

Book Review

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Emerging Voices: South Asian American Women Redefine Self, Family and Community, Sangeeta Gupta (ed), New Delhi, Sage, 1999

Emerging Voices: South Asian American Women Redefine Self, Family and Community is a collection of 11 essays addressing the issue of bi-cultural identity among South Asian American women. The collection is the outcome of the 1994 South Asian Women's Conference organised by the editor. Gupta recognised that the history of South Asian immigration to America is largely a male-focused history. There is literally nothing written on the experiences of South Asian women, which, according to Gupta, is a result of women migrating as dependents who participate primarily in the private sphere. Gupta is careful to state that her intention is not to present a history of South Asian immigration that inserts women into the existing narrative. Rather, it is her intention to present several 'woman-centered' accounts that will add complexity to the existing body of literature. In this vein, the contributors explore subjects that surface more in the 'private sphere'—subjects which are not generally captured in, as Gupta puts it, conventional 'history.' The result is a collection of essays discussing bi-cultural identity through a range of 'private' issues including dating, marriage, divorce and sexuality.

Gupta introduces the collection by outlining a brief history of South Asian immigration to the United States. This volume is mainly concerned with post-1965 immigration, which is described as a movement of urban professionals. The majority of women who migrated since 1965 are wives or daughters of male professionals. With this background in mind, contributors to the volume explore how these women and the subsequent generations of South Asian American women struggle to redefine themselves, their families and their communities in a bi-cultural reality.

Gupta suggests in her introduction that the collection may resemble a hodgepodge because the essays range from intensely personal biographical essays to more traditional academic papers. Her intention is to "give a more complete picture of the experiences of these South Asian women" (p 26). The hodgepodge approach lends strength to the volume as a whole, as the reader is forced to think about identity issues on several levels. Sabah Aafreen, Lubna Chaudhry and Pooja K in their biographical essays take the reader through their own processes of identity formation. The conversational-toned pieces of R Kamna Narain, Sudha Sethu Balagopal and Mantosh Singh Devji also provide readers glimpses of how several South Asian American women define and redefine themselves and their communities within a bi-cultural reality. The more traditional academic works by Kauser Ahmed, Lalita Subrahmanyam, Karen Leonard, Anannya Bhattacharjee, and the editor compliment the personal essays by identifying and analysing trends. One example of how the essays compliment each other can be seen in the essays by Sabah Aafreen and Karen Leonard. In her personal essay entitled "In Search of Self," Aafreen, a first generation Asian-Indian, speaks about feeling torn between her identity as a "good girl" as defined by the parental generation and her identity as a young American woman. She relates a story about her desire to attend university rather than to marry a cousin living in India. Aafreen applied to a university in secret because her parents were against the

idea of higher studies, and told them about her decision only after she arrived on campus. In her essay entitled "The Management of Desire: Sexuality and Marriage for Young South Asian Women in America," Karen Leonard explores secrecy, especially surrounding interpersonal relationships, as a way of reconciling the demands of two cultures: the culture inside the home and the culture outside the home. Leonard presents a trend with which individuals, such as Aafreen, can identify. The reader gains a more well-rounded understanding of the issues at hand by presenting personal accounts alongside more traditional academic writing.

While I find Gupta's hodgepodge approach to be an effective way of presenting the material, I did not find the physical organisation of the volume to be helpful. The essays are organised into three sections entitled "Redefining Self," "Redefining Family" and "Redefining Community." I found these divisions to be more of a distraction than a help to the overall layout of the book. In truth, all of the articles deal with personal, familial and communal identity issues, which is apparent in R Kamna Narain's chapter entitled "From Starbucks to Sangeet: Whether at a Trendy Western Spot or Traditional Eastern Gathering, South Asian Women are Dealing with the Same Issues Every Moment of Their Lives." Narain questions 'choice' in selecting a marriage partner. Her conversationally-toned piece explores the experiences of women dealing with varying degrees of pressures to marry. The different types of marriage (arranged versus self-chosen) and the varying degrees of pressure to marry by a certain age show the dynamic redefining of this institution among the women as individuals, their families and the wider community. In another essay entitled "A Generation in Transition: Gender Ideology of Graduate Students from India at an American University," Lalita Subrahmanyam questions how unmarried graduate students would define themselves as individuals within a hypothetical marriage relationship and how the students would subsequently define 'family.' Subrahmanyam suggests that as the graduate students redefine their marital roles, they also have to redefine 'family.' Although both of these essays appear within the section entitled "Redefining Self," the issues are interrelated with family and community identity. To label these essays as 'self identity' is to deny the numerous layers within which identity formation simultaneously takes place.

The "emerging voices" in this volume examine choices South Asian American women are making about identity. This type of volume has the potential to reach other South Asian American women (or for that matter, other bi-cultural persons) who are also struggling with self, family and community identities. In her introduction, Sangeeta Gupta emphasises, "there is no *one* experience" (p 24). The range of experiences, coping methods and choices explored in each chapter presents the reader with numerous ways (for me, new ways!) of thinking about and understanding bi-cultural identity formation. It is this diversity that gives this volume its strength and potential to reach and possibly impact a wider audience. To provide one way of defining or redefining 'South Asian American woman' is not only to fall into the 'historical' trap, but also to risk the alienation of many women, as illuminated by Anannya Bhattacharjee in her chapter entitled "The Habit of Ex-nomination." Bhattacharjee argues that elite Indian-Americans construct a single Indian-American community identity that does not include in its definition illegal immigrants, lesbians, battered women, among others. Those who fall outside the bounds of this one definition of 'Indian-American' are thus alienated by the community. In general, the authors do not fall into preaching 'the right way' to redefine identity. Sangeeta Gupta, however, disappointingly falls into this trap in both of her articles. In "Dating and Marriage" Gupta finds that "the second generation is willing to consider an 'updated version' [of an arranged marriage] in which they can actively participate" (p 134). Two pages later Gupta goes on to say that "women want to renegotiate the arranged marriage system and *bring it into the 21st century*" (p 136) (emphasis mine). Finally, Gupta says, "it is unclear how much *progress* has been made towards more consensual or semi-arranged marriages" (p 137) (emphasis mine). As I read this chapter I felt as if I were reading a book on economic development from the 1950s. Gupta seems to advocate *one* pattern of identity formation—a linear model where one progresses from identifying with the home culture (arranged marriage) to identifying with the majority culture (self-chosen marriage). Gupta *almost* escapes this trap in her second essay entitled "Marriages, Divorces, and

Rebuilding Lives.” In her groundbreaking work on South Asian American divorcees she provides solid examples of how some women are coping and rebuilding their lives. Unfortunately, Gupta used the conclusion as an opportunity to deliver a political speech on challenging the patriarchal institution of arranged marriages (even though one of her five informants had a self-chosen marriage!). I understand this volume to be a challenge to the conventional understanding of the immigrant experience, not an outright rejection of it. Therefore, I feel that Gupta’s rejection of ‘traditional’ institutions such as arranged marriages on the grounds that it perpetuates patriarchy is to deny a valid space in which many South Asian American women *positively* define themselves and their families.

I do not want to dwell on the few weaknesses of this collection because, overall, *Emerging Voices: South Asian American Women Redefine Self, Family and Community* was a joy to read. Again, the strengths of this volume lie in the mix of personal experience and more traditional academic work, as well as the multi-disciplinary and multi-generational approach. This strategy brings to the fore issues outside of the ‘historical’ tradition and allows readers to gain an understanding of how some South Asian American women redefine themselves, their families and their communities throughout their bi-cultural lives. The contributing authors have successfully added complexity to the existing body of immigration history. More importantly, they have laid the foundation for future research which can and will result in building institutions and support networks sensitive to the needs of South Asian American women.

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