Chitra Banerjee’s “The Maid Servant's Story” presents the readers with a curious scene of a young upper-class Bengali woman, known as the wife, who lies soaked in her own urine on a hospital cot in early 1960s in Kolkata. Confined to institutional bed rest after experiencing severe discomfort in the late stages of a second pregnancy, she waits for her delivery under the supervision of a Kolkata hospital staff. However, this is not the privilege. During hospitalization, recommended by her doctor and encouraged by her husband, the wife sleeps on a narrow military-green cot and "in spite of the open windows her room had smelled faintly of urine (for she wasn't allowed to get up to go to the bathroom)" (AM143). For an upper-class woman accustomed to a well-staffed, luxurious estate, the austere cot and inaccessibility to the toilet suggest that Kolkata’s mid-century modern health facilities and reforms were deficient even with respect to the health care of the elite. Obviously, Divakaruni has the wife bear the consequences of these institutional inadequacies as a way of animating the wife's de-humanization, a process exhibited by her immersion in an ostensibly modern but nevertheless primitive and degrading space.
Succinctly put, the wife becomes temporarily a dirty body; a figure introduced in earlier chapters whose defining association with excrement symbolizes social and narrative minority. Here, one can rework this definition to show that the wife's temporary dirtiness marks her ethical lowness. Steeped in urine, or at least the odor of it, the wife becomes dirty at the penultimate moment of giving birth, a supreme enactment of her heteronormative duty as a woman. In Divakaruni's version of this event, however, the wife must become dirty at the moment of giving birth because her impurity spotlights the very moment that her focus turns completely inward, eliminating her previous commitment to contesting a most faithful maid's return to forced sex work.

Divakaruni's short story “A Perfect Life” features filth and elaborates on ethical issues in a similar vein. This time, in the setting of late-twentieth century San Francisco's East Bay, an upper-class Indian American protagonist and narrator named Meera finds a homeless and obviously abused boy in her apartment's vestibule. Extending her sympathy, Meera invites him into her home and she leaves for the office. Upon her return, she is met with utter filth: "As soon as I opened the door I was struck by the smell. It was worse than ten baby-houses put together. I followed my nose to the bathroom. There was pee all over the floor, a big yellow puddle, with blobs of brown floating in it"
The boy, whom Meera calls Krishna, is obviously untrained in the proper usage of toilet.

Over time and with effort, Meera succeeds in training this once little savage into becoming a neat boy. While Meera's instruction enables their parent-child intimacy, that bond is broken when Meera turns Krishna over to foster care as a step toward official adoption. Specifically, while under the care of his foster mother, Krishna runs away, and by having Krishna run away at the moment Meera seeks to assimilate him formally into her life. Divakaruni here indicates that official recognition and incorporation of subalterns into upper-class life is an inadequate way to address subaltern interests. The author suggests that ensuring a formerly oppressed figure's assimilation and acculturation into dominant culture does not fulfill Meera's ethical responsibilities. Rather, by returning to Maid Servant, one can read Divakaruni's representation of a mob and its onlookers as suggesting that ethics must consist of shifting fundamental ideologies of oppression across class and caste differences. Ethics constitute a set of beliefs that aim to address the abuses of power and domination, an endeavor that is not necessarily circumscribed by laws and other official institutions. The lapses of ethics in both “The Maid Servant’s Story” and “A Perfect Life” enable the readers to approximate a definition of it, one that heightens our awareness and critique of certain hegemonies of oppression.
It is worth pausing at this point to note that “The Maid Servant’s Story” and “A Perfect Life” are not stand-alone stories but were first published and positioned alongside each other in *Arranged Marriage*, Divakaruni’s closely-knit collection of eleven short stories. Divakaruni moors this collection to West Bengal, specifying Kolkata as the common geographic reference point for most of her stories. From Kolkata, characters travel near and far. There is a journey by train to Gopalpur and another by airplane to Chicago. More often than not, the details of these journeys are skimmed over as Divakaruni focuses on Indian American characters already settled in San Francisco's Bay Area. In this way, Kolkata and the Bay Area emerge as the collection's two dominant geographic reference points, and situated within this context, Divakaruni imagines how Bengali Hindu and U.S. American nationalisms surface and converge across those geographically bounded borders.

By situating “A Perfect Life” and “The Maid Servant’s Story” within this collection, one can show that their representations of impurity and comparison of upper-class and subaltern figures add distinct historical and critical dimension to the whole. At this point, one should also review the other stories of the collection to reinforce this point. *Arranged Marriage* begins with three successive, succinct, and disparate snapshots of traumatic violence as experienced by women and their families in West Bengal and the U.S. As one reads them, these opening
Stories, “Bats”, “Clothes”, and “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” illuminate how economic and social challenges experienced by working-class characters manifest from India to the U.S. The next three stories, “The Word Love”, “A Perfect Life” and “The Maid Servant’s Story” shift the collection's purview to middle-class and upper-class women.

Though “A Perfect Life” and “The Maid Servant’s Story” as part of this narrative set are presented from the perspectives of socially privileged figures, they also offer extensive sidelong glances at subalterns, suggesting that even as the collection's perspective shifts to privileged families, socially marginal figures are not forgotten in that transition. In the following two stories, “Disappearance” and “Doors” there are no shocking wife beatings, murders, or racist trauma, which Divakaruni alerts the readers to in the opening volley of the collection. Rather, these two stories focus on ephemeral yet troubling forms of matrimonial disharmony between young middle-class Indian American couples. The collection's concluding narratives, “The Ultrasound”, “Affair” and “Meeting Mrinal” offer comparative middle-class Bengali and Indian American characters, doppelgangers who have been close friends but who have made drastically different choices with respect to relationship and career.
These synopses are meant to highlight how the various plots of the collection are tied to registering the difficulties, disappointments, and disintegration of marriage as experienced by women of humble and upper-class Bengali Hindu origins. More precisely, Divakaruni's titular reference to arranged marriage informs us of the fact that a particular construction of Hindu domestic life is most pertinent to shaping the collection. Offering a historical and anthropological review of this particular construction of marriage, Devika Chawla observes that arranged marriage—a Hindu sacrament and duty—has helped socialize male spiritual and economic empowerment at the cost of dispossessing and subjugating wives to the rules of the husband and his family. Indeed, certain women have settled into this domestic arrangement. In fact, an estimated ninety-five percent of all Hindu marriages in India are still arranged. However, as Chawla and others such as Radha S.Hegde have demonstrated, the acceptance of arranged marriage has not translated into unqualified oppression of women. Moreover, there are women who have rejected the role of submissive Hindu women and wives altogether.

In Divakaruni's hands, reference to arranged marriage operates to highlight such Hindu notions of domesticity as a main framework. More precisely, in *Arranged Marriage* there are stories about abused, distraught, and discontent mothers, daughters, single women, divorcees, and female friends. While the beliefs and practices of
marriage are at the root of these women's discontent for the majority of the stories; in other cases, there are challenges that stem from the violence of U.S. American racism. To put it differently, Divakaruni does not posit marriage as an end point of female development but suggests that gender conventions prescribed by arranged marriage permeate the lives of her poor and elite Bengali and Indian American characters, even if they resist tradition or experience economic, social, and individual personal difficulties directly unrelated to Hindu gender hierarchy.

**Arranged Marriage** offers a commentary on traditional Hindu gender roles. Analysing **Arranged Marriage** one can also show how “A Perfect Life” and “The Maid Servant’s Story” function to expand the collection's purview of domestic life by situating the stories within a larger ethical conversation. “A Perfect Life” and “The Maid Servant's Story” are structurally alike as they begin, transition, and end similarly. That is, Divakaruni sets up the central narratives of these two stories with brief descriptions of ideal upper-class homes in the East Bay and Kolkata, respectively. Breaking that pristine surface of upper-class life, however, socially marginal characters appear at the doorsteps of the elite and are invited inside. As they assimilate to the life-style of the upper-class with varying degrees of success, they disrupt the smooth operation of their hosts' domestic order. As a result, they are extracted from these temporary accommodations, and Divakaruni concludes the stories by having her upper-class protagonists resume their former
lifestyles, almost as if their contact with subaltern figures had never occurred. However, because the socially marginal figures of “The Maid Servant’s Story” and “A Perfect Life” emerge in different but related historical and geographic settings, the specifics of narrative and theme are similar but not quite the same.

For instance, the wife of “The Maid Servant’s Story” is a representative beneficiary of Indian nationalist gender reforms. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, Indian nationalists advocated the education of upper-class women, arguing that it would guarantee the development of robust, patriotic sons and a secondary, supporting cast of daughters. While assessing the efficacy of various nationalist reforms in education, political representation, property ownership, and widow rights, postcolonial critics have pointed out that gender reforms have benefited upper-class women but have also been deployed to reinforce colonial, national, and postcolonial hierarchies of power. Building on this critique, one can see Divakaruni’s subaltern figures evaluating the way those marginal characters have operated to illuminate the limitations of Indian women’s social uplift. To be specific, one can interpret the eponymous maid’s presence of “The Maid Servant’s Story” as commenting on the way gender reforms have benefited upper-class women but have not trickled down to benefit the rest of the society. Furthermore, Divakaruni’s figuration of an undifferentiated mob during the crescendo of events in this story
conveys that economic and cultural reforms among the working-class are needed to question the practice of heralding the preservation of tradition at the cost of devaluing women, not just upper-class women but their working-class counterparts as well. To put it succinctly, “The Maid Servant’s Story” allows us to question the ethics of nationalist gender reforms.

Reading of “A Perfect Life” the readers can see how a legacy of gendered public health discourse underpins Meera’s claims to U.S. nationalism. Specifically, Krishna’s dirty emergence in an upper-class Indian American woman’s immaculate East Bay home evokes early-twentieth century debates on Chinese immigrant maternity and hygiene. This history enables one to understand how Krishna’s disappearance at the end of the story interrupts Meera’s linked claims to maternity and Americanness. Such an interruption functions to cast doubt on the process of recognizing and incorporating subalterns into the majority. This process is limited because it only acculturates subalterns into a dominant class rather than addressing core issues of oppression and domination. Though it might be tempting to interpret *Arranged Marriage* as a collection that focuses only on the way Bengali and Indian American women adopt and resist culturally prescribed roles of wife, daughter, mother, friend, and citizen, a reading of “A Perfect Life” and “The Maid Servant’s Story” suggests that the collection also operates as a commentary on ethics.
To strengthen this discussion of ethics and subalternity, one can refer to debates regarding Asian American studies' critical and theoretical foundations. Quite simply, such debates are ultimately, like “The Maid Servant's Story” and “A Perfect Life”, a matter of ethical responses to the marginalization and incorporation of others into a dominant body. Specifically, Susan Koshy and others have pointed out that Asian American studies' interest in and, at times, inclusion of marginal groups as part of the field's purview have been vital to the discipline's self-formation. The efforts of South Asian Americanists have not only helped to illuminate this as a defining feature of Asian American studies, but they also have consistently and deliberately sharpened the terms of the debate.

Arguments for the incorporation of South Asian American studies into Asian American studies have been diverse and even in direct opposition to each other, and recent scholarship have been careful to make its case based on historical and theoretical issues rather than common or uncommon ethnic and geographic origins, a practice more typical of past critique. Specifically, Sucheta Mazumdar's foundational historical analysis of Indian American immigration, Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth's co-edited South Asian American Studies Reader. Vijay Prashad and Biju Matthew's guest edited volume on political culture in Amerasia, one of two leading journals of the field, have not only facilitated these debates but have helped shape
the conceptualization of Asian American studies as a field of theoretical practice and comparative historical study rather than one that coheres around superficial claims to a common culture or location.

Notably, Ketu H. Katrak made this point early on by introducing the concept of simultaneity of geography to the field. This concept names "the possibility of living here in body and elsewhere in mind and imagination". (201) For Katrak, simultaneity of geography named not only a defining feature of South Asian diasporic literature but also a theme that might be read across Asian American literary production. More recently, Srikanth argues in her book *The World Next Door* that South Asian American literature might be read to help complicate the nationalist frameworks of U.S. American literature. In her words, "I see South Asian American literature as providing the means to pull back from a close-up view of the United States to reveal a wider landscape of other nations and other peoples". (4) Read together, then, Katrak's and Srikanth's respective efforts have contributed to an oeuvre of South Asian American literary criticism that has been committed to illuminating the literature's transnational historical and theoretical contexts, contexts that dovetail with the interests of Asian American studies.

Certainly, one way to extend Katrak's and Srikanth's respective critique is to read Divakaruni's stories as describing the way colonization, transnationalization of production and labor, and anti-
immigration policies in the U.S. and Britain have influenced Indian immigration to the U.S. While Divakaruni’s work is historically significant in this way “A Perfect Life” and “The Maid Servant’s Story” describe certain complications of incorporating and assimilating marginal subjects into the world of the elite. Through these stories Divakaruni points to the limitations of upper-class women’s agency in India and the U.S. despite their advances in social and material life. Thus “A Perfect Life” and “The Maid Servant’s Story” indicate that despite achievements gained by women through Indian nationalist gender reforms and U.S. immigration, foundational beliefs and practices that enable the exploitation and oppression of the working-class remain firmly in tact. “The Maid Servant’s Story” is especially valuable for the way it points to the significant role that the working-class play in affirming and changing society’s core gender values. Divakaruni’s representation of these matters shows that mere recognition by the majority and allowance of assimilation does not adequately address issues of exploitation and oppression that are at the heart of subalternity.

Such a reading as this takes inspiration from the Subaltern Studies group’s interest in and effort to excavate histories that have been marginalized in the homogenization of Indian nationalist narratives. For example, one can perceive the figuration of the wife in “The Maid Servant’s Story” as a beneficiary of India’s nationalist gender reforms, but this elite woman’s immersion in her own filth also
represents an indictment against her. Giving birth and raising a healthy and intelligent son has been conceived of as an ultimate act of womanhood as prescribed by heteronormative patriarchy, but by miring the wife in her own filth at the penultimate moment of giving birth to a son, Divakaruni indicates that conception and maternity can be problematic when deployed to justify the neglect of the banished maid who stands for the oppressed generally. Krishna's elusiveness in “A Perfect Life” suggests further that conforming subalterns to dominant methods of representation only relegates them to the standards of the elite, hardly an ethical form of equality.

The longest story of the collection “The Maid Servant's Story” presents two narratives, one nested deftly inside the other. Divakaruni sets the opening story in the late-twentieth century from the perspective of Manisha, a woman in her mid to late twenties who has returned to Kolkata for a family visit after having settled in California with a university teaching position. To Manisha’s clear disappointment, her absence and settlement into a successful professional life in the U.S. have not broken her mother's inexplicable shell of aloofness, but they have reaffirmed her closeness to Deepa, Manisha’s aunt and her mother’s sister. After discussion of the younger woman's California Bengali boyfriend, Manisha and Deepa transition to a conversation about wedding saris, and Deepa cautions her niece ominously against wearing the generally accepted colour of saffron on her wedding day.
Explaining the cause for her warning functions as the point of entry for Deepa's bad-luck tale one flashes back to the early 1960s and takes up the main mid-section of the story.

As the dominant narrative of “The Maid Servant’s Story” this bad-luck tale accrues around the wife, an upper-class Bengali woman. Divakaruni's brief return to Manisha's narration at the conclusion of the short story serves to confirm that the tale is, in deed, about Manisha's own mother (the wife), Deepa (the sister), a maid whom Manisha remembers only vaguely, and herself as a child. Reference to Deepa's twenty-year marriage periodizes the contemporary bookend sections of the story, as narrated by Manisha, during the mid-1980s. As suggested earlier, the nested mid-section of the narrative begins with a description of the wife as an ideal nationalist Indian woman and her less-accomplished unmarried younger sister who is visiting to help during the last stages of the wife's second pregnancy.

As an exemplary Indian woman, the wife is an upper-class Bengali Hindu woman who has converted her educational opportunities into the superior supervision of an organized and tidy household and hands-on care of her young daughter. Not just an excellent housekeeper and mother, however, she is also physically attractive and inspires the admiration of her husband, a British loyalist banker who boasts of his wife's many achievements. At first, the employment of a
new maid, named Sarala by the wife, facilitates her management of the household, but Sarala's dubious past surfaces and disrupts the household's appearance of calm.

This chapter begins with Divakaruni’s description of the wife, for it suggests that she has benefited from Indian nationalist and postcolonial gender reforms. At the same time, Divakaruni conveys through the wife’s figuration of an ideal Indian woman, that those reforms have not shifted certain fundamental beliefs and practices that justify the devaluation and subjugation women. What is pertinent here is as to how Divakaruni’s cast of characters—the wife, the sister, Sarala, a putatively enlightened but nefarious husband, a rioting mob and an indifferent general public—stand for the way that despite legal process and progress on behalf of upper-class women, fundamental ideologies of gender subordination and widespread social inequity persist, unabated by upper-class women’s empowerment. Divakaruni’s figuration of the mob as it petitions for its right to access the labor of a working-class woman conveys that these shifts must happen across class and caste borders but have yet to do so.

As an exemplary Indian woman, a rubric that nationalists have deployed to refer exclusively to middle-class and upper-class Hindu woman, the wife exhibits how elite women have taken advantage of nationalist educational reforms to better serve their families and the
nation-state. Historically, caste women have been held to a standard of pativratya (devoted and self-effacing wife), a standard that has in theory confined them to the domestic sphere and has restricted them from employment and property inheritance. Expanding their access to the public sphere in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, nationalist feminists championed the education of middle-class and upper-class women, arguing that the future of the nation's development depended on women, the primary caretakers of the nation's sons.

In “The Maid Servant’s Story” Divakaruni describes how women have taken advantage of this legacy of nationalist reforms through her depiction of the wife. That is, the wife is college educated, an uncommon distinction for women of the mid-twentieth century as remarked by the narrator, and she remains intellectually active by reading books, learning music, and writing letters to her family. These pursuits, however, are not self-serving, for her devotion to the home has only been enhanced by such individual pursuits. The wife maintains the smooth operation of the husband's family's luxurious estate, located in an esteemed section of Kolkata, by supervising a cadre of domestics and caring for all the dependents in the household. For example, she feeds, bathes, and reads to her daughter rather than rely on an ayah (nanny) as her peers have, and though there is no mother-in-law with whom to contend, there is an ornery aunt of whom she nevertheless takes care without complaint.
While the wife stands for Divakaruni’s portrait of a paradigmatic Indian woman the author also describes the subtle ways in which the wife disobeys her husband’s implied authority. Notably, such agency and resistance are showcased in response to Sarala’s invitation into the household. When Sarala first appears at the gates of the family’s estate, the wife invites her inside despite the sister’s attempt to intervene. The sister characterizes herself according to a habit of wariness, and this habit leads us to second-guess the other characters’ actions. In this case, her concern over Sarala’s invitation into the household stems from the husband’s previous declarations against helping ragged tramps, trespassing street urchins, and aggressive beggar women who appear at their gates to ask for food. With Sarala, however, the wife makes an exception because, as suggested by Divakaruni’s description of the maid, she is not like the unruly, dirty, and animalistic masses that have previously petitioned for alms.

There is no mistake that Sarala is an unemployed working-class girl when she first emerges in the story, as her coarse sari and bony appearance suggest. However, a distinctive air of regality - Sarala reminds the narrator of a forest goddess - differentiates her from the wretched masses and this gains her entrance into the gated estate. More precisely, Sarala looks not only like a forest goddess but according to the narrator’s first impression, She is attractive in a primitive, “adivasi” way. “Adivasis” are India’s indigenous inhabitants
and known to share a strong connection to the land and forest, though they are a diverse group differentiated in terms of culture, language, location, occupation, and responsiveness to modernization. While certain “adivasis” have profited from modernization, Divakaruni’s identification of Sarala as an adivasi and forest goddess suggest that, in the case of “The Maid Servant’s Story” an evocation of “adivasis” is meant to emphasize Sarala's unschooled potential. In other words, Sarala might be untrained in the ways of upper-class civility but despite her lack of edification, she assumes an air of rustic regality and decorum. She is acceptably primitive, a distinction that sets her apart from the vulgar working-class. More importantly, Sarala's potential indicates that representation of working-class and indigenous people is difficult if not impossible, given the fact that the suppression of their vulgarities is intrinsic to Sarala's recognition and representation. In this way, Divakaruni suggests that true equality cannot be achieved when one group is subjugated to the terms of the other for recognition.

Drawing on Chatterjee’s review of nationalist discourses on Indian women one can read Divakaruni’s descriptions of Sarala as representing a common woman. Though common women are typically characterized by immorality and crudeness, Divakaruni presents Sarala as one who has the potential to assume middle-class habits and thus help normalize middle-class culture as national culture. To put it differently, beyond educating her family, the wife also helps develop the
potential of a working-class counterpart. Of course, this says as much about Sarala's potential as it does about the wife. That is, while the sister's inclination is to reject Sarala's request for work, following her brother-in-law's established course of action, the wife's ability to differentiate Sarala from other desperate petitioners and to develop an independent decision based on her own observations suggest that the wife does not submit blindly to patriarchal directives. In this way, Sarala's presence complicates the laudatory introduction to the wife's educated obedience and domesticity.

However, Divakaruni indicates that hiring and educating Sarala, while at odds with the husband's initial opinions, would not proceed without his conditional approval. For example, when the husband learns about Sarala's hiring, he objects vehemently but relents after Sarala makes her appearance before him. Unlike the sister's and wife's initial impression of Sarala's quiet regal strength, the narrator, assessing Sarala's sexual potential from the husband's perspective, makes note of her slim straight taut and sinuous physique, adding specific mention of Sarala's "curve of breast and hip" (AM 121). For the husband, Sarala is welcome for her sexual appeal. Once established in the household as the wife's faithful maid, the wife begins to teach Sarala how to read and write despite expected objections from the husband. When the husband learns of these lessons, he protests on the basis that literacy empowers the working-class and could shift the reigning power structure.
The wife defends herself and Sarala by claiming the importance of helping exploited women and making the most of Sarala's individual intelligence. She punctuates this line of argument by evoking her husband's grandfather's endorsement of similar social work. At this point, the husband finally relents. Indeed, in both cases, the husband agrees to the wife's decision to disobey his implicit authority, suggesting that the husband must actually sanction the wife's resistance of him. This ironic struggle over Sarala's hiring and education indicate that while on one hand the husband's concessions denote his wife's agency, on the other, they also suggest that on a certain level, she requires her husband's final approval.

Divakaruni complicates the wife's agency further through her hospitalization, emphasizing the point that her presence is important to maintaining domestic order. On one hand, the narrator recognizes that though the wife is credited with the smooth operation of the domestic workforce, it functions efficiently in her absence. On a more intimate level, more importantly, are the details of household that run amok when the wife is not present within the home. To refresh our memory, when the wife is close to giving birth to her second child, she experiences unusual discomfort and her doctor recommends hospitalization. During the wife's hospitalization, the sister witnesses the husband's sexual harassment of Sarala at the doorway of the maid's room. Rather than intervening or confronting either the husband or
Sarala, the sister remains silent, begging off responsibility by claiming ignorance in such matters, a need to protect her sister from dishonor, and knowledge that such indiscretions are normal for most families. The important point here is that with the wife gone, the husband seizes upon an opportunity for an extramarital affair within their home, and the sister is unable to prevent it.

A second case of domestic disturbance surfaces during Sarala's expulsion from the home. Just prior to the wife's hospitalization, Sarala's mother appears at the gate and demands to take Sarala back to Biru, Sarala's husband. But Sarala refuses by justifying this refusal on the basis that her mother and Biru have forced her into sex work. At this point, the conversation becomes heated as the mother calls Sarala's accusation a stinking lie and promises to return the following day with reinforcements from the bustee (the slum). Despite the potential threat of the bustee's stink, a metaphorical stench of shame so vile that others will act in response to it, the wife exerts her authority and defends Sarala against exploitation. That is, she responds by forcefully dismissing the mother and by having the darwan (gatekeeper) escort her out of the property. These results change drastically when Sarala's mother returns with bustee in the wife's absence. The morning after Sarala rejects the husband's overtures, the mother returns with reinforcements from the bustee, and this time, the wife and darwan are not on premises to protect Sarala. Timid at first, the sister takes
command of the situation with the cook and gardener beside her as they face off with the bustee.

While the sister in the wife’s stead manages to fend off the crowd with the help of the gardener, cook, and the police who arrive just when the bustee breaks open the gates, she cannot secure Sarala's safety from the husband. When the husband comes home after the bustee's protest, he decides to ask Sarala to leave based on the shame and potential danger to the family, the stink that the mother promised to bring to the household. The sister protests, but the husband overrules her and commands Sarala's expulsion from the estate. At this point, the wife's absence makes a significant difference as her previous victories in debates with her husband suggest that she would have outmaneuvered him and secured Sarala's safety once again. Here then, the sister's failure helps to shine light on the fact that Sarala's safety and edification have been dependent on the benevolence of one empowered upper-class woman.

Read alongside the sister's defeat, the crowd that gathers around Sarala's ousting demonstrates that the empowerment of upper-class women cannot, by itself, sustain the uplift of the masses at large. More specifically, during the bustee's protest, the contest over Sarala's future brings the stinking masses. Dirty bodies are minor characters who have minimal narrative presence and bear a metonymic association with filth
that represents profound social marginalization. As the bustee forces its way through the gates of the family's compound, a symbolic entry into the narrative, these dirty bodies claim recognition, not as Sarala who accedes to middle-class gentility, but as Kolkata's lowest common denominator who have no discernable potential for acculturating to a bourgeois lifestyle. Unable to individualize all their faces, the sister only sees flashes of rotting teeth, flared nostrils, hateful frowns, and wolfish grins. As a dirty, baleful, and animalistic mob, the bustee represents the counterpoint to the wife's family, and this unhealthy and unhygienic mob has come to the steps of the bhadralok (people of good family, esteemed in class and caste) to reclaim one of its own.

While their presence helps to draw attention to the poverty that percolates under the calm surface of upper-class life, their purpose for rising to action is questionable. That is, they have assembled to return Sarala to a mother and husband who will exploit her. At the same time, we can also interpret their presence as decrying the opportunities that one of their own has secured individually while they have been left out of a process of uplift to which the wife invites Sarala.

Surrounding this mob an audience of local workers gathers to watch but not intervene in the protest. While the inaction of the onlookers - "street vendors and sweepers, passersby on their way to work, servants from some neighboring houses" (AM 150) convey that
they take neither side in this power struggle, by doing so, they help to seal Sarala's expulsion from a safe household and her return to forced sex work. In short, the assembly of bustee and working-class onlookers affirm collectively Sarala's mother's and husband's right to make decisions on behalf of a daughter and wife, even if that means submitting Sarala to forced prostitution. By subjecting her to the will of the bustee, Divakaruni represents Sarala, despite her airs of regality, as the subaltern's subaltern. Accounting for this doubly subjugated figure, Divakaruni takes the emphasis off Sarala's own individual development and turns our focus to the crowd, indicating that gender reforms are needed not only to advance elite's women's educational opportunities but also to shift the way women and men from the working-class reify gender hierarchy.

The husband's indiscretions offer only further evidence that changes in gender hierarchy are needed from the bhadralok as well as the bustee. That is, he plays a likely role in the mother's second and successful attempt to extract Sarala from his household. Though Divakaruni never explicitly implicates the husband in enabling the mother's return when he, the darwan, and wife are not on premises, the mob's manifestation at an all too convenient time, the morning after Sarala has refused his overtures, suggests that he is responsible for inviting them back to estate. To review, we witness Sarala repel the husband's advances by scratching and pushing him the evening before
her ousting, and at the end of this struggle, the husband shoves her back, cursing, "Bitch! You'll be sorry" (AM 146). The next day, the bustee arrives, weeks after the mother promised to return with reinforcements. Though Sarala's return to prostitution is likely, the husband claims he has no other choice but to release Sarala from his wife's employment to maintain the family's safety and good name. Here then, the sister has little chance in opposing the collective will of a working-class mob and an upper-class British loyalist. The point here is to consider how the bustee and the bhadralok guarantee Sarala's abuse. Their mutual complicity shows us how perceptions of gender inequality must be challenged across class and caste differences, rather than focusing the energies of gender reform solely on fostering elite women's political and economic agency.

As noted earlier, nationalists argued that the edification of upper-class women would trickle down through society because as mothers, they would impart their knowledge and habits to the family who would then spread their enlightenment throughout society. While nationalist and postcolonial reforms have benefited middle-class and upper-class women by reforming certain laws (e.g., widow remarriage, child marriage, rights to property ownership, political representation, and educational opportunities), those reforms have not benefited the majority of women. In “The Maid Servant’s Story” the wife's class and caste status enable her to take advantage of those reforms as she
overrules and asserts authority over her husband, the husband's ornery aunt, and Sarala's mother. However, Divakaruni conveys that the trickle down effect has not functioned to disrupt prevailing, oppressive gender hierarchies.

Assessing nineteenth century literary representations of public health discourses and practices in India, William Kupinse argues that though sanitation efforts have functioned as an arm of colonization in India, the Philippines, and regions of Africa, the keenness of India's novelistic responses to public health commentary differentiates its hygienic discourse from the others. Such commentary extends through the late-twentieth century with literature of the diaspora as in the case of *Arranged Marriage*. Though “The Maid Servant's Story” does not take place entirely in India and though it is not a novel, references to an epidemic with long lineage and modern health care services clearly put astride earlier responses to colonial institutions of health. More precisely, in “The Maid Servant’s Story” references to the cholera epidemic of 1964, ineffective health clinics, and an unhygienic hospital help volley a critique against upper-class nationalist reforms.

Early on in the story, we learn that the wife's husband and newborn succumbed to a cholera epidemic after the maid servant was ousted from the household. Although cholera existed before the nineteenth century, virulent outbreaks starting in 1817 commanded
heightened public attention and action from both British and Indian officials. More importantly, according to David Arnold, the 1817 outbreak dovetailed with the expansion of British rule in South Asia, linking onslaughts of cholera and colonialism. This was not a coincidental association as British military personnel inhabited unsanitary living conditions that facilitated the spread of cholera among their ranks. Moreover, trekking throughout India, they carried and spread cholera along with them. While certain Indians recognized this connection between the spread of colonialism and cholera, Arnold argues that they were more likely to assess the spread of cholera as a part of religious beliefs.

Meanwhile, Europeans were more amenable to faulting their Indian counterparts for the epidemic, and in an iteration of this blame game, Hindu bathing rituals and pilgrimage were targeted as a vector of the disease. This discourse, as Arnold contends, helped justify colonialist claims of Indian inferiority, even though the British military were as culpable and thus as inferior as Hindu pilgrims for carrying and spreading cholera. In light of this history, we can read Divakaruni’s representation of the husband’s death by cholera as helping to reactivate the link between the epidemic and British colonialism. Additionally, because cholera has been especially virulent among the rural poor, one can interpret Divakaruni’s emphasis on an upper-class
family's submission to the epidemic as having less to do with historical facts and more to do with its literary significance.

To understand this significance, we can turn to Arnold who observes that contracting cholera is a filthy pathway to death. In his words, the symptoms of cholera "spoke only of the vile pollution of diarrhea and vomit". (Arnold161) We can understand the husband's contraction of cholera as highlighting his own moral stink and the faultiness of British claims to superiority. That is, the husband's pathway to death, characterized by symptoms of diarrhea and vomit, help manifest his moral depravity, a different stink from the one associated with the socially marginal figures of the bustee. Here, the husband is not physically dirty or unkempt, but by attacking Sarala during an unreciprocated clandestine tryst and championing class inequity, he exhibits low ethical standards.

Having the husband, a British loyalist, die from cholera allows Divakaruni to not only emphasize his depravity and but also gesture to the faultiness of British claims to superiority. More specifically, anticipating the approach of cholera in Europe during the 1820s, European officials believed that cholera would be kept at bay by their superior modern defenses, but they were proven wrong as cholera crossed into Europe as it had in other parts of the world. Similarly, by the 1960s western trained scientists believed that cholera had been
eliminated by improved modern sanitation systems, but a new strain resisted those improvements and re-emerged worldwide in the 1960s and 1970s. During this epidemic, cholera touched down officially in Kolkata in 1964, and as a literary device, Divakaruni’s draws on this particular history to imagine a cause for the husband's death.

In light of this history, we can read the husband's death by cholera as emphasizing the limitations of modern health reforms. References to the husband's grandfather's charitable works in health care and education punctuate this critique, particularly as it relates to the efficacy of modern reforms for the working-class. Introducing the husband to the narrative, Divakaruni does so by making note of his grandfather's sponsorship of free medical clinics and slum schools. By the bustee's and Sarala's presence, however, Divakaruni suggests that the grandfather's charity has not been effective. For example, the narrator's description of the bustee's rotted teeth and their body odor testify to their lack of interest in modern health and hygiene standards.

Sarala’s illiteracy also intimates that the grandfather's efforts have not been extended and/or taken up by those who appear willing to learn. While the shortcomings of these reforms might stem from the limited reach of the reforms themselves or from families who are resistant to change, the point remains that for Divakaruni, educational and public health initiatives have had limited reach among the working-
class. For Sarala, her mother's exploitation makes it clear that even if Sarala had the opportunity to attend school, her mother would have denied her, conveying that without ideological changes among the working-class, the abject subjugation of poor women will persist.

Divakaruni's ironic naming of Sarala sharpens this point. As noted above, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani was an early nationalist feminist who advocated the education of upper-class women. Chaudhurani claimed that the education of elite women would serve the nation because mothers, according to Chaudhurani, represented the backbone of the family, and by enlightening the family, the nation would uplift its citizens. By naming an illiterate and exploited maid after this nationalist figure, Divakaruni indicates that Chaudhurani's claims have not functioned to uplift working-class women along with their elite counterparts. This also registers an implicit critique of formal education, questioning the weight put on educational institutions for uplifting the masses.

In line with this commentary on Kolkata's public health conditions, the threadbare and unpleasant conditions of the wife's hospital accommodations suggest further that modern health services were lacking in the early 1960s despite efforts to institutionalize them. One of the last scenes of Deepa's bad-luck tale set a year after Sarala's ejection from the household clarifies this point. During this scene, the wife, husband, their two children, and the sister are being chauffeured
to a party and, in order to avoid traffic, detour into a red light district. The wife claims one of the sex workers is Sarala, and disregarding her husband's angry warnings against it, the wife reaches out to the woman and calls Sarala's name. Responding to the wife, the sex worker spits a blood red wad of betel leaf onto the wife's palm. This rejection, whether the woman is or is not Sarala, is so traumatic for the wife that it leaves a lasting impression on her, hardening her into a distant version of her former self. Read in light of this scene, the stench of urine and the lasting stain of splattered betel leaf juice convey the wife's own ethical shortcomings. More precisely, when the wife returns to the estate after giving birth, celebrations preoccupy her, and though she mourns Sarala's disappearance, she does so briefly. That is, upon her return to the estate, the wife simplifies Sarala's dreadful situation, commenting Poor Sarala adding only, "Poor, poor girl" (AM 157).

While the wife is understandably focused on her newborn and not on a former employee, the empathy for such solipsistic maternity legitimates her social irresponsibility. Meanwhile, from the very beginning, Sarala is not just any other maid. She outshines the service and loyalty among all of the workers, even calling the wife the familiar Didi (older sister). Taking matters one-step further, Sarala risks her safety by leaving the estate to procure a blessing for the wife when the wife is initially uncomfortable as a result of her pregnancy. Indeed, leaving the estate exposes Sarala to those who recognize her and force
her back into sex work. While Sarala risks her own well-being in this way, the wife does not return the favor by searching for Sarala or even by objecting more vociferously to her husband's final expulsion of the maid. This expulsion, resulting in all likelihood with Sarala's return to forced prostitution, indicates that the wife's Poor, poor girl response to the situation is not only an underwhelming and inappropriate remark given the circumstance, but also is an indictment against the wife's ideal Indian womanhood. Simply put, Sarala's unparalleled devotion to the wife and the wife's lack of reciprocation suggest that a nationalist paradigm of maternity has operated to reinforce the subjugation of working-class women.

In “The Maid Servant’s Story” the wife's interests are split between obligations to a newborn and a devoted maid who is forced to return to sex work. The wife's decision to privilege family over her maid's security situates her firmly as an ideal Indian woman and devoted mother. Contrastingly, “A Perfect Life” describes how such maternal and civic obligations might be stitched back together by introducing the readers to Meera, a twenty-eight year old recent but acculturated immigrant from Kolkata, who functions as the story's narrator and protagonist. Meera lives an enviable existence by U.S. American standards, and for her, those standards consist of supporting herself with a fulfilling and lucrative job as a bank's resident software expert. This affords her a chic apartment, designer clothes, and a
content personal life with friends and a committed yet free relationship with a white boyfriend named Richard. Responsible primarily for her own happiness, then, Meera is out of her element when she stumbles across Krishna, a homeless and obviously abused child who requires her attention and care. Despite wishing the boy to disappear, she sympathizes with him and subsequently invites him into her home. There is a steep learning curve, but Meera surmounts it by assimilating this once wild animal into her life, even jeopardizing her relationship with Richard over caring for Krishna. Taking matters one step further, she tries to adopt Krishna, but he runs away after Meera. In order to process the adoption, she has turned him temporarily over to foster care. Though his rejection aggrieves Meera, she returns to Richard with promises to marry him under the condition that they not have children, a likely outcome of his past objections to Krishna’s intrusion in their “A Perfect Life”.

In this version of maternity and subalternity, a narrative parallel to the one found in “The Maid Servant’s Story” the author offers us an elite protagonist who extends her maternal care to a vulnerable subaltern. Unlike “The Maid Servant’s Story”, “A Perfect Life” suggests that maternity can be deployed for ethical purposes. Further, maternity is not a straightforward choice for Meera because in certain ways it disrupts and reinforces her claim to being an American. We can read those claims in light of late-twentieth century debates on Indian American
nationalism and early-twentieth century health discourses on Chinese immigrant maternity. This history presents a context to read Meera's initial rejection and eventual acceptance of maternal instincts. As Divakaruni describes how mothering skills, such as the instruction of proper hygiene habits, might be deployed on behalf of helping a subaltern, the author indicates that Meera's attempt to incorporate Krishna into her upper-class life is not an adequate means to addressing his needs. In other words, Meera's actions illuminate how maternity has been used as a vector for acculturating subjects to a dominant culture, casting doubt on the ethics of assimilating the formerly oppressed to upper-class life. Thus, Krishna's presence and subsequent disappearance articulates the failure of formal incorporative processes to offer the kind of ideological shifts needed to disrupt reigning hegemonies of domination and subjugation that perpetuate subalternity.

Unlike the ideal Indian woman projected as the wife of “The Maid Servant’s Story” Meera rejects the thought of subjecting her interests to motherhood and, by extension Indian tradition. That is, at the beginning of her story, Meera objects to the indignities and parochialisms of childcare to which her inferior cast of Indian counterparts have been assigned. Meera's contempt for maternity and India serves to address the Indian American community's practice of yoking women with the responsibility of preserving Indian tradition. Furthermore, Divakaruni's
comparison of Meera and her undifferentiated cast of Indian counterparts functions as a commentary on the way discourses of health, gender, and nation have intersected to represent India as primitive and inferior in comparison to the West. Finally, Divakaruni's figuration of maternity sets up Meera's transformation from an affluent and independent American to a socially responsible citizen.

Divakaruni begins “A Perfect Life” by introducing us to Meera whom the author characterizes in contrast to Meera’s Indian friends. That is, Divakaruni identifies Meera and these Indian counterparts in terms of their Americanness or Indianness, cultural reference points that are elaborated by their material living conditions, employment, personal appearance, and various relationships. Growing up in Kolkata as a teenager, Meera fantasized about life in the U.S., and by her late twenties, during which the narrative takes place, she achieves the dream of settling in the U.S. and feeling "like a true American" (AM 73).

More specifically, Divakaruni marks Meera’s Americanness with material and personal achievements: she lives in a desirable East Bay apartment, works a satisfying job at a bank, wears European and American designer clothes, and balances her professional life with good friends and a tall and lean and sophisticated boyfriend who respects Meera’s need for intimacy and independence. Additional multi-cultural reference points underscore her cosmopolitan American lifestyle. That
is, rather than circumscribes her cultural interests to India and the U.S., Divakaruni notes that Meera listens to Ravi Shankar as easily as she listens to Chopin and Dvorak and does so while relaxing in a blue silk kimono and posh European and American designer labels. Dabbling in such globally recognizable and commercialized Indian, Polish-French, Czech, Japanese, and various brands of European and U.S. American culture, Meera differentiates herself from her parochial sari-clad Indian counterparts whose main interests focus narrowly around their families and motherhood.

Describing those inferior counterparts, Divakaruni has Meera make contemptuous note of their unkempt hair, stained saris, and bodies that sag ungracefully under the heft of post-baby weight. Meera's sums up their appearance: "They looked just like my cousins back home who were already on their second and third and sometimes fourth babies. They might as well have not come to America" (AM 75-76). In Meera's eyes, then, motherhood and Indianness are linked inferior states of being from which she differentiates herself. Indeed, her Indian friends are the opposite of the impeccably polished and unattached Meera. As an extension of these Indian appearances, the houses of Meera's friends are in disarray, resulting primarily from the responsibilities of raising children. Specifically, “the households of friends who had babies seemed to me a constant flurry of crying and feeding and burping and throwing up" (AM 74), and emphasizing this
point, Meera adds that "over everything hung the oppressive stench (there was no other word for it) of baby wipes and Lysol spray and soiled diapers" (AM 74-5). Here, babies are the matrix for disorganization and filth, a filth so oppressive that it overwhelms and eludes the mitigating efforts of disinfectant sprays.

The unkempt condition of these Indian homes resonates with Meera’s opening description of India as a moist, sticky space. Meera recalls that as a teenager she spent her humid nights in a cinema house where a rickety ceiling fan that revolved tiredly offered little relief against the uncomfortable humidity but where films imported from the U.S. offered a different form of reprieve. Thus, while moist, sticky air is not quite on par with vomit and excrement, they all cause Meera’s discomfort and are aligned with an India that Meera—to her mind—has escaped, geographically and culturally with American exports and becoming American. Her vision of India—a land of tropical climates, primitive mechanisms, and dirty babies—echoes against certain historical representations of India as a filthy, diseased, and chaotic place, a charge made by Europeans and Indians alike.

Divakaruni builds on this long history of associating impurity with India by introducing mother-love into the equation. Meera describes this love as messy and instinctual: "Real and primitive and dangerous, lurking somewhere in the female genes—especially our Indian ones -
waiting to attack. I was determined to watch out for it”. (AM 75) Here the emphasis is in examining the significance of linking primitiveness, motherhood, and India in the contemporary moment.

These equations evoke historical discourses on Indian immigrant maternity in the late-twentieth century. Observers of late-twentieth century U.S. Indian immigrants have argued that the community's preservation of Indian culture has been indexed against the extent to which women have become submissive wives and self-sacrificing mothers. Specifically, the self-proclaimed representatives of this community, whom Anannya Bhattacharjee identifies as the immigrant Indian bourgeoisie, have upheld patriarchal Hindu gender roles in the name of protecting the community's connection to Indian culture. Though she recognizes that these self-appointed spokespeople are not homogenous, Bhattacharjee finds it characteristic for representatives of this cohort (e.g., the National Federation of Indian Associations) to speak on behalf of the Indian community by espousing the value of U.S.-based technology and economics, while pledging a commitment to preserving the autonomy of Indian culture through, for example, discourses that standardize traditional Hindu gender roles.

Read alongside studies such as Chawla's reading of gender expectations in late-twentieth century India, Bhattacharjee's work conveys that traditional Hindu values have been stretched across to the
U.S., functioning to affirm masculinist gender roles and to consolidate an Indian Hindu immigrant bourgeoisie as the gold standard of the Indian immigrant community. Bhattacharjee concludes, "Any challenge to the family or the Indian community translates into a betrayal of national cultural values for the national bourgeoisie. For the woman (who is the mother, the wife, the bride, the daughter-in-law, or the daughter-to-be-married) to disown her roles is to betray not just the family, but also the nation" (10). Thus, the preservation of traditional Hindu family life through the control of women is bound up with the preservation of Indianness in the U.S.

In light of this context, Divakaruni deepens the meaning of Meera's derision of India's oppressive traditions and primitiveness by suggesting that her contempt stands for a rejection of the Indian community's mores and her claim to the civilities of individualism, solvency, and materialism. Meera reflects on this issue when she states, "for the first time in my life I felt free. It was an exhilarating sensation, once I got used to it. It made me giddy and weightless, like I could float away at any moment" (AM 74). Simply put, for Meera, individualism (i.e., not being an "Indian woman") is a treasured and definitive aspect of her American life.

However, Krishna's introduction into Meera's life brings the very disorder and responsibility that she abhors into her home, suggesting
that at least initially his presence threatens to re-introduce Meera to being a proper Indian woman. One can contend that Meera re-routes the representational significance of motherhood espoused in the Indian immigrant community to affirm her ethical responsibility as an American. When Meera first sees Krishna, he has backed into a small dark corner under the apartment's vestibule stairwell, reminding Meera of a wild animal, an animal humanized only marginally by a filthy shirt. Despite certain reservations, Meera decides to extract Krishna from the corner and in doing so; Krishna scratches her and ruins her designer running suit.

Meera's spoiled clothes foreshadow not only the havoc that Krishna wreaks during that day but also in her future plans. That is, Meera's professional and personal schedules are no less than meticulously kept, and the morning after finding Krishna, she has to forego her morning routine of working out. This sets the pace of her day as Meera's usually punctual and fastidious performance at work falls into disarray:

I'd been late to work (a first). I'd run into the meeting room, out of breath, my unwashed hair falling into my eyes, my spreadsheets all out of order. My presentation had been second-rate at best (another first), and when Dan Luftner, Head of Loans, who'd been waiting for years to catch me out, asked me for an update on the monthly statements
software the bank had purchased a while back, I'd been unable to give him an adequate answer. [AM 78-79]. This summary of Meera's lateness, unwashed hair, and disorganized spreadsheets emphasizes in multiple registers that Krishna has disrupted the usual order of Meera's life. In fact, for Meera, the events of the day, punctuated by her chief rival's triumph over Meera's unpreparedness, represent a low point in her professional life.

After this atypical day at work, Meera arrives home to an unwelcoming surprise. While left alone in her apartment during the day, Krishna produces a foul mess as odors of excrement permeate her usually pristine apartment. Cited at the top of this chapter, this scene envelops Meera in an oppressive stench even worse than her friends' homes. Thus, the squalid condition of Meera's apartment indicates that Krishna's incorporation into Meera's world is disruptive enough to break the cool, clean shell of her formerly perfect life. Though Meera is tempted to scold Krishna for such savagery she succumbs to his obvious vulnerability and decides to take care of him.

At first glance, then, Meera's decision to incorporate Krishna and the dirty mess that accompanies him into her home suggests that she accedes to what Meera perceives to be an Indian part of her. That is, mothering Krishna - a disorderly and dirty child - likens her to those Indian friends whose houses are unkempt and in disarray as a result of
having children. Because Meera associates maternity, disorganization, and dirtiness with India, Krishna would seem to represent Meera's idea of being properly Indian. Even more, when Meera realizes she must turn Krishna over to social services before she can adopt him legally. She wonders if she should have bypassed the process altogether and taken Krishna to India. As a space where unregulated adoption might have been overlooked, India, as Meera imagines it, is likened to a certain disorderliness that echoes the chaos that children reek in her friends' lives. It is also worth mentioning that Krishna, the name Meera gives to him, is a Hindu deity whose adoption as an infant put him out of harm's way and saved his life. In these various ways, Divakaruni underscores the point that Meera associates Krishna with her idea of India, despite the fact that Meera's friend Sharmila points out that he does not look Indian. Succinctly put, for Meera, being a mother to Krishna should make her more Indian.

This is not just a one-way affair as we have seen through Meera's first contact with Krishna: when he scratches her, he also soils her designer clothes. Reiterating this point, Meera spends the day at work with unwashed hair and soapy water soaks through her white Givenchy blouse during Krishna's first bath, suggesting that even while Meera teaches Krishna to be more like her, her meticulous appearance becomes dirty through their contact. Admittedly, a blouse soaked in warm soapy water is hardly filthy, but its whiteness and high-end nature
stand for the garment's refined delicacy, a delicacy that is, in fact, easily susceptible to water damage. For Meera, then, a water-logged Givenchy blouse is much like Krishna's filthy shirt, and linking them in this way indicates that as much as Meera cleans Krishna, Krishna makes Meera dirty and thus more properly Indian.

While Krishna appears to re-introduce Meera to a maternal and Indian side of her as defined by certain spokespersons of Indian American culture, Meera adapts to the situation by developing a new routine that prioritizes assimilating Krishna to her lifestyle. This conveys that it is not Krishna who makes Meera properly Indian but Meera who makes Krishna and herself more properly American. Indeed, rather than scold Krishna after defiling her apartment by his improper use of the toilet, Divakaruni ends the scene by having Meera give Krishna a bath. Reluctant to get into the bath at first as a result of past abuse, Krishna eventually relents to Meera's urgings. Assessing the outcome, Meera observes, "he looked a lot better after his bath, with his hair all shiny and his face clean, and weren't the circles under his eyes a little lighter?" (AM 82). This trend of cleaning, polishing, and lightening Krishna continues as he not only begins to smell of Meera's jasmine soap but also learns to tidy after himself and use the bathroom properly over time.
In fact, Krishna's progress gives Meera such satisfaction that professional achievements and her relationship with Richard begin to take secondary importance to mothering Krishna. Though her domestic priorities have changed, her habit for order has not. Moreover, smelling like jasmine soap, making his own bed, and using the bathroom properly suggest that Krishna has endeared himself to Meera because he has assimilated to her lifestyle. Thus, Meera's brand of motherhood does not consist of an unruly household and a persistent stench of vomit and excrement; it consists of normalizing a subaltern to a structured routine and habits that characterize a civilized modern lifestyle. More precisely, Meera's efforts to teach Krishna proper hygiene habits and assimilate him to her upper-class lifestyle stand for a different way of asserting her socially responsible Americanness, rather than a primitive Indian selfhood of parochial mother-love.

Historically speaking, scholars such as Nayan Shah and Bonnie McElhinny have observed how discourses of maternity, nationality, and public health intersected in the context of early-twentieth century U.S. domestic and colonial settings, respectively. As they show, domestic and colonial health reformers argued that the development of physically and morally healthy subjects hinged on teaching mothers how to prevent disease and facilitate healthy child development. In this way, mothers became a key vector through which U.S. middle-class heterosexual domesticity was institutionalized as part of dominant
culture. With respect to early twentieth century San Francisco—the most pertinent geographic context with respect to “A Perfect Life”—Shah focuses on the efforts that extended child-care instruction to Chinese immigrant households, instruction that lagged behind programs for white citizens despite the fact that birthrates had been rising among Chinese immigrants.

Advocating on behalf of this group, Chinese American social workers called for improved social services as they cited the growing presence of Chinese immigrant housewives and growing birthrates. For those social workers and others, then, the presence of wives and children symbolized the presence of heteronormative family life among Chinese immigrants, a direct challenge to reigning nineteenth century perceptions of Chinese immigrant bachelorhood and female prostitution. In other words, transforming notions of San Francisco’s Chinatown as a symbol of disease, dirtiness, and deviance into a site inhabited by candidates for citizenship pivoted on the bodies of women. These calls for the instruction of health and hygiene, especially with respect to mothers and children, operated to nominate Chinese immigrants for improved social services and housing. In fact, in certain respect, the work of Shah’s book Contagious Divides reads as a narrative of the way discourses of health, hygiene, and domestic life were deployed in demonizing an immigrant group and then revised to transform certain
members of that marginal group into representatives of model middle-class citizenry.

Notably, Chinese and Indian immigrants were compared in early-twentieth century public health discourses. They were characterized as dirty and diseased in parallel and overlapping ways, and public health discourses drew on these dubious alignments to regulate their entry into the U.S. Though Indian and Chinese were likened to each other as unsavoury necessary elements of California's economy, discourses on the rehabilitation of Indian immigrants did not follow the course that debates on Chinese immigrants in San Francisco were taking. For example, Chinese immigrants took advantage of various loopholes and exceptions to exclusion laws and secured the passage of official and unofficial wives and daughters to the U.S. This led to a veritable baby boom among Chinese immigrants in the 1920s and allowed reformers to claim that Chinese immigrants had adopted middle-class domesticity and thus deserved greater access to certain social services.

Unlike Chinese immigrant women in the Bay Area, Indian women were simply not represented in significant enough numbers in the early-twentieth century to have been held accountable as wives and mothers for normalizing American middle-class domestic life for the Indian community at large. Early immigrants from India to the U.S. were mostly Punjabi men and those who did marry, married Mexican women. Thus,
early-twentieth century discourses that emphasized the duties of Chinese immigrant maternity in assimilating Chinese America did not pressure Indian immigrant women in the same way because in practical terms, a critical mass of Indian immigrant women did not exist to the same degree as their Chinese counterparts.

While dominant public health scrutiny of Indian immigrant women has not been as intensive as in the Chinese American case, Meera's oversight of Krishna and instruction on matters of hygiene nonetheless evoke the way Chinese immigrant women were held accountable for the development of a citizenry prepared to participate in modern society. Read in this light, Divakaruni's emphasis on Meera's instruction of Krishna's hygiene habits suggests that Meera continues to express her Americanness by being a hygiene-conscious guardian. Aligned with the earlier discussion of Indian immigrant maternity, this reading approaches Meera's instruction of Krishna as evoking discourses on motherhood that have been deployed to shore up parallel claims to preserving Indian immigrant tradition and the modernity of U.S. culture. Krishna is representationally significant because his presence invites us to consider how discourses on motherhood, childhood, health, and citizenship deployed in the early-twentieth century with respect to Chinese American history were reformulated to represent Indian immigrants' preservation of Hindu tradition and acculturation to U.S. culture in the late-twentieth century. In short, we can interpret
Divakaruni’s figuration of Meera and Krishna as a description of how motherhood has been deployed to cast two different nationalisms.

Most pertinent in this context is our reading of maternity as an ethical expression. For Meera, relinquishing her beloved independence to take care of someone other than herself is an achievement against her fierce American individualism. Moreover, the fact that Meera extends her guardianship to someone who is not a biological child, family member, or even ethnic counterpart demonstrates that she has developed a conscience that is not yoked to usual forms of forming social bonds. In this way, Divakaruni suggests that the skills of maternity can be deployed for the benefit of others. However, Meera’s benevolence is extended only on her terms, as Krishna must assimilate to her modern lifestyle. To my mind, this smacks of benevolent assimilation a form of colonial altruism that justified the U.S.’s modernization of putatively inferior and primitive others. As critics have pointed out, such generosity functioned to implement modern beliefs and practices into inferior zones, normalizing the dominance of one ideology over indigenous ones. In the case of “A Perfect Life” Meera's benevolence not only reinforces her claims to being an American, but more importantly, it also functions to perpetuate another generation of modern subjects in the form of Krishna. Krishna, however, rejects that very prospect.
By the end of the story, Meera turns Krishna over to foster-care to initiate the steps toward official adoption. However, he runs away while under the temporary supervision of a foster mother, and though Divakaruni refrains from articulating his own motives for choosing the unknown over a compassionate foster mother, his departure amounts to a rejection of Meera's formal attempts to adopt and incorporate him into her life. That is, Krishna learns to clean and tidy after himself, following Meera's instructions, but his disappearance truncates Meera's effort to transform him into an officially recognized civilized subject. This exemplifies Gayatri Spivak's much-debated claim that the subaltern cannot speak. As we understand her argument, subalterns cannot speak, not because they are literally speechless or vessels devoid of thought, but because their beliefs and practices are always mediated through official discourses, articulated by historians, cultural anthropologists, literary authors, and others, thus adulterating the representation of their voice.

While it is debatable whether this holds true in every instance of representing subalterns, it suffices to point out that Spivak's argument and Divakaruni's figuration of Krishna dovetail. In large part, Krishna is a mute character, communicating with Meera by way of gestures and facial expressions that convey fear and pleasure. For example, he expresses a non-verbal fascination with a story about a lost mouse who has been separated from his family, and Krishna even cries out
‘Mama’ five times through a stream of tears when separated from Meera during his initial transfer to foster-care. Quite literally, then, Krishna speaks for himself and manifests a clear point of view on certain matters, albeit in a limited way.

Divakaruni’s representation of Krishna and his ultimate rejection of foster-home-care suggest that the world of privileged immigrant Indian women cannot adequately represent subalterns. This holds true on three registers. For one, even though Krishna has significant presence in the narrative, his severely limited speech, unknown origins, and mysterious disappearance intimate recognition on Divakaruni’s part that she cannot fully represent him. Here, the underdevelopment of Krishna’s narrative animates the way a subaltern cannot speak in a text written by a privileged Indian American writer.

Secondly, by running away from foster care, Krishna rejects Meera, indicating that the acculturation of subalterns into an upper-class woman’s home is problematic. This also is exemplified in “The Maid Servant’s Story” where assimilating subalterns into upper-class norms does not address the fundamental beliefs and practices that normalize inequity and social marginalization into dominant culture. In a third way, Divakaruni reiterates this point with Krishna’s rejection of the state’s official recognition of him; his disappearance during foster care articulates Divakaruni’s recognition that the state has not and will not
adequately represent or meet his needs. The issue here is not to lament Krishna's failed socialization as Meera's protegee but to address his rejection of formal adoption as an invitation to recognize the limitations of those who speak on his behalf.

Following Antonio Gramsci's discussion of subaltern history, we can maintain that Krishna would no longer represent a subaltern if Divakaruni had represented the past, present, and future details of his story. According to Gramsci, historical representations of subalterns help signal the varying degrees to which they have been incorporated into a representative national body. That is, the history of the State and the ruling classes are one in the same because, as Gramsci argues, the ruling elite commands its history as national history. Clarity and coherence are characteristic attributes of such national narratives, whereas fragmentation is typical of subaltern history and symbolic of subalterns' lack of organization and unity or their marginality and yet-to-be-subject status in the State.

It follows, then, that when subalterns are represented as a unified and cohesive front, they have already begun their development as a State power. Thus, coherent narratives of subalterns are already histories of an emergent ruling elite. Building on these premises, we can read Krishna's narrative deficiencies as helping to convey his subaltern subjectivity, and one can approach his rejection of narrative and official
state recognition (i.e., foster home care and adoption) as a critique of those assimilation and acculturation processes that incorporate subalterns into middle-class immigrant life. Specifically, though Krishna submits himself to Meera's routines, he refuses to take part in a more formal process that may or may not meet his needs. This presents a rejection of a system that only superficially attends to the needs of the vulnerable. This resistance also operates on a narrative level, as Krishna's limited presence in the story suggests that conventional efforts to represent subalternity cannot adequately represent him.

Drawing on Spivak's study of a subaltern who speaks in J.M. Coetzee's novel Disgrace, one is compelled to consider whether this kind of incorporative efforts is itself a way that Krishna speaks. In Spivak's words, "[i]t is precisely this limited perfect validity of the liberal white ex-colonizer's understanding that Disgrace questions through the invitation to focalize the enigma of Lucy [Coetzee's subaltern]" (Spivak 24). Following this point, we can recognize that our efforts to, in Spivak's words, counter focalize characters like Krishna and Sarala help expose the limited perfect validity of elite Bengali and Indian American women's understanding. We can return to the remarkable of scenes of "The Maid Servant's Story" in which the wife lies in her own urine and betel juice stains her hand to consider this point further. That is foregrounding analysis with Sarala allows us to read the wife's defilement as displaying the wife's own disgracefulness. Pointing out
this equality in lowness however, is not enough to constitute a subaltern’s speech because recognition of the wife’s ethical lowness is not accompanied with, as in the case of Spivak’s reading of Coetzee, a recognition promising nothing or anecdotal encounter between a caste woman and subaltern, which follows Spivak’s reading of Coetzee. In other words, in Arranged Marriage, optimistic encounters between the privileged and subaltern are truncated. Only lasting impressions of rejection remain: a sex worker’s spit on the outstretched hand of a Bengali elite woman and a boy running away from the embrace of an upper-class Indian American professional. In “A Perfect Life” and “The Maid Servant’s Story” then, the point remains that subalterns have not been represented adequately by the upper-class because the elite, as Divakaruni imagines them, are invested in preserving the power dynamics of inequity while extending such privilege only to the lucky few.

There is no doubt in the context of Arranged Marriage that Indian nationalist gender reforms have empowered upper-class women and that immigration to the U.S. has allowed formally educated Indian American women to pursue professional and personal goals apart from domestic obligations. By foregrounding the collection with “The Maid Servant’s Story” and “A Perfect Life” we can suggest that those achievements are represented in light of ethical (under)development. That is, “The Maid Servant’s Story” and “A Perfect Life” articulate how
maternity has been deployed to sanction social irresponsibility and an ethical obligation to assimilate subalterns into the majority. Either way, the point remains that a fundamental structure of oppression remains intact.

WORKS CITED


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