

**Gender, Migration and Agency:
Developing a “Hauntology” of New Becomings in Shauna Singh Baldwin’s “Devika” and
in Ginu Kamani’s “Just Between Indians”**

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ABSTRACT: In recent short stories written by diasporic Indian women writers, changes in terms of location or national identity are generally depicted as providing significant opportunities for Indian women to challenge and revise culturally-inscribed gender roles. In two collections of short stories written respectively by Ginu Kamani and Shauna Singh Baldwin, *Jungle Girl* and *English Lessons and Other Stories*, not only are ghosts employed to rupture boundaries between the living and the dead, but they also represent enabling presences which authorize female voices by resurrecting stories of women that have been silenced or forgotten. In these two books, the emergence of the archaic is recurrently tinged with liberating undertones since it opens up new spaces for identity by countering gendered expectations of ‘acceptable’ behaviour and by constructing alternative realities. My essay will therefore focus on the central metaphors of female ghosts and doubles as transitional figures through which women in transit empower themselves. My aim is to show how culturally displaced women appropriate the uncanny so as to engender new identities and assert the value of individual female experience. In these haunted narratives, I will contend, women move from a ghostly time of repetition to a ‘hauntology’ of new becomings.

Key words: Diaspora, Gender, Migration, Uncanny, Agency, India.

Introduction

In recent short stories written by diasporic Indian women writers, changes in terms of location are generally depicted as providing significant opportunities for Indian female characters to challenge and revise culturally-inscribed gender-roles. Maybe because they portray women who are in transit between different selves and who sit uneasily between past and present, an impressive number of these texts is haunted by ghosts and ancestral doubles, thus literally exploring what Homi K. Bhabha calls the “uncanny moment” of cultural difference (BHABHA, 1994, p.159). In *Jungle Girl* by Ginu Kamani and *English Lessons and Other Stories* by Shauna Singh Baldwin, the emergence of the archaic recurrently engenders a “hauntology”¹ of new becomings by resurrecting or decentering stories of women that have been silenced or forgotten. In Baldwin’s “Devika” and Kamani’s “Just Between Indians” in particular, the ghostly time of repetition constructs disjointed realities that not only counter gendered expectations of acceptable behaviour but also rupture ready-made categorizations of India as a site of stifling traditions and the West as a space of liberation and agency. Drawing first on “Just Between Indians” and then on “Devika,” my essay will therefore focus on the central metaphors of female ghosts and ancestral doubles as transitional figures through which Indian diasporic women engender becoming-bodies and create new interstitial spaces for identity.

The “transnational turn” of the diasporic subjectivity

In the wake of decolonization, large-scale migrations have resulted in the formation of increasingly hybrid multiracial and multicultural societies, suggesting the possibility that cultural identities may cut across national borders. Perhaps unsurprisingly in this context, the

¹ I have borrowed this term from Jacques Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*.

acceleration of migratory flows in the last part of the twentieth century is often associated with celebratory evocations of multi-hyphenated identities and cross-cultural transfiguration by hybridity theorists such as Homi K. Bhabha and James Clifford, who tend to portray the migrant as an icon of postmodernity and as a symbol of an identity “always-in-becoming.” Influential writers such as Salman Rushdie or Bharati Mukherjee also participate in presenting migrancy as the ultimate condition of late capitalism and as an emblem of globalisation’s fluid social forms, insisting on the ways in which transcontinental mass migrations can disrupt essentializing notions of identity and transform the culture of the host societies into “fusion chambers,” to borrow Mukherjee’s most optimistic words (MUKHERJEE, 1994).

From the late 1990s onwards, however, a wide range of scholars have started pointing out that institutionalized discourses on cultural hybridity were hardly in a position to accommodate the paradoxes of a new global interaction.² The paradigm-shift in matters of transnational migration, the far-reaching influence of an electronic media culture and the emphasis on the possibility of return complicate the space of migrant identity construction so that it is now untenable to represent immigrant self-fashioning in terms of a one-directional movement from the homeland to the “West.” Post-90s transcontinental migration is indeed characterized by an unsettling of binary oppositions such as arrival and departure, receiving and sending societies, or temporary and permanent residencies, notably because today’s migrants experience the homeland as being only a plane, a phone-call or a click away, as the saying goes. In the case of the Indian diaspora in the U.S., the reach of globalization and the recent liberalization of the Indian economy are coupled with a steady intensification of various forms of interactions with the U.S. which, along with the complex network of connections now operating between R.I.s (Resident Indians) and N.R.I.s (Non Resident Indians), invalidates the archetypal opposition between “India” and “America” in which the former stands for a space of stifling traditions while the latter epitomizes a site of agency. Without going as far as Mohsin Hamid who argues that today’s immigrant novel is as much about leaving America as it is about going to the U.S. (HAMID, 2008, p. 47), it is worth mentioning that the “transnational turn” of the diasporic subjectivity, as Vijay Mishra puts it (MISHRA, 2007, p.3) calls for an in-depth reconceptualization of the migrant experience, notably because it bears witness to the compelling influence of contemporary India on the Indo-American diasporic subjectivity.

Gender and diaspora

In late 1990s narratives by Indian American or Indian Canadian women writers such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shauna Singh Baldwin, or Ginu Kamani, the increasingly complex and multi-faceted nature of the relation between homeland, host country and diaspora is given a new dimension through a gendered approach to migration. The majority of these texts further disrupt universalizing celebrations of “globalization-as-cultural-hybridity” by showing that the “transnational turn” of the diasporic subjectivity by no means adumbrates a loosening up of constrictive gender-roles. In short-stories such as Lahiri’s “Mrs Sen” and Divakaruni’s “Silver Pavements, Golden Roofs” for instance, the reconstruction, even the ossification, of social and gendered hierarchies from India to the U.S. undermines the narrative of U.S. exceptionalism while pointing to the blind spots of transnationalism.

One of the most frequent narrative strategies through which Indian American or Indian Canadian women writers show the limitations of female agency in a context of “new migration” is by giving access to their female characters’ “pre-departure subjectivity,” to borrow Mala Pandurang’s phrase (PANDURANG, 2008, p.272), thus metaphorically

² See the essays published in *Tracing an Indian Diaspora* or in *South Asian Women in the Diaspora* for instance.

displacing the drama of immigrant self-transformation half-way between the North American and the Indian stage. This geographical and temporal enlargement of the narrative scope shows the ways in which Indian diasporic women are made to bear the burden of one of the most paradoxical consequences of the liberalization of the Indian economy, that is, a profound ambivalence of the Indian society as regards the “desired undesirability” of the western world. As Bharati Mukherjee shows in *Desirable Daughters*, Indian diasporic women are indeed conditioned well before their arrival in the New World to refrain from identifying too closely with the “corrupting” influence of Western value systems, which predisposes them upon arrival to evolve a form of compartmented identity within which the internalization of their role as keepers of Indian traditions remains unchallenged by their apparent determination to lead the American way of life. However, an increasing tendency of recent texts written by Indian American or Indian Canadian women writers is to associate the resurfacing of India on the stage of female migrant identity construction with a gain of agency, not with self-division. In Divakaruni’s *The Vine of Desire* and in Lahiri’s *The Namesake* for instance, Sudha’s and Ashima’s physical returns to India can be seen to constitute the apogee in processes of self-definition. Although they deal with a form of psychological return to India through identification with ancestral doubles, the two short-stories that I will discuss in this essay show that the female characters’ quest for diasporic agency in a global era proves better fulfilled when Indianness is not discarded, but is remodelled instead, upon entry into the West.

“Just Between Indians”

“Just Between Indians” is the penultimate text of *Junglee Girl*, a debut collection of short stories released in 1996 by U.S. based Indian author Ginu Kamani. As its title may already suggest – *Junglee* indeed translates from Gujarati as “untamed, wild, uncontrollable woman” – feminine sexuality and its relation to Indian womanhood constitutes the main theme of the collection. In *Junglee Girl*, not only does Kamani boldly challenge western paradigms of Indian women as asexual and passive objects of the dominant order, but she also represents feminine sexuality as a means of subverting patriarchy and traditional gender-roles. Although the story is in keeping with the provocative tone of the book, “Just Between Indians” stands out as the only narrative taking place in the United States and combines a rhetoric of dislocation with the overall themes of sexual identity and Indian womanhood. In this story, Kamani explores what has become the major source of conflict between the different generations of the Indian diasporic community, that is, the dilemma faced by those who must either accept an arranged marriage or resist familial pressure and consequently face up to the threat of communal marginalization or exclusion. Through its gendered and transnational perspective, “Just Between Indians” emphasizes the role of Indian women as symbolic boundary markers for their community and thus seemingly fits the cliché of the modern Indian woman who is victimized by third-world ethnic practices and consequently won over by a western ideology of free-will, feminism, and self-chosen alliances. Yet, through an excavation of the ghosts haunting the protagonist’s endorsement of a western rhetoric of freedom, I intend to show that Kamani’s story strongly problematizes binary oppositions that systematically equate western values with women’s liberation and feminine self-fulfilment.

Revisiting the wounds of the past

“Just Between Indians” opens in medias res, a narrative strategy which plunges Kamani’s reader head-on into the narrative while echoing its protagonist’s apparent unpreparedness for the scheme she finds herself caught in. Invited as a guest to spend a spring-term vacation at her father’s friend’s place in New York, Daya, a U.S. student and young Indian woman, comes to realize that her stay was purposefully scheduled by her parents so as to coincide

with the visit of her host's brother and his two sons of marriageable age, Ranjan and Sahil. Incensed at the prospect of being paraded as an "eligible girl" in front of near-strangers, Daya laments what she sees as her parents' betrayal and embarks on a nemesis-like crusade in a house that she scathingly renames "a pick-up joint for Indian men" (KAMANI, 1997, p.158).

Ironically, what constitutes the trigger of Daya's crusade as well as one of the major elements of the plot is consigned to the offstage space of the diegesis. Indeed, it is by way of Sahil's mysterious insinuations that Daya comes to realize in the opening scene that Ranjan is engaged behind closed doors in a long-distance phone conversation with her parents to discuss her availability for marriage. Filtered through Daya's perspective, the limited third-person narration reflects the protagonist's offstage position and subsidiary role as regards Ranjan's proposal while it emphasizes the ambiguous nature of Sahil's self-appointed mandate as mediator between Daya and his brother. Of key interest here is the way in which the narrative bounces back and forth in time so that it parallels Daya's predicament with the first marriage proposal she received as a fourteen-year-old girl, following a camping trip during which she was mercilessly teased by her elder brothers and their male friends. Through Daya's recollection, Kamani signals the extent to which this traumatic event opened an unbridgeable chasm in the protagonist's relation to her hitherto idolized brothers and more importantly, how her mother's delight at having received an early marriage proposal for her daughter initiated a breach of trust which took on dramatic proportions: "From then on, in her own house, Daya felt afraid. She knew it was only a matter of time before she would be betrayed" (KAMANI, 1997, p.154).

From that point on in the text, it thus becomes clear that Ranjan's proposal has opened for Daya a Pandora's box of stored up grief and rage by both reviving the betrayal of her brothers and the threat of separation from her family. In this context, Daya's rage against Indian men in general and her scapegoating of Ranjan in particular seem less informed by a feminist agenda than by the need to alleviate the wounds of the past. What Kamani provocatively suggests in her story is that, although her protagonist masquerades as an Amazon and is dismissively characterized by her host as a "modern," rather than "Indian" girl, Daya's endorsement of western values is only a smokescreen hiding a profound sense of loss. In this respect, it is no accident if Daya's visions of "grabbing Ranjan by his crotch and forcing him to his knees, while his father and uncle [plead] for his life" (KAMANI, 1997, p.167) are juxtaposed with fantasies of after-marriage family reunion in which the mother/daughter relation gains new momentum:

[Daya's parents] would be delirious with excitement if she reported back to [them] that the matchmaking had worked. Overnight, their attitude toward her would change, become more generous, more respectful, more relaxed. Her mother would hover around her, laughing, joking, confiding in her as she prepared Daya for being a wife. [...] Fantasizing intimate moments with her mother was something Daya could do for hours. (KAMANI, 1997, p.168)

In these excerpts, Kamani reveals the archaic nature of Daya's fantasies, which significantly oscillate between nemesis-like visions of punishing "Indian men" and after marriage/before the Fall fantasies haunted by the ghost of motherly love. Unsurprisingly, in this prelapsarian fantasy-world, love and hate are tightly intertwined and the time is out of joint. Yet, between the lines of Daya's archaic daydreaming, Kamani suggests that the ghostly time of repetition not only brings about possibilities for revenge; it also opens up new opportunities for love, mourning and renewal. In this respect, it is revealing that Daya's ruthless rejection of Ranjan is coupled with her growing sexual attraction for Sahil, as if she could indeed redeem her scapegoating of one brother by her desire for the other. Indeed, while Daya's ambivalent fantasies point to her longing for motherly love and thus reveal her undying yearning for a

totalizing state of unity and community, on the other hand Sahil and Ranjan are characterized as two polar opposites still haunted by the suicide of their own mother some years before in the very same house. True to the antithetical meaning of their names – “Sahil” means “ruler” and Ranjan, “pleasing” – the two brothers represent two components of a whole, two doppelgangers whose fixation on their dead mother mirrors Daya’s obsession with her own.

Enabling Doubles

The motif of the double is usually interpreted as a symbol of Death. Yet, in Kamani’s story, the two brother’s “Jekyll and Hide’s routine,” as the protagonist calls this, indirectly soothes Daya of the wounds of the past by enabling her to redirect both hatred and desire. Unsurprisingly in this context, not only does Daya’s sexual relation with Sahil towards the end symbolize the protagonist’s espousal of desire over hatred, but it also prefigures her reconciliation with Indian men and Indian womanhood. Indeed, even if Daya takes refuge once more in “familiar anger” when she discovers that Sahil had sex with her in his mother’s deathbed, and what is more, on the very day of his mother’s death anniversary, the recollection of his embrace makes her eventually understand that the night they spent together enabled her lover to accommodate the shadow figure of his dead mother and break the “spell that hung over him” (KAMANI, 1997, p.181). Through Daya’s realization and her consequent repositioning of herself as a modern Persephone of sorts, Kamani suggests that Sahil’s morbid projection works both ways. Clearly, his recasting of Daya as his dead mother’s double empowers her in turn to evolve new subject-positions in connection with a shadow figure of totalizing wholeness, which enables her to exorcize her archaic yearning for a prelapsarian state of unity and identity. In other words, Sahil’s dead mother represents a transitional figure through which Daya embraces womanhood by exchanging her quest for motherly love and full identity for a new recognition of sexual difference.

Significantly, the last scene of the book merges the protagonist’s final endorsement of difference over sameness with the joint reassertion of her Indianness and relocation in the New World. As Daya ventures for the first time out of her host’s house to visit the city, she is called after by a Greek hot-dog vendor who insistently inquires about her nationality and goes wild with joy when he learns that she is Indian: “India! Most beautiful woman in India. I see movies. Happy, happy, dancing, singing! [...] Every man love Indian woman! Whole world love Indian woman” (KAMANI, 1997, p.183) Weary at first of the vendor’s ravings about Indian women, his unadulterated displays of joy finally seem to echo a crucial reason for her affiliation with the New World: “This is what I came for, this is what brought me here” (KAMANI, 1997, p.183). In some ways, Daya’s reflection indicates that she has now evolved a core of identity flexible enough to accommodate others’ projections, yet strong enough to retain a stable sense of self. In Kamani’s story, the protagonist’s reassertion of her bond to the New World is thus coupled with her reconciliation with womanhood in general, and Indian womanhood in particular. “Just Between Indians” comes indeed full circle as Daya lets go of her anger and manages to take in the vendor’s naïve joy: “So many years of anger [...] and this man sees only beauty in my face” (KAMANI, 1997, p.183).

Devika

Published in the very same year as Kamani’s story, “Devika” also deals with sexual identity, Indian womanhood and relocation in the New World in relation to the stock theme of arranged marriage. Yet, while Daya is portrayed in “Just Between Indians” as a ‘*junglee*’ rebelling against her status of “eligible girl,” in “Devika,” Baldwin first characterizes its eponymous protagonist as the quintessential good Indian wife who cooks traditional dishes, cleans the house and dresses up while patiently waiting for her husband to come home. Through its constant bouncing back and forth between here and there, between the grim

emptiness of Devika's new Canadian life and her projections about the bustling world of India, the opening scene of the text shows that the protagonist's impeccable dedication to her domestic role hides in fact a sense of dereliction and homelessness that verges on psychic fragmentation. In order to remedy her feelings of intense loneliness, Devika invents Asha, an imaginary friend who takes the shape of her best friend back in India. Interestingly, by summoning Asha in Canada, not only does Devika mentally transport her friend across space, but she also beams her up, so to speak, across time. For Devika's invention of Asha is in fact a reinvention or rather, a resurrection of sorts. Indeed, far from duplicating the real Asha, that is, the domesticated woman who sent an aerogramme from India celebrating the joys of marriage and motherhood, Devika's imaginary friend restores to the present a past version of her friend, the "wilful, fun-loving, irreverent Asha, the one who'd sworn never to be married" (BALDWIN, 1999, p.156).

Subverting Patriarchy through Doubleness

Unsurprisingly in this context, not only does Asha's ghostly company represent for Devika a diversion from loneliness, but it also comes to constitute a strategy for subverting her husband's patriarchal authority. By recurrently setting a third plate on the table for her friend at dinner time, Devika imposes Asha's absent presence on Ratan, her husband, and thus creates an interstitial imaginary space through which she can start looking at "Mr Right-Can-Do-No-Wrong Ratan" from a different perspective. Interestingly, if Devika's doubleness in the domestic sphere empowers her to challenge culturally-inscribed gendered hierarchies, it also preserves and maintains a dichotomy between "good girls" and "bad girls" which is presented in the text as an essential frame of reference for Baldwin's character in terms of identity construction: "In Canada, [Devika] found it more difficult to sort the good girls from the bad ones. It is important to have both, because if there are no bad girls, how would anyone know that girls like Devika are good?" (BALDWIN, 1999, p.158). Here, Baldwin suggests that Devika's split identity constitutes a coping mechanism to reassert boundaries in the face of extreme acculturation. Indeed, while her "identity-as-Devika" secures a sense of continuity by complying with norms of behaviour that construct "good" Indian womanhood as being selfless and pleasing, her "identity-as-Asha" enables her to indulge more freely, albeit in a schizophrenic way, in hobbies and pastimes that are synonymous with western influence and "bad" Indian womanhood. Psychologically sheltered by the pretence that she is Asha, the protagonist starts smoking, goes for walks on her own and buys cowboy jean jackets, high-heeled boots and lingerie. Though irritated at first by Devika's attitude, Ratan comes nevertheless to acknowledge Asha's presence in the hope that his wife's imaginary friend may influence her to put a modern gloss on her "Indian convent-girl" appearance, and then look more suited to his own professional ambitions. Indeed, obsessed as he is with projects of promotion and upward mobility, "model-minority" Ratan keeps on fantasizing about inviting his tyrannical boss over for dinner and assumes that he can only do so if his wife looks western enough to agree with Peter Kendall's whiteness. Here, one of the main ironies of the text is that it parallels Devika's schizophrenia in the domestic sphere with Ratan's fantasies of unlimited success in the professional world, as if Baldwin wished to create a disturbing mirror effect between the protagonist's invention of "Asha" and her husband's fixation on his boss.

Creating interstitial spaces for identity

Clearly, much as the protagonist's hallucinations construct "Asha" as an all-pervasive presence condemning Devika's lack of personal aspirations, Ratan's compulsive daydreaming positions Peter Kendall as a god-like ideal which sanctions every single detail of his everyday life. Unsurprisingly in this context, Ratan engages in acts of imaginary rebellion that only convey the extent of his own psychic colonization:

Suddenly he'd given way to anger. Pure anger, making him fight the rush-hour traffic as though he were driving in Delhi again, looping in and out and honking all the way to Little India on Gerrard Street. There he'd eaten chaat with his fingers, like a desi-di-haat from a village, and drunk a brown bottle of warm Rosy Pelican beer, as though daring Peter Kendall to drive by and see him. (BALDWIN, 1999, p.166)

In this excerpt, Ratan's outburst indicates that he so thoroughly identifies with a white power structure that the endorsement of a stereotypical Indianness seems to represent for him the only means to regain a sense of his own individuality. Baldwin points here to the limits of Ratan's compartmented identity, since his sense of self can only fall back on predetermined dichotomies opposing India to the West. By contrast, it is revealing that Devika's haunted identity enables her to *both* criticize "white people" *and* indulge for instance in western style clothing. What Baldwin suggests in her text is that via the imaginary recreation of her "jungle" friend, the protagonist imagines a border-consciousness of sorts which not only blurs the boundaries between past and present, between India and Canada, but also resists categorizations and ready-made identifications. In this respect, Asha, whose name means hope, represents an in-between space of empty potential, a transitional figure of empowerment, a disembodied image of an identity yet to come. Significantly, it is through Asha's "eye" (pun intended), and more particularly, through the pictures that his "wife-as-Asha" takes of him, that Ratan will eventually gain a measure of his self-division. Although intended as a "toy" which would divert Devika from her "Asha non-sense," the camera Ratan buys for his wife's imaginary friend comes to represent a third body relaying images of a still-born identity on the verge of extinction:

[Devika was taking] pictures of Ratan as though she wanted to have him, a piece of him, all the time. And they weren't even nice pictures; his hair was thinning.

In fact, his hair was falling out in patches. There were small bald spots on the back of his head, and he took himself to the emergency room at North York Hospital.

"Stress-related," said the doctor from Poland. (BALDWIN, 1999, p.169)

Here, the photographs taken by his wife provoke in Ratan a specular crisis of sorts and suggest that his quest for upward mobility has taken its toll. Through the lens of his wife's camera, not only does Ratan bitterly recognize in himself a degraded image of his model-minority ideal, but he also comes to realize the extent to which constant demands and expectations placed on him have in fact cannibalized whole chunks of his identity. In this context, Ratan's desire that Asha were a real person signals the emergence of new spaces for identity. Indeed, "Asha" now represents for him the ultimate locus through which he can negotiate new subject-positions without reifying himself in conformity with the pre-existing ideals of model-minority husband and highly-skilled professional. Sustained by her husband's desire for her ghostly alter-ego, the protagonist is now ready to embrace "Asha," her "wished-for-identity," and to shed "Devika," an identity fittingly encapsulated by a name which means "little goddess." In this respect, the car accident during which the protagonist is nearly killed both marks the death of her "identity-for-other" and the letting go of a totalizing sense of self. Left in a hospital room to recover after her near-death, the protagonist renames herself as Asha and re-territorializes in the "here and now" by redefining her life as "Ratan, and Canada, and herself. No one else" (BALDWIN, 1999, p.173).

Conclusion

In a similar vein to "Just Between Indians," "Devika" thus merges the death of haunting ideals with relocation and new beginnings. Under the guise of embracing a rather clichéd mythology of the New World, Baldwin's and Kamani's representation of Canada and the U.S. as *both* birthplaces of hope *and* places of haunting gestures in fact towards new models of

integration. In these two texts, migrant women do not travel light. Yet, far from hindering their integration in the host society, their cultural and spiritual luggage eventually enables them to construct new becoming-bodies which not only take into account the value of pre-migration experience but also go beyond the traditional assimilation between assimilation and cultural pluralism.

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