

lawless and chaotic time, gave me a fascinating insight into what the distant or maybe the not-too-distant past must have been like.

I read books on geography, history and assorted subjects. Then I read books on biology. Through yellowed and crumbling pages I read about the orderly arrangements of living things, with regard to their similarities, relationships and evolution. With much interest I devoured pages about Linnaeus, a Swedish naturalist, and his *Animal Systematics*—about phyla, genera and Latin names.

I felt weary. Why was I doing this? What was it that I was looking for? I began going down through strange-sounding names...Phylum Porifera, Phylum Coelenterata, till I stopped cold at Phylum Annelida. In parentheses the authors explained that the Latin "annelus" meant little ring. Best known examples: earthworms and leeches. I read on and found that Phylum Annelida was broken down into classes: Class Archiannelida, Class Polychaeta, Class Oligochaeta, Class Hirudinea. I shut all the books and shut them hard. I could hear the pages within them crumble. I had a fleeting urge to eat those yellow tidbits of paper.

I began to realize what just might be happening in those remote villages. Have you? I am scared. Are you? My heart is sinking as I begin to dwell on the diverse subjects, such as self-fulfilling prophecies, reincarnation and even being simply scared. But then my name is Eugene Roache. What's yours?

Predicaments of the Hyphen

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The offices of the Indian Consulate, Paris

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Trying to get a tourist visa to travel to India, I am called again to the counter, surveyed, finally asked, "Are you of Indian origin?" An immediate freezing, and then a slow stammer, "I don't know what you mean. I was born in the United States; my father is Indian, that is he used to be...now he's an American citizen..." my voice trails off. I begin again, unable to control the pitch of my voice, a register too high, "Why do you want to know? What difference does it make?..."

I am cut off before I can make a proper offensive. "Just one moment, please be seated," says the consulate official coolly as she turns from the window. A few minutes later I am informed that the Consul General would like to speak with me. Would I wait until 5 p.m. when the Consul has finished with his meetings? It is only 3:30 p.m. I wait. At 5:30 p.m. I am told that the Consul has already gone home for the evening, and am asked to return the following morning.

The next morning my appearance causes a stir. I hear variously in French, English and Hindi the same question and confirmation, "That's her?" "That's the one." In the next few minutes, half a dozen people enter the booth on one pretext or another. I am made to repeat why I had not been able to obtain a visa for visiting India before leaving New York; how I'd left it until the last minute, how the Indian Embassy in New York had been closed because of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, the last three days in May before I left for Paris.

The consulate official frowns at me and studies my application. I look down and find penciled in large letters across the top: NO PROOF OF INDIAN ORIGIN. Further down the page in red ink I can make out the scrawl: "Applicant became hostile when asked about her origin. Refused to answer question in a straightforward manner."

I look up. The consulate officer fondles my passport, then stamps it aggressively before delivering a short lecture on applying for visas well in advance of departure. I never see the Consul General, nor am I told why I was made to wait.

* * *

Certainly the question, "Where are you from?" is never an innocent one. Yet not all subjects have equal difficulty in replying. To pose a question of origin is subtly to pose a question of return, to challenge not only temporally, but geographically, one's place in the present. For someone who is neither fully Indian nor wholly American, it is a question which provokes a sudden failure of confidence, the fear of never replying adequately.

The consulate official's questioning highlighted, in a brief moment, a series of contradictions about how we understand and talk about identity. By "origin" was she referring to my parentage, place of birth, or both? If she meant to emphasize my parentage, was it because I "looked" Indian, thus invoking concepts of "race" and "blood," which I am usually at pains to dispute? Did it matter that one parent was Indian by birth and the other not? Was it important to know that both were American citizens? Did it matter what I called myself, or with what culture(s) I claimed affinity? For me, race, nationhood, culture and identity were as surely entangled in the consulate officer's question as she had seen it to be "straightforward."

I am aware of a potentially productive conflation of second-generation with post-colonial subjectivities. Airports and consulate offices are increasingly marked as the sites for the enunciation of post-colonial identities.¹ Airports, of course, mark the geographical space of liminality, while consulates and embassies signal (at least) the discourse of citizenship and rights in foreign territory. At such sites arrival and departure scenes are immanent, but suspended by what is now departmentalized as "International Relations." Although there are obvious similarities between second-generation and post-colonial positionings, I think it makes sense to underscore further points of contact, to mark those differential, though contradictory, predicaments of the hyphen.

Hyphen-Nation

When I was growing up, no discrete identity existed that I could claim. Faced with a questionnaire, I never knew which box to check, "Asian," "White," "Other"? I was among the first-born to that second wave of Indian immigrants to the U.S. which began as a trickle in the early '60s when immigration restrictions were relaxed. As Gouri Bhat notes, the date of our parents' arrival in this country is important because it limited our cultural options.² This slice of the second generation was raised without "Indian friends, Bharatanatyam dance classes, Karnatic music recitals, Hindu temple societies, or Hindi films," because the large Indian communities of Los Angeles or the San Francisco Bay Area, Dallas or New York, were not firmly established until the mid-seventies.³ Bhat argues that "Indian-Americans have had no distinctive creative voices of their own, probably because that generation of [second]-wave immigrant offspring is still maturing, now swelling the college ranks."⁴

The increasing currency of terms such as "Indo-American," or "Indian-American," even given the maturing of a generation seeking its voice, does not reassure me. Rather it signals for me the continual virulence of identity politics in the United States as newer groups rush for their hyphens, even as some groups begin to abandon them, as still others, such as U.S.-born or immigrant Puerto Ricans, have never adopted them.⁵

The Indian-American hyphen retains the imaginary of the nation-state, its mobile diaspora with increasing (if complicated) choices about whether to go or stay. It is a hyphen that signals the desire (and the ability) to be both "here" and "there." Yet the post-colonial nature of this particular hyphen should not obscure other processes of hyphen formation. For example, in the African-American context, the notion of a "diaspora" with "a land of return" is problematic. Such a notion must be located equally in post-civil war "repatriation" schemes launched by whites to return American blacks to Africa, and in the social movements of Marcus Garvey and others who viewed this return as a form of empowerment.⁶ Then too

there is the fact that few Anglo-Americans recognize the political etymologies of the words "Native American" or "American Indian." Five hundred years after Columbus, too few "Indian-Americans" recognize how their hyphen participates in the erasure of those on this continent long before Columbus got lost.

I do not mean to suggest that claiming the hyphen has not also been difficult or without worthy elements of struggle. For there are other, more derogatory ways of naming my generation. We of the alphabet soup⁷—the ABCDs (American Born Confused Deshis); the ABCDEFGs (American Born Confused Deshis Emigrated from Gujarat); with HIJs (Houses in Jersey)—are the ones Salman Rushdie satirizes in *The Satanic Verses*, the ones who cannot properly pronounce their own South Asian names:

"There was a TV reporter here some days back," said George Miranda. She said her name was Kerleeda. I couldn't work it out.

Zeeny interrupted. "He doesn't know what freaks you guys turn into. That Miss Singh, outrageous. I told her, the name's Khalida dearie, rhymes with Dalda, that's a cooking medium. But she couldn't say it. Her own name. Take me to your Kerleader. You types got no culture. Just wogs now. Ain't it the truth?"⁸

If Rushdie's caricature of South Asians in Britain rings true, so also does Bhat's account of attending a Hindi language class at the University of Texas: "wall to wall ABCDs" with slack-jawed West Texas drawls.⁹

There were, however, other reasons for not knowing who I was; it was not simply the lack of some ready-made identity when I was growing up in the '60s and '70s. There was also the fact that my father rarely spoke of India, except to punish one of his willful daughters: "If we were in India you would never speak to me like this!" Nor did he ever speak to us in Tamil, his mother tongue. It was only later that I learned that an Indian birth would not have prevented English being my first language (given trajectories of a certain South Indian caste, the privileges of an aspiring class). I use the term "first language" deliberately. Although English was my mother's tongue, I cannot bring myself to call it my mother tongue.

Bharati Mukherjee speaks of being born into a class that does not live in its native language.¹⁰ And I puzzle over the relationship between post-colonial South Asian friends who are illiterate in their mother tongues (What must it be like to be so supremely literate elsewhere, but to stumble through intimate geography in a Madras or Delhi, unable to read street signs, buses, store-fronts?) and someone like me speaking with a clumsy tongue, who after years of language study, can read and write enough Hindi to tell whether the bus is going to Janakpuri or Chanyakpuri and enough Tamil to skim the newspapers and write to my grandmother. Are we "Midnight's Children," post-colonial and second-generation: born that some might speak, and others to read and write; that some be deaf or dumb, and others blind?

Meena Alexander speaks of a "treasured orality," a "cherished illiteracy" in her mother tongue, Malayalam. She records memories: A Scottish tutor who over and over makes her say "duck duck," "pluck pluck," "milk milk," "silk silk";¹¹ her "split sense of writing in English."¹² And finally, in spite of her attempt to ironize the "privilege of illiteracy," a sense of rage:

Come ferocious alphabets of flesh
splinter and raze my page

that out of the dumb
and bleeding part of me

I may claim
my heritage.¹³

* * *

For a post-colonial critic, writing about an “over-there” enacts a certain similarity with the anthropologist’s “Being There”—the act of writing about one place from another. And yet, as Nasser Hussein argues, the act of “going home” subjects the post-colonial critic to a particular vulnerability, a loss of the immunity that exile affords.¹⁴ Thus Salman Rushdie confesses, “...however I choose to write about other-there, I am forced to reflect the world in fragments of broken mirrors...I must reconcile myself to the inevitability of the missing bits.”¹⁵

This fractured or hyphenated identity marked by the geographical site “over-there” is also marked temporally by the term “post-colonial.” As Hussein continues,

Hyphens are radically ambivalent signifiers, for they simultaneously connect and set apart; they simultaneously represent both distance and connection, belonging, and not-belonging. What is even more curious about a hyphenated pair of words is that meaning cannot reside in one word or the other, but can only be understood in movement. “Post-colonial” then suggests a movement away from and yet a vital connection to colonialism.¹⁶

Hyphenated identities in the U.S. share with post-colonial identities, “a movement between cultural identity and nation-states,”¹⁷ revealing important limits about the specification of difference. For it is not possible to hyphenate all identities. If it seems strange to speak of Bengali-Indians (or Bengali-Americans), Punjabi-Indians (or Punjabi-Americans), Tamil-Indians (or Tamil-Americans), it is not absurd to note that a Gujarati Samaj, a Singh Sabha, Tamil Sangam or an American Federation of Muslims from India (AFMI) finds potent expression on American soil.

The hyphen enacts a violent shuttling between two or more worlds. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, however, argues that “the challenge of the hyphenated reality lies in the hyphen itself: the *becoming* Asian-American; the realm in-between, where predetermined rules cannot fully apply.”¹⁸ Minh-Ha continues,

[T]he *becoming* Asian-American affirms itself at once as a transient and constant state: one is born over and over again as hyphen rather than as fixed entity, thereby refusing to settle down in one (tubicolous) world or another. The

hyphenated condition certainly does not limit itself to a duality between two cultural heritages.¹⁹

All identities are intrinsically coalitional, in that they seek to establish grounds of affinity. The term Asian-American, however, is a deliberately constructed coalitional identity, an inclusive political term of solidarity for those of diverse Asian backgrounds which attempts to distance itself from the logic of nation-states. Other coalitional identities such as “South Asian” or “women of color” function similarly.²⁰ It is important to recognize though, that coalitional identities are by nature unstable, and may also, as in the case of “becoming Asian-American,” set into play a necessary set of exclusions when talking about affirmative action criteria and the specific histories of different immigrant groups in the United States.

The hyphenated ethnic identity in the U.S., however, has more often than not marked a move toward the center. The hyphen in “Indian-American” then, must be seen not simply as a conflict of identities, but as a political signifier, not merely as Bharati Mukherjee has put it, a form of “ghettoization,” a “temptation to be surmounted.”²¹ Thus hyphenated identities have typically signaled a politics of assimilation in this country, at least formally different from experiences in Canada or Britain, where South Asians may form part of a coalitional identity termed “Black.”

In fact, the place of South Asians in the U.S. has often been to work against coalitions with people of color. “Affirmative action alibis,”²² South Asians are often unwitting or willing mediators between the white power structure and other communities marginalized by it. We find it easier to condemn the racism that is sometimes directed against us, than the hypocrisy and racism in South Asian communities directed against other American people of color.

Indeed, I wonder if the unwarranted attention given Dinesh D’Souza’s book *Illiberal Education*²³ isn’t related to the politics of the hyphenated Indian, many of whom are members of a large and increasingly powerful business community anxious to prove to the conservative interests who run this country that it too stands for the same liberal values of “competition” and the “free market” ready to emphasize that the “race” recorded on some South Asian passports is still “Aryan.”²⁴

A recent article in *Indian American* magazine, an emerging voice of such hyphenated interests, reports triumphantly that Indian small businesses in San Francisco qualify for the “Minorities and Women Business Enterprise Program,” allowing them to compete with well-established firms for lucrative public contracts by taking ten percent off a minority bid.²⁵ In order to be considered, the Indian community had to present evidence of historical discrimination in California. This, no doubt, was done by pointing to two groups settled in the state in the early 1900s: the “Mexican-Hindu” community of the Imperial Valley²⁶ and the Sikhs of Yuba County, many of them agricultural workers or small orchard owners. (Other Sikhs have been more recently employed as low-paid cannery workers in Stanislaus County.)²⁷ The irony of the Indian victory in San Francisco should not be lost. The less well-off Sikhs of Yuba county may never be in the position to benefit from such Affirmative Action policies,²⁸ yet Indian businessmen are not only given preferential treatment in the United States, but as NRIs (Non-Resident Indians), they are also awarded higher rates of interest to invest in India. Thus even as they proclaim historical victimization, they enact the power of

privilege. The hyphen is indeed an ambivalent signifier, for it includes under its umbrella first-generation immigrants, both citizens and non-citizens, and second and third generations born on American soil, born as well to different experiences of racism and discrimination.

* * *

I wonder at the ease with which Bharati Mukherjee can proclaim "I am an American,"²⁹ words which were forced back down my throat in grade school, words I was never permitted to say with any amount of certainty. How is it that Mukherjee's post-colonial transition from "graduate student to citizen"³⁰ remarks neither upon a process of immigration long problematic for India, nor upon second-generation subjects who have often found the promises of unmarked citizenship elusive at best?

Kalpana Vrudhula's poem, "Do not belong to this or that, but I am here" expresses some of the ways in which second-generation Indians handle the presumption that they are not American:

"Are you from India?"
"No, my parents are."
"Oh, How exciting! You know I saw the movie Gandhi. I thought it was great... Have you been?"
"Oh, Yes, of course!"
(I've only gone once, I was already 23)
"The guy I work with is from India. You must know him? his last name, uh... let me think, oh yes, Patel?"³¹

Vrudhula is effectively able to convey the ignorance with which most white Americans view India through her repetition and variation of these lines throughout her reflections. Her continual polite reply to the ignorant questioner: "Oh, Yes, of course" is a means of underscoring both the nature of the question and her own (lack of) response, for she is not able to say, as the title of the poem suggests, "No, I'm from here."

Yet if second-generation Indian voices are coming to terms with citizenship, Americanness and cultural belonging, they must also face questions of race, and in ways that immigrant parents have not often been forced to confront. Indeed, I would argue that race is perhaps the most crucial juncture distinguishing South Asian post-colonial from second-generation subjectivities. That is, second-generation writers must reconsider not only their relationship to white Americans but to American people of color as well. The second stanza of Vrudhula's poem painfully manifests what Mira Nair's film, *Mississippi Masala* (1992), portrays so clearly about racism in the Indian community (whatever else might be said of the film).

"Say baby is you mixed?"
"Mixed?"
"You know, I knows you black, but you're sometin' else too?"

"No, I'm not *mixed*."
"Yes you is. You're black 'en?"
(Why the hell should I answer this guy?
I could, but he probably would ask me
what tribe anyway).
"Come on baby, what else is ya?"
(Ah... The bus).³²

Here Vrudhula repudiates an attempt to establish affinity on the basis of color. Instead of the polite replies proffered her other interlocutors, she provides no information at all to her black questioner, responding instead with a stereotype that is far more offensive than her questioner's attempts at conversation.

Gouri Bhat's essay, on the other hand, attempts sustained reflection on the complexities of color and identification both within and outside of the Indian community, showing both a willingness to recognize points of contact with other communities of color, and an unwillingness to use color as a means to appropriate the experiences of those less privileged. She calls the Indian-American child's benign sense of difference "the form without the content of prejudice."³³ And although there is room for disagreement on the levels of racism that immigrant and second-generation Indians face in the United States, the very unevenness of the community's exposure to racism points largely to the protections afforded by class privilege. As Bhat writes,

In the classrooms of radical discourse, the darkness of my skin is like a badge of honor. I am marked as an Empath. Guilty and solicitous white male scholars tip-toe around my privileged understanding of cultural texts. And I think: I was not raised in the barrios, in the ghettos, under the British colonial empire, so how is my color a window?³⁴

* * *

My Illinois birth certificate registers my mother's race as "white," and my father's as "Indian." The very appearance of the category "race," and the responses it elicits, somehow surprise me. And yet in California miscegenation laws remained on the books until 1951, with the result that most Punjabi men in the Imperial Valley formed families with women of Hispanic origin.³⁵ "Men and women applying to the county clerk for a license had to look alike, and most often it was Hispanic women who satisfied that requirement. Many a license application had 'brown' and 'brown' in the blanks for 'race'..."³⁶

Yet I cannot forget that my childhood in Fresno (as the daughter of an immigrant who arrived in the U.S. in 1960) was not that of Kartar Dhillon's, whose father arrived at the port of San Francisco in 1899, and whose family faced life-threatening racism. As Dhillon recounts, "My mother was sure she would die after surgery. A doctor told her she would have to go to the county hospital in Fresno to have a tumor removed. Her first sight of the doctor in the hospital confirmed her fears. 'That man does not like Indians,' she told us. 'He is the one who

let Labh Singh die.”³⁷ Dhillon’s mother was right. She did die a few days after the surgery. The year was 1932.

Second Wave, Second generation

The accounts of women from the second wave of Indian immigration to the United States, are of course, markedly different. They traffic hugely in the idioms of class privilege, and unless one is knowledgeable about conditions of the everyday in India, it is easy to mistake such markers for the generalized oppression of women in India. Thus when Bharati Mukherjee proclaims: “I was born into a religion that placed me a Brahmin, at the top of its hierarchy, while condemning me as a woman to a role of subservience,” and later says without a trace of embarrassment, “I’m a person who couldn’t ride a bus when she first arrived...”³⁸ It is easy for an American audience to misunderstand that the sheltered life evoked here refers not so much to being shut away, as to the privilege of being driven from one place to another. Likewise, in Indira Ganesan’s 1990 novel, *The Journey*, the narrator reflects upon how her mother weathers the transition from a small South Indian village to the United States. She wondered, “as a young girl who had family and servants to cater to all her needs, a woman who had never been to the market by herself,” how her mother could leave for America to bravely face supermarkets, kitchen appliances and car washes.³⁹ Ably conquering self-service America, the narrator’s mother does not lament the loss of servants in India.

I do not mean to suggest that all narratives that mark later periods of Indian immigration to the U.S. are so steeped in the language of adjustments to material, rather than emotional conditions; or that all such transitions are easier rather than difficult. For there are many different stories of arrival and survival. If the extent to which race is addressed by the subjects of first-generation narratives is inflected by class positioning, second-generation subjects, because they have been interpolated from early childhood into the racialized structure of U.S. identity politics, are compelled to confront race in their narratives. A recent documentary by Indian feminist Indu Krishnan, *Knowing her Place* (1990), poignantly addresses some of the emotional crises of identity among second-generation and immigrant Indians in the United States. The film opens with a middle-aged woman naming the pain of a “second generation immigrant child”: “It takes a long time to figure out where you belong.”

Krishnan presents a dramatic subject, a woman who oscillates continually between the questions, “Are you Indian,” and “Are you American”—never able to answer either. Vasu, the wife of an NYU mathematics professor, is tortured by this question-cycle which enacts a vicious attack on her fragile hold on selfhood and identity. In order to escape the endless repetition of these questions, Vasu attempts suicide while the documentary is being made.

Vasu’s family had moved to New York when she was a baby, and her childhood was effectively American (she avidly describes her passion for “rock and roll”). So too was the racism she experienced at age seven or eight: children who spit on her to see if the “dirt” will rub off. Although her family returned to India when she was twelve, she spent only four years in India, returning to the U.S. at age sixteen with a husband. Yet those four years, the years of adolescence, must have been as formative as her American years, deepening what Vasu calls “the dualism within her.” She movingly, if obliquely describes her experience of puberty, shut away for several days in a dark room as is the custom among orthodox groups, part of

her knowing this was unacceptable in the country she had left behind, and part of her accepting the isolation: afraid, and at the same time understanding that it was impossible to ask questions.

Before returning to India at age twelve, Vasu entertained the hope, encouraged by her father, that she might attend the Sorbonne. Her hopes were cruelly dashed, however, upon her father’s death when she was fifteen, the event that provokes her early marriage. Vasu tells her audience, “My feeling about marriage is very bitter... I just didn’t want to get married at sixteen.”

As a historical subject, Vasu’s particular experience of immigration to the United States falls between two major waves of Indian immigration to American shores, one at the turn of the century and one later in the ‘60s.⁴⁰ Yet perhaps it is Vasu’s very particularity as a subject that instigates experiences of identification across very different audiences. Although she is in her mid-forties, since Vasu’s childhood was American she speaks to a second-generation, college-age audience. Her being trundled off to India at age twelve also signals the powerful gender differential that marks second-generation experiences in South Asian communities. Girls are more restricted than boys, not allowed to date, and to this day, may be sent “home” during the teenage years to ensure a protected environment and proper marriage. The response of Vasu’s mother to the question, “What would happen if boys and girls dated?” (“They would... slowly start kissing...”) usually marks a point of heartfelt laughter among audiences, yet it also dramatically underscores the different way in which female, as opposed to male, second-generation subjects “return home.”

Vasu is, however, also an adult immigrant to the United States, and this aspect of her identity—named by the filmmaker, but not Vasu herself—provokes another range of identifications, including the complicity of Krishnan herself in erasing certain questions about post-colonial identity by subsuming it too quickly into its second-generation counterpart. However, the particular dualism of Vasu’s historical positioning says something about the nature of second-generation identities in general: pointing to an oscillation between post-colonial and racialized American subjectivities.

The film generates strong responses from three other (not always distinguishable) groups of people—South Asian women, South Asian mothers, Anglo-American mothers. It is not uncommon to hear from a cousin’s mother-in-law or an Indian friend’s aunt that Vasu’s sense of an unfulfilled life, her plight in raising (male) children, and lack of sympathy from her husband resonate powerfully with their own experiences. It is also not uncommon to hear older Anglo-American women in the audience (particularly those who have parented teenagers) say that the film engages their experiences as well. And it is true that Vasu’s interactions with her teenage sons—lack of respect, being taken for granted—are not atypical of mothers’ experiences in a variety of cultural and historical contexts. The film then speaks powerfully to that generation of women who were first emboldened by Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*,⁴¹ revealing that the middle-class woman’s “housewife dilemma” is far from resolved.

Although it is Vasu’s middle-class status that enables different groups of women to identify with her across cultural space, it would certainly be wrong to reduce Vasu’s conflicts to an American “housewife’s dilemma.” Although Krishnan’s own focus unwittingly plays to this interpretation (ordering Vasu’s life into a therapeutic narrative: identity crisis, attempted

suicide, counseling, increased self-confidence, new job, functional subject, functional family), Vasu's own diagnosis of "cultural schizophrenia" is a compelling one.

Vasu plays the Indian daughter when she visits her mother at home in Madras, and the dutiful Indian wife at home with her husband in New York; with her two sons, she struggles to be an American mother. For holidays she prepares elaborate American meals, rather than the sambar or rasam she prefers to cook. (At a Thanksgiving meal her younger son says a mock grace: "Thank you Vishnu for this food..." then complains that the roast is too mushy.) Her older son dates, plays in a rock band, and has his own apartment at age seventeen. He too says that his mother's cooking doesn't suit his "utility function."

This is perhaps the axis that should have been more thoroughly explored by the filmmaker. Vasu's children appear as *cardboard examples* of assimilation to the materialist values of the Reagan era. The older son, explaining that he couldn't live in India because he wants to be comfortable and happy, says, apparently *without an ounce of self-consciousness*, "Money can't make you happy but if someone gave me a million dollars right now, I'd be the happiest guy in the world." Later when he is asked "Do you feel Indian or American?" he says "Both" too quickly, then challenges, "What's the conflict? I am how I am. Just like Popeye says, 'I am what I am what I am.'" Vasu's younger son tells her, too, that even if she went from Queens to India, then back to Queens, she "has no conflict."

Why is it that Vasu's children so strenuously resist acknowledging her conflict? (Her husband resists too, but at least acknowledges that "the conflict may be real for the person experiencing it.") Is it only a matter of patriarchy in the household, or is this a juncture the filmmaker might have probed more deeply? What is it that Vasu's children, and by extension, Krishnan herself, repress?

What is advanced by the film is the fantasy of assimilation (and indeed, as "new ethnics," Indians seem to be among the recent "model minorities"). What is repressed is the question of the children's American-ness, precisely because it is assumed. The children assume it, possibly because the fear of not being fully American is very powerful. Vasu's comment that she knows what her older son feels when people call him Go-pal instead of Gopal is telling. Krishnan herself assumes the children's American-ness because she continually presents "Indian" and "American" as essentialized identities, never broken down into further specificity. (During the scenes filmed in India, for example, the voice-over never identifies that the language spoken is Tamil, or the community, Brahmin.) Thus in Krishnan's eyes, the children must be American because they lack Indian markers: language, religion, appreciation of food, etc. I suspect that if Krishnan had probed deeper, she might have unearthed second (in this case, third) generation sensibilities that are not articulated in the film.

To Krishnan's credit, the hyphenated identity, "Indian-American" is never offered as a solution to Vasu's dilemma. Vasu herself never articulates it as a possibility. Instead the film closes with an affirmation of Vasu's duality: she has not chosen, nor can she ever choose, one culture over the other. "Growing up in two different cultures, or coming from one to another, is like moving two directions at once; or being in two places at once." The final words of *Knowing Her Place* remind us that one definition of biculturality is not being "home" in either place.⁴²

deshi native, local

samaj society

sabha meeting

sangam organization

Vishnu one of the three gods of the Hindu trinity

1. See for example, Gayatri Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 65, 91.
2. Gouri Bhat, "Tending the Flame: Thoughts on Being Indian-American," *COSAW BULLETIN* 7 3/4 (1993), 1-2.
3. *Ibid.*, 2
4. *Ibid.*, 4. The original quote is "...that generation of first-wave immigrant offspring is still maturing..." The word "second" is an author insertion.
5. See for example: Jose Limon, 1985 for discussion of terms Chicano vs. Mexican-American; Rosa Linda Fregoso, and Angie Chabram, "Chicano Cultural Representations: Reframing Alternative Critical Discourse," *Cultural Studies* 4.3 (1985), 3-12; A. Juarbe, Rina Benmayor, C. Alvarez, Blanca Vazquez, "Response to Poverty Among Puerto Rican Women," *Report to Joint Committee for Public Policy Research on Contemporary Hispanic Issues of the Inter-University Program for Latino Research* (Hunter College, CUNY, 1992); Rosa Torruellas, Rina Benmayor, A. Goris, A. Juarbe, "Affirming Cultural Citizenship in the Puerto Rican Community: Critical Literacy and the El Barrio Popular Education Program," *Centro Cultural Studies Task Force, Language and Education Task Force* (Hunter College, CUNY, 1991).
6. See Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," *Framework* 36 (1989), 68-81.
7. This is not a unique phenomenon for second or third generation groups. ABC, for example, is also slang for "American Born Chinese."
8. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking Press, 1988), 54.
9. Bhat, 4.
10. Bharati Mukherjee, "The 400-Year Old Woman," *San Francisco Review of Books* 16.3 (1991). See also Nita Kumar, *Friends, Brothers and Informants* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
11. Meena Alexander, "Language and Shame: Reflections on My Life in Letters," *IKON* 12/13 (1992), 20.
12. *Ibid.*, 21.
13. *Ibid.*, 23.
14. Nasser Hussein, "Hyphenated Identity: Nationality Discourse, History, and the Anxiety of Criticism in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*," *Qui Parle?* (Summer), 8.
15. Cited in *Ibid.*, 11.
16. *Ibid.*, 10.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 157.
19. *Ibid.*, 159.
20. As Chandra Mohanty writes, "women of color" often used interchangeably with third world women is a term which designates a political constituency, not a biological or even a sociological one. It is a sociopolitical designation for people of African, Caribbean, Asian, and Latin American descent, and native people of the U.S. What seems to constitute 'women of color' or 'third world

women' as a viable oppositional alliance is a common context of struggle, rather than color or racial identification." Chandra Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle," *Third World Women and Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Mohanty et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

21. Mukherjee, 57

22. Spivak, 62.

23. Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

24. In 1923, the U.S. Supreme Court disallowed the claim of a Punjabi Sikh to be considered a member of the Caucasian race. From Baida Nath Varma, "Indians as New Ethnicities," *The New Ethnicities*, ed. Saran and Eames (New York: Praeger, 1980), 29.

25. Sunita Sorabhji, "Indians Win Minority Status," *The Indian American* (September 1991).

26. Karen Leonard, "Pioneer Voices From California: Reflections on Race, Religion, and Ethnicity," *Sikh Diaspora*, ed. N. Gerald Barrie and V. Dusenbeery (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1989); and *Making Ethnic Choices* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

27. Marcelle Williams, "Ladies on the Line: Punjabi Cannery Workers in Central California," *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian American Women*, ed. Asian Women United of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

28. "One can say that earlier Indian immigrants, living mainly in the Fresno Valley of California... maintain their cultural identity...but have not quite access to the primary group network of power holders in American society. Their position is lower-middle-class....As compared to them, the newer immigrants of the 1960s and 1970s are in the upper-middle to upper-class structure of the occupational ladder." From Varma, "Indians as New Ethnicities," 38.

29. Mukherjee, 57.

30. *Ibid.*, 56.

31. Kalpana Vrudhula, "Rentike cheddah revadi, Nenu lkkada unnanu," *COSAW Bulletin* 7 3/4 (1992), 10-13.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Bhat, 3.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Leonard, 134.

36. *Ibid.*, 121.

37. Kartar Dhillon, "Parrot's Beak," *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian American Women*, ed. Asian Women United of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 214-215.

38. Mukherjee, 56. See also Kumar, *Friends, Brothers and Informants*, 13.

39. Indira Ganesan, *The Journey* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 44-45.

40. "Indians can be classified as new ethnicities because their migration to the U.S. started first as a trickle in 1885 and reached its peak of 5,000 immigrants in San Francisco in 1910... In 1922 there were 2,600 Indians in the U.S. but in 1940 only 2,400 were counted. Of the more than 3,000 Indians in 1950, the student population was 1,500. In 1946 rigid immigration laws gave India an annual quota of 100, which was not changed until the Immigration Act of 1965. Then started the second wave of immigration." From Varma, "Indians as New Ethnicities," 29.

41. Betty Friedan, *Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963, 1983; New York: Dale, 1974).

42. Spivak, 83.

Fly Me to the Moon

SUNITA VATUK

"My dear sister Sunita,
On that particular day when you left India
your Bhabhi left this world."

Maybe it takes a soul to hold a plane aloft.

We come from the airport
in a car with dying headlights.
Now my father writes
"My dear Ashok,
Today as your parents leave the United States
your American Nani left this world."

I listen.
Sound stops and time stops. I go off
looking for the place to start it again.
Tim, wrapped in the darkness
of our drive can't leave his room.
The bathroom very cold.
The living room cold,
my father sat alone.

I used to wish that I could stop time.
And wondered, what effect on my lifespan,
would oil freeze in my car
so I'd have to walk everywhere
till I turned it back on.

In Fazalpur in a corroded cardboard box there's a picture
of her sent back to them
my father's first New Year's in America,
their memory of a meeting that can never happen.