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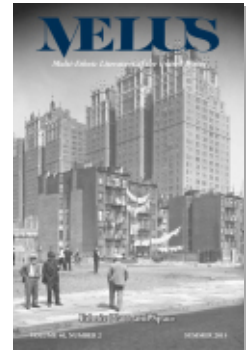
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Being (and Feeling) Gogol: Reading and Recognition in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*

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In January 2006, Manish Vij, a regular contributor to the popular South Asian American cultural interest blog *Sepia Mutiny*, posted an incisive send-up of the commodification of transnational South Asian novels in Western markets.¹ The illustration “Anatomy of a Genre” identifies several of the more common clichés that broadly comprise popular representations of South Asian culture in the West: Eastern sensuality, ethnic dress, Indian cuisine, arranged marriage, interracial romance, and second-generation cultural confusion—tropes that name a set of cultural symbols so identifiable that they can be easily labeled (see Figure 1).

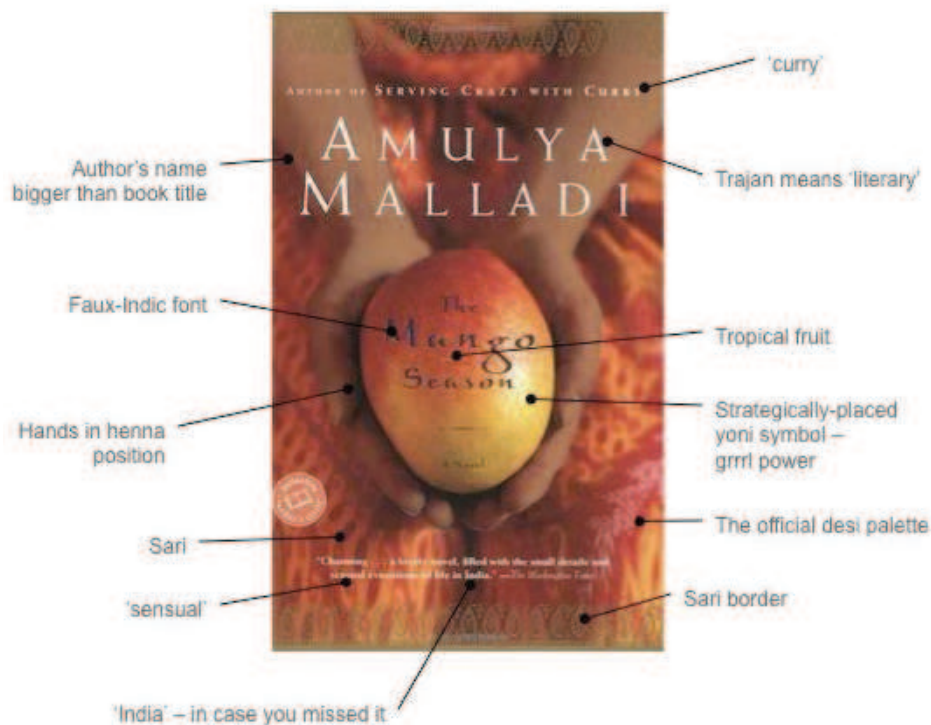


Figure 1: “Anatomy of a Genre.”

Reprinted with permission from Manish Vij.

“Anatomy of a Genre” parodies the features that drive the publication of transnational South Asian literature, such as book covers, reviewership, and exoticising marketing strategies. Eliciting more than fifty enthusiastic comments, this small cyber-event reveals a community’s self-consciousness and indignation about the powerful marketing initiatives and strategies of commodification employed in the service of selling South Asian culture to Western consumers.

And yet, the frustrations that inspired “Anatomy of a Genre” and elicited such fervent commentary seem to contradict another instance of everyday readership that I encountered during an interview for a broader interdisciplinary study on the uses of transnational South Asian fiction within a South Asian American reading group.² Explaining how this fiction affects her life, Priya, a young Indian American woman who participated in my study, asserted a powerful sense of recognition in reading this literature.³ In contrast to the reactions elicited by “Anatomy of a Genre,” in which blog readers were responding specifically to the clichés used to market transnational South Asian literatures, Priya and several other young women and men of Indian descent asserted feelings of comfort and self-realization because of the thematic consistencies of the literature. In fact, Priya explained that after her marriage ended, she took solace in reading novels, particularly by female writers of South Asian descent, to help her make sense of the cultural and romantic struggles she faced as a young Indian American woman:

I think whether you get an arranged marriage or whether you marry somebody that you fall in love with, you still face a lot of the same struggles, especially with family. . . . And a lot of the stories that I read explored that whole conflict. I think for somebody with my own personal experience—[marriage] didn’t go very well for me—I like reading about it. It makes me feel like it is research, you know? You learn something. (Priya)⁴

Both instances of lay readership, the blog and Priya’s response, present distinct responses to literature written by female authors of South Asian descent.⁵ On the one hand, the blog readers’ wry, witty responses to “Anatomy of a Genre” indicate a jaded and frustrated response to the tropes of arranged marriage, interracial dating, and exoticised South Asian femininity in popular transnational South Asian literature. One blog reader even amended the infographic by suggesting that with the addition of a few more clichés such as “crazy aunty,” “wedding scene,” “white boyfriend/girlfriend,” or “reconciliation with ‘East’ and ‘West’ (pathos filled),” “Anatomy of a Genre” offers a veritable guide to writing the exoticised Indian diasporic novel. However, Priya expressed a sincere longing for

many of the same tropes that inspired such irritation in the blogosphere, explaining that they provide her with insight into her ethnic and gender identity and comprise a type of research into her own sense of personal and social identity. Put in context, these instances of lay readership are quite distinct: “Anatomy of a Genre” was posted by a savvy male reader and self-fashioned cultural critic, whereas Priya’s response was elicited during a one-on-one interview about the uses of this literature in her life. Vij and Priya demonstrate that the concept of lay readership encompasses vast differences in readerly expectations, desires, and subject positions. Nevertheless, they dovetail in their reckoning with the cultural expectations that attend the formation of South Asian American identity through literary representation. In other words, these two types of readers do not necessarily disagree on what tropes and themes pervade popular transnational South Asian literature; rather, they differ in their responses to and uses of them.

I begin with these two contexts of lay readership to emphasize how these reading practices overlap—namely, they share a preoccupation with the issue of how people of South Asian descent are represented in literature by people of South Asian descent. The difference between blog readers’ and Priya’s responses to popular transnational South Asian literature reveals that in either scenario, the skeptical or the earnest, tension can emerge between who we feel we are and how we enact or represent that sense of self. Both cases evince a desire—felt broadly within the South Asian American community—for recognizable representations of South Asian identity in literature. In my ethnography of readership in a Washington, DC-based South Asian American reading group, the Network of South Asian Professionals (NetSAP) Book Club from which Priya’s response is drawn, I observed diverse reactions to this body of literature during book club meetings and in interviews with its participants. However, our discussions consistently circled around the issue of recognition in literary representation.

On the one hand, NetSAP readers are invested in the stakes of ethnic literary representation and its potentially transformative and enlightening effects. On the other hand, these readers are knowledgeable consumers, cognizant of how the marketing of ethnic literatures can devolve into fetishization rather than critical engagement with difference. NetSAP readers offset the illuminating effects of transnational South Asian literature with a weariness of modern multicultural politics through the complex act of literary recognition. For these readers, to recognize oneself in transnational South Asian literature is crucial to the formation of a cohesive South Asian American identity, since recognition for them involves

both a personal coming to self-knowledge and a public acknowledgment of South Asian presence in the United States. In this way, NetSAP readers' relationship to transnational South Asian literature brings together the theoretical duality of recognition: in reading practice, recognition denotes a self-directed, personal moment of understanding, whereas it also implies a social desire for public validation (Felski 30). In other words, recognition in this context of reading emerges from the self and from interactions with literary, social, and political others.

Reading for recognition holds particular leverage in minority and feminist literary criticism because it enables reading to become instructive and empathetic.⁶ Yet, when the act of reading becomes a way to understand the world and our position in it, we are left with a double-edged sword. As Carla Kaplan summarizes, recognition and identification in reading can invite uncritical, solipsistic indulgence in literature's comforts, creating a "space of safety, homogeneity, familiarity, and sameness, a community intent on identification and self-affirmation to the exclusion of difference, desire, and critique" (143). By elucidating the mixed blessings of recognition as a reading strategy and examining its overlapping operation in lay and academic readerships, this essay establishes a productive relay between two sites of readership and community that are seldom in dialogue with one another. The exigencies that motivate academic and lay readers are formed by varying cultural desires and professional expectations. Drawing attention to the commonalities in these two spheres of reading does not preclude analysis but rather aids it. It not only presumes similarity and comfort in a text but also functions through difference and discomfort with the literary other.⁷

Within lay and academic readerships, the politics of recognition in reading entail desires for literary representations of South Asian American experience that can be deemed authentic. Similar to the personal and public duality implied by the act of recognition, discourses of authentic identity involve inward discovery and social validation; as Charles Taylor notes, the modern discourse of authentic identity is produced through "partly overt, partly internal" dialogue with others (34). In the case of South Asian American readership, claims of ethnic authenticity not only facilitate a personal relationship to the homeland but also allow for the construction of a new ethnic American subjectivity. In seeking and promoting authentic representations, lay and academic readers of transnational South Asian literature enter into a key quandary of multicultural politics: the same features that authorize ethnic and racial exclusion also suggest a unique identity worthy of inclusion in the US cultural milieu (Rudrappa 137). Thus, the search for authentic narrative descriptions of South Asian American

experience involves personal desires for self-understanding and accurate representation. At the same time, this concern with ethnic authenticity, which functions through the dynamics of literary recognition, constitutes a signal impasse for readers of South Asian fiction by potentially propagating cultural homogenization, stereotyping, and the commodification of difference.

In the field of South Asian American literature, nowhere do these issues of recognition, authenticity, and stereotyping coalesce more fully than in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003).⁸ As a cultural figure, Lahiri reflects much of the ambivalence around ethnic authenticity produced in the interpretive field around the novel. NetSAP readers and literary critics commend Lahiri's revisions of common representations of "traditional" Indian culture in transnational South Asian literature.⁹ Lahiri's work takes on the imprimatur of renewal and reinvention, establishing a break with literary predecessors and cementing her status as a progressive and innovative South Asian American writer. However, her success is not unqualified; Lahiri has been criticized and openly questioned for focusing on an affluent, Hindu, heterosexual Indian-American experience to the exclusion of other ethnic, linguistic, and minority populations within the South Asian American community.¹⁰

The Namesake is a watershed text of South Asian American experience because it stages the impasse of ethnic authenticity so completely. As one of the few second-generation South Asian American narratives to garner mainstream acclaim, the novel not only provides NetSAP readers with an opportunity for personal identification, but it also takes on public import for South Asian Americans more generally. The novel's overall popularity is conflicted, however, because while it offers a recognizable narrative of immigration and assimilation, the success of its depiction stems from the stereotypes (particularly concerning gender and ethnicity) that it perpetuates. In this way, *The Namesake*'s reception oscillates between assertions of the novel's public significance for coalitional identity formation and its private meaning within readers' lives. The novel functions similarly in literary academia as a touchstone text describing the complexity of second-generation South Asian American experience.

Striking parallels occur in the conversations this novel inspires. For lay and critical readers, discussions of the novel and its reception reveal themes central to debates on South Asian American community formation such as class privilege, assimilation, the maintenance of traditional gender roles, inter- and intra-racial dating, and immigrant versus second-generation experiences.¹¹ Literary recognition can operate to establish and challenge stereotypical expressions of the aforementioned themes in *The*

Namesake that are vital to the definition of ethnic authenticity in South Asian America.

The formation of ethnic literary canons impacts the institutionalization of multiculturalism and its expression in sites of popular culture. In efforts to include or recognize South Asian female voices in the multicultural canon, literary critics reinforce the gender hierarchies that they seek to dismantle. Attention to lay reading practice exposes how the impulse to include ethnic authors in multicultural canons can inadvertently authorize totalizing generalizations about gender for these same writers.

In the early phase of my ethnographic research on the NetSAP Book Club, when *The Namesake* came up, I informed interviewees of my own interpretation of the novel. I explained my sense that *The Namesake* presents limiting, stereotypical representations of Indian women and objectifies the three main female characters as materialistic consumers, victims of brown male oppression, and repositories of ethnic tradition. The stakes of my interpretation prior to meeting with NetSAP readers involve three related concerns: first, the narrative pivots on Gogol's relationship to his father and his uneasy return to cultural heritage as the prodigal ethnic son, evoking what Gayatri Gopinath argues are the "patriarchal and heteronormative tropes of the term 'diaspora'" (5). Second, the novel's female characters are foils to the male protagonist's development, contributing to rigid notions of what constitutes authentic South Asian female subjectivity in the West.¹² Finally, class is a structuring theme of the novel and descriptions of consumption, brand-name materialism, Gogol's ivy-league educational privilege, and his desire to leverage his cultural capital to attain a higher social class fill its pages; yet the economic exigencies of immigration or assimilation are obfuscated by Gogol and his father's quests for self-realization and individuality. Accordingly, before I spoke with NetSAP participants, I believed that the work uncritically depicted South Asian aspirations for upward class mobility, celebrated an unexamined Indo-chic ethos, and encouraged collusion with the model-minority myth.¹³

My perspective on *The Namesake*, formed first as a lay reader and shortly thereafter as an academic reader of the novel, embodies the conflicts between sites and styles of readership this essay explores. My movement between literary critic and NetSAP participant magnetized my reading practice in different but not mutually exclusive directions.¹⁴ After I first read the novel, my emotional response overshadowed the analytical one. Yet it was the affective intensity of that response that structured my inquiry into *The Namesake* as an object of study. I felt a profound attachment to the novel, as if many of the feelings of exclusion, displacement, guilt, and

confusion I had experienced after my family immigrated to the US from New Delhi in the early 1980s had been represented. Like many NetSAP readers, I felt that it provided a sense of shared cultural experience that I had previously not encountered. By the time I spoke with NetSAP readers, I realized that my opinions of *The Namesake* had changed: my academic side wanted to maintain critical distance to contextualize the narrative's tropes in terms of the broader field of transnational South Asian literary history, while another side felt a strong personal connection to Lahiri's descriptions of the South Asian American experience. Only by speaking with these readers and confronting the challenges they presented to my readings did I learn that my adherence to this untenable divide—between academic skepticism and personal investment—perpetuated the false dichotomies I wanted to examine by obscuring the mutually constitutive taste-making influences that lay and academic reading publics exert on each other.

For example, NetSAP readers acknowledged and at times shared many of the concerns I had with the novel, but they also expressed a powerful attachment to *The Namesake*'s poignant representations of the second-generation experience, including the effects of ethnic difference and similarity in romantic relationships, the comfort of shared experience, and a longing to connect to their parents' histories of immigration. Thus, their reading practice evokes Kenneth Burke's characterization of literature as "equipment for living" (qtd. in Long 131). Elizabeth Long explains that when seen in this mode literature becomes "less a platonic ideal than . . . something that is pressed into service for a task beyond itself, a tool employed in the construction of human lives" (131).

Sri, leader of the NetSAP-DC Book Club, explained that Lahiri's popularity is based on what many South Asian readers take to be the accuracy of her representations: "Her voice is America. Her stories are very true" (NetSAP, *Red Carpet*).¹⁵ Sri emphasizes that Lahiri writes South Asians into US cultural citizenship. This sentiment was echoed by the majority of readers in my study, who emphasized that they felt a strong sense of recognition with the novel's male protagonist, regardless of their own gender. As Sunil, a Bengali American put it, "I related to it on so many levels. I thought it was really me" (Sunil). During a Book Club meeting about Kamala Markandaya's social realist novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), Aisha, a Pakistani American participant in the club, contrasted her experience of reading *The Namesake* with her experience of reading Markandaya's novel, which describes the harsh daily realities of a peasant woman in rural India: "I found [*Nectar in a Sieve*] very refreshing. I kept thinking of the book *The Namesake*. I have no idea why. I was thinking,

‘Gogol’s problem was that he didn’t like his name and look at [Rukmani’s] problems.’ It was so refreshing because the books that we’re reading nowadays are so materialistic.” Her comment sparked a degree of consensus among book club attendees, but readers were careful to qualify the historical differences between the two novels. Eventually, the hostess of the meeting, Niha, suggested that the difference between the two novels was the level of recognition and identification they encouraged in the reader: “*The Namesake* is about being and feeling that you are Gogol” (NetSAP, *Nectar*). Because *The Namesake* provides such a relatable representation of second-generation South Asian American experience, it requires the reader (particularly readers invested in South Asian American identity formation) to reckon with the authenticity of that depiction. Such reckoning is not as straightforward as it may seem; rather, it invokes the duality of literary recognition wherein identification with the text may illuminate some material realities, such as the historical moment in which it was produced, and obscure others, such as the generalization of ethnic experience through a male protagonist.

NetSAP readers are not alone in occasionally glossing over some of the novel’s more determinative details in favor of foregrounding a recognizable narrative of the South Asian American experience. The academic reception of Lahiri’s oeuvre is similarly contradictory and is described best by what Shu-mei Shih calls “technologies of recognition” endemic in the field of ethnic and post-colonial literary criticism. As Shih explains, these technologies of recognition are discursive literary critical practices that collude to sacrifice analyses of global economies, class context, or gender hierarchy in the service of promoting multiculturalism through minority narratives of belonging (17-18). Reading for recognition can conceal as much as it exposes, because lay and academic readers foreground particular narrative strains contingent on their personal and communal, emotional and strategic interactions with the novel. I aim to keep the benefits and challenges of reading for recognition in view by setting my readings of the three main female characters of Lahiri’s novel—shaped by the “disciplinary activity” (Felski 12) of work and professionalization—alongside NetSAP readers’ interpretations of these same figures.

In dialogue with NetSAP readers, I parse the meanings encoded in Maxine and Gogol’s interracial romance, Moushumi and Gogol’s intra-racial marriage, and the depiction of Gogol’s mother, Ashima. Each of these provide insight into the themes that define South Asian American ethnic authenticity: how class privilege shapes ethnic affiliation and issues of assimilation, the ambivalent performance of traditional South Asian identity through the recurring trope of arranged marriage, and the persistent stereotypes that drive the narration of South Asian female characters.

Although the novel narrates South Asian American male experience, foregrounds masculinist subjectivity, and centers on male-male familial bonds, NetSAP readers' interpretive practice ultimately disrupts the dominance of *The Namesake's* patriarchal leanings.

As the main interracial romance in the novel, Gogol and Maxine's relationship raises questions about the interplay of class privilege, assimilative desires for whiteness, and national belonging for South Asian Americans. As Sheng-mei Ma argues, narrative representations of white female bodies in Asian American texts represent "the disadvantaged group's fallacy of assimilation. White bodies . . . become not only an exotic physical entity whose fair skin and corporeal features captivate . . . Asian American men but also a political symbol within which lies the promise of power" (67).¹⁶ Lahiri draws an ambivalent, somewhat critical portrait of Maxine by cataloguing and lingering over her materialistic lifestyle. Maxine is an affluent white American, a New Yorker by birth, and privileged in every sense. She functions as a representative of Western high culture and international sophistication. Detailed lists of what Maxine instructs Gogol to eat, drink, and buy abound, implicitly commenting on their class difference. Maxine becomes a cultural usher, teaching Gogol how to affect the highbrow tastes that would enable him to realize the cultural capital of his Ivy-League education and gain proximity to the advantages of whiteness.

The full implication of Gogol's cultural difference from Maxine, rooted in his ethnicity and the limitations it imposes on his social and class status, is blunted by the narrative's return to stereotypical tropes of bicultural incompatibility. For example, the failure of Gogol and Maxine's relationship is attributed to her inability to understand Gogol's return to his family and culture after his father dies. In other words, cultural difference overshadows the incomplete racial and class critique that the novel initiates. Maxine's presence in the narrative and the attendant issues of class, assimilation, and national belonging that her relationship with Gogol foregrounds are eclipsed by ethnic alterity—once an object of sexual desire for Gogol in his quest for a more advantageous class position in America, she becomes an object against which Gogol defines himself.

Similarly, for NetSAP readers, Gogol and Maxine's interracial relationship thematized the tension between desires for assimilation and ethnic authenticity. Whether or not they had personal experience with interracial romantic relationships, readers explained that these scenarios in the novel symbolized a common desire to successfully negotiate their own complicated cultural affiliations. As Nishi explained, reading South Asian diasporic literature reinforced her sense that she would be more comfortable dating within the Pakistani American community:

[The more I read] South Asian literature, the more I really wouldn't want to marry someone who didn't share some of those experiences, like going to Pakistan, like the richness of the culture, or the cultural values. I guess my values are [shaped by] South Asian literature. Not to say I don't want to be adventurous, or want to meet other types of people, but I love the history that I have, and I want to see it in other people that I know. (Nishi)

Nishi's sense that the literature reflects and shapes her moral values was also reflected in her description of how *The Namesake* was "touching in a way" for how it portrayed the longing to "connect with your parents' history," but also how that can often be an alienating experience when "your reality at school or in college is changing" and "when [having] white friends shapes what you're like and who you are and what you're attracted to" (Nishi). In Nishi's reading, the complexities of interracial dating encode the broader difficulties of negotiating a bicultural identity and the strong desire to respect her family's wishes while also fitting in with mainstream Anglo-American culture.

In another instance, Meera, a recent Indian-American transplant to the DC area, explained that Gogol's longing for Maxine could also be read as a longing for racial acceptance:

The American girl [Gogol] was dating in New York was the epitome of what he wanted. [She] was everything that he wasn't: total upper-class, very cultured, very worldly, in a European sense. . . . I saw [their relationship] like him just going after what he didn't have and what he wasn't, because that is what he thought he wanted to be and . . . could become by being with her. (Meera)

Nishi's and Meera's readings stack issues of taste, assimilation, and the trappings of cosmopolitan culture—features in evidence in Gogol and Maxine's relationship. These two readers retool the more materialist and androcentric features of this interracial romance in accord with their second-generation experiences. They use the novel in ways that free its romantic narratives from what Rajini Srikanth names the more "overdetermined" "Orientalist perceptions" of South Asian sexuality: "repressed women, domineering men, female feticide, loveless marriages, crude and unsophisticated sexual desire" (98). At the same time, their understanding of the novel confronts and replicates tendencies within the South Asian American community to maintain a deracialized position in the US through strategic cultural consumption and affluent class aspiration. NetSAP readers' interpretations of Gogol and Maxine's relationship parallel what scholars such as Bandana Purkayastha characterize as an assimilative strategy for South Asians in the United States wherein the group asserts an upwardly mobile ethnic identity in the symbolic realm and sites

of political coalition in order to avoid being “incorporated into the U.S. racial system” (Purkayastha 10).¹⁷ Furthermore, NetSAP readers’ interpretations align with the conclusions of scholars who observe that for South Asian Americans the fetishization of norms of Anglo-American culture and taste reflect social standing and impact political affiliation. In other words, NetSAP readers’ recognition of the novel’s complex rendering of interracial romance mirrors and furthers scholarly observations by demonstrating how representations of sexual desire, tethered as they are to longings for racial and national belonging, impact South Asian racialization in the United States.

Similarly, intraracial romance in the novel, figured through the trope of a quasi-arranged marriage, encodes desires for belonging and assimilation as well as anxieties about displacement. Sunaina Marr Maira explains that the trope of arranged marriage “provides the counterpoint to the image of a hypersexualized land of Kama Sutra. Public discussions of dating and marriage among second-generation Indian Americans, and their underlying erotic fantasies, are thus fraught with the politics of not only gender and sexuality but also nation, generation, and race” (153). While Gogol and Moushumi’s relationship continues many of the same themes regarding sexuality and second-generation assimilation introduced in Gogol and Maxine’s romance, in this case the romantic narrative presents an exploration of ethnic authenticity and insularity rather than deracialization. In other words, Gogol’s failed marriage to Moushumi, a Bengali American woman, revises the fable of ethnic romance because it demonstrates that cultural similarity does not necessarily result in easy romantic relationships.¹⁸ Critics interpret their union and its dissolution as a progressive choice, a refusal of Eastern fatalism and an assertion of Western individuality. For example, Robin E. Field interprets Gogol and Moushumi’s divorce as an assertion of individuality and newfound American subjectivity, replete with the freedom to make messy decisions about romantic preferences and sexual infidelity: “In *The Namesake*, marriage is a complicated manipulation between the traditional expectations of immigrant parents and the desires of the second generation. . . . Lahiri . . . underscores how cultural similarities do not necessarily lead to personal compatibility, as this marriage crumbles by the end of the novel” (173). Field claims that Lahiri’s “most significant contribution to contemporary American literature” is how she captures the “delicate balance between cultural prerogatives and personal agency” (168).

For academic readers, Gogol and Moushumi’s narrative arc is defined by a simplistic trope of choice and development; the failure of their intraracial romance signifies the triumph of Western individuality and

the transcendence of ethnic obligation. For NetSAP readers, Gogol and Moushumi's romance muddies these binaristic and reductive critical tendencies by suggesting that romantic choice does not always signal affiliation with either Western modernity or Eastern tradition, but rather requires more fluid understandings of bicultural identity.¹⁹ From the start, Gogol and Moushumi's relationship is founded on a shared desire to remedy their cultural displacement by being together. They initially agree to meet at Ashima's request, thus invoking the trope of the arranged marriage. Moushumi has recently ended an engagement with a white American man due in large part to cultural differences. Gogol and Moushumi function as cultural correctives for one another, remedying not only their heartbreak, but also feelings of ethnic alienation that their forays into interracial romance produced. In fact, the initial basis for their attraction is described through their shared background and heritage: "They talk endlessly about how they know and do not know each other. In a way there is little to explain. . . . He can imagine her life, even after she and her family moved away to New Jersey. . . . There had been the same frequent trips to Calcutta, being plucked out of their American lives for months at a time" (Lahiri 211-12). They are united by their common culture, shared experiences, and the second-generation dilemma of how their ethnicity leads to misperception and misunderstanding in the US. For example, they visit an Italian restaurant, where the waiter asks if they are brother and sister. Gogol is "at once insulted and oddly aroused. In a way, he realizes it's true—they share the same coloring, the straight eyebrows, the long slender bodies, the high cheekbones and dark hair" (203). They both seem somewhat pleased by the mistake and excuse its potential narrow-mindedness because it reminds them once more of their common ground.

This moment offers a critique of insular South Asian communities in the US by foreshadowing the false sense of security based in a shared background that unites Gogol and Moushumi. When they get married, the wedding is portrayed as an expectation that they fulfill, but of which they are not entirely a part: "He is aware that together he and Moushumi are fulfilling a collective, deep-seated desire—because they're both Bengali, everyone can let his hair down a bit" (224). Their courtship, marriage, and newlywed life fulfill a sense of cultural obligation to their parents, extended family, and the wider Bengali community. The underlying implication here is that their union satisfies the older generations because it will ensure the continuation, through marriage and procreation, of Indian tradition in the US.²⁰

NetSAP readers interpret Gogol and Moushumi's doomed marriage as a powerful view into the romantic obligations and struggles that face second-

generation South Asian Americans. As Padma, a reader who objected to repetitive portrayals of passive female characters, explained, “We’re still in that generation where we are dealing with the whole arranged marriage thing and [the] difficulty of finding people who understand the whole East-West mix, and I think maybe that was part of *The Namesake* that maybe people really connected with” (Padma). Priya explained that the novel presented the dilemma of family and tradition versus individuality and development through tropes of romance: “The struggle between marrying somebody your parents want you to, versus someone you love, that struggle, [that’s what] *The Namesake* did, and I lived that for a while. I feel I can totally relate to those things” (Priya). Priya strongly identified with many South Asian novels’ depictions of failed or doomed romances because, as she explained, they helped her make sense of her own recent divorce and its cultural implications. Padma’s and Priya’s readings, imbued as they are with concerns about the relationship between romantic choice, familial expectations, and bicultural identity, invoke a salient detail of Gogol and Moushumi’s romance—that its collapse is triggered by Moushumi’s decision to leave Gogol for another man. As Tejinder Kaur argues, Moushumi’s decision to leave the marriage signals her independence from cultural obligations (40). Similarly, Field interprets her inability and unwillingness to conform to the expectations of the Bengali community as an assertion of Moushumi’s global identity, forged by personal choice rather than national or ethnic affiliation (176).

However, because Moushumi’s narrative arc is defined by a choice between brown or white men (the former representing oppression and the latter rescue from that oppression) the novel reinscribes reductive and gendered Orientalist paradigms. Lahiri offers an insight into Moushumi’s motivations:

And yet the familiarity that had once drawn her to him has begun to keep her at bay. Though she knows it’s not his fault, she can’t help but associate him, at times, with a sense of resignation, with the very life she had resisted, had struggled so mightily to leave behind. He was not who she saw herself ending up with, he had never been that person. (250)

Originally, Gogol was Moushumi’s alternative to Graham, the white American man who had left her weeks before they were to be married. In essence, Gogol rescued her and “obliterated her former disgrace” (249). Graham’s presence is a shadow in the narrative that causes Gogol to feel insecure in his relationship to Moushumi. Graham’s race is a factor in his appeal to Moushumi, because it ensures her a degree of cultural rebellion. Marrying a white man would not have fulfilled the desires or expectations

of relatives and would have enabled her to act outside of cultural norms. Predictably, when Moushumi wants to escape her marriage from Gogol, she has an affair with another white man, Dimitri. Whiteness—specifically, whiteness universalized through the gender of the male subject—ostensibly becomes an unmarked and uncomplicated signifier of freedom of choice and escape from tradition. Ultimately, to interpret Moushumi's rejection of Gogol and "tradition" in favor of a white man as a move toward freedom reaffirms racial and gender hierarchies. These interpretive moves instantiate what Gayatri Spivak identifies as the familiar narrative structure whereby the white man rescues the brown woman from the stultifying and rigid expectations of the brown man (297).

For Priya and Padma, Gogol and Moushumi's romance enacts a range of anxieties relating to their own bicultural identity. They describe anxiety about denying their heritage if they date a non-South Asian and the struggle to honor their individuality and family obligations. More importantly, however, their readings complicate scholarly tendencies to frame the failure of Gogol and Moushumi's marriage as an escape from Eastern oppression and a movement toward Western choice. As Pooja, another NetSAP reader explained, her reading of the novel prompted her to reconsider thinking of dating according to cultural binaries:

[*The Namesake*] really was a huge eye opener to me realizing that you can date an Indian or South Asian [but that], we're all pretty much growing up with American values these days. So it really doesn't mean anything at the end of the day, because if you're marrying someone who grew up here, you're pretty much marrying someone who's not probably growing up with those values. (Pooja)

Pooja asserts cultural integrity, a system of values that she once thought essential to Indian identity. By reading *The Namesake*, she became aware that this value system is destabilized by what she perceives as the competing American value system in which divorce is acceptable. Her response also demonstrates a tendency to essentialize identity along national and racial lines by creating a divide between South Asian and American culture.

Overall, these readers acknowledge that race and ethnic affiliation impact romantic involvement, but they also emphasize that *The Namesake*'s romantic narratives challenge rigid notions of a divide between Indian and American cultures and encourage consideration of what categories of racial affiliation might signify. In contrast to academic interpretation, their readings of romance in the novel indicate that Moushumi's rejection of an Indian man in favor of a white suitor does not ensure her liberation, just

as Gogol's marriage to an Indian woman after leaving his white girlfriend does not safeguard his aspirations to conform to ethnic expectations. In this way, NetSAP readers cast light on the binaries that course through academic readings of Gogol and Moushumi's marriage and undermine untenable divisions between East/West, tradition/modernity, and oppression/liberation in favor of more fluid, dynamic constructions of ethnic affiliation.

The depiction of Ashima, Gogol's mother, extends the clichés of South Asian identity and femininity evident in Gogol's romantic relationships. Ashima, whose characterization is grounded in repetitive associations with traditional ethnic foods and motherhood, becomes a rendering of Shamita Das Dasgupta's observation that South Asian women bear the burden of replicating a homogenous ethnic "authenticity" and of reproducing traditional culture in the United States (5).²¹ Yet because Ashima's narration relies on the most heavy-handed clichés of South Asian femininity, NetSAP readers' centralization of her character provides one of the most powerful and surprising displays of how literary recognition can legislate a variety of interpretive meanings.

Descriptions of ethnic cuisine, cooking, and eating dominate Ashima's appearances in *The Namesake*. A common trope in South Asian diasporic literature links descriptions of food to particularly classed and gendered identities under the rubric of national affiliation.²² Ethnic Indian cuisine comes to symbolize Indian culture through a language of consumption, creating a set of culinary metaphors that mirrors the consumption of ethnic texts in the literary marketplace. Anita Mannur makes this connection explicit: "Cursory examinations of many ethnic-themed novels will demonstrate how a visual rendering of food on novel covers is frequently also the means by which publishing houses market Asian Americanness to a readership hungry to consume delectable renditions of alterity" (14). Ashima's association with Indian cuisine marks her as the keeper of cultural tradition and national purity in the domestic space of the American household. In fact, the novel opens with Ashima alone in the kitchen of the apartment she shares with her husband Ashoke in Cambridge, approximating *chaat*, an Indian snack, with "Rice Krispies and peanuts" to satisfy her pregnancy cravings (49). Food provides a connection to the homeland of India and a way to both temper and underscore her displacement in the West.

Yet, while food metaphors encode Ashima's cultural adjustment, they also operate through stereotypes of South Asian female subjectivity whereby the South Asian woman becomes the authentic bearer of Indian national purity and unchanging ethnic tradition. As the traditional wife,

Ashima reproduces India in the home through her culinary skills, and food also provides a way to deepen the intimacy in her marriage and to learn more about her husband: “[S]he has come to know him. . . . By now she has learned that her husband likes his food on the salty side, that his favorite thing about lamb curry is the potatoes, and that he likes to finish his dinner with a small final helping of rice and dal” (10). The food metaphor contributes to a limited characterization of South Asian female subjectivity, and Ashima is read according to several clichés: the obedient daughter, the diligent wife, and the forbearing and sacrificing mother (Chu 19; Prashad 105).

The drama of pregnancy and the language of (re)birth pervade characterizations of Ashima and Ashoke’s immigration experience in particularly gendered ways. Ashoke’s reinvention in America is a redemptive experience; his narrative arc is defined by rebirth in America after his near-death experience in India: “He was born twice in India, and then a third time in America. Three lives by thirty” (Lahiri 21). But for Ashima the trope of isolated motherhood and insular cultural reproduction define her experience of assimilation: “For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. . . . Like pregnancy, being a foreigner, Ashima believes, is something that elicits the same curiosity from strangers, the same combination of pity and respect” (49-50).

By equating pregnancy with the alienation of immigration, the narrator describes a gendered spectacle of what it means to be a foreigner. The “pity and respect” that foreignness elicits is likened to a perpetual pregnancy, implying that the condition of being foreign should have a transformative resolution. This metaphorical rendering of difference as a state of pregnant longing and expectation suggests that the transition from immigration to assimilation at once partakes of public recognition and is also an insular, private, and internal process that carries with it the promise of resolution. In fact, it is literally motherhood that enables her adjustment to American self-sufficiency and independence: “She begins to pride herself on doing it alone, in devising a routine. Like Ashoke, busy with his teaching and research and dissertations seven days a week, she, too, now has something to occupy her fully, to demand her utmost devotion, her last ounce of strength” (34-35). As mother and wife, Ashima represents familiar, stereotypical modes of traditional South Asian femininity. The metaphor of pregnancy to characterize her adaptation to living in the US reinforces the limited trope of the long-suffering Asian mother.²³

By the end of the novel, Ashima eschews the more staid elements of Indian cultural tradition. She has no trouble adjusting to Gogol and

Moushumi's divorce, and is in fact proud of them for not settling for an unhappy married life: "They are not willing to accept, to adjust, to settle for something less than their ideal of happiness. That pressure has given way, in the case of the subsequent generation, to American common sense" (Lahiri 276). Ashima participates in the "progress" of the second generation by acclimating to the values of American individuality. Her development is figured as an increasingly multicultural identity, albeit one that participates in a complacent and gendered East/West binary of developmental progress from tradition to modernity.

NetSAP readers' interpretations of Ashima's character development do not resolve the more determinative narrative elements that define her—namely, her associations with consumption, domesticity, and motherhood. Rather, through their desire for Ashima's story of immigration and adaptation to be told, these readers defy the patrilineal, masculinist focus of the novel. At the most basic level, NetSAP readers describe a sense of empathy with Ashima's representation, explaining either that they learned about their mother's difficult experiences of immigration by reading the novel or that they were touched by their own mothers' empathy for Ashima's character. NetSAP reader Pooja described this experience: "I know my cousin was telling me her mom really identified with the first half of the book more. And so did my mom, because they could understand the whole thing, getting married, coming here, adjusting to the life and bringing up your children here" (Pooja). For Pooja the novel presents opportunities for both first- and second-generation readers to assess their experiences and examine them side-by-side. During an interview with book club participant Raj, I asked if he felt that there were troubling gender stereotypes in the novel. He replied that his mother's recognition of Ashima's experiences recalibrates the stereotypes: "In terms of stereotypes in *The Namesake* . . . you could say Gogol's parents are stereotypical, but my mom said it's just like her life, so I don't know what to tell you" (Raj). Raj values the novel for giving voice to his mother's experience of immigration and offering a context for his own experiences. By allowing these NetSAP readers to recognize their parents' unwritten immigration experiences, the novel offers an example of how lay readerly desire can recast gendered clichés. These readers enact a "politics of articulation" wherein "they show how the meanings of texts change as they hook up with different interests and interpretive communities" (Felski 10). In bypassing the dominant patriarchal narrative of Ashoke and Gogol's reconciliation and instead focusing on Ashima's isolation, struggle, and eventual adaptation, NetSAP readers strategically reinterpret Ashima's story to locate the displaced South Asian female subject within a representational system that

may otherwise occlude or dismiss her experience.

Creating sites of relay between academic and lay readers grants productive insight into how literary texts can take on nuanced, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting meanings in different interpretive contexts. The meaning of *The Namesake* is constructed not only by published scholarship or book reviews of the novel, but also by the novel's lay readers. For example, NetSAP readers' insistence on subverting dichotomies between Eastern and Western cultures in favor of more fluid categories of identity through tropes of romance and their focus on South Asian women's experience of migration through the character of Ashima illustrates, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, that we would do well to "attend to literary texts, not because their transformative energies either transcend or disguise the coarser stuff of ordinary being, but because those energies are the stuff of ordinary being" (2). As the case of *The Namesake* shows, academic and lay interpretations of romance and migration involve the protocols of literary recognition, a practice that incorporates the politics of representation, demands for group and individual self-determination, and self-scrutiny—surely the raw materials for the sort of "transformative energies" Sedgwick intends.

Because ethnic literary canons are inflected with investments in being recognized and recognizing others, the stakes of literary representation for ethnic minorities in the US are both urgent and ambivalent. Western or Anglo-American readers might excuse literary stereotypes about South Asian identity, but often South Asian readers strategically interpret ethnic and gender clichés in order to uncover relatable narratives of ethnic American identity formation. To fully comprehend the impact of ethnic literary canon formation for the group of South Asian American readers this literature ostensibly represents, we must consider both the construction of textual meaning and how the situation of authorial personas plays a key role in sculpting literary meaning.

There is a trend in the reception of Lahiri's work to associate her with one of two literary predecessors: Bharati Mukherjee (Jha 115; Katrak 5) or Salman Rushdie (Rothstein). In the case of the former, more common comparison, critics generally note that Lahiri's work builds on but ultimately supersedes the particularly South Asian *American* tradition established by Mukherjee (Maxey 539; Rajan and Sharma 158). Conversely, journalist Mervyn Rothstein reports that Lahiri is seen as a successful descendent of the Rushdie-centric global South Asian literary diaspora, or in other words, one of "Midnight's Grandchildren." This divided narrative of Lahiri's generational descent exemplifies a broader ideological trend in the critical reception history of transnational South Asian literature. Within

this literary tradition, the matrilineal, nation-based strain epitomized by Mukherjee's work requires refinement if not usurpation, while the patrilineal, transnational literary strain represented by Rushdie signifies success and innovation. Scholarship on South Asian diasporic fiction identifies and constructs an implicit divergence in the burgeoning literary canon of the South Asian diaspora that divides literature that deals in issues of identity, assimilation, and the immigrant experience from historical narratives of partition, religious strife, and political exile (Rajan and Sharma 156).

In recent academic criticism, particularly by feminist scholars, this divide maps onto gender.²⁴ Gita Rajan and Shailja Sharma write, "One does not need specific knowledge of history, geography, or civilizations to understand Lahiri's narrative world" (156). In contrast, Rajan and Sharma assert that writers such as Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, and Amitav Ghosh require knowledge of the history of empire and colonialism (157). In part, the aim of their project is to define two different forms of cosmopolitanism and anoint female writers of South Asian descent as the newer globally-conscious and globally-marketable strain. They argue that writers such as Lahiri comprise a new kind of cosmopolitanism that is more widely recognizable because it moves beyond "oppositional, emancipatory, or center-periphery narrative threads" (Rajan and Sharma 158). Rajan and Sharma theorize the concept of recognition in South Asian writing to argue that the success of this body of literature is contingent on "the intermingling of difference and familiarity" in various contexts of reception (151). In their effort to promote the recognition of South Asian female writers and praise Lahiri's accessibility, Rajan and Sharma inadvertently reinstate the gender problematics of the Western canon, casting the identity-oriented, authentically ethnic and accessible voice as female and the historical, postcolonial, and difficult voice as male.

The ideological implications that arise in our efforts to establish multicultural canons confound well-intentioned projects that seek to diversify the range of voices of the South Asian American and transnational experience. Reflecting on these multicultural agendas, Kandice Chuh writes:

Minoritized literatures tend to be coded as "(multi)cultural." Meanwhile, the "literary" is reserved for canonical writers and texts. This solution to the multicultural problem retrenches a divide between "high" (literary) and "low" (minority) culture, effectively racializing the idea of culture itself. . . . This kind of logic minoritizes (re-racializes and re-hierarchizes) even as it "celebrates diversity." (16)

The demand for institutionalized multiculturalism, which not only authorizes tokenistic pluralism but also sanctions the elision of particularized,

historical difference among and within racial groups, reinstates a racialized divide between high and low cultures and structures hierarchies of gender. In the case of South Asian American literature and its place within the multicultural canon, critical tendencies to separate the post-colonial, masculinist tradition of Rushdie, Ghosh, and Naipaul from popular South Asian American writers such as Lahiri and Mukherjee both describe and fortify tacit regimes of gender, further compounding multicultural hierarchies and devaluing literary representations of ethnic experience in the United States, particularly by women of color.

In other words, characterizing the androcentric South Asian diasporic tradition as one that focuses on modern Indian history, empire, and the colonial experience implies that these texts encourage historical investment and political engagement with the experiences of South Asian immigrant groups. Conversely, well-intentioned critical efforts to claim the South Asian American literary tradition as founded particularly by female writers inadvertently open these narratives of second-generation ethnic American identity formation to familiar critiques of identity politics and exoticization. In this way, narratives written by female authors of South Asian descent continue to bear the burden of exotic representation.

Thus, the ultimate outcomes of literary recognition are ambivalent and fraught: for academic readers, the “technologies of recognition” at play in well-intentioned attempts to place ethnic literatures within academically sanctioned literary canons can produce totalizing binaries, the fetish of ethnic authenticity, and the replication of gender hierarchies. The explicit desire for recognition, self-awareness, and public representation that defines NetSAP readers’ approach to this literature potentially recalibrates the more determinative elements of *The Namesake*, particularly the novel’s gender biases. By placing these two reading communities in dialogue with one another, we generate a model of reading that foregrounds the situated, dynamic, and dialogic nature of interpretive practice, reminding us that the act of reading always involves the reading subject’s agency within and submission to the symbolic realm.

Notes

1. I frame the opening of this article in terms of transnational South Asian fiction, rather than use more specific terms such as Indian American fiction, South Asian immigrant fiction, or South Asian postcolonial literature, to reflect the expansive swath of literature dealing in themes related to South Asia. The term *South Asian* itself brings together disparate traditions, cultures, and histories, uniting the nations of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Maldives into one regional designation. For more information on the fraught issue of nomenclature in this field of literary study, see Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth (1-19).
2. Interview and transcript material in this article draws on an ongoing research project on a book club associated with a regional chapter of the Network for South Asian Professionals (NetSAP) located in Washington, DC. The project studies how readers of South Asian descent use transnational South Asian literature to negotiate their identitarian affiliations in the United States. The NetSAP book club is affiliated with a larger national non-profit, the Network of Indian Professionals, whose mission is to promote South Asian presence in America through professional development, community service, cultural events, and political involvement. Material used in this article was collected from October 2005 to November 2006. During this period, I attended seven book club meetings and conducted nineteen interviews with NetSAP participants. I did not guide the discussions, but I announced that I was conducting a research project. In interviews, I made my perspectives clear to the readers, and we debated our divergent and overlapping perspectives.
3. All names of interviewees and book club participants are pseudonyms. Quotations have been edited for clarity.
4. I quote directly from interview transcripts in order to capture spontaneous responses in conversation. While my practice of juxtaposing lay readers' and my own interpretations may raise concerns that I unduly privilege my own voice and ideas, the essay will make clear that my approach seeks out the real value of the juxtaposition.
5. I use the term *lay reader* to denote readers who do not have professional literary critical training. Lay readership is diverse and varied. The term's clerical connotations are deliberately invoked. Janice A. Radway and Elizabeth Long warn against the increasing gulf between literary academic and lay readers, noting that the professionalization of literary studies isolates academic literary discourse from the concerns of everyday readers and develops a set of arcane, esoteric terminology that rivals the technical terminology common to the social sciences. See Long (71) and Radway (*Feeling* 120).
6. For more information on empathetic or transformative modes of reading, see Rita Felski (25), Carla Kaplan (13), Long (145), and Radway (*Reading* 102).
7. For additional discussion of the comforts and challenges presented by literary recognition, see Felski (29) and Kaplan (26).

8. *The Namesake* tells the story of Gogol Ganguli, whose Bengali parents immigrate to the United States in the 1960s after the father almost dies in a train crash. The novel follows Gogol through his adolescence into his young adulthood, focusing mainly on his romantic life—specifically two long-term relationships with Anglo-American women and his failed marriage to a second-generation Bengali woman.
9. See Judith Caesar (82), Robin E. Field (168), and Noelle Brada-Williams (453).
10. See, for example, Boris Kachka, Mandira Sen, and Summi Kaipa and Prageeta Sharma.
11. For a summary of these recurring impasses see Shilpa Davé et al.
12. For background on the interplay between ethnic authenticity and gender in South Asian America see Shamita Das Dasgupta (1-17) and Sunaina Marr Maira (132-37).
13. The term *Indo-chic* describes the wave of neo-orientalist interest in consuming various cultural artifacts of the East such as *bindis*, *saris*, yoga, and Eastern mysticism. The term is also self-orientalizing and can describe an affluent, South Asian consumer aesthetic. See Graham Huggan (67).
14. As Felski explains, “the ethos of academic reading diverges significantly from lay reading,” but “this distinction is not a dichotomy; professional critics were once lay readers after all” (12).
15. Jhumpa Lahiri was a topic of conversation in fourteen of the eighteen interviews I conducted. Ten of the interviewees strongly identified with Lahiri’s work.
16. See also Ruth Maxey.
17. See also Susan Koshy (287).
18. See, for example, Field (173), Gita Rajan (134-38), and Laura Anh Williams (70).
19. The developmental narrative of choice that lay and academic readers find attractive and compelling in Gogol and Moushumi’s relationship invokes problematic paradigms of Eastern oppression and Western choice. See Inderpal Grewal for an exposition of how these paradigms function in South Asian diasporic literature (65).
20. The trope of failed marriage in *The Namesake* repeats a familiar paradigm in Asian American narratives in which the unsuccessful marriage plot symbolizes the protagonists’ thwarted assimilation and cultural placement. See Patricia P. Chu (18-19).
21. See also Sayantani DasGupta and Dasgupta (326).
22. For more information on how this trope functions in Asian American studies, see Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (18-76).
23. For a more detailed explanation of this theme in Asian American literature, see Chu (19).
24. Sandhya Rajendra Shukla discusses this gendered divide. As she says, “the first Indian authors to have U.S. literary celebrity have been female” (161). Shukla argues that the emblematic Indian American writer, Bharati Mukherjee, self-

consciously identifies her work with “paradigms of ethnicity” and Americanization, in contrast to US-based, male South Asian writers, such as Abraham Verghese whose stories of Americanization are framed within the concept of Indian diaspora (Shukla 170). See also Shukla (134-35, 160-70). Vinay Lal argues that because the novel requires an intimate “grounding in the social order...male Indian American novelists have not generally been able to set their stories to American life” (109). In contrast, he asserts that, “Asian Indian women writers, among them Bharati Mukherjee, Meena Alexander, [and] Jhumpa Lahiri . . . speak more directly to the condition of being an Indian in the United States” (111).

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