their fractured gaze becomes complicit with the West's desire for its Other as they live in the First World and function as spokespersons for native woman in the Global South (Chow 589). They therefore function as "exotic minors" unable to "fight the crippling effects of Western imperialism and [Third World] paternalism" (601).

These artists cannot face up to their "truthful relationship to those 'objects of study' behind which [they] … easily hide – voyeurs, as 'fellow victims,' and as self-appointed [custodians]" (605). Chow claims that "It is necessary to write against the lure of diaspora: Any attempt to deal with 'women' or the 'oppressed classes' in the 'third world' that does not at the same time come to term with the historical conditions of its own articulation is bound to repeat the exploitativeness that used to and still characterizes most 'exchange' between 'West' and 'East.'" (605). In spite of moments of critique of colonialism and globalization, these writers are unable to politicize the relationships of self and other, of the Global North's exploitation and the Global South's oppression, for they "[mask] the pleasure" (JanMohamed, "Economy" 23) they derive, allowing them to exploit the Other, which ultimately undermines the very possibility latent in these texts.