

Second-Generation Indian Americans and the Trope of Arranged Marriage

Priya J. Shah

UC Irvine Department of English

I was sitting in the Atlanta airport last October, minding my own business and desperately trying to recover from the excesses of four days of celebrating a friend's wedding, when the middle-aged man sitting next to me struck up a conversation. Upon finding out that I was Indian American, his pleasant smile was replaced with a look of patronizing concern: "So, they're going to send you back there to get married huh?" he asked knowingly. I immediately went into defense-mode: "We don't do that anymore," I retorted and our ostensibly innocent conversation came to an abrupt end. As I sat in stony silence across from that poor man, I wondered why I had responded the way I did. After all, I was just coming from the wedding of a bride and groom who met at a regional youth convention that we all know is just a marriage market by another name, and only few months before another friend had gotten married after her parents set the ball in motion. I obviously knew then from my own first-hand experience that arranged marriage is a lot more complicated than parents sending their child back to India to get married and that indeed, arranged marriage in one or another of its infinite variety of forms happens all the time. Why then was my first instinct to vehemently disavow arranged marriage altogether, thus implicitly accepting this stranger's stereotypical reduction of the practice?

This paper is my effort to understand just this problematic. It appears that my "psychosis" regarding the question of arranged marriage is not only a personal problem, but rather that the trope of arranged marriage haunts the creative output of a large cross-section of Indian American youth. For instance, in the last decade or so, a spate of Indian American cultural products (literature, films, music) have interrogated the diasporic identities of "1.5" and second-generation

Indian Americans. Significantly, a number of these works employ (either centrally or peripherally) a caricatured version of arranged marriage as the locus for their representation of Indian American identity-formation. If we agree that any productive engagement with the question of arranged marriage must necessarily acknowledge its complex and varied character, and that furthermore, compliance with or resistance to heteronormatively-defined arranged marriage should not sum up the totality of Indian American identity, how then do we understand the pervasiveness of arranged marriage as a trope of cultural and generational conflict?

In this paper, I will argue that Indian Americans are interpellated by a “regime of representation”¹ that encompasses the images of Indianness produced by strains of US and Indian popular culture. If, in the words of Stuart Hall, the meanings of arranged marriage “float” so widely, how is it that these representational paradigms attempt to “fix” what is signified by the term?² It is my hope that an investigation of this issue will show how this fixing produces stereotypes that are then used as emblems for diasporic Indian selfhood, and that what is at stake here is nothing less than control over female sexuality in the service of a hegemonic definition of cultural identity. Finally, through an examination of the Indian American film, *ABCD (American Born Confused Desi)*, I will analyze the process by which second-generation Indian Americans generate self-definitions that often remain bounded by this representational matrix, and in so doing often replicate the fixation on arranged marriage as an overarching signifier of diasporic identity.

In 1995, Chitra Banerji Divakaruni published a collection of short stories titled simply, *Arranged Marriage*. Winner of the 1996 American Book Prize, *Arranged Marriage* received much critical acclaim. In praise of the book, one critic wrote:

“... [Divakaruni] explores the vast differences between women's lives in India, the country of her birth, and in the U.S., her country of choice... these are stories about arranged marriages orchestrated by parents far more concerned with status and skin color

than with their daughters' happiness... most of Divakaruni's... stories revolve around the attempt to maintain traditional Indian gender roles in the freewheeling U.S., where even the most obedient and self-negating Indian women discover they can live a far more fulfilling life.”³

The terms of this review are significant because they belie the way in which the liberal multicultural project continues to define the US through a gendered discourse of West v. East, despite affirmations of cultural relativism. Inderpal Grewal argues that at the same time multicultural society encourages the essentialization of minority cultures in the name of celebrating “tradition,” it rewards Indian women who “break free” of their putatively oppressive cultures through participation in American liberalism;⁴ hence the popularity of books like Divakaruni’s and films like *Mississippi Masala* and *Fire*. The East (in this case identified as India), is constructed as the land of oppression, tradition, and material concerns, while the US is shown to be a “freewheeling” space of female choice and opportunity, offering even the “most obedient and self-negating Indian women” the chance to live a “far more fulfilling life.”

The meaning of arranged marriage that we find privileged here (forced marriage driven by material concerns) works within a binary of West and East that coalesces around the question of choice. The creation of a stereotype of arranged marriage works by first reducing the complexity of the practice to an essentialized idea of marriage without choice or love, and then positioning it in contradistinction to the “love marriage,” presumably found in the West and based upon personal preference and free choice. According to this rhetoric, choice is what defines modern, liberal America in opposition to the inherent authoritarianism of eastern societies like India. If, as Susan Moller Okin would argue, a society’s modernity and moral worth are measured by how its women are treated, then this type of dichotomy, which exploits the figure of the immigrant woman as the central marker of respective cultural policies, serves to underscore American progressivism and moral righteousness.⁵

It is not only the US media, but the Indian media as well, that is interested in manipulating the trope of arranged marriage. I will concentrate here specifically on the way Bollywood attempts to fix the meaning of arranged marriage because of the film industry's unique and important relationship to the construction of Indian identity both in India and the diaspora. Arranged marriage became an especially potent symbol for Hindi cinema as the art form merged with the nationalist project of defining India vis-à-vis the West, first during the fight for Indian independence, and then more explicitly after the establishment of the Indian nation in 1947. Like many nationalist projects, this resolution is defined by its extremely gendered character: women symbolize authentic Indianness, while men represent progress and the force of modernization. Within this gendered vision, arranged marriage comes to hold special meaning – it is theorized as the means by which a distinct Indian identity – the joining of the modern with the traditional within a putatively indigenous practice – can be constructed and retained.

What then is the idea of arranged marriage *in the diaspora* that the Hindi film industry perpetuates? While appearing to be framed within the same simplistic binary of love marriage (Western) versus arranged marriage (Indian) that we find in US popular representations, the working out of this trope is actually more complex. While the love/arranged binary continues to be mapped onto a dichotomized cartography of West and East, the meaning of arranged marriage within the Indian context shifts toward an idea of the parentally-sanctioned love marriage, overdetermined by workings of fate. Within the diasporic context, a fear of Western contamination attains fervent immediacy and the practice of arranged marriage becomes the locus for the working out of nationalist identity vis-à-vis the diasporic community, a logical extension of its original role. These films most often fall into two categories: the redemption of the “corrupt” diasporic subject and the return of the “true” desi. In the first type, the corrupt “love” marriage functions as a synecdoche for the threat of Western corruption of the (gendered) Indian body

(*Pardes*). In this genre of Bollywood film, explicitly aimed at the diasporic market, a “traditional” arranged marriage between a second-generation Indian immigrant and an Indian woman is idealized as a practice that could function to tie Indians in the diaspora (gendered male) to their motherland (female). The Indian woman is constructed as the authentic figure of Indianness (innocent, yet sexually transferable), who injects culture and tradition into a diasporic community that is in constant danger of being contaminated by Western licentiousness and crass individualism. Yet, the message, (playing on the supposed paranoia and guilt of Indian immigrants) is clearly that Indians in the diaspora must remain worthy of such a marriage.

The second trope, the return of the “true” desi, revises the gendered terms of the argument, and valorizes the parentally-sanctioned love marriage as the vehicle for transferring women/culture. The most popular example of this trope is found in the blockbuster *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (DDLJ)* (1995). In this case, both the hero and the heroine are diasporic subjects, leading to the construction of what Purnima Mankekar argues is “a discourse of female sexuality that is shot through with ambivalence. At the same time that female sexuality is semiotically linked with the fertility of the motherland, it is also configured in the virginal purity of the heroine, a purity that is inherently precarious and always at risk in the West.”⁶ Ultimately, as Mankekar suggests, the film functions to remind immigrants that “India is the place to which [they] must return to consummate their desires within the confines of marriage.”⁷ Despite the apparent reworking of the trope of arranged marriage, the film neatly collapses any distinction between the diasporic Indian male and the Indian national, and by excluding the heroine from any agency in the question of marriage, also works the same trick with love and arranged marriage as well. Ultimately then, within this allegory of arranged marriage, both parties would benefit: India would receive a much-needed influx of immigrant dollars, while nostalgic Indian immigrants would obtain a way to alleviate their fears of cultural dislocation through the marriage and relocation of second-generation daughters in India.

What I have just quickly sketched then, is the regime of representation in which, I am arguing, Indian Americans negotiate their identities as such. Significantly, both first and second generations are implicated in this process. Many scholars of postcolonial Indian diasporic identity focus on Bollywood as the primary source of first generation Indian selfhood, yet in doing so they often ignore the very real engagement of Indian immigrants with US multicultural discourse. As critics like Vijay Prashad and Uma Narayan have shown, a conservative and/or fundamentalist minority of the Indian immigrant community has responded to the space multiculturalism provides for essentialized identities by positing an absolutist definition of Indian culture.⁸ This process of identification hinges on the reinvention and subsequent reification of cultural practices like arranged marriage despite their changing nature on the subcontinent. In the face of overwhelming pressure to give up culturally constructed identities in favor of (what Bollywood for example shows to be antithetical) white models of courtship, marriage and sexuality, a narrow and static model of arranged marriage is burdened with the weight of cultural preservation in which women are especially implicated as carriers and preservers of tradition.

From our discussion then, it appears that both US and Indian popular media, as well as certain minority groups within the Indian American community itself, emphasize a reified form of arranged marriage as the representative cultural marker of Indian American identity. Although these representational systems differ from each other in the meanings they ascribe to the practice, they all function to bind the process of identity formation within the constructs of an essentialized, heterosexual, and gender-based definition of diasporic Indianness. How then do second generation Indian Americans respond to the work of these representational paradigms? To begin to answer this question, and to hopefully shed some light on the politics of my response in the Atlanta airport, I would like to turn to an examination of the Indian American film, *ABCD*

which was released in 2001. *ABCD*, according to its own byline is a story “about choices” (more on that in a minute).

Now remember when I said my psychosis wasn't only a personal problem, well the protagonist of *ABCD*, Nina Mehta is affected by it too, and let me tell you – she's got it worse than me! Nina, a 1.5 generation Indian American living in New Jersey, has a complex about being Indian. Her character is motivated not only by the stereotypical assumptions she makes about Indians like her mother, or her newly-arrived suitor Ashok, but by what she assumes *they* expect of her as an Indian American woman. The film takes an ambivalent stance towards Nina, who pushes away anything offered to her by Indians because she assumes they are trying to mold her into a stereotypical Indian girl. In her character's most telling scene, when Nina rejects Ashok, the falsity of her own stereotypes are made explicitly clear. When Ashok asks her why she won't see him any more, she tells him, “I'm not what you want.” She thinks he wants a “good” Indian wife, he tells her he just wants to get to know her on her own terms. Yet, Nina cannot operate outside of the defensive cocoon she has built around herself. She has convinced herself that to be Indian means to have an arranged marriage, and that an arranged marriage means denying her own personality. By asking us to sympathize with Ashok, the film suggests that Nina is completely wrong.

Or does it? While this important scene suggests that Nina is only sabotaging her own chance of happiness by internalizing the stereotypes fed her by Western culture, the representational work of the film as a whole suggests a different conclusion. Let us start with the byline: “it's about choices.” Immediately, we are clued in to the rhetoric of the multicultural space in which this film operates: what choice is it about exactly? The choice to be either Indian or American, or perhaps the freedom of choice Nina associates American culture as providing in contrast to the directives issued by parents in Indian culture? The film develops the issue of choice through two vectors, arranged marriage and occupational pressures, with romantic and

sexual relationships operating as the primary lens through which both characters, Nina and her brother Raj, negotiate their identity (significantly, only Raj is given the occupational subplot). The issue of marriage is developed within a series of juxtaposed binaries: West v. East, choice v. fate, and finally the love marriage v. arranged marriage. The dichotomy of West (America) and East (India) is produced by representing Indians through a rather straightforward application of the terms used by all three of the representational regimes we have discussed.

The character of the mother, Anju, who is so crucial to the formulation of the film's tripartite binary of West v. East, is drawn as a caricature of first-generation immigrants, espousing the most conservative of their ideals. Anju is the stereotypical Indian mother: loving, overprotective, manipulative, living vicariously through her children. She is obsessed with her children's marriages, to the extent that she basically ignores Raj's protracted and uncomfortable engagement, and verily tricks Nina into meeting Ashok. As the representative of Indian immigrants in the film, Anju is shown to privilege the machinations of fate rather than personal choice in her understanding of human life (a worldview she shares with Ashok). Finally, Anju is also the film's strongest advocate of arranged marriage. In the film's most explicit discussion of marriage, Anju shares her own experience of being married at sixteen and knowing her husband only a week before their wedding day. Although she admits that times have changed, when Nina asks her how she could have loved her husband after only a week, she retorts: "What's love got to do with it?" Finally, in response to her children's single status, Anju wishes they had never come to the US, believing that if they had remained in India, she would have already found them spouses, and their lives would "make sense." The film, then explicitly positions the identity formation of Indian Americans Nina and Raj vis-à-vis Anju's appropriation of arranged marriage as the ultimate signifier of Indianness.

Interestingly, even as the film adopts many of its representational strategies from those we have associated with US popular culture and the essentialized representations of Indian

identity fostered by multiculturalism, it simultaneously adopts a hybrid of the Bollywood narratives of diasporic redemption and return. The film draws an implicit association between arranged marriage, Hinduism, and then finally Indianness more generally so that Nina's discomfort with the Hindu religion operates to emphasize her disjunction from her Indian heritage. Yet, she is not shown to be happy in her "American" life either, importantly defined by her romantic involvements. When we are first introduced to Nina she has just thrown out a violent one-night stand, and as the film progresses it becomes clear that she has never had a healthy romantic or sexual relationship. In contradistinction to her flaky ex-boyfriend, Sam, the chain of no-good men, and the promiscuous sex, the film offers Ashok, the lovable, open-minded, respectful Indian, just arrived from Gujarat. Nina's initial scenes with Ashok are those in which she is portrayed as happiest and most in touch with her Indianness, what the film suggests is her "authentic" self. Taking a cue from Hindi films like *DDLJ*, *ABCD* suggests that the diaspora is best saved from utter contamination by the West through the arranged marriage of second-generation Indian American women with Indian men.

The climax of the film comes when Nina and her on-again-off-again boyfriend Sam attend the wedding of Shamila, Nina's childhood friend. Nina obviously feels uncomfortable there, and does not really know how to respond to Sam's exotifying interest in Hindu weddings, other than by disparaging them. In a short conversation between Nina and Shamila after the ceremony has been completed, we find out that Shamila is to move back to India with her husband. As the leave-taking occurs, Sam questions Shamila's profuse tears. Nina explains that in Indian culture daughters are considered alienated from the family after marriage, and so must leave their own home for the husband's. The film does not question this glaring stereotype, instead Shamila's mournful tears mark the moment in which Nina finally agrees to marry Sam. The repudiation of Indian culture this decision embodies is signified by Nina's condition that they not be married "like this," but instead in a church "where everybody's happy."

Ultimately, if *ABCD* if “all about choices,” Nina’s range of choice boils down to the question of a love marriage with a white American or an arranged marriage with an Indian. Moreover, the film suggests her identity is sealed, and not necessarily for the better, when she picks Sam over Ashok. This expressly unsatisfying ending should alert us to the profound limits set on diasporic identity when it is structured around a stereotype. In this short paper, we have begun to rehearse the process by which a stereotype of arranged marriage has been made to circulate between hegemonic, heteronormative, and profoundly gendered regimes of representation. In so doing, and by exposing the fallouts of failing to critically engage these paradigms, we have demonstrated that it is time to move beyond constructs of identity that have been carved for us. If it is indeed “all about choice,” and even if it really is not, let us choose to determine for ourselves the terms of our selfhood as second generation Indian Americans.

¹ Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other,’” in Representations: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, ed. Stuart Hall (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 232.

² Hall, 228.

³ “Review of Arranged Marriage,” Booklist on Amazon.com; available from http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0385483503//qid=1064447121/sr=8-4/ref=sr_8_4/102-372549-0456908?v=glance&s=books&vi=reviews; Internet.

⁴ Inderpal Grewal, upcoming monograph.

⁵ See for instance, Susan Moller Okin, Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women? (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁶ Purnima Mankekar, “Brides Who Travel: Gender, Transnationalism, and Nationalism in Hindi Film,” Positions 7.3 (Winter 1999): 737.

⁷ Mankekar, 737.

⁸ See Vijay Prashad, The Karma of Brown Folk (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2000) and Uma Narayan, “Essence of culture and a sense of history: a feminist critique of cultural essentialism” Hypatia 13:2 (Spring 1998): 86-107.