CHAPTER FIVE

NARRATIVES OF "MARGINAL" MEN AND WOMEN: THE POLITICS OF GENDERED LOCATIONS

Women, abos, gays, kids, koalas, druggies, whales, and now the Asians. Endangered species, every one of them. The list of those marginalized by this rotten society gets longer every day. And does anyone give a damn? That's Australia for you! (Gooneratne, A Change of Skies: 131)

Gender plays an important role in how we constitute ourselves or how writers create a subject in the domestic as well as the public life in their narratives. At other levels it also works as an instrument of oppression, alienation and marginalization—in or outside the home. So, gender should also be understood “simultaneously as a structure, that is, a latticework of institutionalized social relationships that, by creating and manipulating the categories of gender, organize and signify power at levels above the individual” (Ferree et al. xix). Thus preservation of traditional gender ideologies and roles aggravates and sometimes even creates the tensions that plague many South Asian migrant families. On woman’s proper role and responsibility in the traditional family sphere, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1989) note: “The ideologies of women as carriers of tradition often disguise, mitigate, compensate, contest, actual changes taking place. Womanhood is often part of an asserted or desired, not an actual cultural continuity” (17). In gender studies women’s sexuality is central to the discourse of ethnic and national processes.¹ Women are “biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities since they give birth to children, who are future members of an ethnic group” and “[...] seen as the bearers of culture for the ethnic group” (Rudrappa 97). Marginalized in one way or the other, women are often portrayed as passive victims “forced to struggle with their oppressive cultural systems” (Van der Veer 14). However, in the diaspora “marginality is a collective phenomenon which must be studied at the group and societal levels” (Drew 81). And this concept of marginality (of a woman) should be understood alongside the concept of the “marginal man”—“one whom fate has condemned to live in two societies and
in two, not merely different but antagonistic culture” (Park 945). Men in the diaspora attempt to reproduce their dominant patriarchal role in a new social milieu because they try to maintain family honour and are often undermined by loss of position or centrality, i.e. their place as the pivot around which others turn (Goode 1982), through the lack of recognition of qualifications, language, and the loss of financial mobility and class superiority.

It further analyses how social, cultural, political and economic conditions of both the homeland (old home) and hostland (new home) affect these subjects and shape their roles in the society. This chapter by looking at some of the narratives as case studies, analyses how both diasporic men and women are placed on the “margins” of the mainstream society and also on the traditional societies they have left.

The chapter shifts the focus from the politics of sensory and spatial locations towards a politics of gendered locations and difference to see if the stereotypical image of the marginal immigrant still holds. It also attempts to find out how the South Asian diaspora community has changed in relation to the gender discourse over the years by analysing the representation of male and female protagonists in selected short stories and narratives of South Asian diaspora in Australia.

Before I begin, the two theoretical concepts—“marginal” and “centre”—popularised especially by the book Empire Writes Back (1989), need some explanation with reference to their usage in this chapter in the context of South Asian diasporan “marginal” men and women, and politics of gendered locations. The term “centre” is used to indicate the hostland—the oppressing powerful Anglo-Australian idea of a nation that marginalizes the new immigrants’ notion of home and identity. As a result the diasporans are put on a secondary level or margins of the society. The centre tries to assimilate and subjugate the margin and the diasporans at the margin use subversion to challenge these assimilatory pressures into majority culture (see also Corkhill 1994 and 1995). Here, gender does not refer only to women. According to Judith Butler (2004), gender is a construct that regards the ideas we hold about masculinity and femininity, about appropriate roles and about power relations. It is a “historical and social category” that is continuously enacted even though under the constraints of existing norms and imaginaries that differ across “geopolitical
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boundaries and cultural constraints on who is imagining whom, and for what purpose” (J. Butler 10; see also Schiwy 275).

According to Alison Blunt (2005), “diaspora space” is “both gendered and racialised” as “feminizing the diaspora” is important both in terms of “studying the migration of women and in the domestic symbols often used to represent resettlement” (12). It is beyond doubt that being a woman, a migrant and a citizen is to hold a complex subject position in today’s world (see Tibe-Bonifacio 2003). The main argument advocated in the history of western thought was that men and women are essentially different in nature—men, on the one hand, are strong, rational and are constructed for productive work; while women, on the other hand, are considered to be weak emotional and destined for reproductive roles or procreation. Under this historical viewpoint, according to Feminists and Marxists men are in possession of power over women because of the system of patriarchy. Cutting across these age-old stereotypical gender constructions is the concept of marginal man. On the issue of “marginal men,” Milton Gordon (1964), the noted sociologist held the view that the individual who engages in frequent and sustained primary contacts across ethnic group lines, particularly racial and religious, runs the risk of becoming what, in standard sociological parolance, has been called “the marginal man.” The marginal man is the person who stands on the borders or margins of two cultural worlds but is fully a member of neither. He may be the offspring of a racially mixed or interfaith marriage, or he may have ventured away from the security of the cultural group of his ancestors because of the individual personality and experience factors which predisposed him to seek wider contacts and entry into social worlds, which appeared more alluring [...]. Frustrated and not fully accepted [...], ambivalent [...], and beset by conflicting cultural standards, he develops, according to the classic conception, personality traits of insecurity, moodiness, hypersensitivity, excessive self-consciousness, and nervous strain [...]. (56-57; my italics)

In sociology “marginal man” is a person who participates only slightly in the life of two cultural groups without identifying with either group. In this chapter, the term “marginal man” is used to examine the male characters, who reveal a growing underclass of males in the South Asian diaspora, standing “on the borders or margins of two cultural worlds,” with little economic and traditional choices. The term also includes men whose lack of economic contribution as breadwinners or loss of
patriarchal power (or authority) in the household makes them an outsider and also leads to loss of self-esteem.3

On the other hand, speaking of immigrant women in general, it is important to examine how immigrant women negotiate questions of ethnic and sexual identity (see Rudrappa 100). In “Delicious Solitude” from Masterpiece and Other Stories (2002), Yasmine Gooneratne narrates the experience of an academician, Anita, who had immigrated to Australia from Sri Lanka around fifteen years ago with her engineer husband and their two children. Anita, who never thought of returning to Sri Lanka, is offered a fellowship to visit a Sri Lankan university for six months. She takes up the fellowship and is eager to see her homeland again and live, for at least six months, a life that she always dreamt of—being “truly independent” (48). As soon as the Aunt and Uncle of her husband came to know that she was going to live alone, they “made a most awful fuss” and asked her to stay at their place instead of a luxurious hotel: “A single woman living on her own in the city—and in a hotel, of all places! You shouldn’t allow her to do it, putha” (49).

Anita, who has reinvented herself as a scholar in Australia and prefers to be independent, has to give in to the pleadings of her husband, who has been supportive of her every career decision. As Gooneratne notes:

In fact, as we all know, no married academic can make a success of her professional life if she doesn’t have her husband’s full support; and the fact that Anita’s career has been so very successful is evidence enough of Lakshman’s ungrudging care for her. (51)

The six months that Anita spends with her husband’s relatives reflect the Sri Lankan community’s strong “conservatism” and “conventional attitude” (50). She is treated like “an adolescent daughter of the family” (53). Her husband’s relatives and other people who know her marginalize her point of view and “do not seem to understand that she was a professional, a career woman” (53).

On her return to Australia she vows “never to return to her homeland” which instead of providing her with “Delicious Solitude,” made her angry with herself for having betrayed her principles, for having allowed herself to feel guilty at enjoying innocent pleasures she would not even have thought twice about indulging in Sydney. (59)
She feels that people back home can never understand that woman can be independent and in front of "the conventions and conservative attitudes of Sri Lankan society," her confidence and [H]er mature years, her high professional standing, and her experience of life overseas, all of which should have supported her psychologically through this quite commonplace experience, had counted for nothing. (59)

She was strained and fed up explaining her way of life to the relatives. Although she did not panic at prying eyes and questions, she was unable to fight back their attitude. In Australia, she is an independent woman, "nose vision, individualism and action are her strengths. Her husband respects and "genuinely appreciates" (51) her for these values. In Sri Lanka, her job as Professor in an Australian university is just a token for independence and she is marginalized and oppressed by the conservative authority of patriarchy, represented by her husband's Aunt and Uncle, in the name of "crime and violence" that has "taken hold of society" (51) in Sri Lanka. The feelings aroused in Anita on her return to Australia and her vow reflects that the real psychological violence was perpetuated by the relatives in not understanding her needs and in not respecting her needs and decisions as an individual. Home(land), then for Anita is "a site of [gender] struggle rather than of resolution" and an inter-generational conflict, particularly related to women's emancipation (see Grewal 7).

Home can be understood both as the place of ancestral origin or as the place of subsequent migration or resettlement. Rupa in Chitra Fernando's "The Birds of Paradise" from Women There and Here (1994) on her return to Sri Lanka, on a holiday, finds out that her parents are looking for a suitable boy for her. She overhears her father say, "But Mr Perera, Rupa is an educated girl, so a hundred thousand is more than enough, don't you think? My daughter's a fine girl" (45). On hearing discussions about her marriage and dowry, Rupa feels "self-conscious" and "ashamed," and refuses to marry — even though to refuse is not an option given to her. The family is adamant to marry her, as they believe that it is Rupa's duty as a good catholic girl towards God and the Family (46). Rupa wants to "please the family" but she is not ready to marry the boy of her parent's choice. Feeling depressed and sleepless, she wants to escape from her home and family as "the future that presented itself was bleak" (46). She promises her parents that on her return from Australia,
after finishing the teaching contract, she will marry the boy of their choice. But she never returned and instead married an Australian of her choice. At the end of her story, she notes that she has always wondered in the years that have passed—why did she return to Sydney? The answer is never a simple one for her:

She'd been looking for something: a new being unconstrained by custom and tradition, a splendid freedom. (51)

But, if she was looking for freedom then why did she marry and “settled so easily for comfortable ordinariness, not really different from her mother or Aunt Mary [. . .]” (51). She realizes that all she wanted was to be happy with her memories and stories. She was looking for happiness and togetherness that is represented by the golden bird, the bird of paradise, but on her own terms and while preserving her individuality.

In South Asian diaspora literature, more traditional values still hold sway and marriage remains women’s best hope of improving their situation. The woman in Chandani Lokuge’s “Her Deep Red Scarf” (2000) on hearing a blast of gulls rushing in is suddenly reminded of the suicide bomb attacks in Sri Lanka and “she almost begins to run, thinking of her children and trying to remember whether they could be in the vicinity” (39). But suddenly she is back in time and remembers that “this is Melbourne” (39). She notes that such a moment of experience “tires her, and [. . .] make(s) her feel that she is always somewhere else, locked in some other life” (39). The woman, an academician, emigrated from Sri Lanka because of the conflict at home and is living with her family in Australia. She knows that there is something missing in her marriage but to the world and her community it was very solid and in which she and her husband had joined forces to build a home for their children. And the excessive pride she and he attained from their successes in this foreign land. (39)

She knows that the South Asian community will judge her based on marital status. But she cannot tell anyone in her family and community about her marriage falling apart. She herself doesn’t know what’s missing or “what else had been left out?” (39) in their marriage. She cannot tell because she feels guilty about her own affair with a married white Australian professor. The professor, who in a way is also unhappy with his married life, observes:

fleetingly that he had nothing of his working life at home, not a book that he’d written, not a paper that he read. And that was so much of what he was. [. . .]. (39)
They both understand each other well but cannot leave their respective spouses as it is the children that provide them strength to continue their marriage. Lokugé sympathetically presents the complexities of the inner and outer lives of two people engaged in an extramarital affair but who still want to go back to their families.

Breathlessly, she tells him that she has just called home. All going well? he asks turning towards her. She looks away, and goes into a rhapsody about her children, drawing in her home, her parents, all, all that is her strength. Until he says, with a touch of ambiguity in his voice that she can’t make out just then: you sound a very closely bonded family. And she narrows her eyes, thinking, yes, that’s true, that’s what I am. But she wants him not to think that is all she is. She is more, she knows she is more. But she cannot say it. The scarf flies free again, free of his touch, flapping and flopping against his shirt, and now a bit impatiently, he brushes it away. She wraps it closer against her neck, saddened by his gesture.

Lokugé neither condemns nor condones their affair, but questions their desires and actions. The “flying free” and “brushing away” of the red scarf are images that present separation as a conclusion to their affair and not respective marriages. As, they both know the painful result of the discovery of their affair may lead to divorce but also separation from their children.

The woman with the red scarf understands that they cannot be together.

We are both two other people. She thinks sorrowfully, he with his daughter and I with mine. And with his wife and her husband who remain so tangibly close, because they cannot be dissolved into everyday words. She has been something else, though, for a few days.

She knows that once her marriage fails because of her affair with another man and that too a white Australian, she will be blamed for both the failed marriages and her children may hate her for cheating and choosing someone else over them. Although in a moment of weakness remembering the past few days, she wants to start a new life as a new person, all over again with him.

She watches him out of sight, thinking that if he were to turn towards her once, just once, she would begin a new life as someone they both did not know. She wants him not to turn. And he, perhaps having guessed all she could not tell him, does not turn.

The man too understands the situation in which she is right now. Her dilemma is of keeping up appearances for the sake of relationship, family and community. Her scarf
represent her dreams and desires—"It seems to have a life of its own, separate from her, this scarf, she thinks, feeling its slight tug for freedom around her neck" (40). She also wants to break free, like her scarf, from the chains of relationship and be a new person.

In a critique of gender and class locations, Yasmine Gooneratne in her short story "In the East My Pleasure: A Postcolonial Love Story" (1992) describes a chance meeting, in a plane, of an American Professor with his erstwhile student who is now herself a prominent Asian-American Professor. The American Professor, Philip Carter, had an illicit extra-marital relationship with Leila Tan, a Singaporean-Australian student. He sees Leila on the plane after a very long time and remembers his encounters with this "love of his life." There is a "flood of sensuous memories" (269) and in his "unruly imagination" (271), Carter wishes for "six hours of spiritual communion that could take us ... anywhere, [ ... ]" (270). He profusely acknowledges his love for her and says: "You may not believe this, but I love you. I love you. I have always loved you. I always will" (275). They both become passionate on the thoughts of "jasmine-scented nights" that they spent together in Singapore and start to feel each other (276). For him, Leila represents or signifies "the erotic and the exotic" (Tucker 157). But Leila has another agenda on her mind. She is not anymore a "shy" student but a confident professional woman. She now knows how to handle such men and teach them a lesson. She is a feminist and Carter fears her for being one. In a debate between the two on feminism in academics, he says "We are living in dangerous times, and a man cannot be too careful" (276). He cautiously goes on:

"Leila," I asked her, "do you—would you—are you, by any chance, a feminist?"

"Of course I am," she replied. "Every intelligent woman has to be." This was perplexing news indeed.

"But you can't be Leila," I said. "We have feminists in our Department the way Hamelin Town had rats, and I can't conduct a rational conversation with a single one of them."

"Nonsense," Leila said robustly. "You just haven't tried hard enough, Philip. Or else, you haven't kept an open mind." She added: "And what makes you think ours has been a rational conversation?" (276-277)

Carter becomes agitated and realizes that his "deepest fears" are coming true. He concludes this conversation by adding that he is convinced of his belief that "those
goddamn" feminists are "out to destroy the world" and "they just want to cut off my balls" (277).

Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* (1938) states the choice of educated and gender-conscious women that can also be applied here to the social, political and cultural life of the South Asian immigrant women in the diaspora: "As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world" (197). Similarly, Leila represents the new face of the educated South Asian-Australian women, who are confident and comfortable with their own sexuality and boundaries. She has no qualms about her past life or affairs and has since married and moved on in both personal and public life unlike Carter who professes his true love for her but does not have the guts to divorce his first wife and marry Leila. To teach him a lesson, Leila gift-wraps her tights as a parting gift for Louise, his second wife. She says to Carter: "Tell her you got them from the Duty Free" (279). This reference to "duty free" reinforces the idea that any local or national boundaries do not apply to Leila. She is now free from the pasts and borders. According to Trinh Minh-ha (1989), "Feminism in such a context may well mean 'westernization' " (106) but it is also an emancipatory experience—a true liberation.

Another important issue that emerges from the story is the teacher-student sexual relationship. As Carter says to Leila: "We have shared more than a class-room relationship" (271). Leila is not the one who initiates this relationship; it is Carter, who wants a new love while his wife is pregnant. Leila had no boyfriend, as is clear from Carter’s musings on her college days:

[...] as a freshman she had been Asian enough to have made herself part of a shy sorority, the members of which had gone everywhere together until clashing timetables—or, as in her case, love’s imperious summons—had dispersed them. (270)

The very thought of his “love’s imperious summons” makes Carter feel comfortable about his masculinity and power as a white male. There is also a reference to a competition going on amongst the male colleagues on seducing women. Carter notes:

[...] my colleague Hakim, enterprising, successful, wondrously deft with women, Asian, Caucasian, black, brown, white or yellow. (271)

The categorizations through which the women are looked upon in this dating or seduction game are important. Carter refers to Leila as “Asian enough.” What does he mean by this? For an American, young Leila carries the stereotypical idea of a South
Asian girl—physically very attractive, very feminine, petite and slender with delicate features and innate grace, gentle and polite, and charming and attentive to her partner. On this chance meeting too, Carter is looking for a good time and Leila knows his love is a sham, like it was fifteen years ago. Leila tells Carter frankly that to her, he is still the “America Guru in search of Shangri-La” (275). And moreover, she says:

“Relationship of Guru with student is very special, sir,” [...] “So Confucius says. So say also the Laws of Manu.” (276)

From the above discussion it can be deduced that Leila was in love with Carter, while he was using her as a sexual object without telling her that he was married. To Carter, Leila was the image of just another sensuous eastern woman full of promise, who needed to be freed from the captivity of her backward culture by Western discourse (see Bhattacharya 1998). To us, Leila Tan is the confident South Asian-Australian-American feminist scholar, happily married, who knows her boundaries and knows how to cross borders.

Similarly, Suneeta Peres Da Costa in her story “Older” (2003) provides another angle to the student-teacher relationship. She describes an illicit sexual relationship between an older teacher and his much younger, though not underage, Indian migrant student in Australia. The girl observes:

When I watched you longingly in the corridors, you turned to me and engaged my smile in a most frank and fatherly way. Except one. [...] We were doing the ridiculous warm-up exercise which involved walking about in any direction but only in straight lines; so many of us, intense and horny [...] as I passed, you stopped me and placed your hands on my shoulders. I am sure you felt me quaking under your mere touch as you proceeded to brush back my hair. (121-122)

The teacher probably craves for the girl, but initially “observed a respectful distance” (121). He is nervous and “could not return” to her “even an iota of that affection” which she showers on him. He even lectures her and declares at the beginning that she “almost raped” him (121). Later, succumbing to her charms, he accepts in his bedroom that “I can’t stop thinking about you!” (122); the girl is flattered and feels that she is the master of the situation, as it was she who “waited for the right note” (122).

The underlying theme of this story is not only “the misconception” that “the young are not in tune with their desire” (122) as the narrator observes, but also the
relationship between a much older white teacher with a young migrant student. Yet, here the girl agrees that she initiated the affair—verbally and physically.

Relationship between a student and teacher can be often quite intimate and intense as they share common passions and interests. But as a teacher, here, the man holds a position of trust. For impressionable young students, “not in tune with their desire,” the boundaries between intellectual development and personal life may become blurred, as is the case with the girl in this story. However, there has been debate over whether or not sexual interactions and relationships between students and teachers constitute abuse. In this story it is the girl who first initiates the affair and the teacher tries to talk her off the idea. She knows of the “risk,” involved for him and the “danger” of discovery for her by parents and family in this relationship. There is at a certain level “mutual consent” in this relationship but also a disparity in power relation. Suneeta Peres Da Costa has chosen a subject—sexual intimacy and affair between a teacher and student—not usually covered with this depth in South Asian diaspora writing. She does not present the girl or the teacher as sexual predators. It is presented as something between the two people that clicked beyond their relationship.

The question is—is the girl being rebellious towards family authority? Does she fantasise about having a sexual relationship with an older man? As can be noted in the story, she is not a virgin and had sex with other older men too. Was she trapping him for fun? At the end of the story the girl meets the teacher again and feels that the meeting did not produce “similar sentiments” (128) and he “was no longer new” or “did not look as handsome” (128) as he used to.

In her story “Dreamless” (2001), written after Suneeta Peres Da Costa shifted to the USA for further studies, she writes about how gender circulates in different places. The narrator, a young Indian-Australian woman, is in love and sleeping with a man, who too is a new immigrant to the USA like her. He “lost his family when he was young” (99) and then left his country because of war.

[... ] it was a new city for him too, and also a new language; the language he spoke was an ancient one, guttural, full of fricatives, and he often reverted to it when we were making love, such that it had an onomatopoeic effect [...]. He had lost his family when he was a young man; he hated testimonies and memorials because they gave meaning to loss, exalted loss, when the hardest part of losing for him was the state of profound meaninglessness which was his life. (100)
The narrator notes that she was “dreamless”—as her “sleep had been more akin to a blank page” (99)—and she couldn’t write because of the state she was in. It is only after meeting and

Sleeping besides this man, I had pleasant dreams which would come back to me wistfully during the day; then and there, thinking how comforting it could be to lie beside him, I would want to summon him to me again. (99)

It is with him in these and other moments of reconciliation that the narrator felt “something larger than the languages” was going on (101). But soon this relationship, like many others, turns into disagreements and fights on small issues between the two. He wants to end the relationship and she doesn’t. At the end the narrator leaves for a short while, for promoting her book, and he doesn’t say anything about their relationship.

Similarly, in her story “Sydney 2000” (2003), Peres Da Costa, using the Olympic games as the background, subtly builds a story about relationships across geographical boundaries. Lata, a second generation Indian-Australian, meets Fritz, a German, in Mexico and they both fall in love: “They lived for weeks on a diet of yoghurt and fruit and to keep cool made love on the azuelo tiles” (47). To engage in pre-marital sexual relationship, for Lata, is more a question of determining her own mutual compatibility and preparedness for being a life-long partner. And when Fritz proposes “I want to make a baby” (47), Lata tells him hesitatingly: “I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves” (47). This follows, in the story, with a very short discussion between Lata and Fritz:

“I’m not going to be pressured. I’ve got important things to do.”
“What important things?”
“Important,” [. . .].” (47)

In fact she does not want to continue in this relationship. Fritz, though a lovable and charming person seems now like a child or a sentimental man to her—“The spectacle of him crying redouble(d) her feelings of stupidity, and not knowing what to do” (45) in this relationship. He loves her despite her “undisclosed, infidelity” (45). At the end, they start living together in Sydney. Fritz has gone out to see the procession of the Olympic torch and Lata feels that

a shadow flickered on the translucent glass and a shiver ran down her spine. It made her wonder whether he’d tricked her and not gone at all;
whether he was waiting, watching her, beyond the door. Shifting her gaze quickly, however, Lata confirmed it was only the cat padding after a moth in the hallway; not a bad omen, but nevertheless one that startled her into vision of a future whose features were weighty if as yet unformed. (48)

She still doubts if she has made the right choice. But why did she make this choice in the first place? The answer lies in her family. As a second generation Indian-Australian woman, she is escaping from her parents by making this choice. For Fritz, like her trip to Mexico in the final year of university, is an escape from the values and constraints of her family life, or in other words, it is her attempt at being independent in love and life.

Manik Datar in her story “Web” (1996), experiments with the language of love. She uses the language of the computer and internet (World Wide Web) to express what her narrator, an Indian-Australian girl, is going through in her relationship with a white Australian boy. The narrator says

I lie curled in bed lonely as C:> prompt now that he is gone. I read over the backup of tonight’s conversation trying to work out what might have gone wrong. Could it be that as he tickled the inside of my thighs I said to him, “Oh do be a sweetie and go fly some toast for a minute while I check my file guard.” He didn’t do a screen save like he normally would, but simply packed up his mouse, changed port and swung out the door, his jacket over his shoulders. (24)

She initially believed that they were “compatible,” in spite of their different cultural backgrounds. To keep him as her lover she nurses him through chicken pox and even learns about football, his favourite sport. She writes

For him I got myself in high fidelity dedicated board and up market security which coded all other guys out yet the first time we crashed was not because of another lover but the shape of a ball. (24)

Instead of learning Aussie Rules football she “spent hours learning” European football. She writes further that although it was hard for her to commit herself to such an extent, probably because of cultural difference, but

What didn’t I update? My screen, RAM, keyboard, the lot, and now as I sit like a terminal without a mainframe the feminist in me turns angry as I think why do I let myself feel this way [ . . . ]. (24)

The terminology from computers can be read in socio-cultural expressions: “update” can refer to the process of assimilation, “screen” can mean dressing style, “RAM”
which stands for Random Access Memory can refer to socio-cultural memory or values, while “keyboard” can refer to an individual’s function in his/her community. She is still not able to comprehend the reason why he broke-up with her and blamed her for having an affair with someone else—a false accusation. Datar’s story is bold in an unconventional way. There are hidden references to the progression of sexual intercourse in the first paragraph with the words like “C:> prompt,” “file guard,” “screen save,” “mouse” and “port.” But it is the narrator’s bewilderment at being left by her lover that catches our attention. She is serious in her relationship by assimilating into and adopting Australian culture that is her new home, while the boy wants to get out of it before it might eventually lead to marriage.

For many women home is a place of subjugation and exclusion. Sushie Narayan in “Asha’s Story” (1994), through her protagonist Asha presents this subjugation in India and a way out or resolution in Australia. Asha has felt marginalized all her life. The choice of going to Australia is her parents’; because of family pressure and honour she couldn’t marry her beloved in India; and finally marries a man settled in Australia who “fitted the mould that her parents had cast for him” (136). But he only “made Asha marginally content” (136) and in turn she “lost her faith in men” (136), as “men had done nothing but hurt her” (137). In an accident at the workplace she injures her hands and loses her job. She felt that she is being “pushed around by other people’s expectations” (137)—father, husband and the boss. All these problems in her life bring a feeling of emptiness. She is now struggling with questions—Who is Asha? What is she supposed to do? What was she doing wrong? and What really made Asha happy? After arriving in Australia she saw how “Australians worked, lived and played” (137). So she too asserted herself by rebelling against her parents and culture. Even after the accident, she is not ready to give up. She knows that she deserves a better life, a life on her own terms as an Indian-Australian. This new Australian life, Asha realises can only be pursued by allowing “her roots to nestle into Australian soil” (138).

In the stories of Sri Lankan migrant women writers to Australia, the war, those displaced by war, and many other aspects of the conflict find an outlet (see V. Fernando 2009). Suvendrini Perera in her autobiographical story-essay “Dravidian Curls” (1999) focuses on the women of Sri Lanka and their sufferings. She remembers the mythical tale from her childhood, a story about Mohini pisaasu—
beautiful woman, her wavy hair loose down her back,” carrying her dead baby and walking alone at night. In various versions, she is either portrayed as a demon or a madwoman. Fatal Mohini makes the man, who sees or goes with her, permanently deranged. Perera wonders why these stories highlight, “the deadliness of women, the frailty and vulnerability of men” (112). This question further leads to another: Why is Mohini mad? This question carries multiple meanings that need to be deciphered as Perera observes. Is it an “urban myth from a time of civil war grafted onto a rural folk tale,” like the “stories of the disappearing suicide bomber” (112). In opposition to the image of this deadly woman are the stories of the victims of war—women, who were raped and whose children killed in front of their eyes by rival ethnic groups. Or, the Sinhala women soldiers on the streets of Colombo, representative of another set of women:

[... ] armed women at almost every intersection, Sinhala women, since this is the government territory, from the small towns and coastal villages of the South. [... ] The women are sharp and sassy; against their laced-up ankle boots and jungle khaki, their heavy gold earstuds stand out [...]. (113)

But then who are these women soldiers? Perera writes that they are not the “daughters of the middle class” (113), as one can tell by looking at their bodies—“the spare frames and small bones of these young soldiers,” make it clear that their “childhood and genealogy” was different i.e. they belonged to poor families (113). All the three set of women—Tamil bomber, Sinhala soldier and the rape victim—discussed here are marginalized. The author (to whose curls the title refers to) forms the fourth set of women, who have immigrated to foreign shores and are full of anger and pain, and also marginalized by their position as migrant women, both in the homeland and hostland. But in joining all the stories, from her position as both an insider and outsider, she understands for the first time that “these are ominous stories” of Sri Lankan women and people “morally and culturally at sea” (123).

Marriage, for women, is generally perceived as the consequence of abandoning individual ambition and surrendering to inherited cultural norms (Y. Hussain 10). Ruth Van Gramberg, a Sri Lankan migrant, in her autobiographical short narrative “Immigration Dreams, Foundations and Formations” (1997) observes that as a new immigrant woman, wife and mother, she
became the pivot of existence, as I was required to cajole, comfort, uplift and encourage my husband, guide my children and calm their fears. I had to be brave, strong, cheerful, enthusiastic and supportive, all this apart from trying to adjust and settle into a new environment.

(210)

As the centre of the world at home, she also has to deal with the world outside the family sphere “with absolutely no idea of what was in store” for her (210). She handles all the tasks “diligently” and tackles all the problems that come her way with “zest” and overcomes the boundaries that her gender and migration have placed in her way.

How gendered division of labor and class works in the discourse on gender and social differences is preserved in Australia, away from homeland, forms the subject of exploration in Chitra Fernando’s “The Chasm” from Women There and Here (1994). Manel, an educated nurse, who has recently immigrated to Alice Springs, is also made to work as a servant in the house of the Sri Lankan-Australian Registrar and his wife. They use their social prejudices and the stereotypical notion of a low-class Sri Lankan woman to simplify an overly-complex issue of exploitation, thus feeling superior to her and others in the community. Nelun, the wife of the Registrar, “always hated cooking, washing, cleaning—in short, any sort of movement” and had somehow “managed to survive the rigors of being an Australian housewife [ ... ]” (53). But, the arrival of Manel, who is viewed by them as “a common or garden weed” (53), is a boon in disguise as they were looking for a maid. Throughout her stay Manel is exploited (psychologically and physically) by one or the other family in the small community and it is made sure that she does not feel like an equal or even an intelligent human being. She is more or less looked down upon and treated as an animal, and it is made sure that she “didn’t stray from her side of the social fence” (54). Manel understands the treatment meted out to her is inhumane but she remains respectful, keeping in mind their help and generosity extended to her earlier, keeps quietly compromises with her situation.

Manel is liked by an Australian doctor and there is also possibility of their getting married. But even if she marries this doctor, the small diasporic community there will never treat her as an equal, since some of the people strongly believe—“Manel can change her civil status, but she can never change her ancestry” (63). She is doubly marginalized within her own community and that too by her own people,
who expect that she adheres to a *status quo ante*. Her migration to Australia has instilled in her a confidence and she politely refuses their company and values—of treating her unequally and then justifying it. The high class women in this small Sri Lankan community of Alice Springs feel and accept the stereotype that they are nurturing and generous, whereas men feel they are powerful and authoritative. They expect Manel to follow a specific social role and thus reinforce the *status quo* and start expecting deference from her. She finally rebels against their inhumane treatment and exploitation. Australia provides Manel with a confidence to rebel against her marginalization and she is not afraid to speak out her opinions. She leaves alone for the city and is not terrified anymore of the land or people around her.

Similarly, Sujhatha Fernandes in “A Pocket Full of Stories” (1990) presents Nandini, a Mangalorean servant girl from India, who is “a small, skinny, black girl” (90). She works at the house of a Goan family settled in Australia, which is trying to replicate the Indian social structure. The narrator’s uncle repeatedly rapes Nandini and makes her pregnant. However the sexual exploitation here too is meted out not by an Australian but by fellow Indian migrants, the employers of Nandini. The whole blame for the act falls on Nandini, who is made to leave Sydney for the trouble she has caused the reputed family. For the narrator and readers it is not just a rape in physical and sexual terms but it is the rape of a dream, of a conjurer whose “pocket was full of stories [. . .] never ending multicoloured [. . .] tales” (91). Towards the end of the story, Nandini feels that she is now well educated in the ways of the world. She knows that coming to Australia was a dream for her. Australia was a fantasy world. And now she must leave it with her pockets empty; leaving the child narrator behind to reminiscence about her stories.

Education, particularly of the second generation women, emerges as a central theme in the discourse of gender. It is being utilized to gain more “independence” and “a space for re-articulation of identity aside from both patriarchal and racist structures” (Ramji 236). It not only makes the diasporic women confident but also gives them status, self-worth and respect. As Yasmin Hussain (2005) observes, “access to educational opportunities affords a young woman of the diaspora possibilities of social advancement that may not have been available to previous generations of women in her family” (14). Rashmere Bhatti in her autobiographical narrative “The Good Indian Girl” (1992) analyses the role of education, arranged
marriage vs. love marriage, and career choices offered to girls in the development of their identity in the South Asian diaspora community. Bhatti’s early struggle with the *aache ghar ki ladki* or the “good Indian girl” syndrome, a result of the traditional conditioning of the immigrants household, parents’ choice of bringing up the daughters the Indian way rather than Australian, and community pressures is reflected when she notes:

> My schooldays were confusing. Firstly there was contrast between what was expected at school and what was expected at home. Australian girls are encouraged to play sports, and to express their ideas. You can imagine the confusion when, from the positive environment at school, one went home to a meek, docile existence where the first priority was to get out of one’s uniform and into a Punjabi suit. Then we would make tea and learn to cook [. . .]. (132)

The result of such a syndrome in the diasporic condition can be a dysfunctional upbringing, emotionally and mentally confused personality and lack of social mixing with the mainstream culture which can cause alienation. Bhatti undergoes all these repercussions of the syndrome, as she observes in her interaction with the “other” children at school:

> Throughout high school, participation in social functions was not allowed. It was not considered right to go to school dances, to mingle with boys; there was no social mixing at all. So naturally I became *alienated* when all other children discussed the school dances—I had to make some lame excuse for not going. Another example which comes to mind is sporting events. It was considered improper to wear swimsuit, so we were not allowed to attend swimming lessons. Indeed most of the Indian girls my age do not know how to swim to this day. (132; my italics)

She feels that her alienation from the mainstream society and way of life has marginalized her childhood as she couldn’t live like a normal Australian kid: “Always in my mind was a picture where I was the *good Indian girl*, and it was to this picture that I referred when involved with normal Australian schoolgirl activities” (132; my italics).

Rashmere, like her elder sister, makes a conscious decision to stop this exploitation at the hands of family and community pressure. So instead of marrying after school as the “good girls were expected to,” she rebels and pursues a higher degree. The self-confidence and self-knowledge not just in academics but also in
social life gave her the strength to become an “independent career-minded woman” mixing her “cultural background with a western lifestyle” (133). She annuls her arranged marriage that was strangulating her choices and started living a “working woman’s life in Sydney” away from her family and hometown (134). Labeled a rebel by her Punjabi community, she starts

[... ] working with many women from different cultural backgrounds, seeing their attitudes to life and work in a western world, and how their cultures and religions affected their lives as daughters, wives and women, a whole intriguing set of circumstances opened up for me to consider. Some of these women were so capable, yet were prepared to do mundane work because their main ambitions were focused on the roles of wife and mother for which they were trained and respected. They were quite prepared to come to a western work environment for the financial rewards and then slip back to their other world. However, I was not prepared to live this kind of double life. (134-135)

As Bhatti observes the lives of other migrant and Anglo-Australian women around her, she very steadily forms her own sense of being and self-identity as an Indian-Australian.

She is not ready to live a “double life” like other South Asian migrant women—first, not being employed as per her qualifications and abilities, and second, in the role of being a submissive wife and mother at home. She narrates that instead of letting her parents choose a suitable boy she went on a “husband hunt” — still considered a bold step in her community. This is the only compromise i.e. of marrying an Indian boy that she makes after her rebellion.

Having been brought up in Australia and seen all the benefits of being western, I decided to make a compromise: I would take a selection of elements from both sides to form a new-look Indian woman. I realised that my Indian culture and religion were too important to give up completely, so I decided on an Indian marriage to someone with the right qualities so we could live according to a western broad-minded way of thinking [...]. (135; my italics)

She is now “a new-look Indian woman” with “a western broad-minded way of thinking.” On the success of her marriage to an Indian, who migrated to Australia happily for her sake, she notes that the “key to coping with difference one does encounter is to recognize where these differences stem from” (136). But she still believes that even the second generation married Indian women in Australia
[... ] give more than their Indian husbands do to hold their marriage together [... they] play the role that women have been playing throughout history of the patient and nurturing sex, trying to achieve through their actions the goal of harmonious living. (136)

As has already been noted that rebelling against community and traditional values, and being independent, self-confident and career oriented for Rashmere Bhatti does not mean to “give up my culture or religion” but “to shed the image of a submissive woman and be accepted as a woman of worth in my own culture” (133). The opportunity to work provides Rashmere a chance to develop her own identity outside her prescribed roles as a daughter, wife, and mother. She is also able to gain a new identity outside the house among her co-workers based solely on her qualifications and skills (see Wilson 1985). Her fight and rebellion is then not just for her own sake but to set an example for other girls, “the patient and nurturing sex,” of the community too.

Rashmere Bhatti’s observations about her mother are quite useful in distinguishing between the two types of roles that she has been constantly referring to. Her mother, who “came to Australia at the age of 22 after an arranged marriage,” lived mostly “a lonely pioneer lifestyle with few Indians or Australians around her. Hers was a life of childrearing, cooking and enduring the primitive conditions of bushland Australia” (131). For Rashmere’s mother, who must have spent her early life in India surrounded by relatives and neighbours, a pioneer’s life is a lonely one. She misses “her family and homeland” and because she is not at all fluent in English, relies on Rashmere as her interpreter in dealing with host community. So, much of Rashmere’s “childhood was taken up” with her mother reminiscing about “a carefree way of life full of chores, religion, girlish capers and dreams” (132). In relation to the first generation migrant women, Keya Ganguly (1992) notes:

> maintaining social networks and familial connections is profoundly important for these women and represents a significant locus of their influence both within the home and in the society at large. In the diasporic context, they find themselves alone and without the support systems they were brought up to believe in and on which they counted to provide emotional and psychic sustenance. (42)

So, the first generation pioneer women settlers, like Rashmere’s mother, “look back to the past as a happier time when their family and kinship ties were still intact” (Ganguly 42).
Since Bhatti’s story is from a feminist point of view, we do not get glimpses into her grandfather’s and father’s life as pioneer settlers, except for the fact that they are farmers and still very traditional in their outlook. Her father, despite the fact that he believes in the importance of education for Indian girls, is a traditionalist at heart. He thinks typically like other community elders when it comes to going to a college—that only a college degree is essential and not the learning process, academic environment or the socialising between boys and girls that goes with it. Bhatti notes that he expected the girls to “acquire degrees by staying at home and being good daughters” (133), and be ready to accept the life that parents had planned for them.

Michelle De Kretser in her story “Life with Sea Views” (2000) presents the destruction of a happy and prosperous Burgher family in Sri Lanka. The story is presented through the prison of the suffering of women, who are most affected by the tribulations (civil war and Emergency) and poor socio-political-economic conditions of Sri Lanka. For Estelle, the eldest daughter, there is no choice other than to marry Harry, a Sri Lankan-Australian, and migrate to Australia—an escape route from her Sri Lankan life of misery. But she soon divorces Harry and promises her sister, Monique, that she will find a job and “send a cheque as soon as she was back on her feet” (9). In Australia, Estelle can work, save and also send a part of her income to help her poor family members. But for the family members, Estelle’s divorcing Harry and living with a Slovene migrant, Stefan, represents “living in sin with a communist” (10). Monique, who always dreamt of becoming a musician and journeying, cannot bear the “sadness” of leaving Sri Lanka and her beautiful ancestral “brown house on a green hill” (1). The sadness drives her to commit suicide by jumping in front of a train. By the end of the story the family is completely destroyed by the repercussions of the changing conditions and internal conflicts in Sri Lanka. Their brother Ned, who as the only living male member of the household should have taken over the family responsibilities after his father’s death is shattered because of the depressing conditions of his own life and lost opportunities. He feels marginalized because of his class and becomes an alcoholic, only to die later in a hospital dreaming about leaving Sri Lanka for Australia. Estelle’s marriage to a Slovene migrant in Australia can be read as representative of a survival mechanism or compromise reflecting the traditional hard-working migrant woman.
Of particular interest in the study of gendered locations is the role of woman as mother or homemaker. This role, although presented as an empowering one, silences the women in certain narratives. The grandmother, Aaji, in Shrishti Sharma’s “Saying Goodbye to the Mango Tree” (2003) considers it “ungodly,” not to do housework or as the narrator calls it “the natural rhythms of life” namely praying, washing, cooking, sweeping, dusting, praying, cleaning, gardening, then praying again. Age was no barrier to the vitals of life: to have all in order, to do things in a certain way because they had always been done in a certain way, no matter which end of the world you are in. (54)

The narrator, who is soon going to marry, has a western vision of marriage and spending life with husband:

I was thinking candle-lit dinners and romantic honeymoons. I was thinking the soft crashing waves on a beach and arms around shoulders against an ever-present sunset. I was thinking a tiny little apartment with one bedroom and no dogs, no children. I was thinking the reluctant departure for work every morning and the tender embrace every time we meet again. I was thinking secretly shared smiles across crowded room and the invisible thread that bound heartbeat to heartbeat. I was thinking the world away from the real world. I was thinking reality fading in comparison. My created universe, halfway heaven. (54-55)

Her fantasy life shuts her off completely from the external world and perspectives of her Indian-Fijian-Australian community, where patriarchy has certain pre-defined roles for married women. These traditional roles are narrated in the grandmother’s version of marriage that she believes all Indian women want:

We want him to be there all the time, we want him to bring home what we cannot and we want to have him read the Gita to us before we fall asleep. We want him to be faster than us, so we know someone has already walked the steps that we will soon walk on, and cleared the path of thorns that prick your delicate feet. We want him to smile at us when we hand over that plate of freshly cooked roti and aalu baigan and barfi. We want the day to begin with pooja shared, together under the banner of God. We want to see his face across the room filled with smoke from the prayer havan. We want to see his devotion. We want to see his promise, every time we look into his eyes. The promise we made that day we took those seven holy turns around the sacred fire in front of the entire world, and God. This is what marriage is about, beti.
This is our heaven—something only Hindustani women have because it is something only Hindustani women understand. (56)

Central to the discourse of Indian womanhood and sexuality, in the grandmother’s version of married life, a Hindustani woman is expected to perform her domestic duties. This does not imply that the Indian women are comfortable with the experience of patriarchy, but in their traditional roles and duties the first generation migrant women created a structure of certain authority and status, and learned to operate with different cultural signals within their own spheres of domesticity.

Sunil Badami writes in “My Father’s Stories” (2006) that his “mother loved the sea: for her, it was an infinite, shimmering expanse of possibilities.” But as the wife of a flying doctor, living in a small town in Australia, he observes, “our mother was a quiet woman, whose poise seemed much like the meaning conveyed by the silence between words.” He further writes “Where my father was an egregious, ebullient man, our mother was gentle and reserved. In many ways, our mother was the perfect foil for my father, in relation to some of his more pronounced eccentricities [. . . ].” Here, the mother acts as the “main socialiser” of children, a homemaker, and transmitter of the rich heritage of traditions and Indian way of life to other members of the family.

Clifford (1994) notes that “when diasporic experience is viewed in terms of displacement rather than placement, traveling rather than dwelling, and disarticulation rather than rearticulation, then the experiences of men will tend to predominate” (313). Christopher Cyrill in “The Ganges and its Tributaries” (1993), provides a narrative “of unsettled settling in” (Sharrad 578). But in this settling process, father and his male friends take the centre stage. Christopher’s father is jack of all things—can earn a living, can cook, do gardening, move stuff, clean the house, entertain people at parties, bring up children, etc. While mother and other women characters are marginalized in their traditional spheres or roles as just homemakers

My mother still preferred to wash each plate, knife and fork by hand rather than use the dishwasher [. . . ]. (159)

Or behave plainly superstitious:

My mother said eight Hail Marys during thunderstorms and recited the Twenty-Third Psalm twelve times during lightning storms. My Aunt Eve prayed to St Anthony or St Jude whenever she heard of an
earthquake somewhere in the world, believing that the sixth seal of the Apocalypse had been broken. (163-164)

Here we look at one part of the story where women are socially isolated by being tied to their home and not given due credit in the process of migration or settling in a new home. It is imperative to note the way in which these South Asian women negotiate with the process of settling down. Their life is full of participation in the making of the diasporic society and carrying over of the religious and traditional cultural values. At the same time, the story produces representations of women as ambivalent participants in the pioneering enterprise. They are positioned within the redefined diasporic domestic sphere of communal living but as marginalized participants or as objects of the male gaze.

I looked at my cousin Vismara, who had stopped in the doorway. She was wearing a dark blue and purple sari, and she wore a paper dot on her forehead. She was the same height as me, although she was two years older. Her long black hair was combed flat against her head and parted in the middle. I was still staring at Vismara.

As we drove home I watched Vismara from an angle as she leant back in her seat and looked out the window. At one point she opened her mouth and seemed to swallow.

Christopher’s “looking” and “watching” his cousin with voyeuristic scrutiny and pleasure makes her the object of his gaze and desire. The description escapes a romantic association and stresses the patriarchal consumption of women. This also raises, in the Lacanian sense, the question of “self-identity” within the gaze of the other. In Cyrill’s story female characters appear as “ancillary to the main plot,” which focuses on building a new home in a new land. The women here, as discussed earlier, are not only marginalized but they are “ambiguated as well.” Cyrill, unconsciously, participates in “a process of male gendering, or masculinisation, of ideals and values” (Fuchs 212).

Within the imagination of any given culture, there always exists an archetypal image of the feminine and the masculine, what varies is the value attributed to each gender, and their respective descriptive characteristics. In Yasmine Gooneratne’s story, “Navaranjini Takes Note of Signs and Visions” (1992), Navaranjani is taking a cab ride from the airport to her new home in one of the suburbs of Sydney. At a traffic signal she looks out of the window and finds herself
gazing into a pair of bright blue eyes ringed with what looked very much like my own kohl. They eyes belonging to a young man who appeared to be admiring my earrings, [ . . . ]. As soon as he caught my eye through the glass, he pointed to the brightly coloured parrots swinging from his own ear lobes, and mouthed something that I couldn’t make out. [ . . . ]. (38)

Navaranjani is surprised seeing this young man with earrings and kohl in his eyes but controls her curiosity and observes that “in the land of duck-billed platypus, where reality is stranger than fantasy, why cannot men wear parrots in their ears?” (38). She belongs to an affluent class and probably has not seen gay men openly on the streets expressing their sexuality in Sri Lanka. She is taken aback and becomes conscious of her surroundings and new socio-cultural environment but is also open minded about alternate sexualities and races.

In a commercialized world as ours, a gel of gendering and racism is a lethal mixture that can kill someone’s identity. Susan Koshy (1998) has argued that some scholars “treat South Asian color consciousness as equivalent to white racism and criticise the immigrant community for denying its own blackness” (285). A point well expressed by Gooneratne in “Bharat Changes His Image” (1995). Navaranjini, the narrator of the story observes this in relation to how we perceive Others:

You see, at home in Sri Lanka, and I suppose in India too, which is the centre, after all, of the real Asian world, we always called far Eastern people “Ching-Chongs.” My husband says it’s racist way of speaking, that we learned racism from the British in our colonial days, and must discard it totally now that we are free. But coming from such a Westernised family as his, he just doesn’t understand. There’s nothing racist about saying ... that word; racism’s unknown in India and Sri Lanka. Race and caste and colour just have their appointed places there in the divine scheme of things, in which everything moves in a beautifully regulated order. Everyone knows that. (46; my italics)

The narrator further feels that thinking about colour, in the Asian traditional sense, is not racism.

My husband says we Asians are racist about colour. Well, he couldn’t be more wrong. Our people aren’t racist about colour, they just honour a very ancient and holy tradition that has clear rules about what’s beautiful and what’s not. The marriage ads at home rate complexions according to that tradition, and I’ve always been pleased that my own complexion happens to be the exact shade they rate highest. I notice
that manufacturers of suntan creams here call it Natural Tan, and
Australian women seem to kill themselves every summer trying to
acquire it. (46-47)
The narrator’s views and remarks although framed in an “innocent” manner by
Gooneratne do point out that South Asians are colour conscious when it comes to
gender. In the context of embodied notions of gendered beauty and skin-colour, a fair
girl is desired and black looked down upon (see Osuri 2008).
While on the other hand, Schmidt-Haberkamp (2004) observe that “the image
of Navaranjini and Bharat as exotic and erotic orientals” in Australia “denies their
human and academic qualities, and reduces them to the stereotypical idea of the
oriental as an object of sexual desire” (222). This stereotypical idea, as Navaranjini,
further notes, marginalizes Bharat

[F]rom the moment we arrived in Australia, my husband started having
problems with his image. Before we came to Australia, I’d no idea he
had an image, apart from his reflection in the bedroom mirror or his
shadow on the grass. But now it seemed he’d acquired one, and with it
he’d acquired problems: problems connected, as far as I could make
out, with the various aspects in which, he felt, he appeared to the
Australians around us. (45)
These problems arose because of his being feeling “under constant observation and
fixed in an orientalist image of the Asian Other that crudely groups all Asians
together” (Schmidt-Haberkamp 223). And seeking to assimilate first, they swap their
names to Barry and Jean Mundy—“True blue, fair dinkum Aussies” (50), and
secondly, their “Austin for a Holden, and moved to another suburb” (50).

Bharat’s dilemma as a male immigrant from an affluent family in the originary
home and changing his family name then is not only tied to his family history but is
also a comment on the national or subcontinental history, as “Bharat” means India as
representing the mythical idea of “India,” centre to and encapsulating major regions
of South Asia. But more than that the English name Barry in Sinhalese, the word bari,
means “incapable” or “impotent.” He is unable to defend himself or his image against
the attacks and comments about his identity. His problem, as Chandani Lokugé (2008)
observes is: “Whereas in his homeland he had a position of authority, he is now
relegated to a position as subject [. . . ]. He seeks to identify as closely as possible
with an acceptable Australian stereotype” (207). For Navaranjani, who understands
Sri Lankan cultural associations and history, Bharat’s change of name is regrettable. It
is Navaranjani, his wife, who asserts herself and engages in an exaggerated verbal fight on "racism," "Australianness" and "Asianness" with Prof. Ron Blackstone, an anti-Asian immigration intellectual, whom she blames for Bharat's identity crisis: "[...] I'm someone whose life you have personally made a hell on earth" (52). And continues with: "I'm also," I went on, "a wife. The wife of someone whose personality you have utterly destroyed" (52).

To everyone's surprise, Navaranjani is able to extract an apology from Prof. Blackstone. Here, she is not taking on a role of crusader against racism but just performing her traditional wifely duty in defending her husband's honour. As she says in the beginning of the story,

My mother taught me to worship Lord Shiva in my husband. I've always tried to follow her instructions, especially when my husband is under strain. So I listened very, very carefully as he told me all about these problems. (45)

The reference to Lord Shiva here, more significantly the iconographic representation of Lord Shiva, known as Ardhnarishwar, depicted as half male and half female together forming one body and revered as a state of primal wholeness, is very important because Bharat in "Navaranjini Takes Note of Signs and Visions" is compared with Arjuna, the warrior. In Mahabharata, Arjuna spent one year in disguise to live incognito while in exile as a eunuch. Navaranjani is Bharat's better-half; she understands how impotent he is feeling right now, like Arjuna in exile, without the usual support structure of his family. She also observes that Bharat "being so westernised, [...] is only semi-vegetarian. [...] many of his ideas too are only, so to speak, semi-Asian" (46). She knows, in absence of a full identity—Sri Lankan or Australian—Bharat won't be able to break away from his identity crisis and therefore takes the initiative on his behalf of defending him openly in the party and that too with success.

But, what about Bharat's view of his wife as a protector or guardian? When Navaranjani, during her fight with Prof. Blackstone, is looking for him in the party and calls out his name, he "unaccountably disappears" (52). According to Chandani Lokugé (2008), Bharat is a typical "male chauvinist," he "might not have welcomed or tolerated anything more from his wife than a celebration of the domestic" (216). Lokugé feels that Navaranjani arrived in Australia "as the indulged wife of an absent-
minded intellectual. In her own eyes, as in the gaze of her husband’s, she manifests a role, not personal identity” (2008: 213). She is doubly marginalized in Australia—as she is also an “object of anglocentric racist and sexist stereotyping” (Lokuge, 2008: 213). But “somewhere along the way Navaranjani develops a voice of her own” as independent from her husband’s views (Lokuge, 2008: 215).

In a traditional society it is not just an unmarried girl but also an unmarried boy, who can be a cause of comments from the community, as Bhola remembers the old-timers saying in Brij V. Lal’s “Marriage” (2004). If Bhola is worried about his son, Dewa, for whom he fears that “the passion of youth might led him astray” (210), the narrator observes,

parents of girls faced a much bigger problem. No fate was worse for a family than to have a girl who dishonoured its name. Izzat, or honour, is big among village people. Girls were married off soon after puberty. [...] Sukhraji was betrothed at 13, and married two years later. Sukhraji came into a family of complete strangers, married to a man, a boy really, she had never seen before. She carried on her innocent shoulders the hopes of her entire family, knowing in her heart that she could never return to them no matter what her fate in the new home. No one would have her back. The gift of a girl-child [in marriage], kanya daan, once given can never be returned. (211)

Lal further presents, through Sukhraji’s married life and relationship with her mother-in-law, the recreation of the old structures of India. The mother-in-law, an old woman, “uprooted and displaced [...] was trying to recreate the remembered world of village India where mother-in-laws reigned supreme” (212). Sukhraji asks Bhola:

Have you forgotten how you used to beat me so mercilessly as if I were a mere animal? [...] You never stood up for me, not once, even when I was innocent. You always took her side. Always the dutiful son. Remember how they taunted me when I did not become pregnant for three years? Barren woman, they said. Remember the day she gave me a piece of rope to hang myself so that you could remarry another woman and have children. You stood there and said nothing. (212)

Sukhraji’s being called a “barren woman” reflects the traditional ideology of motherhood that is imposed upon Indian women by the patriarchal society which projects motherhood as a woman’s primary function in life (see Jhalani 2010). Moreover as a diasporan she is looked down upon as an incomplete woman and a bad diasporic “subject” as the “roots of patriarchy lie in the myths of creation” (J. Jain,
South Asian society is an extremely pronatalistic one, and the desire to have a male child is greatly stressed and is considered by some to be a man's highest duty, a religious necessity, and a source of emotional and familial gratification. Bhola remembers all that has happened in the past but has no reply to Sukhraji's bitterness:

Yes, he was a dutiful son. He never stood up to his parents, especially his mother. He was her only son. Nothing, no abuse was worse for a man than to be called a henpecked husband. Keeping one's wife in line, even if it meant thrashing her occasionally, was one way of showing that he was master of the house, the man in charge, retaining his position in his mother's eyes. (212-213)

Bhola acknowledges his love and respect for his wife and says "We have built up our life together from nothing. This house, our children, our farm, our good name: all this we have done together. All this is as much yours as it is mine. God willing, we will be together for a long, long time" (213). Sukhraji realising the truth in Bhola's statement "feel(s) stronger and freer. She was not bitter. Somewhere in her heart she had forgiven her husband for his violent ways. Bhola had been a good husband and father" (213).

Joan, the young wife of Hon. Nandi Gounder, in Satendra Nandan's short story "Nandi" (1990) dies (or is murdered?) in a fire at her home. Joan, "a fair Christian girl [ ... ] tall and slim, with restless eyes like a bird's in a cage" (626), is married to an Indian-Fijian. In those days, the narrator observes, the only daughter of an Indian professor, from Delhi, "marrying a foreigner from Fiji was still unthinkable. London or New York might have been a different matter" (627). Joan agrees to marry Nandi, not because of love but perhaps in Nandi, she sees her Othello—the dark hero she is fascinated by. In Fiji, she teaches English at Tilak High School and meets the narrator, who works as a clerk at the same place. To the narrator "she was like Sita in Ashok Batika" (629). His idea or image of an Indian woman, as Sita, had come from "the Indian epics and Hindi films about these epics" and somewhere Joan was "fulfilling a dream" (629). The narrator feels sorry for her and at the same time is enamoured by her beauty—that results in the "beginning of an adulterous love" (629). The narrator sees Nandi Gounder, Joan's husband as Ravana—"a black man with a huge stomach was pouring petrol on a half-naked woman" (633). The image of Joan burning in flames and dying makes the narrator lose his sanity and all he does is "remember a love, a woman and a world" (633). Joan's story is tragic—married to
Nandi Gounder, a wealthy lawyer and politically ambitious and powerful man lacking a sensitive or romantic side; she sees no future for herself with him. Elopement is not a choice and divorce as an option is out of the picture because of Hon. Nandi Gounder's reputation in the Indian-Fijian community. The only ray of hope she saw was in the affair with the narrator.

Satendra Nandan writing on the issue of marriage and elopement of women in the Indian-Fijian community, notes in “Ashes and Diamonds” (1989) that he did not know much about his grandmother “except that she had four other sons and then had eloped with a slightly fairer girmitya—named Ramsuroop—a jehajibhai, a mate, travelers in the same ship from India” (61). On the plantations, he observes in his story “Mangoes” (1992), the “gossip was mainly about women: there were so few girmit women and their elopement was a common theme. After all, everyone’s mother or wife had eloped with someone, sometime” (235-236).

Madu Pasipanodya in “A Family for Us” (2002) recounts how “One night, when I was four years old, our mother left. I remember her sneak out of the house, but I thought she was just going for a walk. In the morning she wasn’t there and that’s when our father told us that she had run away with a Fijian man” (113). This comes as a total surprise to her. Her father, Shiu, a 65-year old Indian widower, had married twice before and father of seven children from his first marriage married Wati, a 16 year old girl. The marriage was arranged by Wati’s parents. Poverty and other circumstances add on to Wati’s misery and her incompatible match with an old man. However it is only Wati who can resolve the issue of the compatibility of this relationship, even though there are other people involved. The result is her extreme rebellious step of abandoning her own children.

Women on the plantations were sometimes empowered because of their sexuality. Elopement as an option would not have been possible in India, keeping in mind the family structure and traditional roles given to women. The men, particularly husbands in such a relationship, are left on the margins, doubly marginalized as cuckold husbands and poor indentured-labourers, who kept on working on their farms and cursing their lives.

Kirpal Singh Chauli in “Are You Married, Abdul” (1989) presents a humorous interaction between an Indian-Malawian and Lebanese migrant in Australia. Abdul,
the Lebanese migrant is a taxi driver and has married two women. Kip, the Indian-Malawian migrant humorously asks him “So you have just one bedroom for both of them?” (74). Abdul unable to understand the humour behind Kip’s question becomes defensive and replies “What do you think? They are animals! You can’t make love to them at the same time” (74). He continues

“That is against God’s will, Kip! You see, this is God’s plan [. . .]. You must have more than one wife, that way they don’t play up on you. If they do play up on you, you kick them out and give them nothing. [. . .] if one wife is tired, then you have another one. If one is sick, the other one is still O.K. They can all help clean up the house and do the cooking and look after children properly. [. . .] This way the wives try their best to please the man and keep him happy. They don’t argue with the man like Australian women.” (74)

Abdul’s explanation makes us question the status of Muslim “women” in a polygamous marriage in Australia. Kip finds the whole incident amusing and Abdul narrates it as a very common state of affairs in his community. But the comparison of migrant Muslim women with Australian women and the difference in behavior related to their interaction with men from these cultures is a complex situation of understanding social structures. The perceived or real gender inequality in Islam has often been the focal point of criticism in Australia. Muslim migrant women, regardless of nationality they come from to Australia, face hurdles both from within the family, Muslim community and from the wider Australian community. Various studies on Muslim migrant women have suggested that the needs and concerns of Muslim migrant women have been more significant than others and should therefore be dealt with delicately (see Deen 1995; Rasool 2002; Casimiro et al. 2007).

Socio-cultural research on South Asian Muslim diaspora shows that gender roles influence the identity and sense of community of immigrant women (see Espin 1995; Erickson and Al-Timimi 2001). The immigrant women often find themselves sandwiched between racism and prejudices of the Australian society and the expectations of their own community. To overcome these problems they use “clothing, domesticity and sexuality” as a form of resistance against the pressure from both the larger society and their own communities (see Rasool 2002; Casimiro et al. 2007). They are aware that western influence on their cultural traditions would be inevitable to a certain extent due to their Australian environment. For example, one
participant in a sociological study conducted on Pakistani migrant women in Australia by Bianca M. Fijac and Christopher C. Sonn (2004) stated: “I’m not white but I’m not black ... locked between two cultures” and similarly, another participant suggested: “Australians think we’re too Asian, black and Pakistanis back home ... think we are too westernised” (18). Similarly in the Australian society, Fijac and Sonn observe, they were perceived as an ethnic minority and in Pakistan they were perceived as having submitted to western influence (25). They further observe that to some extent the Muslim women in the diaspora feel like they have “compromised their cultural heritage, traditions and identity for a western culture that will never accept them and constantly excludes them because they are so different” (18). Therefore, the Muslim women in the diaspora often find themselves caught between different traditions, cultures and values, creating confusion to some extent in defining exactly who they are and where they fit in (Fijac and Sonn 25).

Tradition and gender are inseparable parts of the cultural baggage that migrants carry with them to the new homelands. Men in the Indian subcontinent, particularly husbands, rarely participate in everyday domestic household tasks—cooking, shopping, cleaning, doing laundry, mowing lawns, etc. This is largely due to the “strict separation of spheres” that is dictated by Indian subcontinental cultural norms which portray domesticity as woman’s domain and economic responsibilities as the male territory (Bhalla 2008). In Chitra Fernando’s “Making Connections” from Between Worlds (1988), Ananda can understand, although with a nostalgia for old days, that the role and responsibilities in Australia are to be shared between him and his wife, Leela. But he cannot help reflecting, that

At home in Beruwela, he hadn’t ever had to bother about making his own tea. Before his marriage to Leela, his mother had made it for him, and then Leela had. He no longer expected Leela to make his tea or his breakfast for him. Things were different here. There were so many things she had to do in the morning: making sandwich lunches for the two girls to take to school and getting her own lunch before she left for work herself at the Epping post office. (90)

He understands the changing nature of domestic roles but could not grasp why the traditions have to be sacrificed for attaining it. A transformation in gender ideologies, according to Vibha Bhalla (2008), is accompanied by ideological shifts in the understanding of new male and female roles by both individuals and their families.
She further notes that these are permanent changes and probably reproduced in subsequent generations. He looks at his grown up daughter and feels a “discomfort” and “distaste” on the way she dresses up here—he “watched the girl balanced on her heels in her short uniform, observed her hair sprayed into a fierce cockatoo peak, her blood-red nails, a bright predatory parrot” (91). The girl answers his questions with a indifference and he remembers how “parental authority” was yielded by his father back home in Sri Lanka. Loss of husbandly and parental authority makes him feel empty. He feels threatened by his daughter’s refusal to maintain traditional family culture as a result of migration to Australia.

Ananda remembers that he never intended to marry and migrate to Australia, but wanted to dedicate “his life to the education of poor” (90). He further notes that nothing of that kind happened. He had married Leela, had two daughters, become a householder and a teacher in a Beruwala secondary school. (91)

He often thinks that he was unable to fulfill his ambition of becoming a “second Gandhi” because of his marriage and household responsibilities. He immigrated to Australia because Leela proposed the idea. He “agreed in principle,” so that his daughters can get the best “food, clothes, employment, education, especially education” (90). On reflecting back at his life he understands that it is his lack of interest in life around—particularly in his wife and daughters and their changed (westernised) perspective that makes him feel marginalized. He was dependent on his parents and friends advice as well as critical appreciation of his ideas in Sri Lanka and therefore couldn’t fulfill his dream. He is now exhilarated by the thought of a new beginning in Australia—as a painter, something he feels he is good at. Now it is through his paintings that he wants to make connections with his family and other Australians.

More and more South Asian writers now base their works on a broad spectrum of themes and explore the gamut of social and political experiences or the dark side of life—madness, depression, drugs, prostitution, adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, and sexual peculiarities in their works. Adib Khan’s young narrator, in the story “Out There” (1997), a second generation immigrant from a war-torn Asian country, is a drug addict and gay who also works as a male prostitute for money. On his way to meet a regular client he is stopped by a female prostitute of Asian origin. He remarks
"Like everything else, the price of lust has gone up. Blame the government and those foreigners" (87; my italics). He feels that with the incoming wave of successive migrants and rising unemployment, migrant sex workers, both male and female, are booming in Australia. He does not consider himself as a prostitute, as he only works part-time to save money to permanently run away, with his lover Joe, to some "other country." In his desperation and greed for more money he murders one of his regular clients, Peter. The presentation of the narrator as a gay/male prostitute shows Khan’s awareness of this difficult and complex question. Adib Khan has taken up a subject that most of the (straight) South Asian diaspora writers are not very eager to engage with. He is not bothered about the issue of morality but traces the conflict that is going inside an individual. He is also able to explore the issue of sexuality and dislocation, two deep-rooted dimensions of social inequality. He provides sexuality with a new dimension within the discourse of gender studies in South Asian-Australian diaspora. The narrator’s silent interaction, in the beginning of the story, with an Anglo-Australian security guard shows not only racist but also homophobic behavior of the mainstream society. The security guard’s masculine male gaze and scrutiny doubly marginalizes the narrator.

The title of Adib Khan’s story “Between Eros and Agape” (1999) reflects the narrator’s shifting between his “passionate love” (with sensual desire) for his mistress and “love” (in a deeper sense of true love) for his wife and children. The narrator, a successful South Asian businessman, married to an Australian woman, feels like a “reluctant exile” in this “strange country” (113). He can be identified as a cosmopolitan family man belonging to any other community. He writes “I was a responsible family man” (111), until, Irene, a divorcée came into the picture with her "confident, bold and intelligent" attitude towards life. Narrator writes even in his adulterous behaviour he couldn’t stop thinking about his wife and her “face … crumpled … strained but still patient. The eyes—dim but hopeful” (113). He also thinks about his wrong-doing, and the “astonishing endurance” and the strength of his wife: “You suffered without a whimper and began a parallel life—another university course, a part-time job. [. . .] How cruel it was to batter you with all those late nights without credible explanations” (112). The affair ends in narrator’s defeat as Irene rejects him: “Her silence said it all. Unpredictable. Uncertain. Hypocritical and weak. Yes, yes … all of those and more” (113). In his rejection he calls Irene’s judgment
“the rationality of the modern female” (113). But at the end loses both Eros (Irene) and Agape (his wife) and now he “walks among feelings and ruptured memories [ . . . ] without destination” (105-106). This sense of being without a direction and living in memories of his wife invokes a strong sensation and realization that he truly loves his wife, but he also knows it is a “belated discovery” (105).

Suneeta Peres Da Costa in “Long Division” (1997) presents a dysfunctional family. The young narrator’s mother is a maniac depressive and father, though trying very hard to control it, is heart-broken by grief and responsibilities of domestic work—household duties and taking care of his three young daughters. Mina, the narrator, through a multiplication problem tries to question the role of her father in the family. This had been the question: “Cathy has six hens: each hen produces six more chickens: how many chickens will there be altogether?” Mina asks Mr Heaney, the Mathematics teacher, why aren’t “the roosters who sired the chickens included in the equation?” The teacher replies with emphasis, “those hens sat on eggs all day—don’t you go inquiring about the role of the roosters. Were the roosters there when the hens were hungry, when their backsides were sore?” (6). The hen and rooster debate is somewhere directly a result of issues that relate to the role of wife/mother and husband/father in the household. Who is more important—wife/mother or husband/father? Mina thinks that in her family both the roles are being played by the father. He has been feminized by his responsibilities. As she notes:

These were the hands of a man that were clumsy but tender in their responsibility. When we were smaller and he used to bathe us, he would take special care with our infant digits and toes, terrified that they might come off in his hands. Now he was preparing the Woolworths burgers [ . . . ]. (5; my italics)

She further notes the changes that have occurred in her father because of his added responsibilities:

Late at night my father was crying—I had never heard him cry before. He was weeping and my uncle had said something as he took my father into his arms, something like, [ . . . ] it will bring you down. (7)

Mina also observes that her father’s body language belies him now. He once was a man [whose hands] gestured always to the greater strength of things, affirming the superstructure of our lives, but whose face frequently bore the expression that belied him, that seemed to say he no longer wanted to live beneath that strength. (7)
This according to the narrator is “the entire grammar of humiliation” and defeat (9). And in moments of despair, sorrow and defeat, the narrator wishes for her mother “to die” (8). Mina realizes the marginalized position that her father is in because of her mother’s psychological problems. As the eldest daughter she is conscious of her responsibilities towards the family and wants to help him in carrying on his role as a father or head of the house or as an anchor to their floating lives.

One cause of marginalization of men (and also women) in the new homeland is the kind of work environment they get. It has been observed in various narratives under study that mostly the migrant men, who were working on higher posts with good incentives in the homeland do not get the same opportunities (at the level of designation or authority) in the hostland. Beryl T. Mitchell in her autobiographical account, “Tea, Tytlers and Tribes” (1997), observes that one of their relatives, who “was now employed with the Sydney ‘Daily Mirror’ [...] was slightly lower down the ladder” (306) than at what he used to work with the same qualifications and experience in Colombo. Although as a migrant from Sri Lanka, he is fluent in English and well qualified for a higher scale, he is not given an opportunity to prove himself. Similarly Beryl’s husband, Doug, who was working as a Manager on a teaplantation in Sri Lanka gets his “first job in an import/export firm” (307). Beryl writes that when they bought their first three-bedroom house in Australia, the husband realized the visible contrast in their status here and in Sri Lanka.

It did not compare favourably even with our first home, when Doug was a junior planter, in Ceylon, but it was a start in our new country and we loved it. (308)

It is only much later that Doug is able to start his personnel line of business and their situation improves. Other planters and high level administrators too, soon realised that to improve their situation they must start their own businesses and some also “went into life insurance” (307).

Similarly, Beryl feels that language—particularly proficiency in English—is one factor that helped these men and women from Sri Lanka to easily integrate, as compared to the Greek and Italian women and men, who “could not get themselves understood in the shops” and as a result of frustration and misunderstanding “tempers would flare on both sides of the counter” (307).
Beryl, who was in Sri Lanka the mistress of the household and uninitiated in housework as her role was only to instruct the servants, has to take up a job to contribute towards home loan payments. She writes

The six week full time training course I had to attend was hectic, and a torture to the mind and body because I had to learn to fit in my new housekeeping skills with commuting to the city daily, and then taking down and absorbing endless notes. (308)

It is only her capacity to adapt to her environment and determination to succeed that helps her in the long run and gain experience to manage “a small but competent office” (308). She is satisfied in her new role and adds “To me, managing the office and the contact with people of every walk of life who came in to buy health insurance or have their claims paid was a fulfilling job” (309).

Van der Veer (1995) in his study notes that the “larger forces of racism and discrimination” are also one of the major causes that inflict ‘marginality’ on South Asian men in the diaspora (14). Anura, a Sri Lankan migrant, in Sunil Govinnage’s “The Vanished Trails” (2005) feels marginalized and persecuted in Australia. He immigrated with his wife Sujatha and daughter Nimali, from Canada to Australia in the hope that they will get good jobs and a secure future for their daughter. But “despite the Canadian experience, Anura could not secure a good job after he arrived in Australia” (75). While his wife is able to get a job as administrative assistant and his daughter gets admission in Marine Biology at Sydney University, only Anura “is not being able to find a job in this bloody clever country!” (76). He outrightly blames Australians for his plight and missed opportunities—“some employers are racists in Australia” (75). He also feels that Indians are taking over all the jobs because of their corrupt practices. On the other hand his friend, Siri, a poet also feels marginalized by the attitude of white editors of magazines in Australia to which he had sent his work for publication. He was not even notified by them about the reasons of his poems being rejected. Amongst the two Siri is still hopeful that a change will take place, while Anura is frustrated because of what he has gone through in life and largely because as a male he feels limited by his contribution towards his family. He says,

I am the only person who missed out on everything! [.] I wanted to do Philosophy degree, but I’d not be able to find a job by studying Philosophy. I’m doing casual work in a computer assembly plant for
my pocket money. If not for our mortgage, I’d have gone back to study philosophy. (76)

With no money, no job, no future, and nowhere to go, Anura feels blocked from becoming a real man, a family man because he can’t get work and therefore contribute anything significant towards his traditional family responsibilities. In the South Asian family the greater authority is vested in the man as the head of the family and he therefore is responsible for decisions affecting the welfare of family members. As the head of the family, he controls work and leisure, earnings and expenses, marriages, represents the family in the outside world and takes responsibility for all members, even in the families where the women have the freedom to education and right to work. In contrast, marriage in the West is, or is at least supposed to be a participatory relationship between husband and wife and, consequently, men and women share responsibilities in all aspects of life, including onerous domestic chores (Bhalla 2008).

Conclusion

[... ] the compulsion to explain, the inevitable positioning of yourself as deviant vis-à-vis the normal, remains – especially for those migrants marked by visible difference. (Ang, 1994: 10)

One of the purposes of this chapter has been to expand on the discourse of marginality and the politics of gendered location. South Asian diaspora writers are creating new ways of representing their individual and collective identities. Issues related to gender are of course at the centre of their work, preoccupation and explorations. Acknowledging multiple subject positions in which both men and women are placed in the diaspora, carries with it what Linda McDowell (1999) calls, “renegotiation of gender divisions” (2). Gender has been dominant to the process of diaspora and women played a critical role in the reconstitution of overseas South Asian society. But life for women in the diasporic situation can often be “doubly painful,” as James Clifford (1997) has suggested that diaspora women struggle with “the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the demands of old and new patriarchies” (259).

Parvati Raghuram (2001) has argued that professionalism has become a part of middle-class feminity in Asia and has redefined both class culture and feminine
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The same phenomenon is occurring in the South Asian diaspora in Australia. The South Asian immigrant working woman is a person, who should be taken into special consideration when migrant adjustment problems are discussed. Banchevska (1978) notes in relation to the difference between a working and non-working woman that “no matter how hard a woman’s life may be when outside work has to be combined with domestic chores, the working woman is better off than the one who remains at home—a mother dependent on her children for contact with the outside world, isolated from all who she knew, and surrounded by a world that is not only unfamiliar and frightening but is also alienating her children from her” (186). But somewhere within the carefully demarcated limits, womenfolk also act as emancipated as seen in the case of Indian-Fijian women (see Tinker 8). Women in the diaspora situation “could be highly inventive: merging and generating new traditions in order to help build a sense of community” (Bates 27).

Although both men and women reinvent the past and themselves, it is alone in contrasting ways which are specific to “the gendering of experience” (Ganguly 41). The diasporic home then, which is “presumed to be a utopian space” and which “allows an immigrant to be his or her ethnic self, is a gendered space that is far more limiting” for women than men (Rüdrappa 100). Female subjectivity forms the primary site of location/dislocation in the stories. The South Asian woman has long been the symbol of the backwardness of South Asian cultures in the orientalist imagination. The narrative of “her subjection and lack of freedom has in the Indian case especially focused on arranged marriages with bridewealth, or dowry” (Van der Veer 14). However, migration’s dislocations provide women with new opportunities to renegotiate power and recreate family patterns that are favorable to them (see Foner 1997; Bhalla 2008). Diaspora space has reinforced positive roles for women, as storytellers, and transmitters of culture, language and folklore, as well as breadwinners for their families (Bates 27). The “stories reveal the vexed and ambivalent renarrations of ‘woman’ produced by the dissemination of identities” (Koshy 69). The writers’ self-reflexive (autobiographical) accounts also provide us with critical insights into operations of power structures.

It has been seen that knowledge production and publication of migrant literature in Australia has helped particularly in the recovery of the South Asian women writers’ voices, memories and experiences. A significant number of the
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Stories analysed here are by and about women who migrated to Australia, alone or with their husbands to pursue and see their dreams become reality. These South Asian women writers have in a very strong way contributed towards the “powerful literary contribution” of women writing in “contemporary Australian culture” and which, according to Bruce Bennett (2001), has replaced “the bush mythology of the pioneering Australian male” (v) as well as that of the pioneering diasporan male who have till now been projected as shouldering the responsibility of contributing towards the making of their homes and of Australia. The women protagonists here are coming to terms with their sense of Australianness or their recently acquired Australian identity and other issues based on race, religion, education or profession. These immigrant women struggle to negotiate a new home, culture and environment that to some often results in fragmentation, detachment and alienation. Their dilemmas although presented at a personal level are community oriented, as these women protagonists unquestionably follow the societal construct where community looks upon them for the preservation and continuation of ethnicity be it Australia or the Indian subcontinent.

In most of the stories about woman, Australia offers a future where she can acknowledge the “dual cultures to which she is heir” (McLaren 42) and as an independent woman present her transformative power. Women in the diaspora space become “their own authors, finding at last their true voice, authenticating themselves in literature” (Jurgensen 84) and questioning society’s structural social identities. In these stories there is also a move away from representation of seemingly silent women whose peripheral positions figure histories of oppression under patriarchal domination, towards a new consciousness. The women, particularly second and third generation diasporans, in these stories link the circumstances of their lives with larger, global events and highlight the need of re-invention rather than offering a return to an “idealized past.” They creatively take advantage of the uneven opportunities available to them in the diaspora spaces and negotiate an improvement in their status and in the relationships with their families (see Pessar and Sarah J. Mahler 2001).

Ganguly (1992) notes that the “men’s narratives highlight their individuality, their ability to succeed—to ‘make good’ (despite the odds)—and their autonomy of will. So what if the ‘good’ is also accompanied by racism and marginality, and with all sorts of ambivalences in self-identity” (41). Migration has uneven repercussions on
men and women. Hence marginality is not only, or even principally, a personal plight. Instead, “it is predominantly a social situation. In this sense, individuals are reflectors and constructors of a larger social reality” (Drew 81). The narratives of diaspora men “embody their own specifications and contradictions” (Ganguly 38). Immigration has provided men with financial security as well as a higher social status in the society. But some migrant men, as presented in some of the stories, have been hit hard by the deterioration in the job market or feel underpaid as compared to their qualifications and skill in Australia. Many are because of this situation unable to maintain stable relationships and some often feel excluded from family life, the decision making processes, their marriage or are deprived of their traditional roles because of lack of economic resources available to them. This reflects a worsened position for men in some of the stories where the existing patriarchal power relations are challenged in the new society.

The prominence of women’s role in the diaspora often decentres the diasporic male voice and the shared diasporic space emerges as a site of contestation. This struggle for space in the diaspora results in immigrant men and women shaping new domestic practices and identities post-migration. Inevitably, the diaspora male and female also become, relative to their socio-cultural milieu, individuals with “the wider horizon” and “the keener intelligence” (Park 946; my italics). Further, the position of marginal man is always relatively of “the more civilized human being” (Park 946) as his is also a search for new identity and place in this world, keeping in mind the historical circumstances and alternating environments (see Y. Hussain 4).

The issues and dilemmas discussed in this chapter, in the light of the historical, social and theoretical background of South Asian diaspora in Australia as discussed in Chapters one and two, help us conclude that both men and women have been and continue to be represented in some of the stories as still negotiating their own sense of being and thus re-framing the discourse of “marginality.” The creative works of diasporic writers also address “multiple levels of contradiction and conflict around issues of collective and individual identity” (Y. Hussain 10)—particularly reflected in women’s role as the guardians of tradition and the transmission of social memory and cultural values in the diaspora. Storytelling and the “embodied transmission of social memory” has been associated not only with diaspora cultures but more precisely with women. Although, the pen symbolises “phallic power”
(Schiwy 279), women writers have also by their questioning of gender paradigms, with considerable success, “seized the opportunity to correct falsifications and distortions of women in patriarchal literature” (Jurgensen 85).

The stories highlight the differences in the role of women and men in their community living in Australia. Women are often represented in these stories or in the background as essentialised oppressed figures of victimhood and despair or the primary lifeline to the homeland or a “springboard to intimacy between people and societies” (Bennett, 2007: 329). But in a few stories we also see a set of women protagonists, who are empowered because of their location, education and contribution in the society. On the other hand, men are shown to subordinate the private and personal spheres to the public and national. Personal attachments, family obligations, emotional dependency make them feel marginalized and impotent in diasporic society and these are perceived as potentially dangerous for self-identity. This may also explain the frequent portrayal of female characters as egotistical, devious, and overly sexed in some stories (see Fuchs 213). More often than not, according to Fuchs (1999) “the public sphere is masculinised and the private sphere is feminised. Thus women appear as wives, mothers, girlfriends, lovers—those whose realm of influence does not exceed the boundaries of the private world” (212). The protagonists, both male and female, within South Asian diasporic short stories seek “self-realisation either in conformity or rebellion” (Y. Hussain 10) and in consequence create new gendered identities.

The resistance to patriarchy has manifested itself in all spheres of life, including South Asian diaspora literature. The exploration of gender roles as a location is necessary in understanding the settlement process of South Asian diaspora in Australia. This is because the roles of both men and women in this community are valuable in maintaining and transmitting cultural traditions and values for the family and community. It must be reiterated here that as a family unit “the men tend to live in yesterday, the women in today, and the children in the future” (Darvishpour 22). The social mobility of women is clearly marked out in recognition of their educational opportunities and class mobility. The women don’t want male roles but they do want to be accepted as women of worth in their own culture and also have an active participation in the development and maintenance of identity and community in the South Asian diaspora in Australia.
Endnotes

1 For a detailed discussion and summary of a wide range of Feminist views, see Humm 1992; McCann and Kim 2002; Moi 2002.

2 Anne Summers has argued in her book Damned Whores and God's Police (1977) that men oppose equal rights for women at work because it “threatens” their “power” in the home (400).

3 According to Sandra Bloodworth (2005) it was the idea of the nuclear family that gave rise to “the gender stereotypes of the aggressive, dominant male and the subservient woman” and it still “continues to shape our lives” (111).