Nine yard sarees : a family portrait

Prasanthi Ganapathy Ram

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**NANYANG
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SINGAPORE

***NINE YARD SAREES: A
FAMILY PORTRAIT***

**PRASANTHI D/O
GANAPATHY RAM
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
2021**

***NINE YARD SAREES: A FAMILY
PORTRAIT***

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School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang
Technological University in partial
fulfilment of the requirement for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Boey Kim Cheng

Authorship Attribution Statement

The creative project **contains** material that has been published, namely earlier versions of both “The Panasonic” as anthologised in *Food Republic: A Singapore Literary Banquet* (Landmark Books: 2020) as well as *Best New Singaporean Short Stories: Volume Five* (Epigram Books: 2021) and “The Cassette” that is anthologised in *A Tapestry of Colours: Stories from Asia 2* (Marshall Cavendish: 2021).

The exegesis **does not contain** any materials from papers published in peer-reviewed journals or from papers accepted at conferences in which I am listed as an author.

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SUMMARY

The creative dissertation is a short story cycle titled *Nine Yard Sarees*. It is made up of eleven closely linked short stories that focus on the extended family of the Srinivasans, a Singaporean Tamil Brahmin family of four. Spanning across India, Singapore, Australia and even America, the multigenerational portrait with nine co-protagonists considers the varied evolutions of Tamil Brahminness as inherited tradition and identity in this diasporic family, touching upon myriad issues including patriarchy, arranged marriage, interracial relationships, pregnancy, sexuality and domestic abuse.

The exegesis looks at short story cycles, first historicising the form before introducing contemporary Asian Anglophone cycles to the established canon. Through a close reading of several texts, Chapter One considers how the form is well-suited for narrative explorations of the diaspora, particularly in terms of cultural identity and the heterogeneity of experiences within any dispersed community. Chapter Two then proposes that the form, both in terms of its internal and external structures, can be seen as a metaphor for the family and is hence an ideal form for unpacking familial structures and relationships. Lastly, Chapter Three unpacks theories about the diaspora, narrows in on the Tamil Brahmin diaspora in Singapore and contemplates the dearth of representation in Tamil popular culture as well as South Asian Anglophone literature, particularly in terms

of significant female protagonists. It closes with a brief meditation on *Nine Yard Sarees* and how the intertwined ideas of family and diaspora are narrativised in the cycle.

CREATIVE PROJECT (REDACTED)

EXEGESIS

Chapter One

Historicising the Short Story Cycle and Examining Diasporas Represented in Asian Cycles

The short story cycle is an ambiguous form that is neither a novel nor a short story collection. As the word ‘cycle’ suggests, the form necessitates an established pattern that ties the stories together, without which the disparate narratives would merely function as a typical collection, a miscellany. Other terms that have been used to describe it include the self-explanatory ‘linked stories’ or the less known ‘composite novel’, which refers to the “[combination of] the complexities of a miscellany with the integrative qualities of a novel” (Dunn and Morris 1) that, regardless of “complete and autonomous” text-pieces (8), highlights a “kinship to the novel” (2).

A foundational text that has helped to popularise the term and discusses early iterations of the cycle is *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre* (1967) by poet and critic Forrest Leo Ingram. Basing his analysis on early twentieth-century short story cycles such as James Joyce’s *Dubliners* (1914), Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Franz Kafka’s *Ein Hungerkünstler* (1924), and William Faulkner’s *The Unvanquished* (1938), he defines the form as a “set of stories linked to each other” with a “balance between the individuality of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit” (5). In

addition, he pinpoints that the stories must be characterised by dynamic patterns of “recurrence and development as an integrated movement” (4) in order for the reader’s “successive experience” to “significantly [modify] his experience of each of its component parts” (10). Susan Garland Mann references and echoes Ingram’s pioneering study in *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide* (1989); where she defines the cycle as possessing a “simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence” (15), which allows for a reading experience that “transcends [the] boundaries” of single self-contained stories (19). It must be noted that this transcendence results not from merely summing up the parts. Rather, it is precisely the deliberate patterning within and between each story that facilitates an amplified reading experience overall.

In America, it was through the literary magazine tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the short story cycle gained popularity. In *The Subversive Storyteller: The Short Story Cycle and the Politics of America* (2009), Michelle Pacht states that America’s “booming” magazine market at the time had created “a venue for the short story, allowing it—and its writers—to thrive” (4). Supporting this idea, Mann observes that writers by the late nineteenth century had become “more self-confident about the validity of the genre” (6-7). While many struggled to convince publishers of that validity, such as dark Romantic novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne who had not been allowed to publish *Legends of the Province-House* as a standalone collection of linked stories and had to subsume it

within a larger collection, the 1842 edition of *Twice Told Tales* (Pacht 16), Pacht argues that it was through these pioneering efforts that the cycle has become one of America's "most representative forms" (10). However, James Nagel, author of *The Contemporary American Short Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (2001), seems to disagree with that appraisal:

...the short-story cycle is the most neglected and least well understood of the major genres in American literature. From the beginning, it has been without a place in literary history, and the individual works within the form have been greeted with misunderstanding and misinterpretation for well over a century. ("Conclusion", 246)

While Pacht recognises the impact of the form, Nagel highlights the blatant neglect, even lack of recognition of it within the larger canon of American literature. Part of this neglect, Nagel posits, can be seen in the way story cycles are often misidentified as mere collections or how their stories are removed from the "intertextual context" upon which they are wholly dependent (246). Mann similarly reflects in her preface that several earlier cycles were referred to as "episodic" or "'fragmentary' novels" which "condemned [these] books...to a probationary status" (ix); she later laments the lack of "theoretical work" on the form despite its growing popularity and familiarity among many readers (xi).

Despite the understated popularity and misunderstood nature of the short story cycle, Nagel argues that the genre remains appealing precisely because it is “patently multicultural” (4) and draws from a “shared legacy reaching back to ancient oral traditions” (5), making it a more universal form than the traditional English novel. This is indeed true if we were to consider ancient literary works outside of Anglophone literature such as the Sanskrit epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, or the Arabic *One Thousand and One Nights*, all of which frame tale narratives, a form that is distinct from but not entirely dissimilar to the short story cycle. Nagel also notes that the cycle became a “genre of choice for emerging writers from a variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds” in the eighties and nineties America (17). This is supported by the fact that numerous literary cycles have gained national and international acclaim and have incidentally been written by non-white authors. This includes Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* (1984), which won the American Book Award in 1985 along with Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* (1984). Closer to home, Jeremy Tiang’s *It Never Rains on National Day* (2015) was shortlisted for the Singapore Literature Prize in 2016. This only further bolsters Nagel’s point about the form’s universality across nations and cultures. It is therefore undeniable that the short story cycle, while ambiguous and often misunderstood, is a globally recognised literary form that has slowly found its way into Singapore literature.

While the form has evolved into a literary mainstay since the nineteenth century, it is no way fixed in its possibilities. As Mann stresses, the story cycle is a genre that is extremely flexible or adaptable (17). Writers have invoked it in multiple ways and used different organising principles to structure their respective cycles. Some like Cisneros have used a single narrator (Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street*). Some like Joyce have used a single place (Dublin in *Dubliners*). Others have used repeating themes. As a result, the form is not necessarily predictable and its adaptations can seem too expansive to be distilled into a single definition. Part of the reason for this is that some cycles were made prior to any attempts were made to formalise the short story cycle, hence amounting to varied experimentation. Even in the case of Cisneros, who wrote *The House on Mango Street* after the publication of Ingram's book, the forty-four vignettes were not consciously conceived to fit into Ingram's distillation of the form. Yet, she intuitively envisioned the forty-four vignettes to be "*cuentitos*" (*cuento* meaning short story in Spanish and *ito* a diminutive to express endearment towards that which is little) which she explained as "little squares of patchwork quilt" that she hoped would match (Nagel 106). The resultant work matches what we now formally recognise as a short story cycle, echoing Cisneros' metaphor of the quilt. Nagel argues that this is an example of the ethnic resonance of the form itself, a crucial point that is a nod to non-white and non-Anglophone literary traditions. However, since Cisneros herself has never defined the text as a cycle and since the

vignettes may not necessarily be regarded by all critics unanimously as short stories, that remains just one interpretation of *The House on Mango Street*.

Regardless of authorial intention, what Ingram proposes in his pioneering dissertation is a valuable means of understanding the inherent diversity of what could qualify as a short story cycle. He establishes a systematic approach by which he analyses three extended cycles: *Ein Hungerkünstler*, *The Unvanquished*, and *Winesburg, Ohio*. The methodology of this approach comprises a series of over forty questions intended to assist critics in closely investigating the “elusive” form (2) in order to “penetrate every dimension of meaning which the aesthetic object possesses” (50) and unpack the nature of the “shifting internal relationships” that have the capacity to “alter the originally perceived pattern” overall (2). After initial readings are undertaken, Ingram calls for critics to conduct a detailed study of the individual stories in the cycle, followed by the “relationships [which] exist among” them (51). This means, in Ingram’s rendering of E. M. Forster’s definition of pattern, analysing the “static pattern of external structure” pertaining to framing devices and prose length as well as the “dynamic patterns of internal structure” pertaining to structure, character, events, themes (11). Some examples of questions include whether the stories are “put together in some obvious geometric pattern”, whether a “single character [occupies] a central position in the cycle”, whether a “single event [is] treated in all the stories” and whether the minor themes in the stories “constitute a new theme for the cycle” (51-52). Ingram expressly states that

not all questions will be “relevant to every cycle” and it is the initial reading that will signal to the critic the necessary aspects to analyse in detail. It is only through answering these relevant questions that the “claritas” of the cycle to be “perceived as a function of the integritas and consonantia of its parts”: clarity, integrity and consonance (53).

Developing Ingram’s research further through deeper application of his systematic approach, Mann selects nine representative cycles – several overlapping with Ingram’s own selection – that are “generally well known to a diverse audience” as well as “represent the variety that exists among cycles” (xi). She analyses them in terms of the process of composition and the “unifying patterns” (xii). Referencing more than a hundred and twenty examples in her extended study, Mann does not propose a methodology of her own but rather, attempts “a history of the short story cycle” (1) by observing the genre’s evolution closely. Moreover, she illustrates the genre’s inherent “adaptability” (17) by unpacking singularities to look at what organises each of the nine cycles and how.

At the start of his study, Ingram, with reference to Western Anglophone literature, observes that early manifestations of the short story cycle featured several uncollected cycles, meaning stories that are “linked by repetition of characters” but have not been curated into “a single volume” (5). This phenomenon was facilitated by the popularity of the literary magazine at that time, as briefly

mentioned earlier. It was only later that consciously collected cycles became a valid and popular form.

Beyond the twentieth-century and American-centric texts that both Ingram and Mann have analysed, there are several full-length cycles from Asia, including ones that address regional diasporas, which have yet to be critically analysed as part of the short story cycle canon. Using Ingram's systematic approach (1967), this chapter will study select collected cycles that have been published in the twenty-first century and that are written by non-white authors of Asian descent. They are namely Pakistani-American Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* (2009), Singaporean Stephanie Ye's *The Billion Shop* (2012), Singaporean Jeremy Tiang's *It Never Rains on National Day* (2015), and Singapore-based Filipino Victor Fernando R. Ocampo's *The Infinite Library and Other Stories* (2017). All four texts deal with issues of identity and diaspora, and will be unpacked in terms of their external and internal structures. The study will also determine the organising principle(s) of each cycle, analyse how these principles manifest within the texts and amplify the writers' chosen subject matter, and lastly underscore any areas of significant convergence or divergence between and among the four texts.

Pakistani-American author Daniyal Mueenuddin's *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* comprises eight stories that share a common setting or "referential field" (Dunn and Morris 31). Rather than retaining the same protagonist throughout the

stories or using a recurring set of characters, each story is written from the distinct point-of-view of a “co-protagonist” (Ingram 51). When read as a whole, the collection provides the reader with a network of characters from all echelons of society who are directly or indirectly linked to the “ubiquitous” K. K. Harouni (23); Omair Ahmad describes the stories and the characters they contain as being “much like a spider in [Harouni’s] web” (60). Indeed, Harouni occupies an elusive central position within the cycle, akin to a mythic figure whose far-reaching influence impacts the lives of these various characters. As the organising principle himself, it is only around his dominant centre that the dynamic patterns of recurrence and development unfold.

Beginning with Harouni’s Multan electrician Nawab in the opening story “Nawabdin Electrician”, the reader learns that the elusive man is an old landowner with significant bureaucratic influence who chooses to reside in Lahore, Pakistan, while leaving his farms in the care of his numerous servants. Over the next four stories, the reader learns just how expansive the network around Harouni is. In “Saleema”, we meet the eponymous character who works in Harouni’s Lahore mansion as a sweeper and gets embroiled in passionate but dehumanising affairs with fellow servants Rafik and Hassan. In “Provide, Provide”, we meet Harouni’s manager Chaudrey Jaglani, who acquires full management of Harouni’s farms, and is revealed to be cunning, classist as well as corrupt. In “About a Burning Girl”, we have a rare first-person narrative from an unnamed male sessions judge in Lahore

High Court whose wife demands him to acquit her servant Khadim from the accusation of “pouring kerosene” over his sister-in-law and “setting it aflame” (129); this demand emerges despite the fact that it means covering up a murder as a suicide. While the story does not have an explicit relation to Harouni, it reveals the extent to which crimes against women in the larger Pakistani society are overlooked, even normalised when there is power and influence involved, which likewise could be applied to Harouni too. The eponymous “In Other Rooms, Other Wonders” presents Husna, who lives in Old City in relative poverty despite having descended from once-landowners. Through serving Begum Harouni as someone “between maidservant and companion” (144), she is given the opportunity to take typing lessons under K. K. Harouni himself as a way of achieving mobility; she ends up in an affair with him and after his death, is forced to return to Old City and hence, poverty once again. This, after a succession of stories depicting suffering women, highlights how a woman’s status in Pakistan is invariably and inextricably linked to that of their romantic male partners, and how slippery any social mobility she attains through a man can be. However, Mueenuddin does not portray these women as scheming for ascending stations in their life in this manner either. Rather, he portrays it as their only option; he states in his interview with Omair Ahmad that “women don’t really have a place in the public sphere” in Pakistan and that sex is “among the best options with which to entrap a man” (57).

It is from the sixth story “Our Lady of Paris” onwards that the focus shifts away from late K. K. Harouni to his nephew Sohail Harouni, whose father “made a fortune in cement and other industries” (287). Sohail and his family are based in Pakistan’s capital Islamabad, and through him, we gain a glimpse into a more worldly and modern manner of aristocracy; he is Yale-educated, his mother is from a “prominent, cultured Lucknow family” (180) and his friends include the son of a Pakistani industrialist (182), through whom he acquires a Parisian apartment to accommodate himself and his lower middle class American girlfriend Helen on holiday. “Lily”, a two-part narrative divided between Islamabad and Jalpana, takes a step further into the upper-class Pakistani world of socialites by introducing Lily, a rich party girl and her would-be husband Murad Talwan, a Princeton-educated businessman and “nephew of the great Makhdoom Talwan” (221), whom she first meets at a party in the house of Sohail Harouni. Their eventual marriage turns bitter, with Murad’s unspoken desire to suppress Lily’s hedonistic ways to the confines of his farm in Jalpana and Lily’s vehement refusal to play the role of the “devoted wife” (268). The final story in the cycle, “A Spoiled Man”, focuses on Rezak who moves his cabin into the garden of Sohail Harouni’s weekend home in Kalapani after days of loitering by the gates of the estate and eventually being noticed by Sonya, Sohail’s American wife. However, the new gardener, the “spoiled man”, meets with trouble when his new wife, a young girl with mental illness, goes missing one day and he is suspected by the police of murdering her,

which subjects him to brutal abuse under investigation. Eventually, he dies and Sonya orders for the cabin to be cleared but kept parked in a corner as a “memorial”, both morbid and moving, to the “old man who entered service bringing his own house” (326).

Through examining the static as well as dynamic patterns of Mueenuddin’s cycle, it is readily evident that the characters are trapped in Harouni’s invisible web, though not necessarily because of Harouni’s own cunning given that he passes away in the middle of the cycle. Rather, *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* is an honest and raw reflection of the inner, insidious workings of society in Pakistan. The people in the lower classes, in particular the women, are deprived of equal access to social mobility and resources. While the men from lower stations pursue work to uplift themselves, the women often feel compelled to pursue these men or other men with substantial influence through sex and romance to acquire status and wealth. However, Mueenuddin also makes it a point to highlight that the characters from the upper classes are not satisfied, let alone happy with their lives, no matter how far they have moved from Pakistan and Pakistani culture. Issues of sexism, repression and corruption may manifest differently as one ascends the social ladder, but they remain invariably palpable.

Stephanie Ye’s *The Billion Shop* is a 2012 chapbook published as part of the Babette’s Feast series (Book XI) organised by local bookstore Books Actually. It comprises four linked stories that focus on three classmates from junior college

whose friendship becomes the organising principle of the cycle: Emma in “City in C Minor”, JJ in “Cardiff”, and Sam in the titular “The Billion Shop” (where Emma also appears as a minor character). The first three stories are set in their final years of teenhood and present detailed snapshots of their beliefs as well as hopes for their impending futures. Performing the function of closure both for the cycle and its characters, the last story “Astoria” takes place several years after JJ’s funeral and depicts the brief reunion of Emma and Sam in Astoria, Oregon, when they are both “almost 30” (88). While the four plotlines do not necessarily add up to a single linear timeline, given the shifting points-of-view and concerns, the stories remain intricately intertwined and unified due to their relationship as classmates and the major connecting event that is JJ’s death.

Thematically, the trio articulate similar feelings of disdain, dissonance and shame with respect to Singapore and being Singaporean. In “Cardiff”, eighteen-year-old JJ imagines Cardiff, a place of seasons, as an escape from “tiny”, “insignificant”, “unsophisticated”, and “hot” Singapore (35). In “The Billion Shop”, nineteen-year-old Sam, now an American citizen who is openly gay, remembers his Singaporean life as a “closeted, celibate” one (49). At the end of the collection, Emma, even with her cookie-cutter life as a scholar-turned-government-official, remains “self-conscious of [her] halting Singaporean pronunciation, uneroded despite four years in New York” (77).

By virtue of timeline and theme, *The Billion Shop* can be structured into two unequal halves, with the fourth story taking place at the brink of the characters turning thirty years of age as a standalone from the first three stories of teenhood. It is arguable, simply by analysing the external and internal structures of the chapbook, that the collection draws a comparison between Singaporean teenagers on the cusp of adulthood (“City in C Minor”, “Cardiff”, and “The Billion Shop”) and their older adult selves (“Astoria), questioning just how much the accumulation of life experiences over time can shape and shift what once felt like unshakeable opinions and dreams.

In “City in C Minor”, the reader meets a young Emma who grows up from age eleven dreaming of becoming a cellist just like the “world-famous” Spaniard cellist of Chinese descent that she idolises (18). However, despite her utmost efforts, she eventually decides to give up her dream after receiving a government scholarship to study not music but “economics and statistics” at a prestigious university in New York (24); it is established early on that she is not financially well-off, with her father often “not having the money” (22), which understandably influences her decision. When she watches her favourite cellist again in her junior year of college, she realises that he, after years of abiding by Western classical canon, has grown “sentimental about his Chinese heritage” (25) and has begun performing fusion East-West music. This leaves her disdainful for he plays the cello as if it is “some other instrument” (26). One wonders if this is an indication of

her devotion to the original nuances of the Western craft or her subconscious rejection of herself for leaving home only to desert her passion altogether and succumb to a normative Singaporean life.

In “Cardiff”, the reader meets eighteen-year-old JJ who dreams of escaping unsavoury Singapore first through his illicit sexual affair with Mrs. Williams, his literature teacher who is from England, and second, through pursuing his college education in the English city of Cardiff where Mrs. Williams comes from. When she warns him against harbouring “romantic notions” of Cardiff (36), insisting that it is like any other city including Singapore, he pushes back, wanting to hold on to what he acknowledges as his colonial hangover (35). However, his dreams are ultimately destroyed not by his own will but unexpectedly because of a naval “ship collision” (47) during his national service that kills him.

In “The Billion Shop”, the reader meets Sam who has given up his permanent residency status in Singapore after his A Levels to be an American citizen, where he was born. Out of the three protagonists in the collection, Sam seems the most successful in realising his dreams. He narrates that in his new home Chicago, he is able to live a freer life with respect to his sexual identity as a gay man and his own religious faith as an Anglican, the two no longer at odds with each other. While back in Singapore during summer break he, now nineteen, discovers through a copy of *The Straits Times* at a Starbucks that JJ has been in a freak accident. It is by pure chance then that he ends up at JJ’s funeral and has to

confront the people of his past with whom “conversations inevitably turn into interrogations” (49).

In the ten odd years that pass unnarrated between “The Billion Shop” and “Astoria”, the reader is led to assume that Emma and Sam begin to question the beliefs and dreams that they held as cocksure teenagers. The process explicitly begins for Sam in “The Billion Shop” when JJ’s mother asks him to drive her to eponymous The Billion Shop, a shop “sandwiched between an Indian barber and a furniture store” that sells paper items from outfits to money for the dead (64). As a Christian who is liberal and “less exhibitionist” (51), Sam willingly joins JJ’s mother in the Taoist ritual of burning a care package, which includes a “palm-sized cardboard shoe with a Nike swoosh” (65), for JJ’s wellbeing in afterlife. Through his respectful participation in burning these paper offerings with a grieving mother for a dead friend, Sam’s staunch beliefs begin to evolve. Later in “Astoria”, Emma mentions that back in school, Sam once said that he believed souls of free-thinkers were bound to “float on the surface of the sea” (70). Sam expresses surprise at having said anything “that obnoxious” (88) and asserts that he now subscribes to the idea that everyone goes to heaven regardless. The shift in his theological belief is subtle but indicative of the influence JJ’s passing has had on him; JJ’s death is akin to a turning point.

In “Astoria”, written from Emma's first-person point-of-view (the only story in first-person), it is revealed that she is now a civil servant serving her

scholarship bond and is married to a colleague two years her senior from the same governmental department. It is clear that she has moved far from her pipe dream of becoming a world famous cellist as mentioned in “City in C Minor”, given the exceeding normalcy and normativity of her adult life. The use of “I” here too emphasises that Emma’s identity has solidified since her unsure teenage self in the opening story. Before ending a work trip to America, Emma drives to the portside city of Astoria to reunite with Sam, who moved there with his ex-boyfriend but now lives alone and works as a manager of a “brick-and-mortar” (76) neighbourhood bank. It is curious to her how Sam, who once boasted of a devil-may-care attitude with loftier dreams his Singaporean friends would expect of “the American” (48), has noticeably mellowed out much like his new home, the “failed city” of Astoria that “once had bigger dreams than just being a quiet seaside town” (84).

During their reunion, Emma confesses to Sam in “Astoria” that she just found out she is pregnant and that she is considering abortion, because she has finally saved up enough for a Master’s degree in music and would like to focus on making herself as opposed to “making someone else” (87). Sam, unlike what Emma expects given his religious faith, shares that he too would not dare to have a child, for he would be unable to “bear it” if he had to bury his own child (88). By the end of the collection, it becomes clear that the weight of JJ’s untimely death in

the face of unfulfilled dreams still lingers between the two friends of “almost 20 years” (76) long into their adulthood.

The overarching vision and organising principle of the cycle is best summarised by Emma in “Astoria”: “School was the bond that held us altogether; when it finally broke forever, we scattered without delay to meet our various fates” (73). Indeed, despite the formal brevity and the disjointed plot progression, *The Billion Shop* is consistent overall in its thematic voice and exploration, and invites the reader into following three different fates that emerged from a once-shared classroom. By merging the ““many”” fates “into an integral ‘one’” (Ingram 11), even if just briefly in “Astoria”, the collection presents a trio of young Singaporeans who lack a definitive sense of belonging for varying reasons and bridled with a sense of escapism. Both parochially with respect to Singapore and universally, Ye’s cycle reveals what it means to be compelled to give up one’s dream (Emma), to be cruelly stripped of one’s dream (JJ), and to gradually redefine one’s dream (Sam).

It Never Rains on National Day by Jeremy Tiang is a collection of eleven loosely linked stories that revolve around Singaporean and Singapore-based characters whose lives are in a state of flux and uncertainty. Though identified in a critical review within *Cha* as a “loosely structured novel” and as a “collection” in a review within *Mackerel*, this work in fact more accurately exhibits the features of a short story cycle.

Firstly, many of the stories are linked by character recurrence, particularly in the case of what I will coin the ‘Sophia’ series that is made up of three stories: “Sophia’s Honeymoon”, “Sophia’s Aunt” and “Sophia’s Party”. Sophia is a Singaporean woman married to a British expatriate banker named Nicholas and each story sees the interracial couple through different junctures of their married life. Significantly, the series marks the beginning, middle and end of the collection as a whole, offering a steady pattern of recurrence to the reader.

In “Sophia’s Honeymoon”, which is a third-person narrative focusing on Sophia’s perspective, the reader is introduced to newly married Sophia and Nicholas who are in Zurich for their honeymoon after their whirlwind of a wedding. As his “young wife” (1) from Singapore who does Pilates in the morning and “never eats carbs after six” (3) to play her part in their picture-perfect union, Sophia feels out of place in Nicholas’ affluent world of fine dining and German opera. At the end of the interval, Sophia decides to leave but gets lost in the city. As she tries to quell her anxiety over being outside of the safety of the hotel, and Singapore at large, she fails to realise that “this might be the last moment she is fully herself” (10). Eventually, Nicholas finds her on the street but Sophia’s anxieties remain unresolved.

When we arrive at the middle of the cycle with “Sophia’s Aunt”, Sophia is in Beijing, out of place once again because of her “patchy Mandarin” (67), though it was once “an article of pride to speak it badly” back in her schooling days (78).

Nicholas has been hospitalised because his years of hypertension – as well as “all those steaks fried in butter” and “French patisserie” (69) – have led to him needing a heart transplant with a predicted year of recovery after. With the help of Gu Ma, Sophia’s Chinese aunt who is a doctor, Sophia navigates the unfamiliar world of Beijing and Beijing’s hospitals to secure a trustworthy doctor as well as a feasible treatment plan for Nicholas. Then the story pivots to Nicholas’s point-of-view, before he is wheeled into the operating theatre, where he is no longer the confident banker at the prime of his career but is instead “sniffing like a schoolboy” (78); he spends the final moments before his surgery resenting both the fact that he is all alone in the hospital room and that his “own body [is] betraying him” (82). At the end, Nicholas is recovering from his surgery and in a moment of irony, as if he had not just been saved by Beijing healthcare or as if his wife’s family had not originated from China, tells Sophia that he cannot wait to leave this “strange country” and “go home” (92).

The final instalment “Sophia’s Party” takes place months after Nicholas’ surgery when the couple are back home in Singapore at their Tanjong Pagar flat. Though he has returned to work, Nicholas, whose third-person point-of-view governs the narrative, reflects on his “physical deficiency” that “receives minimal sympathy” in the cutthroat banking world (174). As Sophia diligently prepares to host her National Day dinner, Nicholas wonders if, despite his wife’s claims, Singapore’s “monolithic education system” has in fact left enough of a mark on her

(169) to breed a degree of patriotism. During the parade, Nicholas is both bewildered and seduced by the mass display of military power, and left unnerved by the “cheers from the crowd” at the sound of “rifles being cocked and fired” (175). When Nicholas casually echoes Huixin and Joy in mocking the “cheap sentimentality” of the event, a Singaporean acquaintance named Calvin tells him to “feel free to leave” (177). After everyone else apologises to Calvin on Nicholas’ behalf, the latter thinks about how, despite years of living in Singapore, he still lacks a “pigeonhole” (180). The story and the collection end on a note of calibrated hope: as displaced as he still feels in Singapore and in his marriage, Nicholas reminds himself of the moment he returned to Changi years ago for Sophia, her “arms wide with welcome” (185).

In many ways, the Sophia series, with its thematic exploration of cultural mixedness, deficiency, and displacement, as well as calibrated hope, establish foundational ideas that support the rest of the cycle. The three stories are undeniably crucial both to the external structure of the collection as well as the internal mechanisms of its subject matter.

A less structured example of linking and organising through character can be seen when the young unnamed woman who flees from Singapore to Europe in “Trondheim” – because she is running from her bond to the teaching service – is briefly referenced again in “Schwellenangst” as the missing teacher in Joy’s school and later given her own stories in “Toronto” and “Meatpacking”. The impact

however differs from the Sophia series because the runaway English teacher is never named, the stories are scattered within the cycle, and the writing is extremely subtle, even understated, requiring a discerning reader to unearth the loose cyclical links.

Unlike traditional short story cycles that tend to abide by a single organising principle, Tiang's cycle abides by yet another principle apart from character recurrence: it revolves around a single event, which in this case is the annual state-organised National Day parade on the ninth of August that marks Singapore's independence. Following "Meatpacking" which depicts overseas (diasporic) Singaporeans celebrating National Day in Manhattan, New York, the penultimate story "National Day" depicts a group of migrant workers travelling to St. John's Island on Singapore's National Day to watch the parade from afar. From their vantage point, the city's famous landmarks "look like beautiful toys" that they could "reach out and pluck" (153). The workers sit on "towels and sarongs" with hard bread and apples that are "starting to brown and soften" (155) to watch the parade but all they can see "are the leftovers" (159). In stark contrast, the final story "Sophia's Party" portrays a gathering of Singaporean and Singapore-based friends in the comfort of Sophia and Nicholas' apartment that is ostentatiously decorated with "red and white pennants" and a "large Merlion" balloon (169). They watch the same National Day parade that the characters in "Meatpacking as well as "National Day" do but this time on television while accompanied by an abundant

flow of food including “spiced chicken wings and roquefort arancini” (179) as well as “red agar-agar, profiteroles and cupcakes with lion heads stamped into their icing” (182). Between the last two stories, in playing with ideas of abundance and lack thereof, Tiang highlights inequity as an integral but hidden part of Singaporean society.

“Sophia’s Party” is also crucial in terms of internal structure as it not only explicates a clear difference in place and societal status between the workers and Sophia and Nicholas’ friends, but also performs the crucial role of elucidating character relationships within the cycle. The story brings many of the characters into a single physical and literary space. Designing the cycle to end this way certainly allows for a magnification and amplification of the themes that define Tiang’s project, such as personhood, nationhood, identity and belonging.

In an interview with Koh Xin Tian for the *Ploughshares Blog*, Tiang mentions that the work was not created with Singaporean concerns in mind, though he accepts that a reader is free to “mine” for such signifiers if they so please. Rather, he sees the cycle as a means of “[breaking] down the boundaries we draw around ourselves, including those of nationality” through numerous “locations and settings” that give rise to numerous “[points] of entry” for “every reader”. The eleven stories come together as a literary commentary both of the city-state and of its people who disperse into the diaspora. It is a holistic meditation on the types of individuals who can emerge from a spatially and psychologically restrained

country like Singapore where several diasporas and trajectories of people interact: the dissatisfied civil servant with escapist tendencies (the nameless runaway teacher in “Trondheim”, “Toronto” and “Meatpacking”); the dreamy and unfulfilled artist (the writer protagonist in “Tick”); the racial minority who is never seen as part of the general populus (Joy in “Schwellenangst” who is Eurasian); the supposedly bilingual individual who perennially struggles with their mother tongue (Sophia in “Sophia’s Aunt”); the underpaid and exploited labourer (“Harmonious Residences” and “National Day”); the privileged but unhappy Singaporean (Li Hsia who escapes to Thailand for a month in “Stray”) and the wealthy but misfitting expatriate (Nick in “Sophia’s Party”).

Comparing Tiang’s cycle to that of Ye then, it can be argued that the chapbook is comparable to Tiang’s Sophia series in terms of its brevity (four stories versus three), the recurrence of characters, as well as the interconnectedness of the plot progression (though the Sophia series focuses on a single point-of-view while *The Billion Shop* explores three). Although *The Billion Shop* is certainly a tighter and more consolidated cycle, what Tiang accomplishes in his full-length rendering of the short story cycle is to maximise the form’s inherent potential to explore multiple threads that need not meet in the middle and still can co-exist as part of the cycle’s larger universe. Seen side by side, these texts are evidence of the inherent versatility of the form and its ability to provide both a panoramic view and close-ups of a troubled and escapist Singaporean society.

Shortlisted for the United Kingdom's 2018 International Rubery Book Award (Fiction), *The Infinite Library and Other Stories* (*Infinite Library*) is a short story cycle made up of seventeen stories written by Singapore-based Filipino author Victor Fernando R. Ocampo. Differing from the first three texts that are realist fiction, *Infinite Library* is a work of speculative fiction. It is also the longest work of the four, and the most loosely linked.

The cycle begins with a period piece "Mene, Thecel, Phares" focusing on a Filipino protagonist Joseph Alonso y Mercado who escapes to Europe sometime in the early twentieth century (indicated by his birth year 1985). However, the stories do not remain within that time period. Rather, they move gradually through the cycle into a future that is post-Earth and in the galactic realm, where something like an algorithm for a soul (first referenced in "Big Enough for the Entire Universe") is conceivable and in practice. While common organising principles such as a single protagonist, a systematic recurrence of character or an overarching plot are absent from this cycle, the stories all belong to the same universe—a universe where an Infinite Library exists, "one where everything that had been written, and everything still to be writ, was spirited away from all eternity" (169).

Borrowing from Jorge Luis Borges' 1941 short story "The Library of Babel" (*La Biblioteca de Babel*) which presents the Library as a "metaphor for the universe" (Keiser 40), the Infinite Library functions in Ocampo's cycle as a recurring symbol that appears in stories both as a real accessible place and a dream

setting. The idea of an infinity semantically signals the absence of disruption, hence a continuum, and the possibility of impossibility. In the text, it can be interpreted to symbolise the impossible diasporic desire for an undisrupted narrative of the collective self to exist and to be acknowledged. Arguably, any diaspora is fundamentally tantamount to disruption, displacement, disconnection and dissonance, and therefore a diasporic existence is precisely the site of an aporia. Yet Ocampo imagines a world where the impossible desire is eventually fulfilled, since the Infinite Library transforms from a conceptual figment of imagination into a real place over the course of the cycle. It is an articulation of Ocampo's desire to liberate the subjects of his exploration, the Filipino diaspora, from an aporetic existence – to become (and be seen as) infinite.

On the whole, the cycle unpacks various issues concerning the Filipino diaspora, including colonisation by Spain and later America, the stronghold of Christianity over the populus, and migration to various parts of the world including Singapore. As distanced as the characters are from the contemporary Filipino diaspora since the stories are hosted within a speculated universe, the issues Ocampo chooses to explore still remain relevant to the twenty-first century Filipino person.

“Mene, Thecel, Phares” explores its protagonist Joseph's resistance against being exoticised as an Oriental upon his arrival in Europe, as it means that his cultural identity is misunderstood and conflated with that which is not him; this

resistance is compounded by his own experience of the Spanish colonisation of the Philippines, from which he has just fled. He is constantly aware of the gaze, of being perceived as “Oriental, Other” or an “exotic curiosity” (9) because of his “generic Asian features” (10). As a writer himself, he hopes for “an alternate world” with “an alternate history” (22). At one point, he dreams of a library filled with “different versions of [himself], scattered infinity through time and space” (25). This is the first mention of the Infinite Library before it is officially named as such in a later story “Synchronicity” where it is depicted as a liminal place somewhere in the afterlife. Joseph’s dream, a dream which other characters such as Ghabby in “Big Enough for the Entire Universe” similarly have, underscores his deep-seated desire to inject himself and his people into the canon. In a way, the opening story frames the rest of the collection because the reader repeatedly returns to the Infinite Library and this shared desire to be written into infinity.

Branching from these sentiments, the collection reveals the desire to preserve native history and culture without mediation via a colonial or Western gaze (the result of such mediation appallingly reflected in “An Excerpt from the Philippine Journal of Archeology, 4 October, 1916”). It also unpacks the feeling of not belonging to any given place, a sense of displacement characteristically experienced by diasporic subjects. In “Entanglement”, a Singaporean woman reprogrammed with the love algorithm by the male protagonist disappears “into infinity” (97) after telling the protagonist that he “cannot program over dissonance”

(96), the dissonance being her identity crisis between being a Filipino and a Singaporean; this story drills in the idea that the diasporic aporia resists resolution. “I M D 1 IN 10” also presents an unnerving commentary on the exploitation of brown migrant bodies in a place known as the New Cities, eerily similar to Singapore and other parallel cosmopolitan cities except that it is set in a futuristic rendition of them. Just before he is executed to save a “Billionaire’s spoiled little 16 yo who suffered from extreme affluenza” (129), The protagonist Allan Walang-Turing tells the reader that he is “just migrant slave labour, an immigrant 2nd-class citizen...a placeholder...filler text” (133). It is a sobering proclamation on behalf of migrants and immigrants within the Filipino diaspora.

Ocampo’s rendering of the short story cycle serves as a testament to the suitability of the form in exploring a postcolonial diaspora existence precisely because it does not endeavour to resolve aporias. The fragmented nature of the cycle makes room for several threads to be explored without the demand of being tied together. It is only through the symbol of the imagined Infinite Library, an impossible conception by the standards of our present world, that the aporia begins to be eviscerated and the diaspora is returned to its original undisrupted self.

The four collected cycles present a variety of organising principles by which a short story cycle can operate and appear unified. *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* employs a common referential field, Pakistan, from which emerge a group of co-protagonists who are all connected to a central but elusive character,

the influential landowner K. K. Harouni. Through this spidery network that presents both the lower and upper echelons of society (who tend to be more Westernised), the cycle unravels the ills of and challenges posed by contemporary Pakistani society. As opposed to Pakistan, *The Billion Shop* is unified by three commonplace Singaporean co-protagonists who are schoolmates from the same junior college and hence have an established friendship upon which the cycle operates. The overarching chronological plot follows them as they transition from teenhood to adulthood, during which time they reduce from a trio to a duo, and observes their own negotiation with their Singaporean identity whether as a continuing native (Emma) or as part of the diaspora (Sam). Still within the Singaporean diaspora, *It Never Rains on National Day* employs a recurrence of character, both major (Sophia series) and minor (the unnamed teacher), as well as a shared event that is the state-organised National Day parade. While similar in thematic exploration to *The Billion Shop*, it, as a full-length cycle, presents a larger network of Singaporean and Singapore-based characters, and by relation, a larger variety and web of negotiations. Lastly, *Infinite Library* establishes a shared, speculated universe that is inspired by a mix of Filipino history, regional mythology, as well as popular science fiction ideas from preceding works such as that of Borges. Through this fictional, futuristic world, the cycle speaks of both the hopes and anxieties of the Filipino diaspora. All in all, these contemporary works exhibit how short story cycles structurally provide both an individuated and a

collective space that is conducive for unpacking the singular and fragmented complexities of the individual, cultural and national identities of diasporic subjects within postcolonial, globalised Asian societies.

Chapter Two

The Short Story Cycle as a Metaphor for Family

Nine Yard Sarees began as an unnamed novel within which I wished to unpack experiences of the Tamil Brahmin diaspora, largely inspired by my own experiences as a Singaporean Tamil Brahmin (colloquially known as *Tambrahm*) woman from a semi-orthodox family. However, while brainstorming, I realised that there were too many tangential threads that I was interested in exploring. This therefore made the traditional novel an unsuitable, even unstable form since I did not necessarily have an overarching plotline that could coherently merge those disparate threads. As an alternative, I considered writing a short story collection. However, in my understanding of the form as a grouping of self-contained and unlinked stories, that too seemed unsuitable as I intended to explore a multigenerational family of characters and hence would have a recurring cast. I feared that the collection would be deemed as too repetitive since the stories I had in mind would be intricately intertwined. I was apprehensive that readers and critics likewise would ask: “Why not just write a novel?”

After winning the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature, Alice Munro, in an interview with the Nobel Foundation that dubbed her a “master of the contemporary short story”, said that the short story form is indeed seen as

secondary or inferior to the novel, and expressed her hopes for the form to “come to the fore, no strings attached, so there doesn’t have to be the novel” (“Alice Munro – Interview – NobelPrize.org”). I believe that this extends to the short story cycle too, which deserves to be seen as an independent form that can hold its own without yielding to the novel, for such a notion is outdated especially in view of the popularity of cycles in today’s literature. As opposed to subsuming a subset of linked stories within a larger body of work in the manner of popular authors such as Munro (in *Runaway*) or Jhumpa Lahiri (in *Unaccustomed Earth*), I decided to develop *Nine Yard Sarees* as a full-length cycle. By transforming the tangential threads into their own self-contained stories, I hoped to create a portrait of the fictional multigenerational family, the Srinivasans, with more affinity to the parts than the whole (opposing Dunn and Morris’ definition of the composite novel mentioned in Chapter 1). If *The Billion Shop* was organised by a three-way friendship, and *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders* was organised by socioeconomic connections, it is arguably acceptable for the organising principle of my cycle to be family and familial relationships.

Conceptually speaking, the structure of a short story cycle is similar to that of a family. Just as a cycle preserves both individual units and the larger collective, autonomous members of any given family, through the merger of maternal and paternal histories, inevitably share cultural heritage, history and paradigms of thinking. In the case of the Srinivasans, their four-piece nuclear family is made up

of father Srinivasan, mother Padma, elder son Krishnan and younger daughter Keerthana. Their maternal roots lead back through Padma to an *agraharam*, or a Tamil Brahmin settlement in a Tirunelveli village named Kalakad; while the *agraharam* is eventually emptied due to migration to the city (Ram), it remains a tangible emblem of the family's Indian and Tamil Brahmin roots. On the other hand, their paternal history begins via Srinivasan's father Rajagopal who migrates from Tamil Nadu to Singapore "on a ship as a teen" to work in the British colonial administration as a clerk (Ram), a critical move that commences the Singaporean Indian diasporic lineage of the family; however, Rajagopal and his wife die young, leaving behind Srinivasan and his younger sister Shweta who experience an abrupt loss of roots both as first-generation Singaporeans and orphans in a young postcolonial Singapore. These shared roots fuse families into a collective, most salient at significant life events such as births, weddings, and funerals. However, every individual, no matter the degree of overlap in experiences with other family members, remains independent in their perceptions; any two family members can have two very different accounts of the same event. This simultaneous existence as an autonomous individual and a part of the collective family, with different degrees of closeness to other members of the family, parallels the cycle that externally and internally balances "the individuality of the stories" with the "necessities of the larger unit" (Ingram 5). This therefore makes the short story cycle an ideal form for the project as it operates as a structural metaphor for the very notion of family.

To maximise the effectiveness of the form in representing family, it is important to consider what truly constitutes a family in the first place, since families do not take on a universal, unequivocal form and neither are they a simple matter of biological relationships. Linguistically speaking, the word “family” has various threads of meaning attached to it depending on the language. In English, it can be traced to the Latinate word *familia*, which in the early fifteenth century was used to mean “family servants, domestics collectively, the servants in a household” as opposed to any ideas of kinship at all (Etymonline.com). In my mother tongue Tamil, the word for family is *kudumbam* (குடும்பம்), which is a portmanteau of *koodu* (கூடு) meaning dwelling and *inbam* (இன்பம்) meaning happiness. This differs from English where “house” and “home”, while used interchangeably in modern context, remain semantically distinct concepts. The former refers to a physical location while the latter is more a psychological space that is associated with the notion of homeliness, to mean cosy and comfortable. In *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard writes that a house, once inhabited becomes a home, and “transcends geometrical space” (Jolas 47). The idea of geometry and psychology converging is not different from *kudumbam* that is a curious, semantic merger of “house” and “home”, placing the family at the point of confluence. The term *kootu kudumbam* (கூட்டுக் குடும்பம்) then, in which *kootu* means to add or sum up, is a well-used term in Tamil Nadu to refer to a joint family living under one roof. It is reflective of a traditional norm in Indian culture, whereby several families used to

live together with “cousins, uncles and aunts [and] raised children collectively”. However, this has changed in contemporary times where most families, “at least those who live in cities, are nuclear” (Pattanaik 7); even within my own family, the idea of a *kootu kudumbam* dissolved on both sides with my parents’ generation. Nevertheless, these tangential ideas, purely from the standpoint of semantics and etymology, point towards the fact that a family can be as narrow (as with nuclear families) or expansive (to include other families and even domestic help) as one desires.

For *Nine Yard Sarees*, given the expansive potential of the short story cycle as a form, I opted likewise for an expansive familial portrait, beginning from the nuclear core of the Srinivasans, who are introduced through the slice-of-life opening story “The Panasonic”, before branching out to their extended family as well as outliers, non-blood related characters, who come into close contact with them including a part-time domestic helper and a Korean-Australian girlfriend. The cycle geographically spans across India, the motherland, Singapore, the land of overlapping diasporas, and cities such as Sydney and New York, the larger global diaspora. It is narrated by a total of nine co-protagonists, each with their own respective short story and hence their own autonomous unit within the collected cycle. They namely are: Keerthana, Padma, Sivagami, Mira, Vani, Fiona, Prema, Shweta and Raji (in order of appearance). By exhibiting different perspectives (mostly third-person, aside from “The Cassette” and “Before The Rooster Calls”),

the cycle dignifies each co-protagonist's way of thinking as well as spotlights personal experiences that may in reality be obscured by family dynamics, cultural norms and societal expectations. The stories operate as self-contained monologues that are also in a non-linear conversation with each other. This therefore allows the cycle to highlight their similarities as well as the particular ways in which they digress from the norms that are enforced and sustained by their most intimate collective—their family. Such a structure speaks to the undeniable fact that no family exists without a degree of internal dissonance, implicit or explicit. However, rather than mirror reality, each unit (text-piece) is designed to be of equal weight, hence bringing intrafamilial tensions to the fore in a balanced, egalitarian way; they are allowed to coexist without trying to overthrow the other. This makes the short story cycle utopian in its representation of family for it resists the hierarchy that is inherent in the real-life social construct and by doing so, allows for a more multifaceted, democratised investigation of the Srinivasans' family tree.

Yet this seemingly utopian form comes with its own challenges. While writing the cycle, it seemed as if the individual narratives across disparate time periods and locations only amounted to an fragmented family portrait. This made concluding the portrait difficult as it was not clear which of the tangential threads should or could be resolved in the final story, or if a finale was even required in a first place. After all, can a family narrative ever be resolved, if it by definition exists on a continuum? Furthermore, a cycle organised by family cannot simply be

an act of materialising, through the use of stories and respective co-protagonists, a factual family tree. Even without an overarching plot that runs through the stories, there needs to be a persistent desire, expressed by one or more of the characters, to tie the cycle together in order for the form to be unified and cohesive.

One Anglophone work that effectively utilises family as an organising principle and reads as a unified short story cycle is Native American author Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984). It must first be acknowledged that Erdrich herself has referred to the text as a novel (Pacht 134). Some critics also regard *Love Medicine* as an unsatisfactory execution of the novel form; one such critic is Gene Lyons who claimed in a 1985 review for Newsweek that the text lacks "central action"—a valid criticism for a novel while an integral feature of the short story cycle—and is a reflection of Erdrich's "inexperience as a storyteller" (qtd. in Schultz 80). Even positive reviews have simply looked at the text's multiperspectivity as a borrowed strategy from modernist writers (Schultz 80). I argue that continuing to treat *Love Medicine* as a novel is in fact an injustice to its excellent demonstration of the cycle form, even if merely intuitive on Erdrich's part, and a misjudgement of the expansive dearth of interpretations such a layered form inherently incites.

In essence, Erdrich's debut work is a cycle containing fourteen to eighteen interlinked stories, depending on which edition one reads. It explores the lives of Native Americans, particularly Ojibwe or Chippewa Indians, through five interconnected families: the Kashpaws, Lamartines, Lazarres, Nanapushes and

Pillagers. While the stories do not unfold in a chronological manner, the nonlinearity generates an implicit conversation about differing generational experiences of the Native American reservation in North Dakota from 1934 up till 1984; most of the stories, however, occur between 1981 and 1984.

What drives this conversation and manifests as a persistent desire throughout the cycle is a long-held family secret, namely about Lipsha Morrissey's true parentage. All editions of *Love Medicine* open with "The World's Greatest Fisherman", which begins with June Kashpaw's death in an unexpected snowstorm after she "walked over [the snow] like water and came home." (7) The rest of the story is from the perspective of late June's niece Albertine Johnson who returns to their family home on the reservation two months later, and becomes an astute observer, even interlocutor to the ongoing tensions in her family (12). Having "learned from sitting quietly around the aunts" (30) about how June was in fact not her cousin Lipsha's aunt but biological mother, Albertine feels a strong compulsion to reveal the open family secret to Lipsha himself, to tell him that his surname Morrissey was in fact June's maiden name before she was adopted by Eli Kashpaw following her mother's death. However, Albertine holds back at the end after sensing Lipsha's apparent resentment of the mother he never knew: "As for my mother, even if she came back right now, this minute, and got down on her knees...I would not relent on her." (39). It is precisely the dramatic tension from Lipsha's continued knowing, his potential discovery, and the risk of a family

fallout afterwards that unifies the cycle and provides the necessary momentum to propel the overarching plot forward across each subsequent text-piece.

While Lipsha is not central to the majority of *Love Medicine*, he becomes the protagonist of the cycle in the final story “Crossing the Water”. Soon into the narrative, he discovers the truth about his biological parentage from Lulu Lamartine, who not only was notorious for her affair with Lipsha’s adoptive grandfather Nector Kashpaw but also suddenly assumes the unexpected role of Lipsha’s paternal grandmother since she is the mother of his biological father Gerry Nanapush: “Do you like being the only one that’s ignorant?” (302) The discovery, while allowing for a necessary release of dramatic tension, is merely the beginning of Lipsha’s crisis of identity. Having been kept in the dark for the entirety of his “short life” (303), Lipsha, out of embarrassment, betrayal and a lack of belonging, considers leaving the reservation altogether by signing on with the action army (305). In the end however, he runs from the army, and reunites briefly with Gerry as well as his half-brother King (whom he has known as his cousin all his life) before returning to the reservation in June’s car at the end. In her essay “Transpersonal Selfhood: The Boundaries of Identity in Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine*,” Jeanne Smith (1991) argues that Lipsha’s decision to leave the reservation was always bound to be futile as “any attempt at forging an identity cut off from the community is doomed” (21). Marginalised and subjected to violence by the white colonial majority, the Chippewa subject must return to the “shrinking

reservation borders” (19) lest their “already frail” (20) identities completely collapse. Smith argues that *Love Medicine* presents the paradox of Native American existence where the “isolated and self-contained” individual only gains meaning by crossing the boundary of the personal into transpersonal relations with the community that is under attack by the external majority (23). What this means is that Lipsha’s journey of discovery, departure and return in the final story is neither singular nor self-contained. Rather, it points to the larger Chippewan existence as well as the inherent and self-preserving communality of the culture.

The effectiveness of the short story cycle form in *Love Medicine* and its use of family as an organising principle lies in the fact that it mirrors and embodies the cultural resonances of the Chippewan subject, family and community at large. What begins as a family secret on the verge of being discovered within an isolated and self-contained story ends as a multilateral narrative about inhabitants of the reservation and the truth of their marginalised existences in white America. Furthermore, the “cyclic pattern” of Ojibwe culture, particularly embedded within the “communally shared belief in cosmic harmony” which directly counters the Western binary ontology, and the “hooplike repetition and variation” of Ojibwe storytelling find an ideal literary home in the cycle form (Schultz 83, 91). In some way, the medium becomes the very message in Erdrich’s intuitive rendering.

Love Medicine highlights that a family, particularly within marginal and marginalised communities, does not exist in a vacuum. If a short story cycle is

organised by family and familial relationships, it is also organised on a subtextual level by the larger community and culture that circumscribes that family. Just as the cycle form of *Love Medicine* is a reflection of the cyclical nature of Ojibwe culture, perhaps, there is something particular to Tamil Brahmin people and culture that the form could mirror and enhance, especially in its egalitarian presentation of text-pieces. For example, what happens to an Iyer family that no longer has an *agraharam* to return to and is instead transposed as a racial and religious minority into a cosmopolitan country far from caste-based traditions? In what way in the loss of physical community and replacement of joint families with nuclear families both repressive and expansive to the Tamil Brahmin subject and consciousness? How distinct is the Tamil Brahmin understanding of family and tradition from Western understandings, and how does this distinction work within or against the cycle, which is a “dominant American form” in the eyes of Anglophone literary tradition (Schultz 92)?

With these questions in mind, I returned to the fragmented family portrait and began to consider, through Erdrich’s example, how to incorporate the plot device of family secrets particularly with the Tamil Brahmin familial and cultural context in mind. I realised that Raji, who appears in the cycle’s oldest story “Before the Rooster Calls” as a young six-year old (1950) and then a married twenty-five-year-old (1969), was strangely amiss from the present-day 2019 narratives despite being the only living grandparent of the family. Hence, I

included epistolary interchapters—between “The Cassette” and “Rakshasa”, as well as between “Rakshasa” and “Agni’s Trials” – as a way of providing readers a glimpse into Raji’s trajectory after the end of her 1969 narrative: her loss of her husband Shankaran Mama, her decision to join an *ashram*, her falling in love with a fellow *ashram* dweller who is from a different caste (which would be seen as improper on two counts, as an Indian widow and as a Tamil Brahmin woman), and her subsequent estrangement from her own daughters as well as the diegesis of the cycle at large. This double estrangement becomes the driving force for the overarching plot, begging the question of whether Raji will eventually reunite with her daughters and their families in Singapore. This question is eventually answered in a final story, “A Long Way from Connecticut”, in which Raji returns to Singapore with her new partner Senthil to attend her granddaughter Keerthana’s wedding, a family event that is set up earlier in the cycle via the eponymous story “Nine Yard Sarees”. While the cycle is not built upon a linear progression and does not attempt a complete resolution, the subtle plotline focusing on the maternal root Raji, created through the interchapters, allows for the disparate autonomous narratives to culminate in a long-awaited familial reunion, a homecoming in which home is not the *agraharam* in Kalakad but in “the very arms of her children” (Ram), hence completing the family portrait.

Chapter Three

From Native to Diasporic: Representations of the Tamil Brahmin in Cinema and Literature

According to the ancient Dharma Shastras, which were law books governing Hinduism, *samudrayana* or crossing the ocean was once prohibited because it was thought to result in the “loss of caste (jati) and class (varna) status”, both notions fundamental to traditional Hindu society (Sarma 67). Lawmakers of that time reasoned that voyagers would not be able to maintain “their daily ritual worship” and “would be polluted by the influence of foreign religion and culture” once on new lands (Gopalakrishnan 20). Millenniums later, following colonisation and globalisation, the Indian diaspora is now the largest in the world, with over 18 million immigrants according to the United Nations, and a majority of whom are Hindus who have apparently crossed the forbidden ocean since the time of the Shastras.

Evidently, the diaspora, formed upon the dispersal of peoples from their homelands, is a site of endless renegotiation. I argue that this renegotiation is twofold, between the diasporic subject and the mystic homeland, and between the diasporic subject and the new land. To the first point, Iain Chambers, in the opening chapter of *Migrancy, Identity, Culture* (1994), writes that unlike travel, where an itinerary has fixed points of departure and arrival, migration blurs these

points and extinguishes the possibility of a homecoming because the homeland, having undergone transmutation since said departure, no longer exists (5). Therefore, it can only exist in the diasporic imagination, defined by nostalgia and grief, and propelled by “some urge to reclaim” (Rushdie 10), hence becoming mystic. On new lands, the diaspora too inevitably changes; it becomes a site that produces a plurality of identities which are constantly subject to mutation (Chambers 5) and “constantly challenged”, landing its hybrid subjects in the irreconcilable interstice of “a scattered historical inheritance and a heterogeneous present” (6). This means that the diaspora can only be a translation, not a replica of the homeland, with its own set of norms and practices; what was once taboo may very well be challenged or even normalised in this new interstice.

However, it must be stressed that the diaspora is not in simple opposition to the homeland. In his 1996 essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Stuart Hall posits that cultural identity, as opposed to being a stable and “collected ‘one true self’” (223) is in fact a “matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’” (225) and that to enunciate one’s identity is to understand it not as “an essence but as a positioning” (226) that is subject to a continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (225). In explaining the traumatic discontinuity from the past in a postcolonial, diasporic world, Hall writes, “The past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual ‘past’, since our relation to it, like the child’s relation to the mother, is always-already ‘after the break’.” (226) Unpacking Hall’s simile,

diasporic subjects are one with the mystic motherland only as long as they remain within its boundaries, i.e. before they become diasporic. Once they leave the 'womb', they are pushed into a state of becoming and being; they are not only another but are also an Other to the native population they were once part of; the motherland can only be perceived belatedly as residing in their past, "a pure set of uncontaminated origins" that they can no longer return to (Hall, "When Was 'The Post-Colonial'? Thinking At A Limit" 246). Tethered by kinship, however, the diaspora and the motherland are now in a non-linear, dialogical relationship. A doubleness of continuity and discontinuity hence emerges, where the diasporic subject is neither in a position of complete oneness or alterity with the motherland but is now in the earlier mentioned interstice. Diasporic identities therefore are syncretic and heterogenous, for they are "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference" ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 235). In invoking Jacques Derrida's idea of *differance* here, Hall goes on to argue that the postcolonial diaspora is home to identities with an inherent complexity that far "exceeds [the] binary structure of representation", such as past/present and them/us, and cannot be simply reduced to "pure otherness" (229).

These ideas are well exhibited by the Indian diaspora in Singapore. The community is largely made up of "descendants of job seeking immigrants from South India who arrived in the 19th and early 20th centuries", with a Tamil Hindu majority that is estimated to be around 60% of the population (Parameswaran and

Sebastian 259). However, its fragmentary complexity, with its "various linguistic, religious, national, sub national, class and caste cleavages" or modalities, is camouflaged too neatly into the racial category of 'Indian' (259) within the government's CMIO—Chinese, Malay, Indian, Other—population model. Such camouflaging overlooks the fact that in a multicultural country with a Chinese racial majority and English, the coloniser's language, as the primary medium of communication, cultural identities are bound to hybridise. It fails to capture that diasporas are "contested spaces" that produce "a confluence of narratives" that should not be conflated (Brah 444). Even the authors who pinpoint this camouflaging fall into the trappings of unfairly equalising diasporic trajectories by generally categorising them as "job seeking immigrants" without unpacking how caste and class influenced Indian migration. In *A Subaltern History of the Indian Diaspora in Singapore* (2016), John Solomon writes that a "substantial segment of Indian migration into Singapore" from the 1870s was made up of Tamils from the 'untouchable' or Dalit caste who often worked as labourers or municipal workers (36). This is opposed to upper-caste Indians, including upper-caste Tamils, who could access white-collar jobs or conduct trade. Today, while several Indian languages and cultures have survived the rupture and continued to exist in the Singaporean diaspora, evidenced by the existence of institutions such as the Dayanand Anglo Vedic (D.A.V.) Hindi School and the Singapore North Indian Hindu Association (SNIHA), what it means to be Indian in Singapore is far

removed from what it means to be a native Indian, given the fundamental difference in positioning. Furthermore, within Singapore itself, there is a multiplicity of diasporic trajectories from the mystic homeland, which only produces more singular, unequal positionalities that differ in their degrees of continuity and alterity. These positionalities are only further heterogenised as the diaspora gives birth to new natives of Singapore to whom India as a homeland is no longer an applicable notion, meaning that the initial tethering only begins to “weaken and fall away” (Chambers 2).

What seems to temporarily unify these trajectories in its alterity to the homeland is the fact that Tamilness now is the most salient Indian subculture in Singapore, despite Hindi being the national language of India, and that caste-consciousness, though not entirely eradicated, has been significantly shed in Singapore as opposed to in India that still socially operates upon notions of caste. How then does Tamil Brahminness continue to manifest in such a community and what meanings are attributed to this particular caste identity outside of its native Indian framing?

To unpack this, it is first important to understand the notion of caste. Ashvin Parameswaran and Rodney Sebastian in their 2007 study “Who is a Brahmin in Singapore?” rightly point out that “caste identities are not monoliths” but must instead be seen as “plastic, variable and complex” (254), meaning that they are by and large man-made just as other social identities are, and are not

immutable. This is made truer by the observation that there is a longstanding dissensus, even within the native population, on the definition of caste, whether it is to be viewed along the lines of “varna, jati or both”, where varna is fourfold—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra—while jati exists in thousands (255); this can also be observed in the ever-expanding reservation policy in India, where the government has gradually recognised more caste (jati) and class (varna) communities as disenfranchised and in need of affirmative action, proving too that these societal demarcations are not as straightforward as one may assume.

In Singapore, where the mercantile Chettiar caste community is “easily the most prominent” (259), there has been no significant Anti-Brahmin movement (280). This is unlike, for example, the strong Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu known as ‘Self-Respect’ that was started by Periyar in the early 1900s; the movement demanded equal rights for lower caste communities, opposed Brahmin hegemony and positioned Tamil Brahmins as “non-Tamil ‘others’” (Solomon 119), a direct response to early nineteenth century Brahmin thinkers, both North and South Indian, who positioned Brahmins as “superior ‘Aryans’” and equals to the colonial British (106). There have, however, been Dravidian reformers in Singapore including in the form of Tamil newspapers such as *Munnetram* and the still-running *Tamil Murasu* (118). Despite such sentiments, Brahminness has been permitted to have its own public face through the Singapore Dakshina Bharata Brahmana Sabha (SDBBS), perhaps in an acceptance of differing caste traditions;

the SDBBS, founded in 1924, is the only Brahmin organisation in Singapore and was created to “fulfil the religious, social and cultural needs of the Brahmins living in Singapore”, according to its official website. However, it must be noted that the organisation is solely reserved for South Indian Brahmins, and has a Tamil majority since several Malayalee and Telugu Brahmins “choose not to join the association” (Parameswaran and Sebastian 261); it runs on a paid membership system where new members must be proposed and seconded by existing ones. Today, SDBBS only has around “900+ member families” (“Sabha Sandesh – SDBBS”), a considerably small and even negligible size when viewed in context of the total Tamil and Indian population in Singapore; this is proportionate to the Indian demographic too, particularly in Tamil Nadu where Brahmins only take up 2.5-3% of the population (Sivan 2019).

In order to understand how Brahminness is perceived in Singapore, Parameswaran and Sebastian surveyed 150 Indians in Singapore, with 107 ‘insiders’, defined as people who “consider themselves Brahmin,” and 43 ‘outsiders’, defined as people who “consider themselves Non Brahmin” (261). Through asking their respondents to reflect on Brahmin norms, what would constitute a norm violation, and the severity of said violations, the authors produced a four-quadrant cognitive model to reflect their observations on how “Indians think about Brahmin identity in Singapore”, ranging from a 1st class “archetypical Brahmin” to a 4th class “antithetical Brahmin” (263). What the study

proved was that there is no stable, fixed definition of Brahminness, with respondents disagreeing even on the basic ‘pillars’ of Brahminness such as parentage, vegetarianism, religious traditions, even SDBBS membership. Yet, while respondents were aware of these discrepancies, 58% still insisted that “caste identity was always immutable,” hence contradicting themselves (268). The authors argue that inherent to the diasporic Brahmin in Singapore is this paradox of “disunited realities and shifting individual identities,” and a persisting idea of and desire for a stable and fixed Brahmin community (281). Even if this community is purely imagined, since it relies on a belated perception of the past before the ‘break’, Parameswaran and Sebastian argue that the imagination in and of itself is sufficient for the continued existence of Brahminness, and by majority, Tamil Brahminness in the local Indian diaspora.

Now that the Indian diaspora and the Tamil Brahmin community in Singapore have been historicised, it is important to consider notions of representation. At the start of his essay, Hall posits that identity is “always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall, “Culture Identity and Diaspora” 222). Later, he also argues that the imagined past, prior to the rupture, is “always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth.” (226); I would argue here that even memory, fantasy and myth are types of narratives. Even so, the Singaporean Indian diaspora rarely finds itself narrativised in South Asian popular culture or literature, let alone the small, negligible subset that is the

Singaporean Tamil Brahmin diaspora. While the diasporic Tamil Brahmin seems to exist in the collective imagination, they are occluded from representation – unless one considers *Never Have I Ever*, an American comedy series released on Netflix in 2020 that revolves around a Tamil Brahmin American family, though their caste identity is merely suggested and the show has received criticism for its inaccurate representation of Hindu culture. Even native Tamil Brahmins, while more visible, are often Othered in representation, caricatured as punchlines for jokes or vilified. Hence, in the absence of narrative representation, diasporic subjects must rely on gross approximation to perceive themselves, aligning nonlinearly with the native subjects via native forms of representation. From their unique positionality of otherness and sameness, they must equate themselves with that which is not synonymous to their identities in order to become at all.

This chapter will therefore look at representations of the Tamil Brahmin, firstly in Tamil cinema to investigate the heavy stereotyping of the native community within the oversimplified binary of the *abishtu* (to be explained later) and the bigot, as well as briefly consider the prevalence of male protagonists over female ones in the industry overall. Then, moving on to Tamil Anglophone literature, we will look at a translated work as well as an original text in order to unpack how native Tamil Brahmin women writers have written themselves and the larger community into a dignified literary existence that problematises and subverts the binary. Lastly, the chapter will contemplate how these native realities may

persist or differ for the diasporic Tamil Brahmin subject who has been largely occluded from representation, through a brief exegesis of my short story cycle *Nine Yard Sarees*.

As a diasporic Tamil child growing up in 1990s Singapore, my Tamilness always felt sidelined. In primary school, Tamil and Malay language lessons were held in small stuffy cabins next to the tuckshop that trembled with every footstep. In secondary school, the only other Tamil student in my level and I had to travel from Bukit Timah to Umar Pulavar Tamil Language Centre, located in Little India, twice a week in order to learn our mother tongue, adding six hours of travel to our already arduous school week. In junior college, my in-school Tamil class comprised a grand total of my teacher, my classmate and myself; if any of us were absent, classes had to be cancelled, though this was a cause for rejoicing if it happened to be the teacher. While I enjoyed learning the language, I loathed the isolation, distance and palpable feeling of being outnumbered as a racial minority. This was compounded by the fact that Singapore, once a British colony, is an English-speaking country, which therefore meant that my mother tongue and culture were always mediated through a colonial inheritance, a third-party language; they became Other to me the same way I, as a postcolonial diasporic subject, was Other to the native.

The most accessible way to counter this unavoidable Othering and to find a sense of oneness or community was to consume Kollywood films with my family.

Borrowing from the moniker Hollywood, the K in Kollywood is derived from the fact that several films in Tamil Nadu are made in the state capital Chennai's Kodambakkam (Slobin 120). Films starring blockbuster names such as Rajinikanth, Kamal Hassan, Ajith Kumar and Vikram formed a bulk of my Tamil popular cultural diet. The first Tamil film I recall watching is *Muthu* (1995) starring my childhood idols Rajinikanth and Meena. My paternal aunts had taken my older sister and I to the now-defunct New Hoover Cinema on Balestier Road for an arguably transformative experience. Since then, I have idolised countless Indian actors and actresses, memorised catchphrases, sung along to catchy songs and sometimes mimicked dances too.

However, if I were to consider my particular subset of Tamilness as a Tamil Brahmin, which only felt palpable to me within the realm of the home, the pop cultural representation does prove limited and has often been yet another source of Othering, making me more conscious of my caste identity and its differing and overlapping signification in the motherland and the diaspora. Firstly, in terms of representation, films such as *Gentleman* (1993), *Shree* (2002), *Nala Damayanthi* (2003), *Anniyan* (2005), and *Aalwar* (2007) have foregrounded Tamil Brahmin male protagonists, though to differing degrees of commercial success; *Gentleman* and *Anniyan* both directed by S. Shankar as well as *Nala Damayanthi* were deemed as box office hits while the remaining two films faced lukewarm reception, becoming marks on actors Suriya and Ajith Kumar's otherwise consistently

impressive track records. Regardless of box office performance though, it would be disingenuous, given these examples, to claim that there has not been any Tamil Brahmin representation within Kollywood.

However, it would not be farfetched to posit that several Brahmin characters have been narrativised and portrayed in a stereotypical, even stigmatised/stigmatising manner. Take the popular *Anniyan* for example, which translates to stranger in English. The protagonist Ambi is a by-the-book lawyer who comes from a conservative Iyengar Brahmin background. From the opening credits of the film, it is evident that he retains visible Brahmin elements in his dressing: he wears a *poonal*, a sacred set of white threads that Brahmin men wear after their coming-of-age threading ceremony, the *Upanayanam*; he wears his long hair in his own interpretation of a *kudumi* (also known as *sigai*), a tight low bun that he secures with a pin [0:01:48]; he also anoints his own forehead with a *namam*, a thin red line that Iyengars draw up from between the brows [0:01:53-0:02:02]. These elements unanimously point towards his ritualistic lifestyle, which is further reinforced by his active participation in devotional group *bhajans*, the joint singing of hymns, within his community. Character-wise, Ambi is extremely prudish, particularly around women as demonstrated through his awkward relationship with Nandini, a girl from his *agraharam* in Thiruvallikeni whom he takes a liking towards. In one scene, when his friend Arivazhagan tells him to confess his love to Nandini, Ambi is bewildered by the very suggestion and

vehemently says, “I won’t touch her!” [00:30:51] and later when he does write her a love letter, he passes it to her parents, saying “It’s wrong to write a love letter. It’s decent to give it to her parents.” [00:36:01-00:36:04].

Ultimately, it is his extreme conservatism and psychological state of repression, both a result of his strict adherence to Brahminism, that manifest in an explosive multiple personality disorder. His violent vigilante persona Anniyan, depicted with long unkempt hair over his face and a menacing voice, is aggressive, even fiendish, a complete stranger to Ambi’s own personality; he makes it his personal mission to punish wrongdoers in society “with death” [00:22:37]. His womanising model persona Remo is sexually forward and hyper masculine, and it emerges after Ambi is rejected by Nandini for being too much of a stickler for rules; he is first spoken about in the film when Nandini wakes up to find the front of her house filled with pots of rose plants and is told by the courier that it was sent by someone named Remo [00:47:30-00:47:48]. It is arguable that these two personas represent facets of Ambi that he is unable to express freely because of his own social conditioning within his caste community, which is compounded by his personal compulsion to operate within a rigid and conservative framework. In “The Brahmin and the Citizen: Shankar’s *Anniyan*,” authors Rajan Krishnan and M S S Pandian argue that the film positions Brahmins and non-Brahmins in a normative binary as “natural and opposed to one another”, but in “failing to affirm the brahmin citizen”, meaning Ambi himself, they posit the idea that “the brahmin and

the citizen can exist only as never realisable ideals” and point to the “[unassimilable] nature of the brahmin ideal as the organising principle of democratic society” (3055). However, while this can be seen as a rightful criticism of Brahmin orthodoxy as fundamentally incompatible with the modern world, the film nevertheless reinforces the binary and the very stereotypes that it seeks to destabilise and reorganise. Ambi becomes the poster boy of the emasculated *abishtu* (the Tamil word for “foolish” and socially awkward that is typically used by Brahmins), hence the repressed male Brahmin who surrenders himself to “the demands of the caste-community” (3056). Furthermore, any transgressions through his non-Brahmin personas Remo and Anniyan are merely framed to be outside of his Brahmin normative state, as strangers to himself, and therefore beyond his consciousness and control.

Given that even Tamil films with Brahmin protagonists rely on a significant degree of stereotyping, it is unsurprising that portrayals of Brahmin side characters and cameos are steeped in clichés. If the emasculated *abhistu* represents one side of the Brahmin binary, then the intolerant, even brazen bigot represents the other. In the second scene during the opening credits of Suriya’s film *Soorarai Pottru* (2020), an unnamed Tamil Brahmin man (identifiable by his accent) is portrayed to be openly disgusted by the fact that he has to share a train carriage with Sholavandhan villagers who are of a lower caste: “Isn’t this a reserved compartment? What’s that stench? Dried fish? Yuck!” [0:07:02-0:07:06]

Outnumbered, he ends up being scorned by the villagers, first for making a sexist comment to the film's heroine Sundari, and second for his blatant caste chauvinism: "So, every time I go to Madurai, I'll have to endure this stench" [0:07:27-0:07:30]. In terms of representation, this is an excellent scene insofar as it affords the villagers a small yet significant victory whilst they continue to suffer from caste-based discrimination since it is also revealed that the express train deliberately does not stop at their village. Moreover, it sets the tone for the introduction of protagonist Nedumaaran, or Maara, whose entire trajectory in the film is motivated by his desire to fight such discrimination; he eventually builds a budget airline carrier that is open to and affordable for all. However, this very scene becomes a point of contention when one realises that *Soorarai Pottru* was inspired by the journey of Air Deccan founder Captain Gopinath, who himself was a Tamil Brahmin (indicated by his full name Captain Gorur Ramasamy Iyengar Gopinath) from a "remote village in the southern state of Karnataka" and whose father had been a "teacher-farmer" (Tilak 2020). The film, despite retaining Air Deccan in name and in terms of its story, rewrites Gopinath as a member of a lower caste community and reframes the Brahmin as the villain, first signified by this brief exchange between the Brahmin man and the Sholavandhan villagers and later solely embodied by Paresh Goswami, Maara's nemesis in the film who is a Gujarati Brahmin tycoon in the aviation business determined to cripple Maara's plans.

From the standpoint of marketability especially given Tamil Nadu's demographic as well political milieu, the rewriting makes sense; in order to limit criticism, the filmmakers have also framed it as not a biopic but rather an inspired film that, according to an interview with lead actor Suriya in *Cinema Express*, is merely "based on an idea from [Captain Gopinath's autobiography] *Simply Fly*". However, from the standpoint of critique, the film, while an engaging and compelling narrative, operates upon the same simplistic binary of Brahmin versus non-Brahmin and hence, does not do full justice to the real-life history of Air Deccan and its founder; it verges slightly on unethical, reshaping the motivations of the very figure it wishes to heroise, though not that Captain Gopinath seems to have publicly minded.

While popular culture via Kollywood has certainly been an access point into my Tamilness, the idea of fully resonant representation is impossible given the inherent difference in positionalities. Given that Tamil Nadu is dominated by Dravidian politics today, a clear extension of Periyar's much-needed movement, it can even be argued that these film stereotypes are a figurative method of resisting, even reversing age-old casteist hegemony, even if such repeatedly narrow characterisations underestimate the general audience's appetite for nuanced characters even within a single caste community. Trying to understand my diasporic Tamilness and Tamil Brahminness through such native representations has thus amounted to a significant degree of dissonance between the native

standpoint with its own peculiar strand of politics and my existence in the Singapore Indian diaspora, which is largely removed from said politics. This dissonance becomes increasingly impossible to reconcile too, given that my diasporic cultural identity is constantly producing and reproducing itself anew in a postcolonial world marked by globalisation and capitalism. Furthermore, as a woman, it is evident that Kollywood, like several film industries in this patriarchal world, prefers men as protagonists. Women rarely are permitted to take centre stage onscreen, even if there has been a marginally upward trend of female protagonists in recent years, and the Tamil Brahmin woman unsurprisingly remains, for the most part, unwritten. Even when she is written, she, by virtue of being a woman, is relegated to a secondary role as an accessory to the male protagonist's trajectory. For example, in *Saamy* (2003), the heroine Bhuvana is an orthodox Tamil Brahmin character, whose womanhood and Brahminness are subsumed under and interpreted through non-Brahmin hero Saamy's male gaze. Evidently, beyond the lack of diasporic Tamil/Tamil Brahmin representation, there is also a significant lack of female protagonists, calling for more complex representations that dignify the personal trajectories of these women beyond their relation to male counterparts.

These gaps only broaden if we move away from popular culture and turn to South Asian Anglophone literature, where there is a lack of both Tamil Brahmin and Tamil literary representations on the whole, regardless of gender. Much of

South Asian Anglophone works are post-Partition fiction and/or fiction that mostly depicts experiences of North Indian communities, such as the Bengalis, Gujaratis or Punjabis. While these are important representations, there is a significant lack of Anglophone literature by Tamil writers that is set in Tamil Nadu or depicts native or diasporic Tamil communities. The few names that do stand out are renowned and prolific writer R.K. Narayanan who is most known for *Malgudi Days* (1943), Kamala Markandaya whose first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1950) was an American Library Association Notable Book, and closer to home and contemporary times, award-winning Malaysian author Preeta Samarasan, whose novel *Evening is the Whole Day* (2008) unpacks class inequality within the Malaysian Tamil community (though only focusing on the dynamic between affluent Tamils and disenfranchised Tamils from the rubber plantations, without explicit mention of any caste communities). Beyond the likes of these authors, literary works that have depicted Tamil Nadu or Tamilan experiences tend to be works of translation, such as that of Bama (1958-) or C.S. Lakshmi who writes under the pen name of Ambai (1944-), both of whom translated by the late Lakshmi Holmström. Even in Singapore, the most notable literary work that depicts the Tamil community is K. Kanagalatha or Latha's Tamil-language short story collection *The Goddess in the Living Room*; the collection won the Singapore Literature Prize for Tamil Fiction in 2008 and was later translated and published in English by Epigram Books in 2014.

Given the general lack of Tamil Anglophone stories, literary works that centre on the Tamil Brahmin community are few and far between. Two of such works are Sivasankari's *Bridges* (2007) and Vinita Ramani Mohan's *Parvathi Dreams About His Sex* (2012). While the former was published in Chennai and the latter in Singapore, both are set in India, exploring the native Tamil Brahmin experience as opposed to the diasporic one, and utilising female protagonists.

Originally a Tamil-language novel named *Paalangal* (1983), the English translation *Bridges* was published in 2007 by New Horizon Media's imprint Indian Writing. The author Sivasankari (1942-) is an established fiction author and activist from Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Several of her stories have been turned into tele-series and excerpts from seventy-two of her works have been documented by the New Delhi office of the Library of Congress for its South Asian Literary Recordings Project "aimed at recording the voices of prominent authors from the region". The novel, which won the Kasthuri Srinivasan Award in 1984 for Best Novel, was partly Sivasankari's way of documenting "graphic accounts" by her Tamil Brahmin elders of "lifestyles, practices, and rituals" from her grandparents and other ancestors' time; the other impetus was from wishing to capture how women are "moulded at a certain stage" of their lives to become the bridge that "links the past and the future", becoming "a wise and effective link between the generations" ("Author's Note" 7).

Set within various parts of India, the narrative moves back and forth between three eras: 1907-1931, 1940-1964, and 1965-1985. Each era looks into the life of one Tamil Brahmin woman, Sivakamu, Mythili, and Charu respectively, and amounts to a grand total of thirty-four vignettes or text-pieces that unfold chronologically within the parameters of the respective era.

Sivakamu's narrative, opening at the start of the twentieth century, details a young girl entering a child marriage at the age of seven to eleven-year-old Suppuni. They officially consummate their marriage after Sivakamu has her first period at age thirteen, from which point she assumes the role of a "responsible housewife" (81) even though she is by contemporary standards still only a girl. Her life is governed by a strong adherence to rituals, superstitions as well as patriarchal expectations surrounding a woman in a joint family. Even as a young mother of a six-month-old, Sivakamu is given "no rest" for she, as a Tamil Brahmin housewife, is expected to complete several tasks along with her sisters-in-law including preparing castor oil from the plant seeds, drawing "*kolams* with rice powders", and making buttermilk from curds (142). Due to the sheer volume of descriptions dedicated to the domestic chores and rituals that the women of the house are expected to do, Sivakamu's voice is inadvertently shrouded; there are very few instances in the prose where her thoughts are clearly elucidated. Hence, she comes across as a pliant, voiceless girl and later a woman who accepts her situation no

matter how demanding, difficult, even outrageous it may seem especially to a modern reader.

Mythili's narrative takes place a generation after. She gets married after high school to a lawyer from Madras named Venkittu who is "against ostentation and unnecessary expense" as a man from the city (102): he refers to the decorations for their bedroom on their wedding night as barbarous (93); he thinks of her deeply oiled hair and overuse of *marudani* (henna) as "disgusting" and calls her choice of jewellery "old-fashioned" (99); when Mythili's parents express their wish to take her home and give her castor oil as per tradition for a pregnant woman, Venkittu refuses on the basis of modern medicine. His own mother laments: "Who does he think he is? Was he born in England?" (101) Eventually Mythili miscarries her first child, and her maternal grandmother Anandam blames it on Venkittu's lack of respect for tradition: "When our son-in-law said no to every one of our customs, I had a bad feeling...Our elders were not fools." (128) Though not in agreement with Anandam, given that they have been at odds since her childhood, Mythili's life transforms into a balancing act between her husband's extremely progressive views, which shuttle back and forth between being demeaning and liberating, with her own more conservative upbringing. Unsurprisingly, Venkittu, as the patriarchal husband who pushes to make his wife "sophisticated" by his 'modern' standards (100), dominates the narrative more than Mythili.

Charu's narrative, two generations after Sivakamu's, sees an only daughter get married off to her widower father's friend's son Suresh. With an MBA from Ahmedabad and as a CEO of a company in Bombay (now known as Mumbai), Suresh comes across as a worldly, educated gentleman. Charu seems to have more agency than Sivakamu and Mythili too, given the fact that she has had officer's training and is employed in Poona (now known as Pune). Hence, one would expect a more equal partnership that defies dated patriarchal norms. However, this assumption is quickly dismantled by Sivasankari: Charu finds herself thrust into an abusive marriage with a "sex maniac" and "sadist" (73) who constantly imposes himself on her. Though there were hints of this in their first encounter when he took her out for a drive and "kissed her with brutal passion" (49) and when he "took Charu almost brutally" on their wedding night, Charu was too naive to have registered this as his disposition to sexual violence. Over the first few months of their marriage, Suresh uses her against her consent to fulfil "new perversions" (55), even going so far as to crush a "lit cigarette on [her] bare breast" (57) and drop "hot ash on [her] naked stomach" (57). Her breaking point comes when he brings home a prostitute after Charu refuses sex on account of being six months pregnant (58). This leads her to seek a divorce, becoming the first and only character in the novel to be a divorcee and single mother.

Sivasankari sections the novel such that the reader follows these three women simultaneously through similar stages in life, from girlhood, to first

periods, marriages, birth (or loss) of children, widowhood, and grandmother-hood. What are accepted traditions in Sivakamu's era are slowly dismantled through Mythili's and Charu's narratives to increasing degrees. For example, when Sivakamu comes of age, the entire village is invited to her puberty ceremony for the "happy event" and "auspicious occasion" (61); she never once questions the rituals. In contrast, when Mythili gets her first period, she tells her mother Rajam that she will "not submit" to the traditional ceremonies because it is "indecent" (32), though she eventually submits to them. Much later in the novel, when Charu's daughter Aparna too reaches puberty, she does not even tell her mother and insists, when Charu discovers a box of Carefree sanitary pads in her bedroom, that it is a "personal affair" that she would not wish to "broadcast...to the whole world" (171). A similar juxtaposition emerges when Mythili's mother-in-law Mangalam is widowed and her brother-in-law Sankaran refuses the traditional ritual where a *sumangali*, a happily married woman, is turned into an *amangali*, a widow:

...what I will never forget is the disfigurement they subjected [Paati] to on the eleventh day. For months afterwards, whenever I closed my eyes, I'd see Paati as she used to be, a smiling face, jewels on her ears, nose and throat, kunkumam spot on her forehead, and a head full of hair.

Immediately my vision would change and I would see her as she was made to be on the eleventh day, in her white widow's robes and her head shorn. I

simply will not accept it if they try to do anything like that to our mother.

(187)

In agreement with his brother, Venkittu ensures that his mother is not “subject to having her head shorn” and whatever customs she ends up following are solely “by her own choice” (188). Exactly one vignette later, Suppuni’s untimely death turns Sivakamu into a widow and she undergoes the very rituals that Sankaran describes, in which other widows in the village “[remove] the flowers from [her] hair”, “[tear] the back of her blouse”, and her head was “shaved close to the scalp” (199). While everyone else weeps during the mourning period, Sivakamu remains stoic and on the thirteenth day after Suppuni’s passing, everyone returns to life as per normal since “the business of life must go on” (200). The sequencing of these narrative scenes gives rise to tension between and among the three narratives that are bound to each other because of their uncanny similarities. The parallels that are drawn among the women reveal the shifting paradigms and expectations within the conservative community over the decades. Even in scenarios where mothers seek to uphold tradition, such as Rajam and Anandam with Mythili or Charu with Aparna, the novel reveals a growing acceptance of resistant daughters simply because it is an expected phenomenon as one generation grows into the next. The resistance is not simply a matter of generational difference either. It stems from an increasing sense of agency for Indian women over the twentieth century, though

one can also read caste privilege into this change as well. Through education and exposure to alternative ideas and lifestyles, the female characters who were once as mute as Sivakamu begin to articulate their own desires and govern their own lives.

As the novel moves towards its end, the choice of its title, *Bridges*, is explained through Aparna's perspective in the final vignette. After choosing to get married at nineteen and losing her husband to a plane accident at twenty, Aparna remarries a Punjabi man named Kamal eight months after her husband's death, moves to Delhi and has her daughter Bulbul. In comparison to the other women in the novel, Aparna is arguably the most independent and non-traditional. For example, she and Kamal communicate only in English since their mother tongues differ and as such; Bulbul does not speak Tamil either despite being a descendant of a conservative Tamil Brahmin family on her maternal side. When Charu comes from Madras to visit, this becomes an issue because Charu is of the opinion that not knowing one's mother tongue is akin to "[knowing] nothing about her culture". Rather than argue with her mother however, Aparna has matured enough to notice a cyclical pattern and recognise her own place amongst the women in her family. Indeed, one of the final lines of the book, from the context of 1998, reads: "All women are bridges. As long as we perform our role as bridges, family bonds, ties, relationships, will never wholly snap, will not disappear, will survive." (240) Despite the tangible tensions between tradition and adaptation as well as tradition and resistance, even rejection, the women of *Bridges* grow to understand

that they become the bridges between the past, as signified by their mothers (including mothers-in-law), and the future, as signified by their daughters (even sons). They are able to operate in that in-between space precisely because they too were once daughters who became mothers, and eventually will transform into grandmothers if life so permits. Their Tamil Brahminness too undergoes this process of renegotiation over the years, manifesting in new ways to be a Tamil Brahmin woman; they are dignified in their own right, regardless of whether they are a Tamil Brahmin wife, a widow, a divorcee, a single mother, or a woman who has married out of their endogamous community.

While *Bridges* details the societal shifts over time and their paradigmatic impact on the women within the Tamil Brahmin community from 1907 to 1998, *Parvathi Dreams About His Sex* is a contemporary novella that grapples with the abstract underpinnings of Brahminism. Through the perspective of a Tamil Brahmin female protagonist named Parvathi, who is arguably a millennial figure, it unpacks Hindu mythology, its treatment of goddesses and by extension its treatment of women. The book, which was published alongside *The Billion Shop* as Book XIII of the 2012 Babette's Feast series by Math Paper Press, is set in India and focuses on a contemporary but orthodox Tamil Brahmin family that abides strictly by Shaivite tradition (16). This branch of Hindu theology positions Lord Shiva as the supreme deity and individuals who are a part of the Shaivite sect prioritise rituals and festivals pertaining to the god such as Mahashivaratri which

translates from Sanskrit to “Great Shiva’s Night” (22). Parvathi’s parents, as strict followers of Brahmin as well as Shaivite tradition, extol the practice of “not-asking” and “doing-without-mind” (72); her father participates in “lengthy recitations of the rudrajabam” (16) during Mahashivarathri, goes so far as to make his own “panchambritam”, a concoction of “mashed banana, rock sugar, cardamom, raisins and saffron” (21) and performs the “esoteric ritual” (18) regularly on their “small brass Shiva-Lingam” at home (20).

The source of tension emerges early, when Parvathi is sixteen. She learns from her parents that the Shiva-lingam, an oblong idol which is the only form in which Lord Shiva can be worshipped in temples, is a sacred phallus (11) that is “actually a representation of Shiva and Shakti” in cosmic union (22), which in other words means in the midst of sexual intercourse. As someone who herself was named after Goddess Parvathi, a form of Shakti, the protagonist Parvathi is struck by the glaring omission of Shakti from the nomenclature as well as rituals performed and mantras recited on Mahashivaratri. She observes that the Brahmin wives, who ironically were in charge of prayer at home, were immediately relegated to the “fringes” in temples, none of them “ever [breathing] a word about Shakti”. Indeed, she pointedly asks, “Where was Shakti?” (23)

The bulk of the novella’s narrative then takes place three years after, when Parvathi travels to Mumbai with her boyfriend Mark for a two-week trip to visit several ancient temples in search of Shakti; she was hoping to find *yonis*, to do

with Goddess Shakti and the metaphysical womb, as opposed to *lingams*. Parvathi's journey to Mumbai at the age of nineteen, on the cusp of young adulthood, marks her first major questioning in life. As someone who is not orthodox like her parents, she is guilty both about her ignorance with respect to her own caste traditions and about her community's historically privileged position. What begins as questioning slowly mutates into turmoil, as she is unable to see herself as separate from her community, since she has been raised precisely in a caste-conscious framework.

This inner struggle and confusion is exacerbated by her dynamic with Mark. Unlike *Bridges* which mostly focuses on Tamil Brahmin marriages, Mohan's novella unpacks an intercultural relationship in its early stages between a "questioning, reluctant Brahmin" and a "secular Jew" (29), looking in particular at the inherent politics between their identities and belief systems. In comparison to Mark, who is comfortable in his Jewishness and capable of separating it from his selfhood, Parvathi feels very much defined and stifled by her Tamil Brahmin upbringing. This emerges after they spot a statue of Ardhanarishvara at Walkeshwar temple, a half-female half-male composite form of Shiva and Shakti (35). Parvathi first wishes someone had told her as a confused child who once wished to be a boy that "a mixed up person wholly girl and boy was a manifestation of the divine" (36). She then reflects on her own reasons for not having sex yet, and considers how much of her abstinence or repression is a

product of her orthodox familial environment in a “middle class suburban home” that was about “carefully preserving the Brahmin way” (42); she even claims to be part of a “ritually well-regulated middle class machine” (53). Her inner turmoil surfaces again in her dream that night, in which she goes through the city’s Brahmin Priests’ Enclave on the way to a piazza. In the dream, she is paralysed by the thought of walking past the priests without pausing to observe and participate in the rituals they are performing because that would not be the Brahmin way: “You don’t just walk through a series of rituals, she reasons in her mind...The priests, she finally reasons, would expect it of her. She is Brahmin. She knows she will be identified as one (they can somehow spot their fellow Brahmins, she thinks).” (48) It is evident that Parvathi is subconsciously burdened by an unsaid expectation that she, as a Brahmin, must inherently know and partake in everything that is part of that framework and lineage. So psychologically circumscribed by her Brahminness, Parvathi struggles to take a stand, swinging between acceptance/active participation and resistance/criticism. After the visit to Walkeshwar, Parvathi comes across a postcard containing the photograph *Brahman Lady* by F. M. Coleman. The photograph is a portrait of an Indian Brahmin woman, dressed in silk and jewellery, seated on a chair and gazing directly into the camera while holding her waist with her left arm in a domineering stance. The fact of the portraiture itself indicates that the woman, regardless of her gender, is a privileged individual of the upper class. Noting this, Parvathi decides

to give the postcard to Mark with a handwritten note stuck onto it that jokes that while she may be a *goy*, a derogatory Hebrew word for a non-Jew, she still “rules” India (45). The joke, however tasteless, emerges in fact from a place of embarrassment, of ancestral shame (which to some may conversely be ancestral pride) with respect to being a beneficiary of utmost privilege within a casteist society. Earlier, Parvathi admits that growing up Brahmin means to explain, deny and apologise “for being Brahmin” before “surrendering and conceding that that is what she was” (44); she sees herself as a modern palimpsest of her community’s past, which is in fact a history of old, and sustained privileges. Unsurprisingly however, the joke is not received well by Mark, as it is a cheap rendering of identity politics and enacts a false equivalence between a Brahmin, who comes from the position of perpetrating privilege, and a Jew, who has been marginalised and targeted in the context of the Holocaust. This culminates in the couple fighting, with Mark accusing her of wearing her Brahmin identity and participating in the rituals like “it’s a badge of honour” (52). The blurred line between Parvathi’s apologia and concession is elucidated in this exchange, and Parvathi, six months into their relationship, realises her own ignorance and the extent of her mental torment, including the fact that the torment is in part self-imposed and self-sustained.

The next temple they visit is the Kailasa Temple in Ellora, where Parvathi finds “humongous sculptures depicting Shiva and Shakti’s life” (60) in the

sixteenth cave. Following that, she came upon “an enormous lingam, as tall as an elephant” within the main sanctum (60). The space is both sacred and charged with erotic energy, with several intricate sculptures of bodies separate and together. There, she meets Danam, a young clairvoyant who tells Parvathi that she is searching “for ancient goddesses” without realising Shakti “has [her] in her hand right now”, her mind the “sugarcane stalk in Tripura Sundari’s hand” (62), Tripura Sundari being one form of Shakti. Following this visit, an understanding descends upon Parvathi that Goddess Shakti is a necessary abstraction of an uncontainable that is fundamentally beyond idolatry and whose meaning therefore resides within the devotee themselves. This signifies Parvathi’s arrival at a traditional understanding of Shakti, rather than a transcendence into new ways of thinking. In one way, this amplifies Parvathi’s own lack of knowledge at the start of the novella. In another way, this could be read as Mohan’s cop-out, to take the reader on a journey that returns to the beginning. If to find Shakti is to realise Shakti has been ever-present, then what does that make of Parvathi’s own search for herself throughout this text within the context of her caste community and the inheritance of privilege and shame?

The answer, perhaps, lies in the final section of the novella when Parvathi decides to end her abstinence from sex. The text discusses how part of shedding a caste-conscious or casteist understanding of the world, one that is in part tied with Victorian constructs and hierarchy inherited through colonisation, is in reclaiming

her sexuality and her sexual desire (76). When Parvathi and Mark have sex for the first time, she describes it as “a million mirrors cascading...more lingams and yonis than she could possibly visit on pilgrimage, more of herself and him persisting, eternally” (80). It is not in caste-aligned traditions or rituals but in the physical and psychological union with her non-Brahmin, non-Indian lover that Parvathi ascends to her ultimate self. In a pivotal line at the very last paragraph, she says: “No one ever pointed the yoni out [because] everything is the yoni” (81). While this does not address the inherent misogyny that the novella points out in Hindu culture and society, likely because Mohan cannot offer any form of reconciliation or resolution, it does highlight the intended precedence of the feminine in Hindu philosophy, even if Shakti is hidden from plain sight. In learning about the philosophical essence of Parvathi, Tripura Sundari, and the yoni, the protagonist accepts herself, body and mind, outside of the tenets of orthodox Brahminism and Hinduism in a largely sexist society.

When viewed in unison, both texts present a multigenerational portrait of the native Tamil Brahmin community from the twentieth to the twenty-first century. Transcending the film industry’s oversimplified binary between the *abishtu* and the bigot that is male-centric too, they provide varied representations of the Tamil Brahmin woman in negotiation with her identity, community, and society by tracing the evolution of traditional practices such as child marriage and arranged marriage, and unpacking the eventual empowerment through education,

employment, and experience. However, neither text predicts nor presents the consequences of moving from the native to the diaspora, and the impact of such migration on Tamil Brahminness as an identity or community. This therefore leaves room for a postcolonial, diasporic portrait of the Tamil Brahmin woman and community in Anglophone literature that problematises and redefines notions of the motherland, diaspora, and nativity.

If *Nine Yard Sarees* is to be perceived as an extension of existing Anglophone literature, it is not in that it provides a diasporic alternative to the native narrative(s) of Tamil Brahminness, since that would merely play into the false notion of “pure otherness” that Hall cautions against (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 229). Rather, its objective lies in pluralising the diasporic narrative of the *TamBrahm* community, through the inherently multiplicitous short story cycle form, and reflecting the interstitial and aporetic realities of its characters. Out of the nine co-protagonists, six are Tamil Brahmin women, while three (Sivagami, Mira and Fiona) are outliers who come into contact with the community/family through work and romance respectively.

Amongst the six, Raji remains native in that she retains her Indian citizenship, but she still moves out of the Brahmin *agraharam* in rural Kalakad, first to Chennai, Tamil Nadu, and then years later to the state of Andhra Pradesh, both relocations that would inevitably result in renegotiations of cultural identity. Her relationship with Senthil, a Tamil man from a “different caste” (Ram), likewise

influences how she perceives herself in comparison to the ideal *Brahmanathi* or Tamil Brahmin woman. Her daughters Padma and Prema migrate to Singapore, becoming diasporic subjects, though their individual trajectories must be differentiated too. After college, Padma migrates from Kalakad to Singapore through arranged marriage to Srinivasan, a first-generation Singaporean along with his sister Shweta. In her new environment, Padma struggles to raise Tamil Brahmin children in “a land of Chinese people and Western modernity” since her husband, who fails to fulfil basic Brahmin expectations such as the daily *Sandhyavandanam* or the recital of the Gayatri mantra, is much less orthodox than she is. On the other hand, Prema and Shekhar, whom she falls in love with while working in the city of Coimbatore, migrate to Singapore after marriage through his engineering job at a “big conglomerate”. As Indian citizens, their path to Singaporean citizenship is much more long-winded, becoming permanent residents in the mid-nineties and only becoming citizens in the 2010s. These nuanced differences between Padma and Prema are further compounded by Prema’s own rejection of orthodoxy after a traumatic still-birth that changes her perception of religion and tradition, both of which she only retains in order to “[keep] up with appearances”, as opposed to her older sister who according to Prema is a “self-appointed *saamiyaar*,” or priest.

Naturally, the sisters’ children, who are born into Singaporean nativity, would not regard India as their immediate motherland and hence mediate their cultural and caste identities from a geographical and linguistic distance. Still, just

as the sisters present two different trajectories from the motherland, a distinction must be made between Krishnan and Keerthana's relationship with the motherland and that of Vani. Krishnan and Keerthana are second-generation Singaporeans, via their father. Yet, because of their Indian immigrant mother, they culturally reside in an in-between state, straddling India and Singapore, an in-betweenness that becomes more pronounced with Padma's orthodoxy. Conversely, Vani is a first-generation Singaporean with Indian parents who only became citizens when she was a teen, which means that she has no longstanding roots to Singapore, other than her own birth and upbringing in the country. Furthermore, unlike the Srinivasans who move into a condominium by the early 2000s, the Shekhars gradually move from flat rental to HDB home ownership, highlighting a slight difference in socioeconomic status between the two families that informs their lifestyles and opportunities.

Problematizing the Indian motherland to Singaporean diaspora trajectory further, Krishnan and Vani choose to leave Singapore for global cities Sydney and New York respectively. In migrating, they end up occupying a double diasporic identity, becoming a part of the global Singaporean diaspora on top of the Indian/Tamil Brahmin diaspora that they were born into, which only hybridises them further. In leaving home and nation, hence removing themselves from spaces that encroach upon the scope of their cultural and personal identities, they become more themselves: Krishnan dissociates himself from what he perceives as a

repressive caste identity and begins to live in opposition to it, even if he is compelled to do so in secret, including giving up his Brahmin lacto-vegetarianism and hiding his eight-year interracial relationship with Korean Australian Fiona Kim from his parents; Vani, having discovered her lesbian sexuality through becoming romantic partners with globetrotter and Singaporean Tamil woman Mira, migrates to an American city where lesbianism is not only more normalised but is given a legal pathway to civil marriage. Keerthana, while remaining in Singapore, marries an Indian citizen and fellow Tamil Brahmin Iyer Vikram. This links her more directly to the motherland, as compared to her brother and cousin, and leaves room for further renegotiations of her cultural identity through her spouse: “This was his home, and her distant homeland.” (Ram)

Given these various roots and routes, *Nine Yard Sarees* is not only a multigenerational portrait of a fictional Tamil Brahmin family, but a multifaceted portrayal that breaks the myth of a monolithic community and reflects the breadth and depth of the family’s diasporic experiences. It reveals the complex, shifting and fluid nature of the diaspora, reinforcing that it is indeed the site of an irreconcilable aporia, and exhibits through numerous characters and their respective narratives what it means to be Tamil Brahmin in a contemporary and global context. Ultimately, in Raji’s paradoxical ‘homecoming’ to Singapore, a foreign land that has become home to her daughters and grandchildren, she redefines what it means to be an equal part of the Tamil Brahmin community and

diaspora. Dressed in a nine yard saree with her non-Brahmin lover Senthil by her side, she symbolically offers, even if only briefly, a reconciliation to the diasporic aporia.

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