

Mother-Weights and Lost Fathers

Parents in South Asian American Literature

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That parent-child relationships should play a significant role within South Asian American literature is perhaps no surprise, since this is crucial material for any writer. But the particular forms they so often take – a dysfunctional mother-daughter dynamic, leading to the search for maternal surrogates; and the figure of the prematurely deceased father – are more perplexing. Why do families adhere to these patterns in so many South Asian American texts and what does that tell us about this *œuvre*? More precisely, why are mothers subjected to a harsher critique than fathers and what purpose does this critique serve? How might we interpret the trope of the untimely paternal death? In this article I will seek to answer these questions – arguably key to an understanding of this growing body of writing – by considering works produced between the 1990s and the early twenty-first century by a range of South Asian American writers.

Mother-weights and maternal mysteries

The prominence of maternal themes within this literature can be traced to the high number of South Asian American women writers.¹ Women's writing is, after all, often matrilineal in its need for female role models and its urge to empower the older generation, especially in traditionally colonial and patriarchal contexts. Within these particular works, the relationship between the usually female protagonist and her biological mother may take different forms, but it is paradigmatically difficult. Fictional mothers are variously depicted as small-minded, materialistic, controlling and unsympathetic towards their daughters. Thus, in Meena Alexander's novel, *Manhattan*

Music (1997), Sandhya's mother, Sosa, is portrayed as critical and implacable and Sandhya emigrates from India to the United States in part to escape this bad relationship, as do the main characters of other novels: Gita in Kirin Narayan's *Love, Stars, and All That* (1994), and Priya in Amulya Malladi's *The Mango Season* (2003). Priya's problematic relationship with her 'Ma' is mirrored by the aggression between Ma and her own mother, and although Priya may believe that by leaving Hyderabad for the US, she has broken this vicious circle of mother-daughter animosity, hostilities resume almost as soon as she returns from America: 'it had just been three days, but I was already tired of being in India, at *home*, and especially tired of my mother' (12; emphasis in original). Malladi establishes an ostensibly inextricable connection here between the mother-daughter relationship, ideas of nationhood, and home as domestic space,² ideas to which I will return a little later.

Such thinking is not limited to fictional texts. Indeed, when Alexander recalls a visit from her own mother to New York in her memoir, *Fault Lines* (1993), she considers that the fact ...I had married a man of my choice, come with him to another country, given birth, and found myself a university job, all in short order, none of that counted. What I felt was the burden of her on my soul, a gravitational pull, a mother-weight. What she felt inside her gave me no room, and I did not have the suppleness of spirit to speak to her (163).

Connected to this notion of an oppressive and inescapable maternal presence or 'mother-weight' is the deployment of what one might term a 'maternal mystery', which often drives plot and character development in fictional works through questions surrounding a protagonist's mother. A case in point is Vineeta Vijayaraghavan's novel, *Motherland* (2001). Brought up for the first four years of her life in southern India by her maternal grandmother, Amamma, Maya is then sent to America to join her mother, Kamala. The

particular maternal mystery underpinning the novel – explored through Maya’s return to the ancestral homeland one summer at the age of fifteen – is connected to the reasons behind Kamala’s earlier decision to leave her daughter behind. Their relationship has in fact never recovered from Maya’s powerful sense of abandonment by her mother and seems to have broken down irreparably, its dysfunctionality apparently well beyond the classic problems of adolescents and their parents.

The reader is forced, for much of the novel, to question Kamala’s actions. In a cyclical movement of past, present and future, it is only by returning to India, the site of her grandmother’s home, that Maya can discover what actually happened: Kamala was too traumatised to look after her as a baby because Maya’s twin sister had died. Kamala then blamed her mother for the tragedy since it had been her idea for Kamala to give birth in India rather than America where, Kamala believes, more advanced medical facilities would have ensured her baby’s survival. Rather like Maya, Kamala has to return to India – to attend to her own dying mother – in order to achieve reconciliation, healing and forgiveness: with both her mother and Maya. The symbolic moment of Ammamma’s death therefore allows Kamala to take on her full role of mother to Maya. Indira Ganesan’s earlier novel, *Inheritance* (1997), anticipates the central premise of *Motherland* through its protagonist, Sonil, who also returns from the US at the age of fifteen to her grandmother’s South Asian home, hoping to discover why her mother, Lakshmi, deserted her. Although the characters and situations in *Inheritance* are less psychologically developed than those of *Motherland*, the narrative relies on the strikingly similar notion that only with the death of Sonil’s maternal grandmother can Lakshmi tell her daughter why she could not bring her up.

South Asian matriarchs are sometimes presented as loving figures – for instance, Mira in Beena Kamlani’s short story, ‘Brandy Cake’ (1999), and Leela in Kavita Daswani’s novel, *For Matrimonial Purposes* (2003) – yet even where they are depicted more favourably, they embody ancestral ways, and not necessarily in a positive sense. Their defence of certain traditional customs, such as arranged marriage and a woman’s duty to stay at home, allows writers to question such mores. As Marianne Hirsch has argued:

there can be no systematic and theoretical study of women in patriarchal culture ...no theory of women’s oppression, that does not take into account woman’s role as a mother of daughters and as a daughter of mothers, that does not study female identity in relation to previous and subsequent generations of women, and ...that relationship in the wider context in which it takes place: the emotional, political, economic, and symbolic structures of family and society (202).

Although Hirsch is addressing Western feminist concerns in the early 1980s, her statement suggests that maternal issues provide an especially rich prism through which to understand South Asian American women, with their roots in a traditionally ‘patriarchal culture’, especially at the first-generation stage. Thus, in *Mango Season*, Malladi critiques what she views as the limited opportunities on offer to Indian women trapped by patriarchal expectation, whilst highlighting their own failure to challenge and liberate themselves from particular societal norms. In this sense, her writing exhorts Indian women to be more self-determining but her implication is that they can more readily achieve this in the brave new world of America.

Surrogate mothers

In *Love, Stars, and All That*, Narayan qualifies her critique of South Asian motherhood by demonstrating that it is in India that Gita can receive unconditional love: from her unofficial surrogate mother, Saroj Auntie. This situation suggests that return visits to India, however troubling and problematic, can be rescued and redeemed by a sympathetic figure *in loco parentis*. Both *Love, Stars* and *Motherland* show that the theme of replacement mothers – in the latter case, a role played by Maya’s maternal grandmother – is almost as important as the trope of the dysfunctional, absent, emotionally unavailable, or unloving biological matriarch and that it in fact provides a necessary narrative alternative. In other words, the ‘wicked stepmother’ motif of Western fairy tales is reversed, since surrogate, rather than biological, mothers appear to be better placed to provide maternal love – and have apparently given more consideration to the matter.

The eponymous protagonist of Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story, ‘Mrs Sen’s’ (1999), is more nurturing to Eliot, the white American boy in her care, than his single, working mother in this South Asian American version of traditional US narratives in which carers of colour offer Caucasian children superior protection to that of their biological parents. Returning to Indian terrain, Alexander’s novel, *Nampally Road* (1991), presents Mira’s birth mother as a notable presence-as-absence, and when Mira moves to Hyderabad after studying in Britain, she instead forges a bond of love with Durgabai, a wise older doctor, whose name means ‘little mother’. At the most obvious level, Mira does this to compensate for her failed relationship with her own family who ‘were strangers to me’ (104). At a more figurative level, such free-thinking older women as Durgabai and Saroj Auntie offer an alternative model of Indian womanhood, although the suggestion is that

the greater freedom they enjoy and the higher degree of loving support they can offer have come at a price: Durgabai is a widow, whose son lives abroad, and Saroj is unwillingly childless.

The notion of maternal surrogacy also reflects the tradition, within the more affluent strata of Indian society, of ayahs (or nursemaids) to perform activities which such figures as the cold and unsympathetic Mama in Anita Desai's novel, *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), refuse to countenance.³ In *Fault Lines*, Alexander recalls that, as a child, she was 'constantly circled by guardians', including 'three ayahs' (87); and Daswani critiques the Mumbai bourgeoisie in *For Matrimonial Purposes* through the figure of Indu, a beautiful socialite whose

slender white fingers, tips coloured a brilliant pink, [were] amazingly unchipped given she had two infant boys. (It must have to do with the fact that the feeding, changing and washing were all left to others) (71).

Ginu Kamani's short story, 'Lucky Dip' (1995), similarly attacks India's social elite through its depiction of surrogate maternity: its protagonist, Maya, is a young girl cared for by her ayah, cooked for by a servant, and entertained by her grandmother. Her mother is too busy socialising to play any active role in Maya's daily life and even complains when asked to join in with one of her daughter's games. The ayah, forced to earn her living caring for someone else's child (compare Hai 420n), is heartbroken to be separated from her own daughter but when Maya suggests to a classmate, Savitri, that Maya's mother may be able to reunite the ayah with her daughter, Savitri retorts 'We'll ask *Mummy* ...No *Mummy* cares about other people's children' (36). Deploying 'Mummy' as a scathingly ironic, Anglophone shorthand for the indifference to children imputed to middle- and upper-class Indian women, Kamani implies that the poor have more

humanity than the wealthy: mordant social comment framed through an explicit attack on the institution of surrogate motherhood.

Although writers betray an explicit discomfort *vis-à-vis* these traditional practices, they also exercise a protectiveness towards them. Thus, a wealthy, unnamed woman in *Motherland* defends boarding schools by arguing that ‘parents are not always the best people to raise their own children’ (74), while Sonil argues in *Inheritance* that her upbringing by aunts is culturally acceptable because Indian ‘parenting’ often involves ‘other relatives’ (56). Revealingly, however, this explanation of her circumstances does little to assuage the pain of her mother’s rejection. Writers’ blend of pride and disquiet towards issues of maternal surrogacy generates an interesting tension whereby this theme is both worthy of comment and straightforwardly accepted as part of an apparently rigid social world. The treatment of non-biological mother figures or ‘mothering-women’ (Reyes 9), who span socio-economic backgrounds, begs wider questions, then, about what kinds of audience writers are addressing: a point reinforced by an element of ethnographic explanation, by turns defiant and uneasy, which suggests that a non-South Asian readership is generally assumed.

The function of fathers

In contrast to these portrayals of unsatisfactory mother-daughter relationships – and the concomitant need for maternal surrogates – are the affectionate ties which exist in these works between women and their fathers. In the non-fictional context of S Mitra Kalita’s *Suburban Sahibs* (2003), a work of extended reportage, Pradip Kothari and Harish Patel are ambitious for their daughters in the United States. This is in fact Harish’s *raison*

d'être, rather as it is for Mahesh Vasi, albeit in a more sinister sense, in Nikita Lalwani's British Asian novel, *Gifted* (2007). Such texts thus offer feminist variations on the stereotype of the tough immigrant patriarch anxious only for his sons to succeed. In *Mango Season*, moreover, Priya's father provides a positive embodiment of India, offering unconditional love and unquestioning acceptance of his daughter, and it is through Priya's relationship with him that Malladi's story draws its greatest emotional force.

The combination of Priya's respect for her father and dismissive attitude towards her mother could be read as misogynist, yet the easier understanding here between father and daughter signals that, in a largely patriarchal culture, women's fathers can sometimes be more empowering to them. For Hirsch, this is because a 'mother projects upon her daughter her own ambivalence about being female' (206). Alexander has commented that, as a young woman:

my mother didn't approve of me writing at all ...[she] thought I should be a good needlewoman, learn how to make good *sambar* ...and take care of my husband. I should have a certain amount of education but not too much. My father ...was a scientist who said to me once ...'When I write a scientific paper, I publish it. If you write a poem, you should publish it' ...Otherwise I had no encouragement within the family. It happens a lot in patriarchal societies that fathers encourage their daughters because they're the ones who *can* ...There's no easy way the mother could encourage the daughter to go into the public domain ... Women writers ...have had fathers who enabled them in some way – look at Virginia Woolf's father – rather than mothers, who gave them something else (quoted in Maxey 25).

A more common paradigm in these works, however, is the absent or deceased patriarch: Gita's father died when she was very young in *Love, Stars*; Renu lost her father as a teenager in Ganesan's novel, *The Journey* (1990); and in several of Chitra Divakaruni's stories in *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001), a father has either left

(‘The Love of a Good Man’) or died (‘The Intelligence of Wild Things’, ‘The Blooming Season for Cacti’, ‘The Names of Stars in Bengali’). In Lahiri’s short story, ‘A Temporary Matter’ (1999), Shukumar loses his father while still an undergraduate, an event which prompts him to study India professionally, while Lahiri’s novel, *The Namesake* (2003), explores, in a more sustained and considered manner, the impact of Ashoke’s death on his son, Gogol. Similarly, Sameer Parekh’s novel, *Stealing the Ambassador* (2002), is marked by Vasant’s death and the ways in which his son, Rajiv, struggles to come to terms with this. And in two debut cinematic features – M Night Shyamalan’s *Praying with Anger* (1992) and Krutin Patel’s *ABCD* (1999) – South Asian American protagonists have lost their father.⁴ In each of these works, the leading character, usually second-generation, is in early life and, in each case, a father’s death is considered to be premature.

Following their parents’ deaths, Raj and Nina, the eponymous ‘ABCs’ or ‘American-Born Confused Desis’ in the film, *ABCD*,⁵ choose hegemonic, white American culture through their selection of white partners over the Indian ones their mother had urged upon them. Raj and Nina’s rejection of their ancestral culture implies that assimilation into ‘mainstream’ (read, ‘white’) America has been made possible because their parents’ deaths have freed them from traditional expectations. Indeed, the trope of parental death has been used as a way of superficially and speedily resolving more complex cultural dilemmas. One wonders what would have happened if their father and mother had survived. Patel, the film’s writer-director, appears to have facilitated a tidy, if problematic, *dénouement* through the figure of premature parental death.

In *The Namesake*, Ashoke's sudden death might, at first sight, be interpreted as a similarly convenient plot device. As for Raj and Nina, this death is almost a filial punishment for Gogol, since before his father died, Gogol had, like them, neglected his family and avoided their wishes and values, to sometimes hurtful effect. But Ashoke's passing exercises the opposite effect on Gogol to Raj and Nina because it propels his decision to embrace his heritage through an inter-ethnic marriage: to Moushumi, a fellow Bengali American. The connection between this marriage and Ashoke's death is spelled out by Lahiri's narrator: 'Gogol is aware, without having to be told, that his father's death has accelerated certain expectations, that by now his mother wants him settled' (191). As Pankaj Mishra has noted, Gogol is motivated by guilt (44); and this sensation combines with regret and a heartfelt desire for a kind of vicarious closeness to his father now that it is too late to achieve this directly.

For both Gogol and Rajiv in *Stealing the Ambassador*, the early death of a father, and the things left unsaid between parent and son, are complicated by questions of cultural identity: in particular, problems of cultural belonging for the son, coupled with a broader discomfort towards parental values. Such difficulties are rendered more poignant and confusing by bereavement and the painful mixture of filial guilt and remorse it elicits. In both cases, however, the death of a father proves pivotal: it leads Gogol to marry (albeit unsuccessfully) in a bid to preserve Bengali culture in America, and it results in Rajiv's trip to India and the opportunity to forge a stronger bond with his paternal grandparents. Recalling *Motherland*, Rajiv also learns during this visit to India that Vasant's relationship with his own father was tense and unresolved, rather like that of Vasant and Rajiv.

Conclusion

Each of these works refers, by implication, to a specific historical moment, ranging from the 1950s (*Fault Lines*) and 1960s ('Lucky Dip') to the 1990s (*Namesake*) and into the twenty-first century (*For Matrimonial Purposes*), yet they present South Asian parent-child dynamics as part of an essentially unchanging landscape. Although this move may be interpreted as part of a wider tendency by members of the South Asian diaspora to regard the ancestral country and its culture as remaining atrophied within a remembered or imaginary past (Ganguly 29–31, 40, 44), it does not account for writers' continued reliance on such schematic archetypes as the unfeeling birth mother, the warm maternal surrogate, and the prematurely deceased biological father. Starting with the first trope, one explanation might be that the difficulty faced by these fictional characters in relation to their biological mothers – a form of 'matrophobia' in Lynn Sukenick's phrase (quoted in Hirsch 202) – allows them to flee traditional expectations through emigration to the United States. As we have seen, South Asian mothers, and the bad relationships they signify, provide justification for leaving. Radhika Mohanram has even gone so far as to argue, discussing 'Her Mother' (1991), a short story by Anjana Appachana, that 'mothers and daughters cannot have a relationship while in India' (34). Or as Firoze puts it in *Love, Stars*:

I used to look down on people who'd come from the Third World to be educated in America and Europe and who then would just stay. I thought they were selfish, that it was their duty to go back. Like Gita: she never spoke of returning. I couldn't understand it, a smart woman like her and all she could do in India. Now I see that there were things about her background that she was escaping, that dreadful mother and who knows what else (200).

Firoze is right to read Gita's decision in personal terms, and Bapsi Sidhwa makes Feroza Ginwalla, the protagonist of her novel, *An American Brat* (1994), ask herself similar questions when she decides to settle in late 1970s America rather than return to Pakistan. Yet the sheer repetition of these ideas across a succession of texts, produced over two decades, suggests a lingering sense of anxiety and even guilt about emigration among certain writers. For this reason, South Asia must remain the realm of the 'mother-weight', and where women cannot emigrate – for example, Sowmya in *Mango Season* and Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* – the Indian home is depicted as a realm of subtle and not-so-subtle tyranny, maternal pressure, claustrophobia, snobbery, and limited opportunities.

But if a patriarchal, class-ridden South Asia is under attack, why are mothers, rather than fathers, made to represent the shortcomings of this rejected society? At a straightforward biological level, the mother's body constitutes, in Alexander's words, 'the first home' (*Fault Lines* 24) and the absence of later maternal nurturance becomes a powerful symbol for wider social injustice. Moreover, as Susan Peck Macdonald has argued (albeit in a different literary context),

the good, supportive mother is potentially so powerful a figure as to prevent her daughter's trials from occurring, to shield her from the process of maturation, and thus to disrupt the focus and equilibrium of the novel ...if the mother is to be present ...[she] must be flawed in some way, so that instead of preventing her daughter's trials, she contributes to them (58–59).

In other words, a mother must be unsupportive if her daughter is to achieve selfhood within the narrative. And in these works, that selfhood is expressed through emigration.

Taken further, these writers are drawing on the age-old trend whereby nationalism has mapped territories as female through such terms as 'motherland' (overtly deployed by

Vijayaraghavan) and ‘mother country’, complicated, of course, by its colonial overtones (Kolodny; McClintock 357; Bhattacharjee 321; Wong and Santa Ana 200). Ostensibly embodying the continuation of gendered, national traditions, South Asian mothers thus serve as a synecdoche for much more, forming a key element of a tripartite conception of cultural identity, predicated on selfhood, nation and family, and belonging to the powerful, Subcontinental trope of ‘Mother India’ (Ash 153; Mohanram 21; Jain 1654–1660). But rather than suggesting *lost* mothers/motherlands – in the manner of the vanished Afghan mother/nation in Khaled Hosseini’s novel, *The Kite Runner* (2003), for instance – many of these South Asian American literary works directly reject the mother/motherland in their bid for individuation through the putting-down of American roots. Katu Katrak has argued that

postcolonial women writers ...challenge the romanticisation of motherhood as motherland, mother earth, woman as earth-goddess possessing mysterious powers of fertility. Women writers’ demystification of such notions reveals certain negative, even violent experiences of motherhood (211).

The very idea of a ‘motherland’ is under scrutiny, then, but crucially these South Asian mothers’ ‘experiences of motherhood’ are not voiced. Indeed, their perspective – rather like that of ayahs (compare Hai 404, 409; Brians 107) – is rarely privileged. That position might even contain its own form of feminist resistance to traditional maternal obligations and Hindu values of wifely self-sacrifice (Katrak 232), rather than the daughters’ simplistic belief that their mothers unthinkingly perpetuate patriarchal ideas. To offer the mother’s point-of-view is – barring a few exceptions (for instance, Kamala in *Motherland*) – beyond the purview of these daughter-centric texts.

For Naoko Sugiyama, the literary discourse of mothers and daughters is also a means of providing ‘women of colour [with] ...an alternative grand narrative’ which can impose

order on ‘the fragmentation and decenteredness of today’s society’ (76–77). Within South Asian American literature, one might read such ‘fragmentation’ as the chaotic emotional effects of emigration (in such first-generation texts as *Manhattan Music*, *Mango Season*, and *Love, Stars*) and as an unresolved bicultural confusion (in a second-generation novel like *Motherland*, for example). The use of the mother-daughter plot also reflects other branches of Asian American literature which inscribe the connection between mothers and daughters, a maternal mystery, and the ancestral homeland (Wong and Santa Ana 195, 201). One could contend, then, that in drawing on matrilineal patterns, these writers are positioning themselves within longer-standing traditions of ‘minority’ writing in the United States and that this may also account for South Asian American literature’s greater reliance on maternal issues than any comparable tendency within, say, British Asian writing. The ‘mother-daughter romance’, in Patricia P Chu’s phrase (143), has proved a successful literary strategy, in creative and commercial terms, for a number of Asian American women writers, possibly because it is a formula which manages to be universal and culturally specific at the same time (compare Ho 57; Chu 165–166). Such personal narratives as *Motherland* and *Mango Season* are not the most threatening proposition in political terms, yet writers like Alexander, Kamani, Desai, Malladi, and Daswani make sharply resonant points about class, caste and feminism through their matrilineal fictions, which generally refuse to offer the homage to one’s mother often associated with the ‘literature of matrilineage’ (Maglin 258). In other words, the personal is political here, in both South Asian and diasporic contexts.

Beyond the paternal representations within such male-authored works as *Stealing the Ambassador* and *ABCD*, fathers may be treated more positively than mothers by women

writers here because they have encouraged, even driven, the emigration so emancipatory, it seems, to their daughters (and sons) and because those fictional daughters may, at the same time, expect more emotionally from their mothers than their fathers. It may appear easier to understand – and, depressingly, therefore to condemn – one’s own sex and to project onto the mother, rather than the father, ‘all the bad things which are too scary to be recognised as part of oneself’ (Bettelheim 70): hence the continual punishing of distant or passive mothers. It is still unclear why paternal deaths recur so frequently across these cultural productions. In one sense, the passing of a parent or elder and the impact of this event on a young adult is simply a universal trope in literature and film, a traumatic rite of passage which forces that character to take responsibility for their life more quickly than they might otherwise have done, because it prompts a necessary, inevitable re-evaluation of their priorities. It is therefore a means of increasing the dramatic potential of a plot, moving the story forward, and emphasising underlying tensions between characters. In the cultural context of these texts, however, additional elements are at work. Through the device of paternal, rather than maternal, deaths,⁶ South Asian American writers may be trying to demonstrate the effects of migration on older men, who make the decision to leave the ancestral homeland in the first place in the bid for a better life, serve as principal breadwinner, struggle to maintain their *amour propre* in trying circumstances, and do not always succeed in emotional or material terms (Roy 104). In *Stealing the Ambassador*, for instance, Vasant loses his initial idealism when he discovers American life to be stressful and disappointing, and his heart attack arguably results, at least in part, from these experiences. Interestingly, Parekh opens up the cause of Vasant’s death to differing interpretations, so that his son, Rajiv, a doctor,

attributes it to an unhealthy diet and ‘not enough exercise’, whereas Rajiv’s grandfather, Bapuji, believes Vasant’s heart was ‘broken ...it was that place [America] which killed him’ (60).⁷ As though to support Bapuji’s version, the narrative painstakingly reveals that the major source of Vasant’s disillusionment is a feeling that, no matter how long he lives in the US, he can never be truly accepted as American.

In common with other Asian American texts, Parekh’s novel is crucially concerned with concepts of Americanness, the need for immigrants to ‘claim the nation’ (Kim 103–111) and the ultimately hollow nature of the American Dream. Vasant claims America in part because of the 1960s immigrant generation to which he belongs, whereas his American-born son has developed more transnational attitudes, no doubt because Rajiv has seen the difficulties faced by Asian Americans in securing a sense of national belonging in any straightforward fashion (Srikanth 95). In literary terms, then, it makes sense – as with the mother-daughter plot – to view the thematic prevalence of South Asian American paternal deaths in the wider context of Asian American literary practices. For Sau-ling Cynthia Wong and Jeffrey J. Santa Ana, Japanese and Chinese American men’s writing offers multiple examples of ‘male anxiety over emasculation and failed paternity [which] lingers ...in the form of fear of cultural extinction resulting from excessive assimilation’ (199). This ‘fear of cultural extinction’, although not expressed in the form of ‘failed paternity’, might be said to haunt South Asian American cultural production, too. South Asian patriarchy – or the culture of the father – faces a crisis in the new nation through the assault of foreign influences, the pressure to assimilate, and the personal and professional disempowerment faced by some male immigrants. This crisis is thus figured in more allegorical terms through the widespread

image of the paternal death. It also means, however, that patriarchy is not attacked through the figure of the father. But in their different ways, both fathers in the US and mothers in South Asia must be sacrificed if their fictional children are to achieve American selfhood.

Notes

1. The relative absence of South Asian American male writers, especially in comparison with British Asian literature, may be explained by the fact that Asian American literary traditions have generally proved more favourable to women than men. In the absence of a significant literary father figure in the manner of, for example, Salman Rushdie or Hanif Kureishi for younger British Asian male authors (and of course female writers, too), South Asian lines of literary descent in the US have generally been female, following the success of Bharati Mukherjee. South Asian American men – including Dhan Gopal Mukerji, Dalip Singh Saund, Krishnalal Shridharani, Ved Mehta, A K Ramanujan, Agha Shahid Ali, Indran Amirthanayagam, G S Sharat Chandra, and Abraham Verghese – have principally gravitated towards life-writing, short fiction and poetry rather than the novel. These genres' lower commercial profile may perhaps explain the lesser prominence of such authors. On the other hand, South Asian American cinema has traditionally been dominated by men: in particular the director M Night Shyamalan and the actors Kal Penn and Aasif Mandvi.
2. For Sameer Parekh, a male writer, the patterns are patrilineal but essentially the same, since his novel, *Stealing the Ambassador* (2002), explores the difficult interconnections between fathers, sons, grandfathers and national belonging.
3. Compare Jain 1658, 1660n.
4. Similar ideas are explored in British Asian cultural production, where fathers have suffered untimely deaths in texts as diverse as Farrukh Dhondy's short story, 'East End at Your Feet' (1976); Suhayl Saadi's stories, 'Ninety-Nine Kiss-o-grams' and 'The Dancers' (2001); and Sarfraz Manzoor's memoir, *Greetings from Bury Park* (2007), which is powered by the personal impact of Manzoor's father's unexpected death. In David Attwood's 1992 film, *Wild West* (written by Harwant Bains), the British Pakistani protagonist's father has already died when the film begins.
5. Ironically, neither Raj nor Nina is American-born: rather they belong to the so-called '1.5 generation', born in one country before settling in another at a young age.
6. Occasionally the figure of the deceased mother haunts South Asian American literature: for instance, in Kamani's short story, 'Just Between Indians' (1995), and Lahiri's 'Hema and Kaushik' short story cycle from *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008); in each case, it is sons who have lost their mothers, those deaths both premature and tragic. See also Bob Roe (dir.), *Dancing in Twilight* (2004; written by Rishi Vij) which is premised on parental death, using Sameer's mother's death as its starting point and concluding with the presumed suicide of his father, Madhav.
7. Bapuji's attitude contrasts with Indian parents who encouraged their children to emigrate to the US in the 1960s and 1970s; see Kalita 36.

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