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Women of the South Asian Diaspora

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Abstract:

In this paper I have made an attempt to study the lives of women of South Asian descent---women who trace their origins to India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. The lives of South Asian women in general are centered on the loneliness and isolation that they experience in an alien country and culture. Their search for identity takes the form of reaffirmation of their cultural heritage. As members of a cultural ethnic group, they share a common set of values, ideas, experiences and behavioral and linguistic traits which distinguish them from other ethnic groups. Their ethnic and cultural heritage gives them not only a sense of identity but also a feeling of belonging and a pride in their ethnicities. It helps them in their struggle to make the United States, a real home for themselves and their families.

Keywords: Immigrant, community, identity, alienation, cultural heritage

As one of the least-studied ethnic groups in the United States, people of South Asian origin have been overlooked by historians and social scientists as well as by scholars of Ethnic and Women's Studies. In this paper I have made an attempt to study the lives of women of South Asian descent---women who trace their origins to India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal. South Asians are an enormously diverse group by nation, region, language and religion. Within each nation there are different regions with different histories, different languages and different ways of practicing the same religion. It is estimated that every language of the Indian subcontinent is now represented in the United States. Moreover, Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis, Jains and many variations within and between each group are represented in the U.S. In spite of their significant numbers and long residency in the United States, South Asian Americans remain peripheral to any discussion of American culture, experience, or history. As with many other marginalized groups, they are absent from the dominant discourse of the nation-state. Contemporary South Asians, who have made their homes in the United States since the 1960s, are contesting their position on the periphery of American life and culture. There is a dearth of material on the impact of the diaspora on the entire South Asian community and the little documentation that is available, focuses primarily on men and their experiences. The presence and concerns of women are largely discounted. In this paper I have tried to focus on the experiences and identity formation of South Asian women in the United States.

For writing this paper, I have used the theoretical framework of diaspora in terms of experiences of displacement and of constructing homes away from home. The word diaspora derives from the Greek---*dia*, 'through', and *speirein*, 'to scatter'. According to *Webster's Dictionary*, diaspora refers to a 'dispersion from'. Hence the word embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a 'home' from where the dispersion occurs. At the heart of the notion of diaspora is the image of a journey. According to Avtar Brah(1997), diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots 'elsewhere'. What is important is how and in what ways a group is inserted within the social relations of class, gender, racism, sexuality or other axes of differentiation in the country to which it migrates. She suggests that the identity of the diasporic imagined community is far from fixed. "It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively." (Brah, 1997, p.444).In his essay, "Diasporas" James Clifford suggests that the main features of diaspora are a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship.(Clifford, 1994, p. 305).Clifford points out that according to Amitav Ghosh, the South Asian diaspora is not so much oriented to roots in a specific place and a desire for return as around an ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations (p.306). Clifford also argues that diasporic cultural forms can never be exclusively nationalist. "They are deployed in transnational networks built from multiple attachments, and they encode practices of accommodation with, as well as resistance to, host countries and their norms" (p.307).

John Berry, a cross-cultural psychologist, in his study of the acculturative strategies of South Asian immigrants points out two major issues. The first one is cultural maintenance, that is, how important are the person's cultural identity and characteristics, and will he work to maintain them. The second one involves contact and participation, that is, to what extent should the individual become involved in other cultural groups, or remain in his own group.When both these underlying issues are considered simultaneously, a

conceptual framework is created with four possible acculturation strategies: 1) Assimilation occurs when the individual does not wish to maintain her cultural identity and seeks daily interaction with the dominant culture; 2) Marginalization indicates a strategy where the individual has little interest in cultural maintenance but also does not want to have contact with others usually due to exclusion or discrimination; 3) Separation occurs when the person chooses to maintain her cultural identity but wishes to avoid interaction with the dominant group; 4) Integration is the strategy when “there is some degree of cultural integrity maintained, while at the same time seeking to participate as an integral part of the larger social framework” (Berry, 2006, p. 9). Berry suggests that the South Asian immigrants seem to use the strategy of integration which is associated with a positive adaptation to a new cultural context.

If we look at the history of the South Asian diaspora we observe that South Asians formed one of the smaller immigrant groups in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Only a handful of South Asian women entered the United States with their husbands. The Immigration Act of 1965 abolished the national origin quota system which had severely limited Asian immigration during the earlier period. It encouraged the entry of professionals, mainly in the fields of science and technology. The Act also caused an influx of professionals from South Asia who were proficient in both spoken and written English. By 1970, South Asians were arriving in unprecedented numbers. The immigrants’ occupations in high demand fields have been very relevant to their adjustment and adaptation in the American society.

The immigration of South Asians to the United States began in the late 1890s with men from the Indian province of Punjab immigrating to California to work in agriculture, lumbering, steamships and the railways. Most of these men initially planned to return home after saving up a substantial amount of money but eventually changed their minds and settled down in California. This small-scale immigration was however restricted through a number of legislations. First, the Immigration Act of 1917 established a “barred zone” that included countries of South Asia from where immigration was prohibited. Second, a Supreme Court decision in the case of *United States v. Bhagat Singh* determined that Indians were ineligible for citizenship or its privileges such as owning land. Finally, the Immigration Law of 1924 prohibited immigrants from bringing family members to the US. Consequently, many of the men married Mexican women, which resulted in the Mexican Hindu community of California. Indians were not allowed to become citizens until 1946, and at that time a quota of 105 Indians per year were allowed to immigrate. After independence from the British colonial rule in 1947, this quota was extended to each of the newly-formed nations of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Burma (Deepak, 2004, p. 7).

The first large wave of South Asian immigration to the US occurred after the 1965 Immigration Act, which ended the racially discriminatory preference for immigration from Northern Europe and changed the quota of 105 per year to 20,000. This change in the number of visas, along with the preferences given to highly educated professionals in the fields of science, engineering, and medicine, enabled the US to find a source of labour to expand its space research and weapons industry in its competition with the erstwhile Soviet Union. In addition, doctors filled the increased demand created by the newly legislated Medicare and Medicaid programs (Prashad, 2000, p.75).

In 1976 amendments were made to the original law, requiring that migrants have firm job offers before immigration. The enormous growth of the information technology sector resulted in a revision of laws to facilitate the increased admission of highly skilled workers and their families as temporary workers via H-1B visas valid for only three years. Almost 50 per cent of H1-B visa holders are from India and Pakistan. Many companies use these software programmers to save on the costs of unemployment and health insurance, providing these workers with neither. The Immigration Act of 1990 further restricted immigration through employer preference by new requirements of the labour certification process placed on employers (Prashad, 2000, p. 77).

The consequences of these changes in policy are reflected in the changing socioeconomic profile of South Asians. From 1965 to 1976, 83 per cent of Indians who immigrated qualified for the preference for scientists, technical workers, and professionals, whereas family reunification was the basis on which 86 per cent of Indian immigrants were admitted in 1992. According to Deepak (2004), the policy of “creaming” the highly educated from South Asia and other Asian countries is made invisible through the Model Minority Myth that Asians, especially South Asians, are genetically predisposed or culturally programmed to excel in math and science, work hard and have strong family values(p.8).

The group that immigrated between the years of 1965 and 1976 was highly educated, coming from urban locations predominantly within India and Pakistan, comprised primarily of scientists, engineers and doctors, and often arrived as family units. This group entered the upper and upper-middle classes of the US and settled in affluent white areas, geographically dispersed from other South Asians. The group that arrived in the US between the years 1977-2000, was less educated and from lower class positions than their counterparts in the first group. This group, particularly those who arrived after 1985, entered the working class and the petty bourgeoisie in the US (Prashad, 2000, p. 78). In addition to India and Pakistan, immigrants in this wave also represent the countries of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. Many of these migrants arrived as singles and work as small business owners, taxi drivers, domestic workers and undocumented immigrants taking any job to survive. South Asians also work in manufacturing, transportation, communication or utilities, retail and wholesale trade. The immigrants who arrived in the US after 2000 are mostly well-educated professionals from a middle-class background. Within the category of South Asians, Indians are the largest group by settlement and annual entrance to the US, followed by Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The numbers arriving from Nepal and Bhutan are

negligible. About 70 per cent of all South Asians in the US live in New York, New Jersey, California, Texas, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Ohio (Deepak, 2004, p. 9).

The fact that most post-1965 immigrants are well-educated and came from the urban, middle-class families of South Asia made them somewhat different from earlier immigrants. With their technical and professional backgrounds and proficiency in the English language, they found it easier to get jobs shortly after coming to the US. Stephen Steinberg (2001) suggests that when ethnicity is associated with class disadvantages, poverty, hardships and a low standard of living, a powerful inclination to assimilate into the mainstream develops among the members of the group. This is because of the prevailing notion that assimilation would improve their chances for a better life. Since the South Asian immigrants have found their quality of life in the US better than they had expected, the desire or determination to assimilate into the mainstream American life is not felt intensely. This affirms Berry's theory that South Asians adopt the strategy of integration rather than assimilation. This has enabled them to develop a network of social relationships for defining their ethnicity and cultural identity. Improved economic status makes the immigrants deal with the American society as consumers. They can buy the goods and services needed to maintain their desired lifestyles and insulate themselves within their homes and communities (Dasgupta, 1996, p. 64). The ethnicity of the South Asian immigrants, especially women, takes the form of reaffirmation of their cultural identity. This also helps them to rebut their sense of isolation from the larger American society.

When the South Asian women get married to men residing in the US, they leave behind their world of kin and friendship. Many women come here with men they barely know. Marriages are usually arranged by parents. The parents of successful men look for brides from well-to-do families who would enhance their social status and power. Thus, marriage is more than a contract between a man and a woman. It is usually a larger social contract between families of similar caste and social status. Therefore, in a typical arranged marriage, it may take several years to work out a close relationship between the man and the woman. Even then the extended family relationship is emphasized rather than the marital one. The early tensions of marriage are buffered by social customs and a network of friends and family support. However, in some urban middle class families, women are allowed to marry men of their own choice. But there are no institutional arrangements for men and women to meet and dating is not a cultural norm.

When South Asian women get married to total strangers and come to the United States, they face the fear and instability of a new relationship without the support they had in their home countries (Dasgupta, 1996, p. 140). They are lonely and often rather poorly equipped to deal with a new environment and culture. They may have never cooked in their parents' homes or even know how to run the house properly. After coming to the US, they start living with men who are often demanding and unsupportive. If these men have lived in the US for a while, they are impatient with their wives' inefficiency and inability to adjust quickly to a new environment. According to an Indian psychiatrist dealing with South Asian women patients: "The pressure for some newly-married women to adjust both to a new man and a new situation can be devastating." (Pandya, 1999, p. 7)

Most South Asian women suffer from a pervasive feeling of rootlessness and alienation. Conflict and problems of adaptation and integration arise not merely from the new and the unfamiliar environment and culture but also from a sense of loss of the old and the familiar. This results in a feeling of confusion and disorientation. Moreover, the absence of a support system and inadequate English language skills make adjustment and acculturation difficult. As a result, these South Asian women suffer from a feeling of isolation and low self-esteem (Saran and Earnes, 1980, p. 364). Many South Asian men want their wives to be more like American women. Their whole concept of aesthetics may change. Some insist their wives to switch to western clothes because they do not want them to stand out in their traditional outfits. Some may want their wives to drink socially, talk to their American colleagues and be more interactive and confident in public. But the women may want to cling to their traditional clothes and ways because they help to give them a sense of identity (Pandya, 1999, p. 9).

But Dasgupta (1996) points out in her study that for many immigrant women, the loss of family and social networks is compensated by a corresponding gain--an improved status within the family. In South Asian countries an extended family with in-laws and kin is usual. This somewhat lessens the wife's importance as an individual. Second, her economic dependence on her husband gives her a lower status in the hierarchy of relationships. In the American setting, the status of an immigrant wife within the family improves for several reasons. Although the wife is economically dependent on her husband, the husband is dependent emotionally and socially on his wife more than he would have been if he stayed in his home country. The responsibility of homemaking is shouldered by the immigrant woman, whereas in South Asian societies, this responsibility is shared with other members of the extended family (p.143).

The South Asian immigrant woman's contribution to the family is emotional, social and often financial too. The majority of the immigrant women came to the US when their husbands were either struggling to establish themselves in the initial stages of their careers or were going to graduate school. At that stage, many of the immigrant women worked to support their families while others were single-handedly taking care of their families so that their husbands could spend more time and energy on their jobs and studies. Without the support system of an extended family, the husbands become totally dependent on their wives. The realization of their importance within their families coupled with their freedom from the dictates of the in-laws have given them a sense of self-worth which their counterparts in the South Asian societies do not always have. But their independence is usually confined to their families and does not take them to "wider horizons" (Dasgupta, 1996, p.144).

Deepak mentions the issue of immigration adjustment as examined by Ross-Sheriff in a qualitative study of 40 South Asian first-generation women. She finds that 86 per cent of the women reported that their lives are more stressful in the US than in their home countries. Some of the reasons for stress that they cited are: a) having to work both outside and inside the house full-time without physical or moral support from their husbands; b) not having their educational qualifications and training accepted, which necessitated the need for re-training; c) sexism in the workplace; d) expectations of being assertive and aggressive in their work-places and e) little time for social life. Despite these stress factors in their lives, only 6 per cent thought their situation in the US was worse than in their home countries. They felt that although living in the US is more stressful, they have more educational and economic opportunities, more freedom, and financial independence, a higher standard of living, more rights and respect as women, and fewer cultural constraints. They felt that they had more exposure to the outside world through their work and appreciated the lack of stigma toward women that are single or divorced in the US. More than half of the women were involved in providing services in their ethnic communities but very few were involved in any mainstream American groups or activities (Deepak, 2004, p. 13-14).

The issues affecting immigration adjustment for South Asian women can be identified as cultural, psychosocial, and structural in nature. Cultural issues are manifested for these women through differing expectations of behaviour in the workplace in the US. Psychosocial issues are related to loss and a lack of social support and structural issues are located in sexism in the workplace, the lack of extended family and household help. Other structural issues women face in the process of immigration adjustment are related to legal status, racism, economic and language barriers including the ability to understand American English. However, interestingly, the different levels of stress associated with immigration adjustment do not necessarily result in a desire to return to their home countries (Deepak, 2004, p. 14).

Jessie Bernard (1982) posits that “how much power a woman might have within her own little bailiwick, it has no leverage. It does not add up.” (p.194) She also suggests that the status of the homemaker is an example of the disjunction between formal or theoretical social status and actual status. The theoretical status accorded to the homemaker is high, but the social status accorded to the work of the household, including the care of the children, is low. An increasing number of these women feel denigrated and depressed. Thus the improved status of the south Asian immigrant women within their families has given them theoretical status but not actual social status. But a majority of these women defend their role of a homemaker. One interviewee said: “I am lucky that I can stay at home and be a good mother” (Dasgupta, 1996, p. 147). They also expressed their desire to go back to school and pursue a career when their children grow up. This justification for staying at home is often accompanied by subtle hostilities to working women. This feeling is understandable considering the fact that accepting them as successful would shatter their myth of staying at home for the good of the family and threaten their sense of self-esteem. These women also uphold gendered division of labour in order to maintain their status in the family and to protect their own sense of self-worth, in a society which is highly achievement-oriented. When the trend of the day projects working and achieving women as “role models,” the stay-at-home immigrant women feel extremely defensive and often experience an identity crisis (p.150).

Lack of participation of South Asian immigrant women in the American workforce should be seen in the light of the opportunities open to them. Unlike their husbands, most immigrant women do not possess professional skills in high-demand fields. As a result, they are unable to find proper employment. Many immigrant women have advanced education, considerable professional training and experience. But they face problems finding jobs commensurate with their qualifications and in their specialized areas (Helweg 80). The frustration they experience as women by watching the participation of other women in the American workforce is alleviated somewhat by circumscribing themselves within their families and communities and invoking their ethnic identity. Their ethnic enclaves provide them with ways of protecting their self-worth but do not solve their long-term problems. They only intensify their isolation from the mainstream American life. They are aware that their roles as homemakers within their families are not accorded any social status. But in order to protect their self-esteem, they reinforce their familial roles and view their household activities in job-oriented terms. Thus, the defense of their roles means the defense of the very system which makes them feel denigrated and intensify their alienation from the larger American society.

Regarding the employment opportunities of professional women, two main problems have been identified: accreditation of foreign qualifications and the issue of American experience. Even when the women’s qualifications are recognized as equivalent, most employees prefer to hire women with American degrees and put emphasis on American experience (Helweg, 1990, p. 80). For South Asian career women, the experience of working in the US could be both fulfilling and frustrating. A young physicist from Harvard said: “I feel terribly at home here. I don’t think I could work in India anymore” (Pandya, 1999, p. 8). On the other hand, a young doctor feels frustrated and alienated in her workplace. What she finds most upsetting is that there is discrimination: “I am expected to prove myself all the time. Nurses question me twice about the medication I recommend but they rarely question my American colleagues” (Pandya, 1999, p. 9). However, most professional women find their jobs challenging, interesting and conducive to personal growth. Though they want to move up the career ladder they do not want to sacrifice their families for their careers and are ready to make compromises when professional and family interests conflict. But the attitude and experience of professional women differ from those of the homemakers and the women working part-time. Women who work part-time say that they are not very occupationally-oriented. They are willing to quit their jobs if they feel any inconvenience in striking a balance between their work and their home (Dasgupta, 1996, p. 154).

The professional women's attitude to home management is also very different. They believe in division of labour at home according to one's abilities rather than along gender lines. They do not believe that women have to bear the chief responsibility for childcare and home management. A professional woman says that since she is out in her place of work most of the time, her child is mostly taken care of by the baby-sitter and by her husband. At times she feels guilty that she cannot give her child enough time and attention. Many of these career women also talk of the difficulties and stress of working full-time and being a homemaker. These difficulties are not expressed as complaints since their dual role of a career woman and a homemaker give them a feeling of achievement and fulfilment (p. 154).

These career women also differ from the homemakers in the definition of their roles as wives. The majority of the housewives, when asked about their roles, focus on childcare, running the home and the family in general whereas the professional women emphasize the importance of being "good companions" to their husbands. One of them commented: "When there is no outside interest on the part of the wife, the marriage must be going to the dogs because of boredom" (p. 155). The financially independent career women also believe that a woman's total dependence on her husband can become a burden to the conjugal relationship. They feel that their professional lives have made them more interesting companions and have perked up their marriages. Thus, unlike the homemakers, these working women do not believe that division of labour along gender lines and total involvement with home and family are necessary to make the marriages happy and successful. On the contrary, confinement of women to the home is seen by them as weakening the marriage bond (p. 155). Many career women also regret that their husbands still go by rigid gender role stereotypes. A successful doctor complains that her husband, while insisting that she works full-time at the hospital, wants her to be a traditional Indian wife. When she comes home from work, he expects her to cook a full Indian dinner, while he watches TV. Many South Asian men believe that taking care of home and family are women's responsibilities even if they are full-time professionals (Pandya, 1999, p. 9).

The professional women's relation with the South Asian community, especially its female members, is very ambivalent. They are forced to communicate as "housewives" and downplay their professional lives while interacting with the stay-at-home women. One woman said: "I cannot share my professional life with other ladies. As far as my profession is concerned, I have to talk to men. But that might create problems. So I try to interact as a housewife. It doesn't bother me." (Dasgupta, 1996, p.156). Another woman regretted: "There is no support system in my community for professional problems. Most members show very impersonal attitudes. They just ignore the fact that I have a profession. You are respected in this community if you are an excellent cook, keep your house well-decorated, and buy expensive clothes and furniture." (p.156). The unemployed housewives dominate because they are a majority. They ignore the professional identity of working women and glorify their roles as homemakers. Most professional women accept it because they do not want to alienate themselves from the community.

Deepak (2004) posits that the differences between generations in identity formation and the negotiations of desire are related to their different experiences of community, identity and settlement. For the first generation, the experience of migration distanced them from extended family and community expectations, which allowed for more freedom and independence in decision-making. Some of these women had also migrated from the homes of their in-laws, another site where independence in decision-making is curbed. Many of them played a pivotal role in building the community in the US, have more status and power and therefore are less bound by social expectations than they had been in India. Migration to a new country away from family and community creates the possibility of doing things differently, without the pressures and expectations of family and community living in the same geographical space. What is common among the first-generation women is a fluid sense of their South Asian identities. Some of the issues they confronted in coming to the US are how to succeed financially, how to regain their class status, how to adjust to being an immigrant and a minority in the US, and how to protect and nurture their children in the US (p.90).

For the second-generation women, a feeling of alienation and exclusion in the US creates a deep sense of loss and longing. This feeling of alienation is a motivating force in their lives, in the decisions they make about work, education, travel, friendships and choice of spouses. Many of these women have travelled back to India or Pakistan and have rich relationships with their cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents. Several second-generation women have travelled to India as adults by themselves as part of a quest to discover their Indianness, which is inextricably bound to their identities. This discovery process often involves reading novels by South Asian authors, attending Indian dance parties and viewing Bollywood films. One of the ways these women negotiate their desire to replace their sense of alienation is by marrying men of the same regional-religious-linguistic background, either through community get-togethers and conferences or through arranged marriage. Most of these women have a rich, varied and lived understanding of South Asianness in the US.

Sometimes women feel branded by American communities as outsiders and other times are told by their parents and communities that as Indians they are different. Restrictions on socializing such as not going to sleepovers or in some cases not going to other people's houses for socializing creates additional barriers to social integration in the neighborhoods they live in. The second-generation women who live in the densely-knit South Asian communities in the US do not have the same sense of void and alienation. For them, the community plays a pivotal role in their social, familial and spiritual life. Women who travel back and forth to their native country and the US are very comfortable in embracing an "in-between" position, moving back and forth between cultures and the multiple locations they occupy. These women do not have the same inclination to find spouses from similar backgrounds. Regardless of

generational location, the women who do not fit the norms of ideal South Asian womanhood along axes of identity such as class, culture or heritage have a more fluid sense of their own South Asianness because of occupying a peripheral position (Deepak, 2004, p.91-4).

Deepak suggests that both the first and the second generation women negotiate their desires using a rich variety of strategies. These strategies are drawn from the wide range of constraints and possibilities available to them as women of the South Asian diaspora in the US. Mothers and daughters are invested in their roles and in their relationships to each other, and this is central in their re-imagining ideal South Asian womanhood in the diaspora. The issues of dating, marriage and sexuality are the ground on which women, families and communities negotiate their desires. Throughout these negotiations, mothers and sometimes fathers maintain their South Asianness by emphasizing their roles as parents and the quality of their relationships to their daughters. Daughters maintain their South Asianness in a similar way, by being good daughters through communication with their parents and through honouring the cultural heritage of the family by searching for routes of continuity through relationship, work and involvement in the community (p.95).

To conclude, it may be said that the lives of South Asian women in general are centered on the loneliness and isolation that they experience in an alien country and culture. Their search for identity takes the form of reaffirmation of their cultural heritage. As members of a cultural ethnic group, they share a common set of values, ideas, experiences and behavioral and linguistic traits which distinguish them from other ethnic groups. Their ethnic and cultural heritage gives them not only a sense of identity but also a feeling of belonging and a pride in their ethnicity. Last but not the least, it helps them in their struggle to make the United States, a real home for themselves and their families.

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