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### **The South Asian Diaspora in the Arts<sup>1</sup>**

Edited by Sujata Iyengar  
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*Andy Kavoori:* The reason I'm here today is to give a sense of why we chose to do a panel on the diaspora. The first logic behind this panel was the rather simple one of what is any South Asian doing writing a novel or starting a dotcom? That was the initial imperative, but beyond that there is the imperative of those two complex contested words, globalization and multiculturalism. Both are really two sides of the same coin, and nowhere is this dynamic represented as much as in art, and film, and literature (not television). So that is the type of logic behind this panel, both the specificities of the South Asian diasporic moment and their lessons for issues of globalization and multiculturalism. But beyond that, what I hope this panel will achieve is a sense of the space that we occupy at this particular moment in time. Our texts have essentially looked at the links between self and space through texts, and I think that the people on this panel are extremely well qualified to speak to that relationship. Speaking to that relationship also means speaking to the historical moment and its constitutiveness in terms of not only knowing that history speaks through us in ways that we cannot know, but equally it speaks through us in ways that we cannot control. And the texts that we produce reflect that. Finally, a comment from a writer who once told me "write from the imagination and not from the experience": essentially, if we are to really understand the complexities of the diasporic moment, we have to look at the ways that people will bring text into life through imagination, and not just through experience. So I give you Dr. Sujata Iyengar and the panel.

*Sujata Iyengar:* There are several themes that I hope our conversation will bring out. First of all, the theme of identity and what it means to be a South Asian artist, whether there are particular themes that surface in the work of writers and novelists hailing from the Asian subcontinent; then the theme of artistry itself and the kinds of genres, media, and diction we use in visual and written texts; and finally, the whole issue of marketability, what it means to sell this as a category, and whether that, again, influences the way we represent ourselves and are represented in the culture at large. Let's begin by querying the whole premise of the panel. What does it mean to bring together people who spent their formative years in, variously, England, the United States, India, and Pakistan? What do we actually have in common besides an interest in the arts? One could certainly argue that a community of people with an interest in the arts is a more closely knit, a smaller, and more distinctive community than those sharing genetic ancestry in

the subcontinent, a space easily more diverse than the United States of America. Do you think we have anything in common, anything that unites us apart from this bloodline? Do you think that this inheritance itself means anything?

*Bharati Mukherjee:* I think that's a very interesting entry point into what we want to discuss. What we have in common is being artists in the diaspora. But I don't think that in terms of generational, cultural inheritance we necessarily have that much in common. But the fact that we have chosen or accidentally have left the home country and made our lives and had our arts—our intellectual, emotional, and artistic imaginations transformed in some ways—is what we have in common. And I'd like to pick up on one thing that Andy was saying about artists and imagination versus artists and experience. I'd like to think that a lot of the post-colonial scholars who wield the big stick—South Asian-born postcolonial scholars like Homi Bhabha or G[ayatri] C[hakravorty] Spivak in these Ivy League-type universities—want us to be assassins of the imagination. I would like instead to think that we are artists who experience the imagination. It's not writing sociology; we are becoming what we want to imagine.

*Waqas Khwaja:* Which brings us another very interesting question, and one that pertains to whether really we have anything in common across the geographical divides that we come from and the locations that we bring with us in our imagination, or that we share, or in which we are situated. Because if it is more a question of individually experiencing our environment (even when we feel displaced in that environment, or in an environment that we come from)—whether we have a memory of that environment as a kind of nostalgic home country that was ideal from this distance but had problems when we were there, or whether *we* had problems with it when we were there, I'm saying perhaps across all cultural and ethnic and geographical divides individuals everywhere share the same kind of experience we are talking of. When we talk of the artist's experience, when we talk about letting ourselves speak from the imagination as opposed to from experience—I would tend to disagree with that statement and say experience plays a role in it—the fact remains that as artists we share the processing of that experience in a particular way. And perhaps there is more in common between people writing and being involved in the artistic activities everywhere than there is simply in people coming from the South Asian countries.

*Sarojini Jha Johnson:* I don't think of myself as an Indian artist. I think of myself as an American. I am an American; I grew up here. I guess what fascinates me about art that comes from Indian people is that it's available. First of all, as I grew up, there really wasn't a way to find out what Indian people thought. Mostly I was surrounded by scientists. Recently I am able to really see a lot of different things expressed, things that I have only thought of maybe in the deepest recesses of my mind. I have Indian parents. They have an arranged marriage. They lived in this country for forty years—it has really been fascinating for me to talk to them about various issues. I think of them as American also. I don't think that they could go back. I guess the impact of the two times that I did go back to India was so profound that it has just infiltrated my psyche, with things that I think are important, and it definitely has come into my artwork. I feel like my artwork is the medium through which I can express my cultural identity. I cherish it, and I want to hold onto it, I guess, beyond the point where my parents are here because really that's the only way that I experience it, other than through the artwork.

*Sujata Iyengar:* That's an important point. It's true, whether you're first or second generation,

those memories constitute the homeland (even if it's not your own) that you want to keep alive in what you're producing. It seems that we're moving from a blanket denial of anything we have in common to an acknowledgment that we share something: first of all, on the general level of the alienation that any artist feels from the culture around him or her, and that leads him or her to produce something, to write about it or draw it or to represent it in some way; second, on the particular level of identity, the sense of uniqueness that comes from the conflict between two cultures and wanting to represent that in art, especially if it's a culture with which you are not familiar, as in your case, Sarojini, where it was your parents' culture. I noticed you began by saying "I think of myself as American," and then talked about how important it was to you finally to encounter the art of Indians. And it seems to me that you clearly have an interest in that, a personal interest.

*Romita Ray:* I feel like I'm trying to be a bridge here between two components. One of the most interesting issues that Sarojini raised, in comparison to what Waqas is talking about and what Bharati is also talking about, is that one always thinks of diaspora as movement to the west. That's been the model so far. But what's interesting is that there is also a point of return back to the homeland as well, and I think that constantly reshapes what people work on, what people do through different eras. And there's been a very important development in what is being produced right now both in India and outside. It's certainly not a unique phenomenon either. I think it was Itty Abraham who brought up that globalization is actually not a new phenomenon when one thinks about the subcontinent. These boundaries have constantly changed over time. The subcontinent sits in the middle of a much larger continent, which is Asia. There have been many movements through it prior to contact with even the west. And this is also very much part and parcel of art history, where Hindu art, for instance, appears on Cambodian temples. Persian art has come to us and it has become liberal art and it has become a product of India. It's very interesting to see, with British artists coming to India from the eighteenth century onward, that now there is the reverse movement of Indian art pouring into the west, where you actually have artists like Sarojini, who are paralleling writers who are now based in the west. But at the same time there is also a point of return. There are two parallel bodies, both in India, or Pakistan, or Malaysia as well as in Europe and North America. It's happening simultaneously, I think. It's very important that we consider both routes of the journey, outside as well as inside.

*Sujata Iyengar:* What might that return constitute rhetorically in literature and visually in the visual arts? Do you feel that there are particular media in art that are associated with this return, or particular media that are excluded? Are there particular literary genres that are excluded? Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*, a great science-fiction novel, tends not to be reviewed or treated as a South Asian novel. Is that kind of fiction excluded? What would stop it from being a South Asian novel in English? Purely its genre? Are we limited in certain ways? I went to an exhibition at the Smithsonian consisting of photographs of the Raj. To what extent is that an Indian exhibition?

*Bharati Mukherjee:* I wanted to get to your question by actually going back to the first decade post-independence. When I was growing up in Calcutta, we didn't think of ourselves as South Asians or Indians at all. We were Bengalis, and I spent the first eight to ten years of my life in such a homogenous, middle-class Bengali neighborhood that seeing someone, even if they spoke Bengali but of Punjabi origin, or someone who was not Hindu, let's say, was very exotic, very

different. And it was a segregated city, with ghettos for Anglo-Indians, ghettos for Muslims, as well as class divisions. It was only when I came to the states, to the heart of the heartland, Iowa, as a—we used to call them “foreign students” in those days rather than the now politically correct “international student”—I realized I was Indian. I was made to feel different and Indian, and I started thinking about nostalgia, homeland, and this, that, and the other. Whereas when I was growing up I couldn’t wait to get away and have a bigger world. I think that, at least in literature, fiction, what the publishing industry has created is a very narrow and commercialized sense of India, so that *The Calcutta Chromosome* doesn’t fit into what is likely to sell as South Asian, whereas Rushdie, with *Midnight’s Children*, is Hobson Jobsonizing India, and suddenly those kinds of books are more likely like something that you can use in a World Literature course. Here’s a book. I brought this. This is by a woman who teaches, Anjana Appachana. A little slim book of stories, published by Penguin India. This woman lives in Tempe, Arizona, but she doesn’t get attention because she is writing not for an American or international audience, but because she is writing for any other reader or an Indian reader. She is not explaining; she is not positioning herself as a bridge. I think that whom we get to read, who gets to be on bookshelves or shelves of bookstores, really depends on what is regarded as niche commercialness.

*Sujata Iyengar*: Do you think that holds true for the visual arts as well?

*Romita Ray*: Absolutely. Absolutely, in terms of the excluding and including of different genres that you were talking about. One of the most interesting sorts of struggles that I’ve had as an art historian was once when I practically came to blows with an art dealer. This was at a conference on South Asian art, which is held biannually. In his mind, anything that was worthy of being called art had to be ancient or *Mughal*, and anything beyond that was not of any commercial value at all. So contemporary Indian art, in other words, was seen as an entire body of work that was catering to Western tastes. This was profoundly disturbing, because of course this man spoke fluent English. And I immediately questioned what is “Western taste” to begin with, if you speak English, and you’re living in America, and yet you’re somehow denying this contemporary hub of Indian production. It’s precisely that kind of inclusion and exclusion. The kind of art that sells has to be, if it’s to be categorized as art, oil painting; certainly prints are included. One of the most interesting developments in the past five years or so is that Sotheby’s and Christie’s and major auction houses are now selling contemporary Indian art, and that has shifted the market towards those kinds of objects. It’s also interesting with British artists. About twenty years ago a print by Daniels would sell for about twenty-five pounds. You could walk down a street in London, go into a shop—they now sell for close to five thousand or ten thousand pounds. So the whole market has shifted in terms of what is declared as valuable art. And even from the perception at home, people who can afford contemporary Indian art have to be very wealthy citizens. Others cannot do this. What’s happened is it’s relegated. Temple carvers who had inherited the tradition of building and carving twelfth-century A.D. temples that we study as Indian art—they’ve been relegated as craftsmen. And artists who are following the academic Western tradition are seen as the ones you hobnob with at cocktail parties, or you consider them artists worthy of their salt these days. So it’s a complicated shift in and out, in terms of contemporary art production, as to what we now relegate to the history books versus the reality of the situation, what art means, what craft means, etc. And I don’t know what the solution is...!

*Sarojini Jha Johnson*: As I keep saying, it was rare for me to encounter an Indian artist. If I talk

to an Indian person they say, "Oh, yes, there are lots," but I want names. I want to know what they do, whether I can relate to it. My question to you might be: what accounts for the fact that there is a market? Is it that the Indian people in America are now interested in their culture, so they're collecting? Is it that everyone is now interested?

*Sujata Iyengar*: This would work for literature as well. What constitutes our readership?

*Waqas Khwaja*: Can I go back a little bit? I think it will indirectly address this question because there are a couple of issues that need to be tackled here. The idea of diaspora itself, and I don't want to go into the root of the word itself. Simply speaking, it is a scattering of people under the impetus of some sort of persecution or perhaps alienation, whether forced or of another kind. So a lot of us who have come to this part of the world or other parts of the West and are writing here or are involved in the artistic process may or may not fit that definition. And yet it's a term that is now widely retailed and it is expected that we just sort of embrace that and accept that as if we are a part of that movement. I think, first of all, you need to understand that part. The second part is, when we talk about artists and writers from the context of the worlds we are talking of, the earlier colonies, there are plenty of people there that we don't quite feel ourselves a part of. In other words, we are talking of the fact that we have had the privilege of education, being born into privileged families, et cetera. And having had the opportunity to educate ourselves within the Western tradition or within a certain tradition, whatever that is, we feel that we are somehow separate from them or superior from them. And I think that there is a grievous problem with that that also plays into what kind of subjects we would select to write about, to paint, to make a kind of a subject for our artistic activities and so on. And the word *subject* here is important because we are trying to wrest them out of context and place them within some kind of another space where they do not have the same environment, support environment, et cetera. So when we say that we are somehow representing our experience, that may be about the extent of the truth that we can claim: truth with a very small kind of a "t" because there's a whole reality out there, or whole realities out there, that never get spoken about, that never get to be, let's say, *interpreted*. That word I can use because we are also acting as interpreters for either our own people or for people out in the west. So I think we need to tackle those questions, and the question of marketability actually plays into this. What gets sold, what a publishing house is willing to publish and display on the bookshelves—we are not determining that. So it is very difficult to write about, let's say, a little locality in the city of Delhi or Lahore or Bombay where only the poorest of the poor exist. But they have a life, they have a family, they have their tragedies, and so on. And somebody like Rohinton Mistry can go ahead and do that, and make it work, and it has worked. But more often than not it is a kind of an elitist art and an elitist writing that you get out of what we call the diasporic experience.

*Bharati Mukherjee*: I would put a spin on that by saying it's the elitist writer who is doing the sidewalk homeless person's number. At least in literature the non-Indian's interest, or commercial interest, in Indian fiction is of ethnographical bias. And so the books that sell are about poor people in Bombay, Delhi, and so on, written by writers who have lived ten years or more outside India but who are creating, in the language that is readable and acceptable for a non-Indian audience, an India that is likely to be inaccessible directly to the international audience. The field has gotten so big now. There are some of us, like Jhumpa Lahiri and me. We say we are American writers, minority American writers, and are writing about immigrants here.

As opposed to others who are doing expatriate fiction, Manil Suri. These are all wonderful writers. I'm not attacking the quality of writing, but their interests, the narrative they are presenting, is that of nostalgia, expatriation, exile, and ethnography. Then you have the globalized writer who is writing for a kind of generalized non-Indian audience, where the English language is being made very plastic. A lot of these novelists like Upamanyu Chatterjee or Rushdie will use within the text of the novel comments, characters commenting, on the pickling of language. Or in the case of Chatterjee in *English August*—that's the title of a novella—I have to use a dirty word, it's not mine, but it's the writer's: *huzur fucked*, that's the language of Indian English, which means that many, many different American, British, and Indian English, as well as Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, have gone into the making of that language. Those of us who are writing very American English for American characters of Indian origin have a very different language.

*Sujata Iyengar*: The point I wanted to make earlier was about the exclusion of certain writers from South Asia from a marketable canon. Anjana Appachana and R.K. Narayan are good examples of that. Narayan is immensely popular in India. His writing, you could argue, is ethnographic, but it is more about ordinary, middle-class people living out their lives in a village in South India. He's possibly the writer that people like my parents, for example, South Indians living in England, read most of all. But that seems to me a particular instance where the market has really corralled what it means to be Indian.

*Bharati Mukherjee*: And it's taken Narayan decades to be recognized.

*Romita Ray*: It's also interesting, as we talk about publishing, that about five years ago *Granta* had brought out an entire issue on South Asian writers and photographers as well. And there was a photographer's work featured; her name was Dayanidha Segal. She takes pictures of upper middle-class Delhi families, and she found tremendous resistance, again, from publishers towards her works because they did not, obviously, depict a poverty-stricken India. You had, in fact, young women in miniskirts sort of lounging on leopard couches and all kinds of things, and they were very powerful images from her point of view. She was documenting a completely different side of life, but again there was this desire to pinhole South Asia into a poverty-stricken category. And poverty is exotic now and that's produced a whole other aesthetic, and it happens over and over again, where it's very disturbing to actually see that particular side of South Asia also made art for viewers.

*Waqas Khwaja*: Let me say one thing. I'm not trying to privilege, when I made that comment, one kind of subject over the other. I'm just saying that writers in their own minds configure the audience that they are writing for. There is some conception of the reader that they are writing for; there is some conception of this idea of why they are writing, who they are trying to communicate with, and what they are trying to communicate to them. There are certain kinds of writers, for instance, who choose that they are only going to be writing for, let's say, only the land of their origin, the people from that part of the world. Whatever language they use, whether it is some form of a mongrel English or it is the local language highly laced with words from western languages, it is their choice. But the fact remains that in the West there will still be a limited market for that kind of activity and that kind of production. And we're not whining about it, but the fact remains simply that the west is doing what it feels is necessary for it and people in

the colonies, or the ex-colonies (I would make a large claim that they may still be “the colonies” with the neo-colonialist position so strongly at work). Globalization is only one manifestation of it. But there are others. IMF, World Bank, are all a party to all of this. So [writers] may have a right to respond to that situation in their own way with their own subjects and so on. To pretend that we are teaching post-colonial literature (and here I totally agree with Bharati Mukherjee!) to pretend that we are writing post-colonial literature, means we are being wielded with that heavy stick. We have been herded into some kind of a homogenous group by Homi Bhabha or by other people of that kind, and it’s a little problematic. It’s a very diverse area; it’s a very diverse kind of readership we are talking of. And there may be very little in common in fact, ultimately, apart from the fact that we are writers, we are artists, and we are responding to a situation on our own terms.

*Bharati Mukherjee:* And you can hear from our accents how very different the diasporic influences have been . . .

*Sujata Iyengar:* How does an artist or a writer resist marketing? How would you do this in your work or in an interview with your agent or your publisher? I agree with Waqas. I’m sure an artist must imagine an audience at the same time, as art is a form of self-expression too. So how do you deal with that, the fact that you are, in some ways, creating this monster, the hungry audience wanting a particular type of South Asian art?

*Waqas Khwaja:* Aren’t we doing it all the time though, whether we are writing a short story or poetry? But since I write poetry I would say more particularly that poets are always trying to find a voice that has not been used before. Harold Bloom talked about the anxiety of influence, and in a way there is something that you want to express through that voice which has been missing from all the voices that you’ve heard so far. So maybe any writer, any artist, is trying to find that place, that voice, that right idiom, that right tone. But I would wonder if, again, there would be a uniform way of classifying that.

*Bharati Mukherjee:* All writers want to be marketed in the sense that you’re *lucky* if some publishing house buys your book and manages to get it at eye level in bookstore shelves. So I’m not going to pretend that I don’t want to be read. But what I have suffered from, because I was stupid commercially, is resisting being put in a category, in a niche. When academics or publishers wanted to do me as an Indian writer to sell to old India hands, I said, after the first two books, “But now I’m an American.” I’m writing about minority Americans who are leading the kinds of immigrational adjustments that European and Jewish immigrant waifs had to face before our South Asian group. And they didn’t like that. “Don’t write about Indians, write another *Tiger’s Daughter*, *Tiger’s Granddaughter* *Tiger’s Great Granddaughter* about your very rich background and your elegant upbringing.” The current novel that I have to hand in next week to my Hyperion arm of ABC Disney is *The Desirable Daughters*. But it’s such a turning around of *The Tiger’s Daughter* that I don’t know if they’ll be happy.

*Sujata Iyengar:* We’re all too peaceful. I’m going to argue with a few people. What about self-loathing? One of the things that critics have identified in what they insist on calling South Asian diasporic writing or art is a strand of lambasting the mother country. For example, Kiran Desai’s *Stars, Stripes and All That*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Arranged Marriage* and any number of books about young women in particular—Bharati, some of your own work might fit into this

category—a young woman comes to the United States, throws off her repressive, horrible, constricting Indian or Pakistani background and discovers America, “embraces,” to use Waqas’s word, the host culture that’s provided freedom. How do you respond to critics, any of you, who say that you are willfully casting yourselves as exiles, as victims, rather than treating the situation with the complexity it deserves?

*Bharati Mukherjee:* I hate to take up so much time, but I can’t resist responding to this question. I think that it’s critics who are suffering—again, I would say the original, positioned, writers of this are Spivak and Homi Bhabha. People who are resisting this or attacking this are those who are suffering from anxiety of authenticity. They need to have black and white or good versus bad, victim versus victimizer. Like a bell hooks in African American literary criticism, they want to see all whites as bad and all immigrant characters as somehow victimized. And so any writer who criticizes both sides is seen as a race traitor or a group traitor. The reason that I would have some problem with, perhaps, *Arranged Marriage* is that the quality of writing does not turn me on in the way that Rushdie’s or Manil Suri’s work does. So I would not have problems about self-loathing in books like Chitra’s so much as I wish that it had more energy; I wish that the sentences were fresher and that the portrayals were fresher.

*Sujata Iyengar:* Have you ever felt marketed or that you were consciously using your identity or ethnicity, Sarojini?

*Sarojini Jha Johnson:* Only recently have I realized that by casting myself as an Asian American there may be an interesting audience for my work. I like to think of myself as an individual. I was raised that way. My father came of age when India became independent. He told stories of people throwing rocks at British soldiers. I think I have been raised to be very independent. He felt constrained, I think, by the things that he learned growing up. And it’s not really religion. In an ancient cultures there are lots of rules. When I was in India I was told, “Don’t say this; don’t do that; women cover their heads.” That was my experience of India. So I guess in art I look for things to be demystified; I look for understanding. I have a child who looks like me even though I’m married to somebody who grew up in Iowa. She said the other day, “Mom, I’m Indian like you.” But my husband thinks that he’s more exotic than I am. He thinks I’m more American: “You’re more American. You understand it better. You know pop culture better than I do. You read those magazines.” It’s almost like an accusation.

*Sujata Iyengar:* The question of rules is extremely interesting because, of course, there are rules on both sides: the experience of many Indians on first coming to England or the United States is how many rules we have here: rules about what to say when, rules about sitting on chairs rather than the floor. So it’s a question of structurally figuring out the underlying logic behind the rules. And you’re right; the logic is completely different.

*Waqas Khwaja:* Right. And I think a lot of people go through that. It’s an act of some courage to admit that we do because the fact that the anxiety we have being seen as correct, as right, as acting rightly, doing the right things, et cetera may play into this self-loathing at some points. How do we overcome that? How do we deal with that? People may disagree with me, but I see that sense of self-loathing in Naipaul’s works. I see that sense of self-loathing even in some of Rushdie’s works. *Shame* is titled appropriately, *Shame*. But then you have *Satanic Verses* itself.

Remarkable as that writer is, you get a feeling at points that, you know, he wants to shed all of that. There are a lot of things that are wrong. There is no question about that. Criticism of those things makes a lot of sense. But then there is a sense that, okay, this is a part of me and I want to get rid of this, the fact that it was my culture, it was my society that succumbed to this kind of situation and so on. It's hateful. Now it's a very human situation, there's no question about it. But then on the other hand there is also a sense of nostalgia. If I found a writer who would perhaps succumb to nostalgia, as opposed to self-loathing, or one who would offer the reverse of that, I think I would have a problem with that because they would be kind of simplistic positions. But if there's a writer with some kind of a conflict there that interests me—and that's just a personal interest that I'm talking about—it interests me because I know this writer is trying to grapple with a set of feelings that don't quite go together.

*Sujata Iyengar:* That might be particularly true of Rushdie, who has created a second exile for himself in leaving London, where he seemed very comfortable and very at home for many years, and going vocally and vituperatively to New York City and complaining bitterly about London. Does he want to be conflicted on some level about where he's living and to castigate the people he's leaving behind?

*Bharati Mukherjee:* I think that your example of Naipaul was particularly appropriate, that there in Naipaul's work I see a generational problem. He was born in 1932, of Indian origin in a multicultural Caribbean community, where to be of Indian origin was to be at the very bottom in terms of power. There the self-loathing—he is in so much denial about self-loathing that he turns his vituperation against India, the home country. Whereas Rushdie's is a very different kind of—

*Sujata Iyengar:* A dialogue?

*Bharati Mukherjee:* Yes.

*Romita Ray:* Well I think it also represents, to a certain extent, what you had brought up right at the beginning, which is that the concept of South Asia itself is so fluid because each of us comes from, perhaps, a different part of South Asia, and our experiences of South Asia are very different at the same time. I mean, when you come into an American classroom, as you said, you're sort of lumped together with all the South Asian students. I had never interacted with Pakistani students until I left India, for instance. So it's a very strange transition to go through. There's a tremendous struggle to define what South Asia is, what India means, what Pakistan means. Should we be breaking these places up? And that also enters the classroom situation. Now that I teach art history, it's very interesting to see how students respond to the concept of South Asian art as well, and it pushes me to think about that too. Because a lot of people don't even know what South Asia is first of all, and you have to explain a lot of the geography and the boundaries, etc. because they're used to the terms "Indian" or "Pakistan," but Bangladesh they don't even consider produces art, which tells you a lot about how South Asia is even thought of in the sort of popular mode. And it is a struggle in some ways, going back to the idea that it's difficult to define who sometimes we are, coming from South Asia and having gone through these various transformations. But I don't want to be a cultural ambassador, standing in front of my class and saying "I am the great voice of India," because I'm not. And it would be very dangerous to actually project it that way. I never experienced the self-loathing that you were

talking about, but if anything has produced discomfort, it's presenting, again, my voice as "the" voice because, as I've said, it's not. There are several voices, and those have to be taken into account, all the time, to shift the lens, as we study these particular subjects.

*Bharati Mukherjee:* I think for writers and artists group identity is dangerous or harmful to art. This may be unpopular, but I think that there is a very essential place for nationalism within the global context. And that's why I have been emphasizing "diaspora" as the word to go with. I do believe that there has to be some specificity, some cultural specificity, within the internationalism and globalization. And that's why those who are writing the fictional equivalent, let's say, of either Satyajit Ray movies or Ingmar Bergman, to use a non-South Asian example, where I can, coming from my little middle-class neighborhood in Calcutta, identify with these Swedish characters or with Bangladeshi villagers. At the same time, they're so rooted, so concrete, in the context. That's the kind of nationalism that I'm looking for. And here, those of us who have chosen to move from one continent to another, one country to another, are saying, that was our homeland then, this our homeland now. I'm no longer the person I was. My writing techniques have changed whether I want them to or not, and the people I write about are very different from the ones that I grew up with. That kind of specificity—"I'm an American writer and don't you forget it"—is spoken in that context of need for roots, nationalism, and self-anchoring.

*Sujata Iyengar:* This is something that's very different in the United States from in Britain, where there isn't a tradition of the immigrant being—

*Bharati Mukherjee:* Oh, you're not *allowed* to call yourself British if you are—

*Sujata Iyengar:* "Black British." "Black" is a term used to describe South Asians and also East Asians. Anybody who is not white, really, is politically a Black Briton. The term has been reclaimed from a term of abuse in the fifties and sixties to a degree now. Part of the reason that the identity of the diaspora in the United States is so diffuse—it's almost hard to characterize it—is because the identity of "American," even when it's hyphenated, I would say, outweighs whatever comes before it. Whereas in Britain these ethnicities are more divided, more distinct. I've been waiting for years for the voice of that generation, the voice of that kind of fiction. Possibly Zadie Smith is it.

*Waqas Khwaja:* That brings into question this idea of South Asia itself as a hyphenated construction: What does it signify? What does it mean? I went to Bangladesh, to Dhaka, this summer to teach South Asian literature, strangely, and while I was preparing the syllabus I was struck with the ridiculousness of the whole exercise. I was going there to teach them about some kind of writing in English from an area of which they were also a part, but really their culture, their language, et cetera, would not be represented. All the dead languages would not be represented. And that's very interesting. And that set me thinking: India has hundreds of languages; Pakistan has scores of languages; Bangladesh has so many languages. There's a lot of literature being written there meaningfully. This plays into the idea of audience as well—

*Bharati Mukherjee:* And globalization—

*Waqas Khwaja:* Exactly. And when you mention nationalism in this context, it makes a lot of sense because you have groups that you're talking about. You have languages, you have affiliations, you have identifications with certain mores of a society, with characters, etc. that would be absent when you pretend to teach under the rubric called "South Asian Literature." So also with "post-colonial," and the bigger term, and the more inclusive term, and so on. So there are serious problems with that term as well, and I think we as writers, artists, perhaps, recognize that, are very cognizant of that. Purists try to homogenize...

*Sujata Iyengar:* And you're also a translator, so you can talk a little about the politics of translation, of which works become translated. Has the interest in South Asian fiction and art in the diaspora, written in English, produced for an English audience, led to fewer works in indigenous Indian languages (I know one can argue English is an indigenous Indian language, let's exclude it for the moment) in non-English languages in India being translated?

*Waqas Khwaja:* You see, translation itself has its own dynamics and sometimes, well always, perhaps, its own politics. I know of writers in Pakistan who write in Punjabi who would want their works translated, if they can, into the Swedish language because somehow they will be in the eyes of the group that can award them the Nobel Prize. I'm not making this up. This is true. And it may seem like magical realism, but there it is. And then translating in English. Why translating in English? Again, I had occasion to speak about this in Pakistan while I was there this summer, briefly, with writers. Everyone came up and said, "You know we want our works to be translated into English. We want people out there to know about what we are doing." I said, "In due course, if it is necessary and if it is needed, these works will be translated. But aren't you writing for the audience here? Isn't it enough that people here are reading you, they like your work, they are writing about this work, and so on?" "No, but people out there need to know that. People out in America need to know that."

*Bharati Mukherjee:* New York! Everyone wants to write for New York.

*Waqas Khwaja:* And yet we are breaking away from the so-called center. It's very ironic. It's paradoxical.

*Romita Ray:* I just wanted to take off on various things that have been said. I think you're sort of missing a certain medium which has played a very powerful role, I think, in this sort of age of globalization, which is film and Bollywood. I had a rather strange experience. A few months ago I was in the High Museum of Art, and I was meeting the curator of decorative arts of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, who is a rather young man but somehow seems to have not used the web too excessively. I was trying to encourage him towards digital technology. I said, "Well, you can tap into all kinds of sources. For example, I can read about Bollywood stars on the web. In fact I can also parcel away their postal addresses and their phone numbers if I ever wanted to pick up the phone and call them to hear what their voices sound like." And he had tremendous resistance towards this, and he said, "Why would you want to do that? Why would you want to live in India while you're living in America?" And it was very poignant, because I thought about that a lot later on and I said, "Why can't I live in two places at the same time in some ways?" And I think the web has certainly opened that opportunity up for us. But if I look at, say, first-generation Americans of South Asian descent and people who are not connected to the language,

say, the same way that some of us who came directly are, who are not connected to the arts the same way, or literature for that matter, but who connect very closely with the culture of Bollywood, even now. There's a whole cult following, whether it's Salman Khan or Hritik Roshan and all those people.

*Bharati Mukherjee:* Bollywood is very sexy scholarship right now. And Partha Chatterjee of the Subaltern group started it at the academic level. We at the Berkeley English Department are offering two courses on Bollywood film. So this is going to be the big thing, yes.

*Sarojini Jha Johnson:* When I was in India in 1981 my sixteen-year old brother was with us, my parents and myself, and he happens to bear a very strong resemblance to Sanjay Dutt. And everybody thought he was this wonderful movie star, and we created a stir wherever we went. And Sanjay Dutt was the son of a very famous Indian actress, so everywhere we went we heard *Nargis ka beta!* [that's Nargis's son!] I just think that it's amazing the power and influence that films have in a culture.

*Sujata Iyengar:* Let's turn it over to the audience now. I can see they are getting restive.

*Audience Member 1:* A lot of Indian American writing, art, feeds into a lot of stereotypes about Indian culture. I was born and brought up here and we were reading *Arranged Marriage* in my class, and my classmates asked me, is Indian culture really like that? It's so depressing—Why do you think she thought people want to read this?

*Sujata Iyengar:* Two possible responses right away: if American culture wants to stereotype, it's not the writer's responsibility. As Romita said, you don't want to be some sort of cultural ambassador. Why should any of the people on stage here care? On the other hand, you as artists must surely feel some sort of moral responsibility?

*Bharati Mukherjee:* You say the stories are all depressing, well, maybe she's a depressive, who knows? In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, which is so heart-warming, among all the stories some tragedies happen. It's not what happens, it's the way they are written. I don't think you can blanket all writers of Indian origin. Jhumpa and Chitra are Bengali Brahmins. I don't know how that happened.

*Sujata Iyengar:* Partition! I was thinking about this the other day, how there are so many Bengali writers, and how Bengal was ruptured, in half--it must be some sort of generational memory—

*Bharati Mukherjee:* About the empowerment you had mentioned earlier. I think that probably women immigrants, who came to the United States rather than to Britain or Germany were empowered more than those who settled in hierarchical, traditional, postcolonial societies.

*Sarojini Jha Johnson:* I'm not very aware of stereotypes or how Indians are stereotyped. I'm not familiar with Americans who are familiar with Indian culture. People didn't even know much about India where I came from.

*Sujata Iyengar:* We may have a situation where the current marketability of South Asian fiction is creating the stereotypes!

*Waqas Khwaja* (to questioner): This goes back to the question of what kinds of writing are taken as examples of South Asian literature; your question might go back to what the professor takes as typical and whom *you* think are typical South Asian writers. There is a tendency to talk about that kind of tension and that kind of anxiety in the classroom, and that becomes a problem.

*Audience Member 2:* The writers you have been discussing all fit into an American immigrant tradition. Sarojini Jha Johnson is a genuinely American artist, in that tradition. There is a trend for South Asian writers to become non-exotic; in another ten or twenty years they will be another immigrant group in America and part of that American tradition.

*Bharati Mukherjee:* This is already happening with the American-born (or those brought here at age two, like Sarojini, or whatever), that generation, in TV and film. M. Night Shyamalan, for example, is Indian, but the material is not necessarily rooted in ethnographical exploration. Trouble with those of us who say we are writing in an American tradition is that immediately the post-colonial scholars at their MLA Convention sessions attack us, "Why aren't you presenting yourself as an Indian?" Articles are written criticizing those of us who say that we are American writers, as opposed to Indian writers writing in the post colonial!

*Sujata Iyengar:* One of the reasons Shyamalan doesn't get that kind of criticism is that he has chosen to avoid those particular kinds of genres that tend to be associated with South Asian writers—the immigrant story, the coming-of-age narrative. In defense of the MLA, I'll put that in here!

*Bharati Mukherjee:* Immigrant means "American," *not* nostalgia, or writing only about the India you left behind!

*Romita Ray:* What's interesting about Shyamalan, he does insert himself into that movie. Again it's a stereotype; he appears as an Indian doctor!

*Sujata Iyengar:* And he's a bomber in [*Unbreakable*.]

*Romita Ray:* In all honesty, I think the problem is not so much South Asian art produced here twenty years from now losing its flavor but even if it retains it, why must it then be considered exotic? It can remain Indian, and what's wrong with that? It can belong to different worlds, and I think that's a very very interesting issue in terms of how art transforms itself. Why does it have to be exotic?

*Sujata Iyengar:* Well, partly because it's marketed that way, with glossaries, words from foreign languages put in *italics*, and so on, or photos of rural women on the cover.

*Bharati Mukherjee:* What I think, though, will *not* disappear is the way we look at the world. Imagine losing that certain kind of perspective. If I believe in individual life, individual tragedies and comedies, it's less important, than for Christian or Jewish writers perhaps. If that will

continue to influence the art of South Asian Americans, there will be a different perspective.

*Audience Member 3:* I would to return to the question about self-loathing, addressing specifically Bharati Mukherjee. When *women* come to this country and experience a type of freedom, when they criticize the patriarchy of the country from which they come, they are accused of attacking the country itself, when they are attacking the patriarchy—that happens a lot.

*Sujata Iyengar:* You probably right, that many male writers have delivered a stinging critique of patriarchy and yet they are not thought to have attacked the country—I hadn't thought of it in those terms.

*Bharati Mukherjee:* For women, it's very definitely seen as the women's fiction, women's issues, and then it's definitely seen as hostile. Any critique of patriarchy is taken as an attack on the entire culture and equated as self-loathing.

*Romita Ray:* It's also very important to keep in mind that this is not just happening outside South Asia. There is a strong tradition of indigenous self-criticism, a lot of self-reflexive writing at the popular level—feminist magazines, *Femina*, for example.

*Bharati Mukherjee:* Well, for me, the real urgency is finding a new literary-critical theory altogether. And K. Anthony Appiah in the African American Studies department at Harvard is doing just that. His theory—he came out with it in response to my saying, “I hate these Spivaks and Bhabhas who are so anti-literature, who exclude any part of a novel that doesn't fit their theory, or attack the entire author, author's life, author's marrying a white man, because it doesn't fit their particular kind of theory!” But we all had *cosmopolitan* literary heritages. I read Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy in Bengali translation, and all that went into the making of me as a writer. To pretend that we only read the epics of the *Puranas* (which are also widely heard and read) is to create a false sense of authenticity and Indianness. And that for me is the crisis in academia. We need a literary theory that is doing justice to both the politics—cultural studies—and art.

*Romita Ray:* That goes back to the point I was making much earlier on about how ancient Indian art is considered much more authentic. Critics have been having a lot of problems with contemporary South Asian art because they think it mimics the west.

*Sujata Iyengar:* Is there a disjunct between what the market values and what art critics value?

*Romita Ray:* Yes. It's more complex than that. First of all, the contemporary Indian art tradition is coming out of our Western art tradition in India itself. They had set up colleges in India for art. It's people *outside*, in some sense, who are less willing to accept that currency that's happening. You can see it in galleries.

*Audience Member 4:* Bhabha's “hybridity” and the “third space”—aren't they similar to the notions you've been discussing?

*Bharati Mukherjee:* Not really. I hate that word, “hybridity.” Or, I'm sensitive to the word, “hybridity”! It seems to imply a kind of scientific experimentation—a particular kind of product—

*Sujata Iyengar*: But you talk about “mongrelization”—

*Bharati Mukherjee*: Yes, exactly! I prefer the word *mongrelization*, cross-breeding. The product is not meant to be a prize flower, it can be a cur, and I want to not only neutralize but valorize words like mongrelization. The “third space”—I think the interesting fight is between the Harish Trivedis at the University of Delhi, versus the Homi Bhabhas of Chicago and now of Harvard University, the Bhabhas who wish to speak for the Indians and the post-colonials as opposed to the people who are in the Third World and who are resistant to theory. Aijaz Ahmad’s *In Theory* is the most interesting and the most virulent attack on the Bhabha-ists, because they’re saying, “Don’t encroach on our terrain.” What Bhabha has to say about *au delà*, the space beyond, strikes me as self-serving neutrality, as opposed to saying combining nationalism, belonging, with transience. Harish Trivedi believes in transactional culture, culture as transactions, as opposed to “this dominates, this subordinates.” I think the Bhabhas *perform* Indianness as opposed to being Indians.

*Sujata Iyengar*: In our remaining minute, I want to defend Bhabha, if I can! Bhabha’s notion of hybridity works well in specific contexts—I think particularly well with Black British Cultural Studies, as in the work of Dick Hebdige. The reason I see it working well in Britain is that there you have a group of people—like me—choosing particular aspects of an ancestral culture with which they are not necessarily all that familiar, as a gesture of defiance, an assertion of belonging, willfully drawing on a hybrid identity within a dominant culture—

*Romita Ray*: I agree with Sujata, but I want to play devil’s advocate. We also have to remember when we are writing, and where we are writing, and how difficult it is to validate anything on South Asian studies. A controversy within South Asian studies is something that I can present to students, to show them that there are differences, that there is not just one “South Asia.” I work primarily on European art, Gayatri Spivak is teaching an entire seminar in German—it’s very exciting for Indians to do that, to be able to do that, since so often you are expected to work on South Asian art and literature.

*Bharati Mukherjee*: : As far as scholarly publication goes, post-colonial criticism is far more easily published than one whole book on a white guy like Robert Frost or Melville or Hawthorne, so I’m not sure I agree about that. And I wish that Bhabha would specify that that theory is specific to the context of Britain, rather than generalizing, if that’s the case!

*Sujata Iyengar*: And Bharati has the last word. Thanks to all of our panelists for their participation, and to you, our audience, for your questions and interest.

## **Biographical Profiles**

Bharati Mukherjee is Professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley. She is author of the novels *Leave it to Me*, *The Holder of the World*, *Jasmine, Wife*, and *The Tiger’s Daughter*, the non-fiction books *Days and Nights in Calcutta* and *The Sorrow and the Terror*, and the short story collections *Darkness* and *The Middleman and Other Stories*.

Waqas Khwaja is Assistant Professor of English at Agnes Scott College in Atlanta. Before coming to the U.S. to study English literature at Emory, he practiced law in Pakistan. He is author of *Mariam's Lament and Other Poems*, *Writers and Landscapes*, *Six Geese from a Tomb at Medum* and editor of *Mornings in the Wilderness* and *Cactus: An Anthology of Recent Pakistani Literature*.

Sujata Iyengar is Assistant Professor of English Literature at the University of Georgia. Her essays on Shakespeare have appeared in *Literature/Film Quarterly* and *Othello: New Critical Essays*, and she is currently completing a manuscript on the meanings of skin color in early modern Britain.

Romita Ray is Curator of Prints and Drawings at Georgia Museum of Art. Before coming to Georgia, she earned a Ph.D. in the History of Art from Yale, and her dissertation title is *The Painted Raj: The Art of the Picturesque in British India, 1757-1911*. She has also held positions at the Yale Center for British Art.

Sarojini Jha Johnson is Associate Professor of Art and Associate Chairperson of Art at Ball State University. A printmaker, she has exhibited etchings, woodcuts, and other works on paper in exhibitions throughout the United States, and she has received numerous Museum Purchase Awards.

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1. "The South Asian Diaspora in the Arts: A Moderated Discussion with Bharati Mukherjee, Waqas Khwaja, Romita Ray, and Sarojini Jha Johnson" took place during the University of Georgia Center for Humanities and Arts symposium on "Globalization and Change in South Asia," at the University of Georgia on February 9, 2001. The discussion was transcribed by Margaret Crumpton.