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Prologue

The blue glass is always the hardest to find. On the beach you catch the waves bringing back the glass from forgotten tossed bottles, frosted green, clear, or mottled pale brown. But the blue glass — that's the real thing.

I search for days without finding any. Sometimes there are slivers; other days, small chunks. Like a beachcomber, I comb the sands for it.

I take the glass home and make some into jewellery and touchstones for people to hang on to; pour essential oils on others so the scents waft heavenward and meld together with the glass to form a bond.

Words are like that. They can fuse with each other and ignite, or just quietly combine.

On sunny days, I take my books with me to the beach. I toss words back and forth in my mind, like churning waves. I cobble them together. A phrase here. A sentence there.

The water. The sun. The sand. The glass. The words. The paper. The connection. I find myself enveloped in it all.

The glass is from bottles tossed into the surf by unthinking people — picnickers, vacationers, those who don't have to return here and live with the remnants of their actions. Over time, the broken glass is ground and moulded by the action of the waves, the sharp edges are softened and etched by the sand and water. The sea glass is washed up on shore and picked up by beachcombers. Some recycle it for other uses like me, others just keep it as a reminder of a day at the beach.
The words I sift through as I sit on the sand are measured in the sea glass. I pick each word up and look through it to see how much light shines through. What use do I have for it? A poem? An essay? A fragment of a sentence, for something to be said in the future? I watch the sun rest uneasily on its bed of water and slide slowly, farther down. I know the hot summer is coming to a close and I am loath to let go of the closeness I feel with nature.

I live to find the blue glass, and sometimes it just happens.

My search for Indian migrant women was like my quest for the blue glass. It was not an easy task. It became a process of rummaging through other people's lives, searching for fragments and relics. Eventually I was able to fit pieces together to form a mosaic of their lives in that other time, that other place. And also in this present time, in this place they now call home, Australia.
Stories are told through movement; they are exchanged in the production of things.
They begin in the hands. They find their rhythms in the chopping, hammering, sewing,
bathing, shuffling and tidying.

My grandmother, my Suppiah Patti, used to tell me stories while her large, wrinkled
hands played with the curls of my hair or stirred a curry in a big aluminum pot.
She would tell me tales about Yama who had taken my grandfather to Yamapura. I
never knew my Suppiah Tatta. Never saw his face, except in the one photograph on the
family altar. Never felt his arms carry me. Never heard his voice. Never smelt the
coconut oil on his hair.

I used to listen fascinated to her tales, also hearing the punctuating sucks and
clicks her tongue made cleaning her teeth of chicken bits.

'Yama's vehicle is a buffalo, which he rides dressed in red and green. He is armed with
a heavy mace and a noose to snare his victims.'

Every time she told the story, a window or a door in the house would slam shut in
the wind.

'Looks like Yama has come to take me away,' she would say.

'I'll beat him up if he dares,' the valiant warrior in me would cry out.

This is the way I remember her. Grey was the colour of the thirnuru streaked on her
broad forehead. No red pottus. No colourful sarees. A religious woman who burnt
incense and jasmine-scented joss-sticks during prayers.
I can mould her face in my mind: cataract-filled eyes behind thick spectacles, full of compassion. I can trace her high cheekbones, the life-lines and wrinkles engraved into her dark skin. Each line of time on her face recorded the joys of her journey through life, her struggles with sorrow, and the threads of wisdom she had bent down and picked up along the way. I can remember the smell of camphor soap after she had a shower. Incense, jasmine and camphor soap, essences of my grandmother, scents of my childhood. I also remember her warm palm on my cold forehead, transfusing stories directly into my brain.

When I came into this world, she was in her fifties and widowed eight months earlier. I was about to turn twenty-one when she left it.

My Suppiah Patti told me if I wanted to know everything I would have to ask and listen. ‘If what you want lies buried, dig until you find it,’ she used to say. Great advice for a writer, but I believe she wanted me to be a doctor and cure humankind of sickness. I used to sit on the green mosaic stairs and listen to her in the kitchen, clattering the pots or on the phone, grumbling about my mother.

I remember the white wall where now my siblings’ graduation photographs hang. It was my magic slate. I heard my parents chuckle upstairs in their bedroom. I saw my brother and sister cry and laugh. And I used to concoct stories of my own. Huddling under the sheets, I told these stories to my sister, night after night.

I also saw my grandmother leave our house one day, after fighting with me because I had told my mother something she had said about her. I cannot remember those words now. She vowed never to return.
Seated on the ninth stair, I watched her big buttocks, encased in the batik sarong, heave from side to side as she walked to my dad’s car. She was breaking with tradition by refusing to stay in her son’s house. Could she have known that I too would follow in her footsteps and break tradition by leaving the same house? We are both like Sita of the Ramayana, who crossed the line drawn by Lakshmana, the line no Hindu woman dared to cross.

My Suppiah Patti eventually returned to our house in a coffin, on her final journey to the grave. That day, I stopped manufacturing tales.

***

Isabelle Allende says, ‘There is magic in storytelling. You tap into another world. I don’t invent anything. The stories are already there, and my job is to find them and bring them to the page.’

Story telling is an essential part of culture. A society’s values are transmitted primarily through storytelling. Every book tells tales, some intended, some not. Like Allende, I too ‘don’t invent anything.’ From my grandmother, I learnt the value of remembering and re-telling stories handed down by other people.

***

There is a story behind my personal journey to Australia. I was born in Singapore. At the tender age of nine, I fell ill with Japanese encephalitis. I had a high temperature, went into a coma and had epileptic fits. The fever and the fits affected the left side of my brain. My left hand became semi-spastic. My tongue receded to the back of my mouth and I lost the power of speech.

Dumb, mute, disabled, handicapped, abnormal, different – all those words soon became part of my mind’s vocabulary ... because even if I did not want to admit it to
myself, that was what I was. I had not only lost a voice, but also the language of
gesticulation, as I could not use my left hand. From being the most loquacious girl in
my class, I became the most silent one.

My parents, although not rich, were stable, and they placed great value on educational
pursuits, being teachers themselves. I had a normal school education, but did not quite
make the grade when it came to entering the local university. I started working as an
accounts assistant. Watching my elder brother and my younger sister graduate as
lawyers, I wondered if there would ever come a day when I would get my chance to
wear the mortarboard on my head. That square shaped hat with a tassel had become my
icon.

After working for about four years in Singapore, I decided I needed a change. I
wanted to try my hand at something creative. I wanted to write. Writing was a passion
in me. It still is. Being unable to talk, I soon discovered words on paper were my one
way to communicate my deepest thoughts and desires. My writing became my breath,
my sight, my hearing, my voice, my life and my power! Without it, I could not be
heard.

**

I arrived at Tullamarine Airport at the stroke of midnight on a cold summer's night. My
father came to Australia to help settle me in. He stayed with me for two weeks,
probably the two most unsettling weeks of my life. I can still recall his first words in the
cab: 'I don't like it here.' I merely shrugged my shoulders and pressed my nose
defiantly against the car window, looked out and decided I was going to love it.
'Aren't you scared?' my father continued. 'We know nothing about this country. What happens if something happens to you? You can't even scream for help.' His voice trembled, as he choked back tears.

'Yes, I'm frightened,' I longed to confess. I wanted to pat him on his shoulder reassuringly. But the need to get my longed-for mortarboard kept me silent.

The story of my journey to Australia is also the story of my growing up. In the eight years since I made that first journey, I have experienced many things: pursuing and completing a diploma and two University degrees, finding part-time employment, falling in love, moving house four times and making friends who have become my family. It is also a journey of my maturity. Becoming independent, being able to cook, do my laundry and learn to clean up my own mess were prized achievements. And discovering that I was able, despite being disabled. I had a voice.

I began to feel a compulsion to listen to the experiences of other people. My own experiences of not being heard, seen or understood has created in me a passion to give voice to others' experiences. This dissertation has its genesis in the stories of eleven migrant women who now live in Australia. I felt there was a silence to be broken amongst these migrant women. Thus began the interviews, which showed me the changing face of Australia through these women's eyes. Hearing their stories, one cannot deny there is a strong Indian voice waiting to be heard in this country.

These pages record conversations, narratives, debates, songs, questions and answers - my dialogues with women who have newly hyphenated realities. Women who are no longer Indian or Singaporean or Malaysian or Fijian but Indian Indo-Australian, Indian Singaporcan-Australian, Indian Fijian-Australian and Indian Malaysian-Australian.
These stories also arise out of relationships. They are about forming friendships and the forging of connections. They form a tapestry that draws on these Indian women's lives. My weaving shows a rich and different picture of women that places importance on the themes of adaptation, creativity, grief, hardships, home and identity resulting from the migration experience. There is also a sense of uprootedness and impotence resulting from an inability to function competently in the new culture. The accounts of these women's journeys resonate with my own odyssey.

This study emphasises the geographical and psychological borders and boundaries crossed in the process of migration. Crossing borders, in both senses, is central to the life experiences of women who have migrated from their country of origin. The crossing of geographical borders through migration may offer women the space and permission to cross cultural boundaries and transform themselves. Becoming a member of a new society stretches the boundaries of what is possible in several ways. When one's life changes, identities and roles change as well. A new culture brings new societal expectations. The identity expected and allowed in the home culture may not be that looked for or permitted in the new host society. Borders are also crossed when new identities are established in life. Most immigrants who cross geographical borders, whether eagerly or reluctantly, do not fully comprehend the breadth of the emotional and behavioural boundaries they are about to cross.

**

My interest in the impact of migration experiences on women’s lives arises not only from my own experiences as a migrant, but also from the history of my “nomadic” grandparents.
Both my grandfathers migrated to Singapore from India in the early twentieth century. My maternal grandmother migrated from Malaysia to Singapore. Their life stories impressed on me the cultural and psychological significance of migration.

My maternal grandfather’s fierce Indian loyalty differs from the feelings of my paternal grandfather. Although I never knew my paternal grandfather, my father has told me he refused to talk about India and his village. On the other hand, my maternal grandfather, my Ramaiah Tatta nursed his nostalgia by constantly retelling stories about India when I was a child. He believed everything originating in India was far superior to its Singaporean equivalent. When my Ramaiah Tatta died, his ashes were taken from Singapore to be buried in his village in Andhra Pradesh, in line with his death-bed wish He loved his country of birth and felt a stronger link to India. From him, I learnt that a deep love for one’s country of birth can last for a lifetime, despite distance and length of absence. He also, unknowingly, taught me the emotional limitations that develop when one clings to old memories and unrealisable dreams.

It might seem strange I have so much to say about my grandfathers’ journeys and nothing to say about my grandmother’s journey. This is because little is known about my Ramaiah Patti’s past. To me, this shows that men make their utterances and are heard, women remain quiet and suffer in silence.

**

I am, what you might term, a first-step migrant.

Migrants can be divided into classes of first or second step migrants. For instance, migrants coming to Australia from their ancestral lands in Europe are what could be termed first-step or first-stage migrants. They do not generally migrate and then migrate again. There have been exceptions to this theory. Quite a few European migrants were displaced before they came to Australia, especially Jews fleeing the
horrors of Nazism, Eastern European refugees and postwar arrivals from parts of the Mediterranean that were disrupted by World War II.

Indians migrate from country to country. They might migrate from India to Fiji or Singapore or Malaysia; then from any of these countries, they might migrate again to Australia or return to India. When they migrate from a country they have already migrated to, they can be termed second-step migrants. Many of the women who appear in these pages belong to this group. They have migrated and travelled from India to London, Singapore, Kenya and even America before coming to Australia.

**

In March 1994, an exhibition, *Becoming American Women: Clothing and the Jewish Immigrant Experience, 1880-1920*, opened at the Chicago Historical Society. In the book that accompanies the exhibition, Barbara Schreier, its curator, tells us when she interviewed first and second-generation immigrants about the years of adjustment to American society, she discovered 'everyone had a clothing story. . . . Female immigrants discuss clothing in their memoirs, oral histories and correspondence as pivotal markers of their journey and remembered objects of desire.'

Do these Indian migrant women have clothing stories? Most of them do. But what I am more interested in is the baggage these women carry. Is what is in their luggage what they have carried from their home in India to their first migration point? Or is it only what they have brought with them from their second-stage migration point? The culture they are thus bringing with them is not directly from India and has the flavour of the countries they have migrated to.

It is hard to believe I do not know how to spell Pappadums in English. After an argument with a friend, I visited the local supermarket with her to check how it was spelt. But I became more bewildered by the varied ways in which it can be: Pappadums,
Pappadams, Pappadoms and even as Puppodoms. Which was I to choose? While, the word is phonetic in English and can be spelt in any number of ways, it showed me how different cultures have influenced the borrowed spelling of a foreign word. So I settled on Pappadums, as a metaphor for the Indian women I talk about.

There are still vestiges of the culture that reside in India. The food, the way they use the languages, the way they sing the language rather than speak it. The clothes and the bright colours they wear. The way they retain what was originally theirs in India or their original homelands.

Becoming a migrant to Australia is a bit like future shock. It is a large unfamiliar landmass. Migrants from any part of the world coming to Australia feel apprehensive. They wonder: How will I be treated? Will my accent set me apart? Will my colour set me apart? Is there racism? Is there religious intolerance? These apprehensions are uppermost in the minds of most migrants.

Surprisingly enough, when most migrants arrive, they find discrimination is an oddity and not the norm. Colour, religion, accent and language do not dominate what might set people apart in Australia. It is how people think. Eventually, after having gone through the apprehensive induction period as new Australians, many migrants recognise this continental island as a safe place to set down roots. Yet they realise that it is hard to tear one’s memory from one’s culture and homeland.

**

I was lucky enough to sift through the baggage of eleven Indian migrant women. And in my search, I found each of these migrant women had experienced Australia differently.

These women have immigrated at different stages in their lives and for different reasons. Wide-eyed women, beside husband and children. What did they dream their
lives would be like in Australia? Women who crossed oceans when they would not go unchaperoned to the next village in their own country. What promises had Australia made to draw them so far? Some of these women came because there was no other alternative. Others left their native lands by choice. For instance, both Vimala and Harbant came to Melbourne of their own free will. Most, though, came because of their husbands’ need to explore the job opportunities in Australia. Some came because the educational opportunities were better for their children here. Others, like Lakshimi and Vicki, came to Australia to be with the men they loved. There are also women, like Tara and Shoba, who are involved in the dance and music industry. They came to show there is a place for Indian arts in a white man’s world.

**

*Pappadums in Paradise?* is a work of creative non-fiction with real characters, although occasionally pseudonyms have been used to protect confidentiality.

It is a narrative about narratives; more accurately, it is an exploration of stories and histories that recover the losses one is subjected to in migration and displacement. These women’s narratives illustrate a process of transformation that is both enriching and challenging. They are witnesses to a particular set of historical and cultural circumstances. They are also onlookers in a process of changes that involves countless women all over the world.

This change is what this work is about. I present to you this tapestry of our individual weavings.
Dance

It is a warm morning in late November. Dressed in a blue salwar kameez - the colour of the sky above - I step out of the cab and feel a faint flush of fear engulf me. Must be the interview. Sparrows sing a symphony among the tall trees, paying homage to the change of season.

In a half-opened garage, I glimpse the costumes for a Kathakali dance performance: heavily decorated head-dresses, green masks and voluminous white skirts. I walk along the cobbled stone path to be greeted by two sculptured baby elephants, their trunks outstretched in welcome. I smile down at them. The doorbell rings and my tongue rasps across my dry upper lip. My palms feel damp.

The door opens and I am greeted by Tara Rajkumar - a dancer and a teacher. Round face. Big eyes. Curly black hair done up in a bun at the back of her head. Dressed in pants, a white top and a black vest.

'Tara of the white lotus,' I remember reading once. A name that has so much meaning. Tara, the ancient Indians' goddess of daytime. Depicted with a wheel on her chest, playing the lute, she is seen among the gods at Ellora as a great, beautiful woman surrounded by children. Come nightfall, the lotus flower closes, showing the outer green of its sepals, and she changes into the green Tara: Tara Utpala, the goddess sent to see us safely through the night. Another Tara, Tara-Dharani the saviour, is shown clutching a book, sent to us to soothe our sorrows. But I see the Tara before me as Tara Ambra: Tara the mother.

She tells me her son, a medical student, is having his examinations today, and asks me if I would mind waiting for a little while she prepares his breakfast.
She shows me to the living room. A black-and-white-photograph shows Tara in a white saree with its dark-coloured borders. The picture rests on the floor behind a brown leather sofa. In the photo, her hair is gathered together at the side in an unusual coiffure and is encircled with a bunch of jasmine flowers. Her eyes seem to dart from right to left, like the movements of an Indian classical dance. On the walls, I see pictures of a red and saffron Ganesha and a plump blue Krishna with his two consorts.

**

Tara is from Kerala, India.

Kerala. Land of palm trees that fill the skyline, green fronds swaying gently and gracefully in the light wind, and fishermen's boats bobbing up and down on the water. A region where there are fast-flowing rivers and streams, the South Indian state where women wear white sarees and where people speak Malayalam and celebrate Onam. The land of dances like Kathakali, Koodiyattam and Mohiniattam. Kerala.

Tara opens the curtains, letting light into the dark room, her movements graceful and elegant. Before her, I feel clumsy. She stands there for a moment at the windows, breathing in the fresh breezes of the new day, and then returns to the sofa. As she walks back, her flowing movements remind me of the waterfalls of her homeland, green rice fields and the palm trees swaying in the wind.

She speaks softly and very quickly; it is a beautiful voice. Unable to detect the typical Indian accent, I wonder if she is really from India. She explains, as if she knows my unspoken question, ‘I was in London for ten years. I went there soon after I was married.’
Tara went to London, not knowing anyone there. She was not even sure if she could continue her career as a dancer or if there would be an opportunity to perform.

‘After a year, I performed. I have never stopped after that. It was in London my career was established. And one performance led to another. After the first performance, there was a request for teaching and I started teaching. I realised an organised process of teaching in South Asian dance was not happening in Britain. And I worked towards establishing an academy.’

Setting up the Indian Academy of Dance in London was hard work. A determined Tara recalls walking the streets of London, urging people to help. ‘Maybe there was something in what I said and maybe there was so much conviction in what I went around talking about, I was able to make these people sit up and take notice.’ She managed to raise £5000. ‘By 1978, I had established the Academy.’

Then came a second move, this time to Australia.

‘Maybe it was destiny. We often sort of wondered how we landed here, because it wasn’t planned at all. I really loved London. I still love London. I would love to go back. But things happened and before I knew it, in 1984, I was in Australia,’ she says, smiling. ‘I was invited to come and tour Australia in 1982-1983. I performed at the Opera House in Sydney, at the Arts Centre in Melbourne, for the theatre opening at Araluen, in Alice Springs.’

She explains, ‘We were just meant to be in Australia. My husband is a scientist and he’s an expert in metallurgy. He was also invited by the CSIRO to come and work in Australia. There were no metals left to be mined in Britain.’

**
Tara is glad to be in Melbourne because of her family. The typical Indian woman, I think to myself, always putting family before herself.

‘When you come to a new country, your workload increases automatically. You have to start all over again. My two sons are happy in Australia. I don’t think they can think of life in another country. They have really adapted.’

When Tara was in London, she was so busy with work she had to send her sons to India to be looked after by her mother. ‘I felt that wasn’t really the thing to do,’ she confesses, a sadness in her eyes, as she thinks of the six months she missed with her boys.

Had she poured into those infants’ ears stories of peoples and landscapes so unlike her own? Pictures of a place where the people were white as ghosts? Where a great big red rock was a national icon? Did she know this continent would be the place she would one day call home?

Home, Tara believes, is ‘where your people are. People whom you love and belong with. There’s a bit of home in India for me still, because my husband and I have no relations in Australia. But even though I can still mentally think of India as my home, physically I am here in Melbourne. If I am in India, I still would be thinking of Melbourne because my home is here.’

Tara often wonders what her feelings are towards both India and Australia. She explains, ‘I think the longer you stay in a place, the stronger are the feelings of homeland to that place. And Melbourne has grown on me. So, as years go by, India recedes further and further as homeland, but I’ll always have a very special spot for it. I often think of India as my mother that has given birth to me. Like a mother … the feelings towards a mother from where I come. My feelings towards Australia are what I
feel towards my kids. Like a teenager who is moving forward. Probably the best times for this country are yet to come, and I'm contributing to that progress.'

Tara and her family have made six or seven trips to India. She explains, 'Having no relatives in Australia, I feel it is very important for my children to have contact with their relatives there, because it gives them emotional and cultural strength'.

Another reason for her to go to India is to pursue the arts. 'I have to keep up to date,' she says, 'and if I don't go and collect research material and see what's happening there, I'll be left behind.'

She went to India twice with the support of a grant from the Australian Council. 'A lot of the dance choreography is based on the drum rhythms of India. Kerala has a sacred drum called the edakka. It is one of the very few drums that is melodic and it is these drum rhythms I went and did research on. It is the sacred drum of Lord Shiva, and in the temples of Kerala the rituals do not take place until the edakka is played outside. It is a flowing, beautiful rhythm you get from the edakka, and those rhythms are suitable to Mohiniattam because this dance form is a very flowing, lyrical kind of style. I went and recorded the entire rhythmic structuring that comes from the edakka. Based on that, I started developing new dance items.'

Tara feels her old home and her new are opposites in many ways. 'In India, there are just so many people. From that comes a whole mountain of differences. And the approach is different because of that. Here there is a rarified atmosphere. In India, there is a teeming … excess of everything … life, arts, riches, poverty, people … everything is in excess … culture … There is too much culture over there. It is like a pot boiling over
if you go to India. Here it is only simmering. Exact amount of everything. We plan so well here and look ahead and do things,' she says.

Even when it comes to performing, there are differences. Tara explains, 'In India, you dance to an audience steeped in that culture. In Australia, you're presenting a tradition that is alien to the majority of the population, unless you're performing for a ghettoed kind of small Indian audience only. Though India is a very multi-cultural country, the Indians who live in India do not necessarily know so much about the traditions. So, when you take a dance form from one state and present it in a city like Delhi—a cosmopolitan state—a lot of the audience would not necessarily understand the entire significance of the particular art form. Thus, explanation and presentation would enhance the understanding of such an audience in India too, unless it is performed in a traditional form in the villages from which the art form originates.

'When you present in Australia, you have to be very conscious that it is being viewed as an art form that is not the norm. So you have to present it in such a way that it is palatable to an international audience or an Australian audience. When you perform a traditional piece, you make it as accessible as possible by giving explanations and making it visually pleasing. First of all, you are taking it from the temple to the theatre, so the changes are being made automatically to make it more acceptable. You must remember the whole concept of the art form and the reasons for performing are also slightly different when you perform in a temple and a theatre.'

Tara admits she did not intend choose a career in dancing. 'I was interested. There was a very famous dancer called Kamala Lakshman whose dance my parents took me for
and I insisted on standing on a chair and dancing with her.' I laugh with her, our
laughters becoming one.

'So my father decided I needed to be trained in dancing. He loved Kathakali,
coming from Kerala, and decided I should learn the dance form.' Even though it is a
male-oriented dance form, Tara explains, 'at the age of four or five, you don't really
think of the style; you just do what you're trained to do. I learnt Kathakali for nearly
fourteen years and I learnt to do male characters as well as female characters. Thus, I
obtained a very deep insight into that dance style. And that became my medium of
performance.'

When she first started learning Kathakali, her family had no intention of letting
her become a performer. It was decided she should learn the art form for knowledge.
'An intellectual involvement,' she says laughing.

She laughs again as she tells me what her grandmother said. A wizened old
woman with grey hair, she begged her young granddaughter, 'It's all right to learn
dancing, but please do not perform. People from good families do not become dancers.'

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I ask her about her gurus. She tells me when she was learning Kathakali she had a
number of teachers. 'I initially started learning from Ramakrishnan. Then I learnt from
a well-established dance teacher in Cochin called Molaeri Nambuthri. I had already
learnt a fair bit and done my arangettam. And when I was about ten or eleven, the great
guru called Kalamangala Krishna Nair saw me perform, and to my great honour, he
agreed to teach me.

'I was only a young girl,' she recalls, 'and he was a very busy performing artist,
one of the great performers of Kerala. Whenever he had the opportunity and time, he
used to teach me. His strength was in abhinaya – expressions; the facial expressions especially.'

Having watched a Kathakali performance of *King Lear* in London earlier that year, I remember the abhinaya of the eyes. The eyeballs rolling upward, downward, from side to side, in circles and diagonal movements. 'Dancing eyes,' my English friend called them. The dancers played out myriad faces, slipping into the many masks of the characters. Like life itself.

Tara continues, 'He was famed for his female characterisations. A lot of the female roles of Kathakali I learnt from him. Most of the time he used to come to my house and teach me. Sometimes, I went to his house to learn. Downstairs, his wife Kalyani Kuttamma was there, one of the very few women who knew this rare style, Mohiniattam. It was hardly learnt by women in Kerala because it had a stigma of being connected to prostitution.'

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The temple dancers, centuries ago, lived the lives of priestesses.

Mohiniattam was dance and it was prayer. The dancers were women, but they were not ordinary women. They were married to the God to whom they addressed their prayers.

The women were devadasis, the prayer Dasi Attam. They became concubines when they fell from their temple status: from religion to royalty. Thus, the women who danced became the keep of the king. Later on, when kings lost their kingdoms and there was war, the women’s status deteriorated further. There was no support for the art form. The temple dancers lost their living; how did they survive without any aid from the temples or royalty when their supporters were busy fighting for their lands? So they
became the keep of the rich. The temple dances of India declined further during the time of the British because the religious connection had lost its importance and there was no money.

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Tara had been studying Kathakali and Mohiniattam for several years when her father was transferred to Delhi. ‘Being a great Kathakali lover, he established the International Centre for Kathakali in Delhi. There was an entire troupe, which regularly taught and performed this dance. There was this great guru called Poonathur Mahadeva Panicker. I was learning male characters in Kathakali at that time. But I used to go to Kerala during my holidays and continued to learn Kathakali with Krishna Nair and Mohiniattam from his wife. Kathakali was my forte. I learnt Mohiniattam because of my own love for the arts.’

Soon after finishing her degree in Education, Tara married and went to London. Her guru, Krishna Nair, came to London to perform for the Festival of India and she invited him to be the chief guest to open her Institute.

She recalls, ‘This was within five years of coming to London, and I was still in my twenties. There was no turning back. It was a very exciting climb in that performance, teaching and dance career. I was touring into Europe while I was performing, and going back to India to learn new items. I am like a mongoose. I pursue; I don’t give up.’

She is grateful to her husband for his support. She believes he could have said, ‘Look, stop dancing. I mean, it is not going to bring you any money. Work in a library or school.’
She continues, 'Going to London and doing the lecture-demonstrations, I came to realise the kind of racism that was happening to Indians and Indian children. There was this general consensus of opinion that India has no culture to offer. There were festivals coming from India on grand high scales, but they did not get to the grass roots. Elite sections of British and Indian society went to see major performances sent by the government of India. But the actual people living in Britain had no opportunity to learn good classical dance forms.

'I have seen racism happening in Britain. But then again I became a role model to the people there, because I was a pioneer in the arts, I had a special place there. And I was trying to make the natives of Britain realise the Indians who were coming in had a culture of their own. So it was the opposite way around. I was aware of the racism, but I was positively working towards bringing the two cultures together.'

Tara has experienced racism mildly. But, she says, 'I'm such a rational kind of person, I quickly put rationale to it: this is the reason why they are reacting like this. As a dancer, you go to a place with a certain position; you're the performer. Fortunately, I only came to Australia in 1984-1985 and there was a change in attitude. This was the time when the Labor government was consciously making an effort to embrace multiculturalism and to make people feel welcome. Had I come before, maybe I would have felt it much stronger. And where I have been on that odd occasion, when you go to a school here, you feel, as if, the parents who are talking ignore you. I brush it off like water off a duck's back, because I feel this happens everywhere.

'You go to India and people from one state bind together and you can feel left out. There is discrimination in India between classes and people who are colour-conscious. If you're brought up in North India, the North Indians always feel as though the South Indians are dark and short. They call them the 'Colour Madrasi' — meaning
the black Madrasi. It is a human failing, and I have come across it here in Australia as well. This street we live on, for example, is a very white Australian street and we were the first non-whites to come here. The golf course at the back is a white Australian private golf course and they were saying, "We have an Indian buying this house."

Tara believes racism comes from the desire for power. She says, 'Our caste system is all about that in India. Hinduism never preaches caste. It is people who produce these problems to keep power. There is racism all over the world. The White Australia policy is one example. Slavery was brought about to get the black people to work so the white people could make money. It is all about people being worried about the loss of power.

'It is also due to upbringing. There are some children who are taught that in their families. So in schools you get these white children who do not know how to react to a non-white person because their parents have told them. It is instilled into them. Nobody is born a racist. Man creates racism. And it is power and insecurity -- these are the basis for racism.'

She compares India with Australia. 'We now have a low-caste person as the President of India. In Australia, the problem is the Aboriginal people and the way they're treated. There is a positive move towards that but it is not fast enough. When an Aboriginal person becomes the President of Australia, then we can say we have total democracy in this country. Australia is very young in those areas and India has progressed tremendously.'

Tara copes with racism by exercising Hindu philosophy and accepting things as they are. 'Push it in a positive direction whenever possible. When it is negative, if you
can do something about it, do it. Otherwise, accept it and say life will go on. That is my philosophy: a peaceful way of co-existence," she explains.

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Tara has been concerned with the role and development of transmigrant dance forms. I ask her to comment more.

'The transmigrant concept I have been very aware of all along, because my life as a dancer has been in a transmigrant form. My entire experience as a professional dancer has been outside India. Naturally, I have taken the art form out of its homeland, out of its place of birth, and it still has to grow. The whole concept of the Academy was to look at that: to maintain the tradition and let it grow, but make it more relevant to the new society it is growing in. If you maintain it in its fossilised form, of what interest is it to a British or an Australian audience or the community? If you go for funding in Australia, the first thing they ask you, "What relevance is it to your new audience and to the society? Your own community can sustain your traditional art form. You don't need funding from an arts organisation to do that." So it is a transmigrant concept which gives it legitimacy. It will come up in a new form but only if you work towards it ... if you want it to happen.'

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Indian myths say Vishnu, the preserver of life, assumed the female form of Mohini to protect the universe from evil demons. Whenever the brute strength of man failed, the enticing charm of the female was the only alternative. Mohini alone had the power to destroy the demons and save the world from total darkness.

The tinkling sound of bells, the sweet smell of flowers, the divine being, her beauty unparalleled – Mohini the Enchantress. The one who could take people’s minds away from the present to another world. The lotus-eyed one, dancing gently and
gracefully, filling the atmosphere with unsurpassed heavenly charms. The demons, true
to her instructions, shut their eyes to behold the beauty they envisioned. She is Mohini
the celestial dancer, one who has come to enchant.

Mohiniattam, the dance form that Tara champions, has undergone a revival in recent
years. ‘I was born after India got its independence. That was the time when all these art
forms were being revived with great verve and vigour and reclaiming one’s own culture.
Mohiniattam is the last of these styles to gain acceptance. It has lagged behind and is
only now coming into its own.’

Tara’s is a life dedicated to intensive study and exploration of the multi-structured
nuances of India’s traditional dance arts and culture. A consummate performer, Tara is
a most welcome pioneer in the rather bleak Indian dance world of Melbourne.

‘I had the time to work on Mohiniattam only after I came to Australia.’ This was
because in London she was busy setting up the Academy and became involved with its
administration. ‘There is only so much you can do,’ she confesses.

She believes what survives of Mohiniattam is only a shadow of the original dance.
‘When I learnt from my guru, Kalyani Kuttiamma — that was twenty-five years ago —
she had only four items. But based on those components it was possible to develop it
further, and there are other people in India who have done research and added new
facets to the style which are typically Kerala. It is one of the very few forms, which has
developed full repertoires for performances for three to four hours.

‘It is growing into a new plant … growing into a tree. It has to have new facets,
but it should not at the same time lose its original basic four or five items, which make
up the foundation.’
‘Is Mohiniattam a dance that has been reborn?’ I ask.

‘It has been reborn in the sense it became dormant,’ she replies, ‘and it is now in the revival process, but the reasons for performing have changed. As a temple dance, as part of a ritual, it is done in a very small area, to a small audience ... when you bring it to theatre, the whole concept changes. It is grappling with these new needs of the art form and how it can be filled – that is what I’m looking at. And when you travel out of the country of its origin, it changes.

‘The non-resident Indians take back to India ideas of contemporary work, which are of significance in the country they live in. A lot of Indian artists have gone to Canada, America, Britain and Europe. We all have a tendency to go back to the homeland and when we go back – not everyone, but at least a few from each country have been making significant impact back in India with contemporary work – the kind of work they are developing in their new country of residence.’

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Tara takes me to the dance studio in her house. The smoothness of the waxed floor touches my bare feet. The cold from the wood seeps through.

She teaches because she loves the work. ‘It’s a way of communication. When you perform, you communicate. And through your performance, people want to learn. There is a section of the audience who is inspired enough to want to learn. That is another reason for teaching. A lot of my non-Indian students come because they want to know more about another tradition, and they are fascinated by the dancing they have seen and feel an empathy for the art form. And I’m excited about that process of communicating to my students. There is something I get from it as well. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be doing it.’ She shakes her head, as if it is impossible to define.
Some of the Indian girls come because they love to learn. Others come because their parents bring them." She laughs gaily. It is important for these parents that their daughters learn Mohiniattam. By doing so, they kept their faith with something ancient and precious about Indian culture. "Thus, they become part of a peer group who don't think it's odd to be Indian," Tara says.

Mohiniattam is an art form through which works can be choreographed to the imagery of different religions, not only Hinduism. Two of her students, Siddhar and Nina have made their debut performances. Siddhar is a Sikh girl. For her, Tara choreographed a poem by Guru Nanak, based on his teachings in Mohiniattam. It was called 'Sun Yaar Hamare,' which when translated means 'Goodbye, My Friend.'

For Nina, a Malayalee Christian, she choreographed a piece on the Immaculate Conception and called it 'Kanniya Mariam' – 'Virgin Mary.' She did this because she felt pieces relating to the students' own religions would have a greater impact on them.

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Tara cannot conceive of forgetting her culture. She explains, 'It is the way you look, the way you talk, the way you walk, the way you behave, it's you ... That's why culture is so important – it's a part and parcel of what you are. And when you are a dancer, it is accentuated even further ... and when I go to perform somewhere, I go there as an Indian dancer. My culture is me and the only difference is, as time goes on, my culture becomes an amalgamation of what I was and what I am. And a lot of what I am, now, is Australian.'

She believes dance has the power to transcend culture. 'It speaks in its own fascinating manner, creating cultural bridges. And it's a belief you can reach out through the art form and touch people to the highest level.'
Tara now sees herself as a guru. A guru, like her own gurus. ‘My connection with my gurus is a bond that will be there with me all along.’ She touches her heart, indicating that is where they will always be. ‘Those are my roots. So what I am doing today is the development from those roots. Whenever I want to think of my roots, I have to think of my days studying with them.’ Her voice trembles as she pauses for a moment and I look up to see sadness in her eyes.

‘They have passed away,’ she says. ‘But they have left behind a fantastic treasure, a part of which I have had the good fortune to know, and I’m trying to preserve that and develop my own lineage. I must have taught about two to three hundred students here, and many more in London as well.’ She now wants her students to continue building on what she is choreographing.

I wonder how many times Tara’s students have thumped their energetic feet on this wooden floor, the sound of their stamping echoing together with the bells on their salangais. The whirling musical sweeps of their bodies. The fiery magical gaze of Divinity radiating from their eyes.

Rabindranath Tagore’s words come to my mind.

_In thy Dance, Divine Dancer,_

_Freedom finds its image_

_And dreams their forms._

_Its cadence weaves the thread of things_

_And unwinds them for age;_

_Charms the atoms’ rebellion into beauty,_

_Gives rhythm to the symphony of stars;_
Thrills life with pain and churns up existence
Into surging joys and sorrows.

On the wall facing me are two miniature Kathakali masks, green with black painted eyes and chutti. On the walls to the left and right of me are the framed programs of each performance.

Tara takes me around, explaining the significance of each work. ‘Temple to Theatre was the first production I did after I did research into Mohiniattam. I went back to Kerala and collected material. Mohini the Divine Enchantress was again an extension into new boundaries – the traditional style of Mohiniattam. In Krishna the Celestial Dancer, I did research into the life of Krishna and presented a whole gamut of items in Kathakali and Mohiniattam depicting the life of Krishna. There was a discourse between a sage and a little boy tracing the life of Krishna, which was linked through performances and items in Mohinattam and Kathakali.

‘Temple Dreaming and Mahamaya had distinct contemporary elements. Temple Dreaming was a production that looked at two lives meeting in time. That is this lady, Louise Lightfoot, who is no more, and myself. So the whole dance performance was based on that. It was contemporary in concept and it looked at creating futuristic possibilities in Australia. And Mahamaya was looking at Earth – Mother Earth, the strength of the soil and what happens to it, and the legend of Kali, and superimposing the legend onto an Australian soil.’

She talks about the creative process involved in making a work. The method is different depending whether she does a contemporary piece or a traditional work. ‘If it is a traditional work, then there is a process to be followed. When I am looking for a new idea and then translating it to a traditional choreography in Mohiniattam, the
process is different from a contemporary choreography of a contemporary theme. What is important in a traditional choreography is you need music to base your choreography on ... not only music, you need ashayam – the idea to put into music. How do you put an idea into music?’ she asks rhetorically, her eyes big behind her glasses.

‘In Western terms, you don’t need words. You can have instrumental music. We cannot do that. We literally translate poetry through our gestures and expressions. So, first we have to take a concept or an idea and put it into poetry, then turn the poetry into music, in a particular mode of music. And in the case of Mohiniattam, it’s a Carnatic mode of music. After you set it to music and particular rhythms, then I choreograph my piece. I already have the idea because it is a traditional format, you have to follow all the stages. Then I choreograph the piece and teach it to the student in order to perform, or if I’m performing, then I’ll perform. If it’s not a new idea, if it is already a set patham or krithi or composition, then I’ve to structure it rhythmically to the way and speed I want it, and then compose or choreograph the dance to that. So those are the two ways of doing traditional pieces.’

She pauses for a moment and then says, ‘When it comes to contemporary choreography, there are so many ways of doing it. Temple Dancing was one of those contemporary productions. It was entirely based on a collection that was left behind by this lady called Louise Lightfoot.’

Opening the trunks in Monash University’s music archives, Tara found an entire lifetime’s collection of books, costumes and writings left behind by Louise Lightfoot, an Australian woman who was involved with Indian dance.

Based on what she found there, Tara wove together a theatrical piece not following any particular theatre tradition. Tara’s imagination evolved a production where she was bridging cultures, ideas and time, showing images of traditional dance
and what is happening today. It was about the movement of Kathakali, through the eyes of an Australian lady who went to India and an Indian woman who came to Australia.

Louise Lightfoot went to India in the 1930s and was involved in Kathakali and its revival. She brought a dancer called Shivaram back to Australia and set up an Australian dance company. Then they toured America, South East Asia and India with their productions. She was also the first woman architect to pass out of Melbourne University, and worked with Walter Burley Griffin in designing Canberra.

Tara tells me *Temple Dancing* toured India. I ask her how Indian audiences reacted to her production. She tells me, excitement in her voice, "We had a fantastic response from lots of people. There was, of course, criticism, mixed with praise. There will always be the question of, "Why is she doing a work about an Australian lady? Is this theatre process workable? Where is she taking it?"

"I had some wonderful write-ups. The previous President of India, R. Venkataraman, invited me for coffee and said how wonderful it was. We had the present first lady of India, Mrs. K. L. Narayanan, as our chief guest in Delhi. It was the vice-chancellor of Bangalore University who hosted the production in Bangalore. So it was a very high-level tour between Australia and India. In some ways, I was taken aback at the importance we received."

*Malakee* was another contemporary piece. Tara recalls, "It was a solo performance I did, based on a theatre script written by a Sydney playwright. It was about a Third World woman getting water to her community. I used my hand gestures and my Kathakali training and spoke this theatrical piece through dance, music and words."
She believes it is sometimes difficult to produce contemporary pieces because one has to cull the work down and developing a new form is not always very easy because of lack of funding, support and time.

But she has lost none of her commitment. ‘A contemporary production can be anything one likes it to be,’ she goes on, her voice passionate. ‘Today, you have wide possibilities to utilise your traditional training and mix it either with contemporary Western dance – maybe not mix it but look at possibilities in moving into contemporary usage of the theatre and dance language to produce new works.’

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‘Tuesday is my laundry day,’ she announces at the end of the tour of her dance studio. ‘Shall I call you a cab?’

I nod my head. As she goes back to her domestic chores, I walk outside to my waiting taxi.

Back home, I remember as a child pouncing upon dandelion fluffs, begging them to grant my wishes. To dance like a ballerina. To be nimble. To let my body curve and glide like a mermaid in the blue sea. The child dons the red dancing shoes as I spin in circles and finally drop to the floor in a pile of giggles and vertigo.
Love

The air is sweet with the scent of spring, the earth still wet from the previous day’s rain. Fruit trees are stirring, coming awake; their boughs hold the promise of buds. Roses in full bloom occupy the garden beds that escort me up the straight path. It is the season of conception, in the process of creation. It weaves its miracles of colour that pierce the mind and linger as pleasurable memories long after the blooms have vanished.

I am here to gather together the threads of a story, woven by a woman, an Indian migrant. Will her story be colourful like spring? Will it be memorable like the fragrance of her garden? I take one more deep breath, filling my lungs with the delicate scents that drift up from the garden. I press the doorbell. Its sharp ring shatters my reverie.

I hear someone rushing to the door, the tinkle of silver bells on the kolusu sounding around the ankles. The bells sound like distant temple-chimes. When she opens the door, I see her feet are arched like wings; toenails painted a pale pink. She mothers me with the softest of hugs. I feel the feathery brush of her skin as she kisses my cheek. Her work-roughened hands caress my neck. Her hair is long, thin, the colour of ebony; it smells of jasmine, still damp to the touch.

‘Come in, da,’ she says. I watch as her fingers stray to the edge of her pink and black batik dress and flirt with an errant thread.

I know her. Her name is Lakshimi, a name given to the Indian goddess of wealth. We are not blood relations, yet love and respect bind us together.

The delicious smell of frying muruku wafts from her kitchen.
'Preparing for Deepavali,' she explains with a smile. Deepavali is the Hindu festival of lights. Legend has it Deepavali falls on the day when Lord Krishna killed the demon Narasuran. Lamps were lit all over the kingdom to express the joy of the people.

The diamonds adorning Lakshimi’s ears glow, like the light from a hundred candles lit for Deepavali. The diamond represents indomitable strength. It is also the stone of reconciliation, sustaining love between husband and wife. On her neck is a single gold chain – the thali, placed there by her husband on their wedding day. This chain will not be removed till one of them dies.

‘She has a heart of gold,’ her husband, Raman once told me.

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We begin by talking of practical things such as working in the nursing profession as a midwife.

Her caring nature led her to choose nursing as a career. Her nursing certificate also provided her with security and the ability to travel. ‘I came to Australia on my own papers,’ she says, not without pride.

With her husband’s encouragement, she became a midwife. Midwifery is a natural extension of nursing, and there were pragmatic reasons for the move. ‘It isn’t physically taxing,’ she explains. ‘As you grow older, you don’t want to be lifting heavy patients. Lifting and washing babies isn’t all that strenuous.’

There are emotional aspects to being a midwife as well. There is great sorrow when a child is lost. ‘Despite that sadness, my life and profession continue.’

As a midwife, Lakshimi has seen many changes in hospital procedures. It has become a common practice to allow husbands to be with their wives during the painful time of
labour. She thinks it is a change for the better for the wife to have someone she knows rather than to be left in the hands of a complete stranger.

'They support the wives, they are there talking to the wives, spending time with them.' Some husbands get in the way of the staff, though. 'They want to know what is happening when procedures are being carried out. Some even faint.'

In Australia, she took her degree in nursing. Her husband always wanted her to get higher qualifications. He felt she had abilities as yet untapped. At the hospital where she works, they expect the nurses to upgrade their skills. She found it difficult balancing family commitments, work and study, but her husband was supportive. He took on the shopping to allow her additional time to complete her assignments. They bought takeaway food when there was not enough time to prepare proper meals. Whenever possible, they would prepare an extra dish, so there was no need to cook the following day.

In the time since she first became a nurse, her profession has changed. She says, ‘Degrees are now required in nursing. The new professionals can do the administrative and computer work, but they do not have the hands-on ability with patients.’ When she originally trained in nursing in England, a hands-on approach was taught. She learned by doing. Knowledge was incorporated with experience. Modern classes seldom incorporate the hands-on technique. Lakshimi feels new nurses require constant supervision. ‘They do not know how to deliver a bed-pan, let alone take temperatures or pass catheters.’

Though she says nursing has given her a sense of fulfilment and achievement, there are difficult aspects to the profession. She worked in the same ward for twelve
years; when the ward closed and she had to move, she felt lost and unhappy because she missed all her old friends. Adjusting to the new department was a difficult experience, and she might have left except hard economic times demanded she continue to work.

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Lakshimi migrated to Melbourne from Singapore in November 1978 to be with the man she loves. A man she met at a temple function in Singapore many years before. A man who was then still married; even after he was divorced, Lakshimi was in no rush to marry.

'I wasn't keen,' she says nonchalantly.

'His family told him "Now that you're divorced, why don't you get married?"' But for Lakshimi, it didn't change anything. 'That's only a piece of paper,' she claims. Love, for her, was a commitment neither sealed nor broken by a mere marriage certificate.

Like Penelope, the faithful wife of Odysseus, she waited patiently for twenty-three years. Half a lifetime for some of us. There is pride in her voice when she declares, 'If somebody can be around for twenty-three years, they are well worth the wait.'

The quest for her love eventually brought her to Melbourne.

'I had known him for eight years before I came to Australia. It was a long time friendship. When I went to London, he said, "I'll be there." He resigned his job and came. While I was a student in England, he would send me money for my airfare to visit Australia during my holidays. It was that sort of thing that made me feel I would be happy here with him.'
Side by side on the wall in the dining room are photographs of the two of them taken during their graduation ceremonies. Beneath the photograph of her husband’s graduation is a plaque with the words “Me and You/ You and Me/ That’s the way/ It’ll Always Be.” A plaque under her graduation picture says, “I’m only happy/ when we’re together/ or/ when I’m with you.”

She gazes at her hands and thinks about the man she loves – the one who is embedded in the heartlines and lifelines of her palm.

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Is this the same hand, she wonders, that was inherited from her father? Her father’s hand that was always too busy to hold her five-year-old hand when they walked through the busy streets of Singapore? The hand that never applauded her efforts to please him as a teenager? The hand raised in anger during her rebellious years?

She says, ‘You cannot be dependent on anybody. You need to be self-sufficient, both financially and emotionally. When I was young, my parents became ill. My father lost his job as the registrar of vehicles in Singapore after the People’s Action Party took over. He went through financial hardships and died soon after at the age of fifty-two. Since then, I have always made it a point to be independent.’

Even for this independent and strong-willed woman, it must have been difficult to leave her family behind in Singapore. She describes her childhood as being fun. ‘We used to play rounders, hopscotch and five stones, bat and ball, badminton and ride bicycles. And I was always with neighbours and my brothers and my sisters.’ She chuckles as she remembers how she used to hit a shuttlecock into thin air. ‘We always played from four to six-thirty. My parents used to sit outside then and talk.’

I see her gaze nostalgically into the past as she sighs, ‘I wouldn’t mind reliving my childhood.’
Lakshimi's house is a fragment of Indian culture, thriving in a European society off the foot of Asia. In a corner of the lounge room there is a small statue of Sarawathi, the goddess of art and learning. She sits on a lotus flower, playing the veena, looking for all like a new bride too shy to talk with the rest of the family.

On the wall facing Saraswathi is a red, white and gold silk tapestry of a scene from the *Mahabharatha*. It depicts Lord Krishna and Arjuna riding in a chariot to wage war against the Kauravas. The Geetaupadasam painting is one of the most powerful Hindu metaphors for the soul. Lord Krishna, the charioteer, is likened to the mind and ego, the horse to our senses; the chariot is our body and the passenger the soul, a passive learner in the journey of life.

In a feminist re-telling of the *Mahabharatha*, Anu Gupta writes:

'Draupadi, the heroine of this saga ... gave birth to many, many daughters. She told them they were beautiful and special. Draupadi taught them to be strong and courageous. She gave them the tools to survive the hardships that a new, darker era would bring. She helped them understand the injustices they would face as women. Draupadi made her daughters believe in themselves. Lastly, she made them promise to always remember they were the daughters of fire, like their mother. And those daughters gave birth to more daughters, who gave birth to more daughters.'

Daughters like Lakshimi, who seems to have inherited all of Draupadi's values. Where does that place her, she who has chosen not to give birth to daughters? Has she failed in her role as Draupadi's daughter?
Hindus believe motherhood is charged with divinity. It is an attribute possessed by the goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, who have traditionally played mothers to worshippers. Saraswathi is portrayed as the mother consoling, soothing and talking to her baby. Aspects of a mother nurturing a child are symbolised by Annapurna, fair and full, standing on a lotus with a rice bowl in her cupped hands, while Surabhi, the heavenly cow, is the eternal fountain of milk.

Things are different for Lakshimi. She is pragmatic. Her voice trembles as she makes an attempt to guess my hesitant question. ‘Why haven’t I had children? Is it difficult for me to see other people having kids? Or why didn’t I want to have kids?” She explains, ‘I never had kids only because I remained single until I was forty-seven. Good lord, who would want to have a child at that age?’

Do I detect sadness in her voice? I dare not ask. She continues, ‘Anyway, I have no regrets. God has been kind to me in other ways. I have had a good life. I have my holidays. Plenty of money. I buy what I want and I have financial freedom.’

She is often the first to feel a squirming baby in her hands. An amazing being, fresh from another world. When she hands the baby to its mother’s outstretched arms, does she wish she could hold on to the child forever? What thoughts go through her mind? Does she wish their positions were reversed? I do not have the heart to ask those questions.

She tells me, in a voice devoid of envy, ‘Happiness is what it’s all about. Happiness for the parents. Happiness in hearing a baby cry. Happiness to know all has gone well with the baby’s delivery. Happiness!’
Every time she asks me, 'Who needs children?' I see in her eyes a love and sadness for her nine nieces and nephews. Around the house are photographs of these nine children — children of her blood, but not of her womb.

Once a week, she makes a forty-kilometre journey to pick up her sister's children from school. 'I enjoy doing it,' she says, her big brown eyes lighting up. 'I am always thinking of things to do for them. It gives me a chance to see the kids once a week at least. The kids also look forward to it that I go and pick them up. I enjoy buying them a little treat. This week, it was an apple pie, french-fries and soft drinks from McDonald's. It also helps my sister. With three young kids, she's got lots on her hands."

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Although her Indian culture is reflected throughout her home, she is not strongly involved in the Indian community in Australia. 'I have barely enough time to do my own work — let alone get involved in the broader Indian community.' She explains further: 'I do shift work. I have had two nursing jobs for the past eighteen years, and I worked seven days a week. I didn't really have time.'

Besides, she says, 'The Indian community is quite inquisitive. And I am not that way inclined.'

She believes in retaining the principal values of her culture. 'If you are born and bred with it, you can't forget it — unless, of course, you don't want to acknowledge it.' She wears sarees — pieces of cloth that, once unravelled, break out into a galaxy of hand-woven stars, streaking comets and colourful horizons. She also wears salwar-kameez.

For entertainment, she watches Tamil films, with heroes chasing heroines around trees, singing love ballads. Tamil movies also with the tear-sogged end: the heroine dying at the hero's feet. The Indian male's fantasy.
Celebration of Deepavali and the Tamil New Year is traditional. She prays to the Tamil gods. Gods with elephant and monkey faces. Blue-skinned gods. Gods with many faces and as many arms and legs.

‘I don’t do all the fasts and prayers. I pray once a day and that’s it. Nothing too drastic, because that isn’t part of my nature,’ she says laughter, bubbling up from inside her.

She speaks Tamil, which is a lovely language, the language of my family as well, with its cadences and lilts. Hearing it takes me back to my younger years, tongue caught between teeth, eyebrows furrowed in concentration, practising the curls and the diagonal lines of the two hundred-odd letters of the Tamil alphabet. Her nieces and nephews cannot speak Tamil and this saddens Lakshimi, who would love to communicate with them in the dialect of her people, their mother tongue.

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‘When I first came out to Australia, I didn’t have family here. I was happy to accept it as home. Because I liked the environment and the space. I had my own freedom and now I’m very fortunate to have part of my family here with me.’ Her youngest brother and sister have also migrated to Melbourne.

Lakshimi has created a home in Melbourne that embodies all of her Indian traditions. She defines home as ‘somewhere you are happy to be. Safe. Spacious. Comfortable. A place with security. Where you are wanted and want to be. That’s home. Melbourne is home to me now,’ she adds with a smile.

For her, Singapore is now a place to visit because relatives and friends are there. It is also known as a gourmet’s paradise, and she goes there to enjoy the food. Rich, aromatic foods from the Orient and India, like nasi-biryani and Hokkien mee. ‘It’s a
place where I go to for a break, it's a holiday place. My husband has all his family there. All year he is here with my brother and my sister and me, so it is nice for us to go back and spend time with his family for a change.'

In her twenty-one years in Melbourne, she has made about twenty-four trips back to Singapore. In that time, the little island has changed considerably. It has become more crowded. 'It's just seething with people and more people,' she complains. More high density, with high-rise flats everywhere. 'All the housing estates there look the same, unlike in Melbourne where the different suburbs have a distinct character. Singapore is becoming more Oriental, more Chinese.'

She says, 'In the bank, in Singapore, the Chinese tellers look at you and talk to each other in Mandarin. I find them discourteous and unfriendly. Yet you see the logos written, "Please be courteous." "Please be kind." "Please queue up." Do people have to be told what to do? It is very frustrating. In Australia, you move when you see someone needing to pass. It is a basic courtesy. Even at the supermarket, if somebody behind you has two items and you have a truckload of items, you let them go before you.' 'In Singapore,' she says, 'courteous people seem to be as difficult to find as room to breathe.'

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As she talks, I think of a different sort of discrimination in Singapore. Discrimination against people with disabilities. Once on a bus, I heard the bus-driver call a boy with intellectual disabilities 'seow' -- a Mandarin word meaning crazy. Discrimination against me because I am unable to talk. We did not fit in. People shied away and pretended not to see us. Those who did see us called us names. Outcasts of society. Cast out by society.
Lakshimi has never experienced racism in Australia. ‘Only in England,’ she recalls. ‘There was one very old English patient who didn’t want a West Indian nurse and me looking after her. She said, “You foreigners should go back.”’

She thinks people are racist because they are uneducated. ‘They are ignorant and thick. Maybe they feel we have come in here and polluted their country. Maybe it is jealousy because we are doing better than they are. Best man wins. If you want to work, work hard and you’ll definitely get what others are getting.’

She believes some Australians are racist, though. ‘They think we have come here and taken their jobs. I don’t think I am a racist, but if anybody upsets me in a racist manner, then I might give it back to them by saying something like “This country would go to the dogs, if not for the foreigners.”’

I am pleased to learn that this quiet woman does not take it lying down.

I remember looking at Lakshimi, sitting cross-legged before the wooden altar, a few minutes before the interview. Her arms were held towards the papier-mâché statue of Lord Murugan, with his many faces and the proud peacock behind him. She spent ten years studying Carnatic music and singing in temples, and her soft voice is still melodic. Her voice, both delicate and strong, sings a song of praise. A prayer song in Tamil. A song about Lord Murugan and what a caring heart he has.

Surrounded by her gods in the prayer room, she looked like a child playing in her doll’s house. It was an odd scene, watching an adult at play. I smelt the sandalwood incense stick giving off its orange glow, and I wondered what her prayers were and who they were for.
I see her wipe her eyes. Are they tears because of the memories my questions have evoked? Or is it dust? And I wonder how many times in the past she cried about her situation, during her long wait for her husband.

But she says, "It was harder for him than it was for me. He had to make sure he didn't upset his wife, and his two children had to be considered as well. It was hard, but then that's how life is. There's no point in getting depressed."

I gaze into her eyes again. They are open wide, full of memories, and I see a story told. A story out of her own life? Maybe, even out of my own?

She puts her hand on the pillow where his head had rested earlier that day. The indentation is still there. She smells his cologne, still strong. She says his name, once, twice, thrice in the quietness of the night, hoping to hear him reply. But she never does hear his voice, for he sleeps with another. Instead, all she hears are her own soft sobs. Sometimes she sleeps like this, reliving every touch and every moment; some nights she only sleeps as morning breaks. She waits for answers, her dreams destroyed while waiting.

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I admire her for having the tenacity to do something for love that would have made her an outcast in Indian culture.

She stands at the door, waiting patiently for me to drive off. I remember her last words of the interview. With a mist in her eyes she said, "I would do it again. A fool, but I would do it again. Only for him."
Enigma

'I have two homes. One in India and the other here in Melbourne. You can say I’m committing territorial bigamy.' Rekha Lal laughs at the shocked look in my eyes as she continues, 'I’m married to the home I have in India, and I’m married to the home I have here. It is a commitment to both places. They have both become very integral to me.'

Rekha speaks with the typical accent that persists on the tongue of all Indians. Her aquiline eyes watch me like a hawk. They seem to devour me. Her eyes are guarded, unwilling to reveal anything. She has a black pottu on her wide forehead; I think of this as the all-knowing third eye. There is a streak of grey through the centre parting of her hair. I see her profile: the long straight nose, the stern lines of her mouth. Her tone does not suggest any mirth, only reproval.

The heat of the day curls in lazy waves around us. The pedestal fan whirs at full speed. It does not ruffle her curly hair. Instead, it decides to play with my papers, scattering them to all corners of the room. The silent room is filled with a gentle, understated hum. There are no sounds except for the ticking of a clock. And the panic beating of my heart.

Around her neck is a single ornament – a gold thali, different from the types I have seen before. It is encrusted with black beads. She wears a light brown salwar kameez, slightly darker than the colour of her skin. On her ring finger is a small ruby.

It is a hot summer afternoon. Something about her manner suggests she has granted me an audience. I sense a coldness and there is an indefinable tension in the air. A glass table divides us like a river. She sits cross-legged on one bank, and I on the other. Will
I be able to cross the river and arrive safely on the other side? Or will my legs be scarred as I make my crossing?

Maybe she is angry with me because I said I had found India dirty during my five visits there. She is quick to retort, saying, 'Well, every place is dirty. If you go looking for dirt, you'll find it. If you go looking for beauty, you'll find it. India has everything. It's dirty, it's rich, it's poor, it's beautiful, and it's everything everyone wants it to be. It's even rich in people.' She shoots statistics at me, figures and percentages, in which I have no interest. 'Five per cent of India's population is multi-millionaires. And calculate five per cent of one billion people. That's a lot of multi-millionaires,' she says looking at my face, waiting for a reaction.

I am shaken, unsure of what to say next. I wish I was brave enough to tell this tigress a UN survey had found 525 million people lived on less than a dollar a day in India. That was almost 54 percent of the population. Where were the multi-millionaires then? And what did being wealthy have to do with cleanliness?

Her eyes are on my face, intent on my answer. I look away from her gaze to see the grey streak in her hair reflected in an oval mirror at her back.

'That's not the India I know of or remember,' I want to protest, but I dare not. A memory floats back to my mind. Milk cows on the street, jangling their bells and excreting at the same time. A squadron of flies buzzing over the cow-dung. A younger me trying to thread my way through the traffic, the unruly crowds and the dung. A demanding beggar, dressed in a filthy brown dhoti, who shouts for more when I drop a paisa coin into his charcoal-black hands. The slums and the smells emanating from the little huts. I remember grimacing at the sight of two lice playing on a woman's head in a temple. 'India is dirty,' I told myself then.
On a small table behind me is a photo-frame with many photos in it. When I first entered the room, my eyes focused on one photo. A tale of a mother's love. Rekha, at a younger age, with her two daughters. One of them, still a baby, is cradled in her mother's arms, at her bosom. The other daughter has one arm around Rekha's neck. I remember something I read a long time before: 'Children are the anchors that hold a mother to life.'

Part of the reason Rekha came to Melbourne was because her daughters wanted to study overseas. She also says the family wanted to mix with and understand other cultures. ‘To make our own place and try something different. My husband and I have travelled a lot. We’ve been to America, Europe, Africa and Mauritius. And we found Australia was willing to take us in.’

So they came to Melbourne in February 1995.

Coming to Australia was a difficult experience. They had come from a position where they had everything, and they had to leave it all behind. Her husband was the general manager of a group of hotels in India. She says, ‘He was the boss. Yet he was working for somebody else. He always wanted to start his own business.’

So, after being in the hospitality industry for twenty-five years, they started a restaurant in Melbourne. She says, with a laugh, ‘We put together the menu by knowing what my husband and I liked to cook. He can cook it and I can cook it and the menu was cooked.’

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Mention Indian food and one immediately thinks of spices and chilli-hot curries but Rekha reminds me that not all Indian food is spicy. She explains, ‘Indians tend to eat a
lot of flavours. We have extremely spicy, bland, salty, sweet and sour food. But I think we use very strong, individual flavours and we mix and match according to our own likes and dislikes. So, in an Indian family, you find the wife catering for a whole range of taste preferences. A child might have something very bland and the husband might want something spicy. Or, if five dishes are cooked, one may be bland, one maybe very sweet, one may be slightly salty, and one may be spicy and hot. So there is a variety given, unlike English food. We don’t tend to eat one main meal. An Indian meal has multiple components, and in the components we take care of the nutritional needs as well as the spice levels. So, if you find something spicy in the curry, there is a sweet dish there that we eat along with the food, so you can always take a dip of the sweet dish and balance what you ate. Our whole style or way of eating food is totally different. If you have been told Indian food is spicy and that’s all you have been given, then you’re going to think that.

Feeling very uncomfortable, I wonder if she thinks I am someone who does not know the taste of chilli on her tongue? Doesn’t she know I cook spicy vindaloo curries? Having no other choice but to proceed with my questions, I ask, ‘What do you think of men cooking?’ Her initial answer is curt. ‘Nothing.’

There is silence and then she tells me her husband is a trained chef. Coming from a household, where the men are excluded from domestic chores and cooking, I am surprised to hear of Rekha’s husband’s prowess in the kitchen. She admits, ‘I’m not a trained chef but I did home economics, so I have some training in cooking. When you are married in India, you automatically have to cook,’ she says, with a smile. She continues, proudly, ‘My husband did not cook after he finished college because he moved into the management side. But when he was thrown into the deep end and was asked to start cooking, he turned out to be an excellent cook.’
Rekha feels that wherever mass production is required, the male is needed. She elaborates, ‘If you look around the world, anything that requires anything to be done on a small scale, women excel at it. But when you need production on a mass scale, then men are required. Therefore the woman cooks at home, the man cooks in a commercial place. The woman stitches at home, the man is a tailor.’

Brimming with feminist theories, I say, ‘But doesn’t that make the woman the domesticated one?’

She explains: ‘It is not domestication; it is nurturing. Nobody requires to be nurtured in the McDonald’s kitchen. It is a mass-production area with no feelings. The physical energy is in the man, and there is a lot more emotional energy in the woman. So wherever there is nurturing required, you need a woman. This is nature’s way of dividing the work. So one person doesn’t have to do it. Thus, most chefs … when they come home from work, it is the woman who does the cooking. Wherever there is a positive energy coming in, wherever there is nurturing coming in the kitchen, then the woman is in charge.’

Rekha tells me the restaurant is mainly her husband’s baby, though she helps him on Fridays and Saturdays. When I ask why, she explains, ‘I am a homeopath and I am into healing because of my desire to help others and myself. I do reiki, homeopathy and yoga. The homeopathy is my baby.’ She underwent a three-year course at a college of Natural Medicine to become a qualified homeopath. She explains to me, homeopathy is a system of medicine developed by the German physician, Dr Samuel Hahnemann. ‘It is a medicine activating the body more than other therapies,’ she adds.

It is understandable that this woman who cooks with a ‘positive energy’ has taken up healing. The strongest influence on Indian cuisine is Ayurveda, an ancient
body of knowledge on health. ‘Ayer’ is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘ayus’ meaning span of life, and ‘veda’ means knowledge. Thus, Ayurveda is the knowledge of how to maintain a long life.

Rekha touches the index finger of my left hand. Her eyes are closed and her hands are ice-cold as she does reiki on my finger. Slowly, my index finger feels warm and it starts to straighten. “‘Roi’ means Universal,” she explains, ‘and “Ki” means life force or energy. Reiki adjusts the chakras or energy centres for healing. I work as a conduit to transfer the universal life energy.’ To become a reiki healer, she had to complete a programme of meditation, practice and attunement with a reiki master.

Yoga, she explains, is also ‘a holistic system to restore health. Health is an inner sense of well-being allowing you to cope with life without losing balance.’

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I ask Rekha what her first impressions of Melbourne were. She tells me she found the people genuine and friendly. ‘Anybody could fit into the Melbourne environment, because there were so many varieties of so-called Australians. An Australian could be black, could be white, could be brown, could be short, could speak a different language, could wear different clothes, and could eat different foods. Yet they were all Australian.’

‘But this does not mean racism does not exist here,’ I reply.

‘I know there is racism the world over, but I lead my life thinking I will only attract those people who will get attracted to me, who will accept me the way I am. So I think the people who are racist don’t get through my barrier. This is a barrier I have created for my protection. I will not allow anybody who is racist to come in through the barrier, and therefore it does not affect me. It is like walking on the road. A dog barks and you don’t get upset, because it is meant to bark. So a racist will be a racist. You
can’t stop them from being the way they are, because that’s the way they are,’ Rekha says, her voice again heavy with indifference.

She laughs as she describes one of the ways Melbourne has changed since she came here. ‘There are many more Indians. Now Indian food is served everywhere and it’s more accepted. You walk into a supermarket like Safeway and there’s a whole aisle of Indian food. Even the Amway catalogue has a large section. There are one hundred and fifty Indian restaurants and probably about fifteen to twenty grocery stores. You don’t really miss the country altogether, because we have our friends here and can get all the food and clothes we could purchase back home. It is the best of what you’ve left behind and what you gain in Australia.’

She finds Melbourne similar to Delhi and Bombay, in that people coming from the same area stay in their own cocoons. She explains, ‘You have the Jewish area, the Indian area and the Sri Lankan area here. That is common – that even though you work together, you still socialise only amongst your own people, because that is where you feel comfortable and you can go beyond a certain level of relationship.’

One major difference is that India has more history and culture. It is more time-tested. Rekha also believes the structure of society here is flimsier.

‘Relationships are very easily shattered. Homes are easily destroyed. The home gets built in six weeks and probably gets burnt down in two hours. In India, it takes a few years to build a home, because everything is solid stuff, and fires are not so common in India. And things take a long time to burn. Relationships there are stronger because the need to bond in families is more important.’

I ask her, ‘What about divorce?’
‘You can only divorce if there is a marriage. In Australia, there is no marriage – so what do you have to divorce? You don’t even reach up to a marriage; you don’t need a marriage to stay with somebody. Relationships are thus flimsy,’ is her answer.

She continues, ‘Here what I dislike is the way children are thrown out on the streets and animals are taken into the house. The community seems to have no feeling towards people. There is a lot of concern for animals and lost souls. I would like to see an equal amount of concern for other human beings as well as for their own children. They are very charitable and yet they want their own children to pay rent,’ she says, her tone aggressive.

I remember a poem I once wrote after I saw an advertisement on the television for World Vision.

Pictures come from around the world
children with ricket bones
or bandaged limbs in war torn worlds
looking lost and so alone.

And out your wallet comes with tears
a cheque you sign with pride.

It's charity sent overseas
home needs you cast aside

As though she had read my mind, she continues, ‘They want to sponsor a child through World Vision. So I see a discrepancy. If you are so generous and you want to support some child in Vietnam, Bangladesh or in Africa, then why are there so many homeless people around? Figures show there are two million people below the poverty line in Australia, and that’s a lot of people for a population of eighteen million. Before you
throw stones at a developing country, you need to look at your own backyard and see what you are doing.'

She speaks of a television programme she was watching. 'They were saying on this programme how wrong it was for the migrants to come and impose their religions and their cultures on Australian society, how the Australian has the right to follow what he wishes. I thought what had happened to this feeling when they came into Australia and imposed their culture on the Aborigines? And what happened to this feeling when they impose their religion worldwide, going everywhere and converting people to Christianity? What happened to that feeling then? That they don't talk about. That is their skeletons,' she says, emphatically. 'Well, that is Australia, and hopefully Australians will change as they become more tolerant towards each other.'

Another aspect of Australian culture she dislikes is the difficulty in making friends with Australians. 'They like to be invited, but they don't like inviting. They love Indian food and they will come and eat your food, but they don't have anything to offer you.'

Rekha believes she has blended in well with Australian society. 'Ninety-five per cent of our business customers are Australians. Ninety per cent of my healing practice patients are also Australians. I work at a bank three days a week as a bank officer with Australians and serving Australians. After two years of the qualifying time, we have become Australian citizens. So I can say I'm part of the typical Australian woman,' she laughs, 'if there is any typical Australian woman.'

I ask her if it is easy to forget one's own culture.
'Why should you?' she demands, as though I am the one who has forgotten my culture. I shift uneasily on the floor. 'It’s easy to forget if you aren’t comfortable with it. If you don’t know, if you don’t understand it, if you have been told to follow it under compulsion. I follow my culture because it is a choice and I am happy making that choice.'

She tells me she does not hang on to any particular aspect of her culture. 'It’s my culture totally and it’s part of me. It goes with me wherever I go. That’s me. When I migrated to Australia, that wasn’t one of the conditions. My papers didn’t say I had to change. I was accepted into the country for what I am, as a professional. There are no expectations. I am not expected to change. But, if I don’t change, it’s not because I’m resisting change. It’s because I can’t see anything to change to.'

And yet she wants me to change. I look as she writes on my paper, her eyebrows knitted in furrows, 'Learn reiki. There’s no need for you to talk.' She smiles scornfully Flabbergasted, I gaze again at her cursive handwriting. I feel hurt but I manage a polite strained smile. For the first time, I feel as though she is disparaging me for my disability and my choice of profession as a writer.

What had gone wrong with this interview? I had expected us to exchange recipes and tell her my own funny stories about burnt onions and garlic and have her recount tales of her own cooking joys and disasters. Instead all I am getting is condescension and hostility. I had to ask her for a glass of water – something which is not expected for someone working in the hospitality industry and certainly not of an Indian household. It is part and parcel of Indian culture to want to give food to people, especially guests.
Before I leave, I ask her if she would be free on another day for some follow-up questions. She cocks her head to one side and her eyes look heavenward as she appears to be mentally running over her appointment book.

'Write to me. I am very busy but I will write back.'

I thank her for the interview. There is a courteous nod from Rekha, as I step out my shoulders slouched. I feel defeated. The door closes. On the porch, I see a carved wooden parrot, drenched in the colours of the rainbow, hanging from its perch. Its silky feathers shine in the sunlight. I touch its fiery orange crest. Orange. Sunset over the ocean. Burning coral. I feel its smooth red wings. Red. The colour of life and death. The anger and rage I feel within me.

I tap its blue beak. Blue. Like the ocean. Like the sky. I hope in a moment of magic it will talk to me. But the parrot is silent, like me.
Music

I hear her voice before I see her. It is at a Bharatha-Natyam arangettam performance at the Alexandra Theatre in Monash University. Shoba Shekar’s voice rises above the hard beats of mirdangam and the harmonious strains of the violin. A voice blessed by the gods she sings of. A voice drowning out everything in its range. She sings about Lord Vishnu as Venkateswara, the Lord of the Seven Hills at Thirupathi. I am seated at the back of the theatre, so I strain over the audience to glimpse her face. I still cannot see it. I decide to sit back and enjoy the music. Having never been religious, I did not think I would enjoy Carnatic music. But slowly I find myself being drawn to her voice, my hand beats the talam on my leg.

Visually, Shoba is the passive object of the audience’s gaze. But aurally, she is resonant. Like the Lorelei of the German legends, she makes hypnotic music. We sit as passive objects, bruised and battered by her voice.

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Now I am on the stage where, moments before, Shoba had crooned out the songs. The notes and the words still seem to swirl in a lazy vortex around her. Her face is pock-scarred but she is a beautiful woman. An inner beauty radiates within. Her hair is long and in a plait. On her forehead is a red pottu. She wears a purple saree. Her voice still melodious and hardly hoarse from the night’s singing, she says she will be in touch with me soon.

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It is a warm March evening when I finally get the chance to interview Shoba. As my taxi draws into the drive, I see her waiting for me outside. Bricks lie scattered in one corner and stacks of wood in another. Shoba explains it is a new house.
Inside the walls sing and the shadows hum. We sit on black leather sofas; white marble tiles glisten on the floor.

In a glass cabinet, I see photos of her children – a boy and a girl. I am surprised to see a photo of Shoba being given a trophy by Professor S. Jayakumar, the Singaporcan Minister of Law. I am curious to know about the Singapore connection.

Her voice still has the Indian accent most Westerners love to imitate and ridicule.

‘I’m originally from India, Tamil Nadu, but most of my time at school, my University studies and my postgraduate studies were in Bombay.’

To my question ‘Why Bombay?’ she replies simply, ‘Because my father was working there. Bombay is very nice. A very vibrant place and a place filled with ample opportunities. Very, very populated, but at that time I didn’t think about it.’

I have my own memories of Bombay – the slums, the crowds of people and Bollywood. Whizzing past the houses of the great Hindi film stars, Amitab Bachan and Madhuri Dixit. Getting thrown from a camel at Juhu beach. The boutiques selling beautiful sarees and salwar kameezs.

She continues: ‘But now when I visit my parents and my grandmother in Bombay, I feel it is so crowded. It looks like a procession of people all the time. I ask how did I live here? Can’t get into the trains. You just have to stand near the door and you’ll be automatically pushed out. You don’t have to get down.’ She laughs. ‘It is so jam-packed. And the roads ... oh god! But when you’re there, you don’t realise it. You get used to everything. Here you’re used to the space; when you go there, you feel the difference. But if I had remained, I wouldn’t have known.

‘After I got married, I was in Madras for some time. Madras is the cultural heart of India as far as Indian music is concerned. I learnt under the best teachers of Carnatic
music, the late Sri D. K. Jayaraman and Smt. D. K. Pattamal. They have learnt from composers who are the grandchildren of the trinity of Indian music. After that we went to the Gulf for some time, and then my husband came to Singapore.

'Singapore was an eye-opener to me. I taught music at Nithilaya. As soon as I landed, there was a huge production that was sponsored by the Singapore Arts Council. Padma Subramaniam was the composer. She wanted the cream of musicians from Singapore. When I told her I was D. K. Jayaraman's student, she asked me to audition. When I sang, she was quite impressed. She said, "I want you to be my lead singer." It was a 55-piece orchestra with Chinese musicians, Malaysian instruments, and Indonesian gamelan and Indian music as well. So I was singing for that production.'

Then Shoba and her family moved to Australia because her husband wanted to start his own business in engineering gears. In a voice filled with reluctance, she says, 'That was why I came here. Personally, I would have liked to stay in Singapore.' Isn't she like Sita, the ideal wife of Hindu legends, who walked through fire at her husband's request? To put aside her own dreams – even lose them – for the sake of her husband and children? An amazing woman who simply says, 'You have to come last.'

But by putting herself last, Shoba found it very hard when she first came to Australia. She remembers always complaining. 'I didn't like Melbourne very much, because I had established so much of relationships and work in Singapore. I loved what I was doing there. I used to write weekly columns for the Straits Times. And I was teaching as well. The type of students I got there were good. When you love the student and the feeling is reciprocated, it is a wonderful relationship. I had friends. I missed all of that when I came here. When I went to Singapore about two years ago, all my ex-students and friends who saw me said, "You should come back. There's nobody like
you here.” I came back to Melbourne and told my husband, “I wish I still lived there.”
There were days when Shoba felt completely estranged, wanting only to go back.

When she arrived in Australia, she decided to start studying again. She did a Master’s in
business and banking at Monash and also worked part-time at the Bank of Melbourne.

Working as a customer-service officer, she was taught how to deal with the
customers in the bank. Shoba found it slightly silly when she was asked to inquire how
the weather was outside. ‘In Singapore, you don’t have to ask. It either rains or it shines
there. But in Melbourne, there are four seasons in a day, so you’re always thinking
about the weather.’

She is slowly assimilating to the environment and culture in Australia. She would like
to think of Melbourne as home, but then again she is torn, for India is where she has her
roots and she also wants to perform there. For her, home is simply a place where one
comes from and that remains one’s home. ‘Now I’ve become an Australian citizen, I
cannot forget the fact I come from India. I don’t think I ever will. I will remain at heart
an Indian. Whether it means my religion, my God, the way I eat, dress or cook, I don’t
think that will change much. Marginally maybe, but not substantially.’

There will always be something she has had to give up – for instance, people like
her parents, whom she misses very much, and Indian food and traditions. Caught in a
bind, Shoba knows she will forever vacillate between the new world and the old one.

Shoba strongly believes it is the love between family members that makes a home.

‘You don’t mind what you do and how much you have to give up for your
family. If you derive pleasure from giving, and if your family members do well, you get
vicarious pleasure. My son has been selected for the Olympics team in volleyball. I
would say that is one of the highlights of coming to Australia,' she says, looking proudly
at her son's many trophies in the glass cabinet. 'This would not have been possible if I
had not come to Australia,' she says, nodding her head.

'The window of opportunity for the children has been fantastic. In Australia, the
best thing is the education system,' she says, once again thinking of her children. 'It
broadens their knowledge. In Singapore and India, when my children were studying, it
was a spoon-fed education, based on books.'

In Australia, Shoba believes, children are given the opportunity to come up with
their own analysis of the problem and solutions. 'What is important here is not the
answer but the way you approach the problem,' she continues. 'The children are taught
to be more confident and more independent in the way they think, feel and express
themselves.'

In Singapore, Shoba thinks children are inclined to follow in their parents' footsteps. She gives the example of asking a girl what she wants to do in a career. The
child might say because her father is a doctor, she too would like to be a doctor.

'She might not have an aptitude for medicine. Why does she want to take medicine?'
Shoba asks, looking vexed. 'All of us are different. In Australia, the children are
allowed to be independent, think, analyse and make decisions for themselves. You hold
yourself responsible for your life.

'If you go to university here, there are so many choices. Sometimes you go mad.
It is like a maze filled with options. You can do Arts and Medicine—totally unrelated
fields but you can take them as one course. There is total freedom.'

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On the subject of racism, Shoba believes it exists everywhere.
‘Because you’re dark-skinned, like in the office, you have to prove yourself, more doubly so that you’re capable. That you do understand the language — though you have a different accent, you have full command of the language. But every step, you’ve to prove your merits every time. You can call it racism or you can call it the lack of knowledge about your background. Even when it comes to funding, if I worked with Western musicians, I might have found more acceptance than with an Indian musician. They would say, “What’s that kind of music?” They have not heard Indian music and they wonder how that would sound. You have to sing, and they say they find something very divine in the music. Every stage, you have to prove yourself and find your way out.

‘You can call it racism, but here they’ll not show it to you. In any other place, they might look at you in disgust. Even in India. It could be the colour of your skin, your eyes, your hair or something you can’t do anything about. You can’t change your colour. But it is there. You have to learn to live with that, to give it back at times or to ignore it. Every walk of life, whether it be art or in a bank, it exists. And we are at the receiving end, because people might not know if a person came from Europe, Czechoslovakia or Russia, they look the same; but with us, there’s a stark difference — the colour difference is there. You don’t even have to look twice. You know, you stand out. You have to live with it, but so long as you prove yourself to be good ... Initially they might think, “Are you capable of that?” But, if you prove yourself capable, they have to accept it.’

Shoba believes some white people might become racist because they have had a bad experience with someone of another culture. ‘They might have had a friend from India and he cheated them. Thus, they think all Indians are the same.’
She cites her husband’s business as an example. Shekar’s business is in imports and exports. He deals in engineering gears, plastics for the computer industry and granite for floors.

‘It was very difficult when we came here, but now it’s much better. Everything takes time. The Australian markets have to be assured it’s a good product. You have to win their trust.’

Shoba’s students come from various backgrounds. Some come from different ethnic backgrounds or have different intellectual capabilities, some could be rich, some could be poor. But she treats all of them equally.

She remembers a student she had in Singapore who was not rich. The student told Shoba that she was the only teacher who treated all of the students the same. The girl had seen teachers always treating students differently because the students were rich or came from a better social background or caste.

‘When I left, she cried.’

All of Shoba’s students are equal in her eyes. She cannot even think of discriminating against a student. ‘Once they come to me, they are all the same. So long, as they’re interested in learning from me, that is all I need. What I want is their input and their dedication in music. I don’t care if they come from India or Sri Lanka. As far as I’m concerned, they are all the same. I can’t be racist at all.’

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She goes back to India almost every year in December. December is the music season there.
'I want to go this year,' she says, her eyes lighting up. 'I didn't go last year. I have a programme on the television and the radio. There are seminars and concerts in Madras as well.' Like Tara, Shoba visits India to keep in touch with the arts scene. She explains, 'Mine is related to Indian arts and whatever progress it has made back in India, I bring it back to Australia. I teach my students the improvements and changes the arts have undergone back in India.'

She finds India has changed tremendously. She believes this is because of the greater exposure to Western culture through television. She confesses, 'I feel more like an Indian than Indians feel back home. I have preserved my culture and religion.'

She also believes there are changes in the attitudes of women in India towards work and family. She explains she was brought up to believe that, as a woman, her first commitment was to her family. 'Even today, I feel my family comes first, then my career.'

'In India now, the career comes first and then their family. I used to sing before I married. The music was there, but I couldn't give it priority. Even after having a postgraduate education - and I was working at that time - I resigned because I was getting married. I sang at home but I didn't think my career was of primary importance. That's the way I was brought up. You can't move away from these thoughts that have been ingrained in you.'

'Now the girls who are singing at the age before they get married, the parents ask, "Will the in-laws allow my child to sing? To progress as a musician?"' When you say a singing career, it involves more. You have to travel outside the country and have to be away from the home for a long time. You have concerts in the evening. Now they say, "Career comes first. So, if the husband or the in-laws are prepared to put up with this, then only will my daughter marry him."
'After I married, my career was pushed into the background. All that mattered was my husband, my family and my children. Even now, I feel that way. When I have something else to do, I think, "How will it affect my family? Should I be doing it? Wouldn't I be better off spending this weekend with my daughter?" Instead of going for a performance, I would rather spend time with my family,' Shoba confesses.

'Even today,' she says, 'I had music classes and many other social commitments. I knew you would be here at five o'clock and I had to get ready.'

As I apologised, I watch the single thick braid of hair swing down her back like a pendulum – a steady reminder of the multitude of tasks to be done in a limited amount of time.

She assures me it's all right and tells me she is happy to aid me in any way. 'Not even now, later on if you need any help, do come forward and ask,' she says sweetly.

I appreciate her inviting manner; she put me immediately at ease with her humour, kindness and open friendliness. Our sense of complicity lies in the fact that we are both women ... Indian women.

What a totally different lady she is from Rekha.

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Indian music is rooted in the Vedas. It is said God himself is musical sound, the sound suffusing through the whole universe. From childbirth to the funeral pyre, music and song pervade Indian life. Without the beat of drums, the clang of cymbals, or the blowing of a conch shell, a place would be considered inauspicious and lifeless.

Shoba says she did not choose music as a career. She tells me, 'There was music in the air in my house always, and I grew up in an atmosphere of music. My
grandmother is a singer; my mother is a veena player. As we grew up, my mother was singing and playing on the veena.

'I learnt music and now it has become such a passion with me. My goal is to do something for the music in the world. I want to make Indian music more accepted and streamed into the mainstream,' she says, smiling.

And to do this, she has set up her school, Kala Kruthi. She explains 'Kala means art, Kruthi is to evolve, to create. It's a Sanskrit word. Where art evolves or where art is created - that's the meaning.'

Shoba has high hopes for her school. Her prime desire is to have Indian arts recognised by other mainstream arts as well.

There are many differences between Eastern and Western music. 'Indian music, with its two distinct vectors - Raag and Taal - is melodic in nature and content, while Western music is more harmonic,' she explains. 'And we sing to a constant pitch. That's why we have a drawn instrument. For their music, the keys shift continuously. Also, a very important difference between our music is the gamakas. After the very deep oscillation ... like I would say “ga ma”.'

She sings the notes out for me, her eyes closed. She continues, 'They don't have the deep gamaka. They have a short ma, which is flatter. Ours is more suited for solo music; it's more individualistic. In Western music, there is more orchestra, and improvisation is quite minimal. Also, with Indian music, you have to memorise a lot. In Western music, they follow the page and they have it in front of them. And also, ours is a more divine kind of music. Indian music is largely spiritual in content and meaning in Western music, the themes are not so philosophical or oriented towards religion.'
Shoba has a dream that Kala Kruthi should be a chief institution like the Kalakshetra in India. She brings out a book and shows me the logo of her school: a bow and arrow and the veena.

She proceeds to read out: ‘Saint Thyagaraja in his magnificent composition “Nada Sudha” in ragam “Arabhi”, says: “The nectar of sound (nada) which is the basis of all religious texts and sciences has taken human form in Sri Rama. The seven bells tied to the bow represent the seven notes. The seven bells together with the bow represent the raga. The three tension strings, the raga graces and the arrow, the rhythmic components.” I also show the seven colours of the spectrum for the seven notes – sa ri ga ma pa de nee.’ She thinks her students should remember the seven notes, the seven colours, the veena and Thyagaraja.

Shoba recalls the initial difficulties in teaching her students. ‘The environment is so different here. The kids have only a limited exposure to Indian music and language. Classical music is a difficult art as well. However, in Australia, children do not know about the Indian culture or language. How will they know about Indian classical music, then?’ she asks.

‘In Singapore, when they came to class, they knew what a guru meant and they knew how to sit cross-legged on the floor. Also, before we started classes, we would do namasakaram.’ Smiling, she says, ‘In Australia, they ask what it means.’

Shoba has written a thesis on how students in Australia should be taught Indian music. She gives me some examples of how she has moved beyond the traditional methods.

‘When my students first came here, they were struggling to sit on the floor. They couldn’t sit still for more than ten minutes. So I used to give them a break of about
fifteen minutes. Now they are here for almost two hours and they sit without any
difficulty. Even to sit down and sing was a whole new concept.

When she is holding a school programme, she insists all the children wear Indian
clothes. ‘Only when you wear the attire, you feel you are Indian. You cannot wear
jeans and give an Indian concert. It does not jell. You have to look Indian to think
Indian.’

Shoba also believes the cultural differences are difficult to overcome. She elaborates,
‘When you are dancing, you say Radha pined for Lord Krishna. However, in Australia,
my students say, “Why bother? If he doesn’t come, I’ll look for someone else.”’ She
laughs gaily.

‘Unless you feel that way, the Indian way, where you’re bound to a man and
even if he philanders, you want the same man – you pine and wait for him … once you
feel that way, it’s very difficult to express yourself in any other way. The culture makes
a lot of difference: the way you think, the way you behave, the way you express
yourself. And Indian classical music and dance is so much steeped into the culture that,
without feeling the way Indians would back home, it’s very difficult for them to express
themselves. Until the children know who is Rama, Sita and who are the gods, how can
they sing in praise of the gods?

‘Most of the songs are religion-oriented. It is not religion in the spiritual sense,
but it teaches you philosophy through the religion. When I teach music to my students, I
tell a little story or a legend so they can relate to that god and to that philosophy in life.’

She relates a story she taught her students today about Puranadasa, a great
composer. ‘He was a miser,’ she says. ‘He wouldn’t even give a dollar to charity. A
boy came to him and asked him for alms for the thread ceremony. In our society, if a
young boy asks for alms, you never send him away empty-handed. You give him something.

‘But he was such a miserly person, he shooed him away. This boy went to Puranadasa’s wife and asked her for alms. Because he always counted the dollars in his moneybox, she offered him her nose-ring, thinking it wouldn’t be noticed. The husband immediately commented on it when he returned home. So she wanted to end her life by taking poison. As she was about to drink it, the nose-ring appeared in the cup. When Puranadasa saw that, he said, “From now on, all I want to do is think about God and give away my wealth to charity.”

‘When you tell the children these stories, they become more involved in what they’re learning; rather than singing something they don’t understand and don’t relate to. Because we’re not singing in English, we’re singing in a number of Indian languages. They will not enjoy or appreciate it unless they know a little of the history behind the story.’

Shoba feels her students are more responsive now; they sing better and are more dedicated to the art form. It was a hard process for her to change her teaching methods to suit her Australian pupils. She believes music cannot be learnt in a short time. ‘The important thing is there must be something drawing them towards Indian music and culture. It is not easy,’ Shoba says, shaking her head. ‘Parents might say, “You must learn music.”’ But the children might come for a couple of months and if they don’t find anything interesting, they will leave. You can’t compel anybody to learn,’ she says.
Shoba is deeply involved in the Indian community in Australia. ‘Through art, I give service to the people. Wherever there is a programme, I try to help by giving my own performances. Even my students have started performing now.’

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She has also hung on to the values of Indian culture, especially values attached to relationships. ‘We don’t believe in anything temporary and we want long-standing relationships.’

But in Australia, she says, divorce and separation are rampant. ‘People here live together for several years. Then they decide to go their own separate ways. Personally, I don’t think that would be the way I would go. I don’t think Western society is right in that way.’

I ask her if she thinks it is possible to forget one’s own culture. Her answer is an emphatic: ‘No. Never.’ She chuckles as she continues, ‘And I think if one forgets one’s culture entirely, if one becomes totally Westernised, I don’t know … There are certain aspects one can assimilate into one’s life from the Western way of thinking, like being independent, being confident in the way one approaches others and also presentation skills.’

Before I leave, I ask Shoba what she thinks are the roles of women in this new millenium. She replies the parts played by women have changed, and it is a very challenging life they have ahead of them. ‘There are so many roles a woman has to play today. We are not only mothers, we are career women as well, and we have to learn to balance our life with many things.’
She compares her situation with that of her mother. 'My mother didn't even know how to go to the bank. She doesn't even know how to write a cheque. Our parents thought they did a great job. But I think we're doing a greater job.' She laughs and continues, 'The man is the financial provider, but we also share in that responsibility as well by working and planning the finances.'

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As I prepare to leave, the sunlight dims; the moment sings. I know now that even when the night is at its darkest, somewhere the nightingale in Shoba will croon.
Agniya Singh puts a plate of jalebi, an Indian sweetmeat, on the dining table.

‘I didn’t make this, though,’ she explains before I reach for the sticky and convoluted orange confectionery. ‘My husband made it’

‘Does your husband cook, then?’ I had only met Agniya and her husband about an hour before, and he did not seem like a man who would know the difference between the oil to fry the jalebi in and the orange sugar that is used to make it.

‘We had a quarrel! He complained about the mess the larder was in and decided to clean it, and he found a packet of the jalebi ready-mix. He expected me to make them. I told him I couldn’t. So he made them.’ Her eyes, dark and almond-shaped, flash angrily toward her husband, who is tinkering with the computer in the study.

What a fiery woman she appears to be. She is dressed in a t-shirt with the word ‘Cebu’ splashed across it and a pair of black jeans, the belt buckle undone. She tells me she thinks an Indian woman is expected to be meek, mild and preferably silent.

Someone who will live an invisible life, denying herself. A woman who would be willing to live without a name. She could be a daughter, a wife, a mother, an aunt, a grandmother, but seldom herself. ‘That’s part of the Indian woman culture,’ she explains. To voice a pain, to tell of a quarrel between husband and wife, would be considered a sacrilege in India. But, Agniya reasons, ‘You have to speak up for what you believe here.’

‘Amazing what a quarrel can produce,’ I say and bite into the jalebi. Its sweetness bursts in my mouth. It brings back memories of sitting in my grandmother’s kitchen the day before Deepavali, and eating ghee balls filled with cashew nuts.
Outside huge oaks hide the sky. Their leaves fall softly like brown raindrops on the
ground. The scent of trees and dried leaves fill the air, signalling the start of autumn.
Inside the house, on the piano, are tiny red statues of the Laughing Buddha and red
dragons. On the wall beside the front door is a portrait of Agnija’s little family. Ninisha
and Sukanya, her two daughters, sit on the cushion and play a James Bond video game.
On another wall is a self-portrait of Ninisha, with the words ‘I Love You Daddy.
Ninisha.’

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Agnija migrated to Melbourne from Calcutta in 1989. ‘Eleven years is a long time,’ she
says simply. Leaving her family and her country of birth, she travelled with a child to
Australia. It was an unfamiliar place where she would be reunited with her husband,
who had preceded her. She did not like leaving everything she had always known and
loved, but she wanted to be with him.

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Agnija tells me of a bad experience she had when she arrived in Australia. ‘There was
an airline strike. I came through Perth and I was to fly from Perth to Melbourne.’

Travelling alone with her five-year-old daughter, she landed at Perth airport, only
to be told her husband was not there. ‘He had organised for me to go with a Salvation
Army officer,’ Agnija says, her lips trembling.

‘And I didn’t know whether to believe the officer or not,’ she continues. ‘I was
in shock. I didn’t want to go with him because I didn’t know him.’ I gaze into her eyes
and see the emotion she relives as she wonders how she could trust a complete stranger.
Who knows what he would do to her?

‘I said I would stay in the airport, and he asked, “How can you stay in the
airport?”'
Finally, at two in the morning, Agnija had the presence of mind to call a family friend in Melbourne. The friend confirmed the man was speaking the truth. But the nightmare did not end there.

The Salvation Army officer took her to a hostel where people with intellectual disabilities were living. She remarks, 'They gave us a room and I stayed there for three days. Sukanya, my daughter, had no understanding of what was going on. She was friendly and wanted to play with them. It was total chaos.'

The situation only worsened when Agnija and Sukanya boarded a special flight from Perth to Adelaide. 'I had to stop at Adelaide, at a hostel for the mentally retarded again.'

After such an inauspicious start, I am amazed Agnija likes Australia. Upon reflection, Agnija says, 'I see how helpful the Salvation Army was because without their help I would have had a difficult time.'

Agnija came to Melbourne because her husband, an electronics engineer, felt he had better job prospects in Australia.

She hardly knew anything about this continent when she came. She giggles 'I knew there were kangaroos here.' I laugh as well. She goes on, her eyes brightening up at the sound of my laughter, 'I knew it was a large country and it had great geographical and historical importance. Melbourne Cricket Ground, some cricket players like Alan Border and Don Bradman. Nothing much in particular.'

She likes Melbourne because it is clean and the traffic systems are more organised. Having never been to Calcutta myself, I know of it only at second hand. I remember a geography teacher at school saying, 'It's the black hole of India.'
I have also read Amir Chaudhari’s *Freedom Song*, in which the city is described as ‘a city of dust.’ He writes, ‘Daily Calcutta disintegrates, unwhispering, into dust and daily it rises from dust again.’

Agniya finds there is a lot less interaction between people in Melbourne than back home, and she constantly has to make an effort to socialise with Australians. This was not the case in Calcutta, she recalls. ‘You see someone and they come and talk to you.’ Also, when she first came here, she had problems getting used to the lack of population. She confesses as she laughs, ‘It was to the other extreme. But I’m used to it now.’

She comments that in Australia things are done differently, especially with regards to childcare. I ask her how it is different in bringing children up here. Agniya explains that you are left to your own devices more in Australia than India. Back home, she says, ‘You have a lot of support from your family while you are bringing up a child. And you also have servants there. The physical work is thus less.

‘Here you have to do everything for your child and that doesn’t give you as much quality time with your child, because you have to do the other chores yourself. In India, the bond between mother and child is closer. You are always with the child and are helping them to learn things constantly, because you do not have to do other things like cleaning. Manners and obedience are also stricter in India. They keep telling children not to do things. Over here, we let them be freer.’

Sukanya, Agniya’s elder daughter, interrupts us, asking her mother for something. As I gaze at the sixteen-year-old’s fair face, I am surprised to see how much it looks like a white Australian face. There is nothing Indian about her. Her hair is short. She wears a
cropped top and cargo-pants. When she opens her mouth to talk, she speaks with a strong Australian accent.

I remember what Agniya told me several minutes ago, when talking about the changes in her child: ‘She used to speak Hindi and after she came here, she has stopped speaking the language. And now she speaks only English. I don’t know if she has totally forgotten Hindi … That’s a big change.’

I am reminded of Derek Walcott’s poem *Codicil*, where he tells: ‘To change your language, you must change your life.’ This immigrant parent clings to a language on which her children have only a thin and withering hold.

She associates English with what remains to be lost; her native tongue and the fragments of language, that she hopes are still clinging to the deep recesses of her child’s memory. Without language, without song, what would she have except for vacations, pictures and long-distance phone calls to connect her to the place of her birth?

Home for this Indian woman is where her family is. She tells me, ‘Australia is home now because I’ve the house and children here. You make a choice and there comes a point where there’s no turning back.’

I ask her if she has ever felt homeless. She replies, ‘I don’t feel as though I’m without a home, but I can feel lonely.’ She ‘misses the family touch,’ as she puts it.

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Agniya is aware of the economic changes happening in India. People have more money due to salary increases. ‘But in my eyes, the poor people haven’t changed much,’ she says slowly, ‘so there isn’t a proper balance at all.’
She observes the differences between rich and poor in Australia are not as marked as in India. ‘People can get by with what they have here. In India, it’s very hard to make ends meet.’

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Agnija tells me she has not come in contact with direct racism, though she has seen it everywhere. ‘Personally, I am not affected by it,’ she says. ‘I can’t colour my skin, because, inside, what you are, is what you are. Even if I see racism, I ignore it. I see it as other people’s ignorance.’

Lowering her voice, she says there have been times when her younger daughter has told her she is teased because of the colour of her skin. I look over at Ninisha, playing the video game with her sister. Agnija usually questions herself in such instances and asks if it is true. ‘Because I’m not there. I don’t know. Sometimes children can be too sensitive.’

Agnija is sure it is ignorance that causes people to be racist. ‘They lack knowledge, they don’t recognise there can be different sorts of people. But even though we’re different, we’re still all the same. I don’t see it as a feature of this country only, because in India you also see a lot of racism. It is not always the colour of the skin. In India, there are different regions. There are twenty-two states. Each state has a different language and culture.’

Agnija and her husband come from different states. They met in the Punjab, where her husband was born and where she went to study. ‘We don’t speak the same language. We communicated in English. Our culture is different. Even if there was a cultural difference, we came from a similar background. We have the same religion.’

Agnija says she does not think she is racist. ‘I am very particular about not being one. But it’s not a very easy thing to do. Racism is a form of prejudice. At one point in
time, everybody probably is. I mean, when you’re young or when you’re frustrated or angry.’

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She glances at my next question: ‘Are you involved in the Indian community in Australia?’ She laughs and says she is involved but it is not a total commitment.

‘I go to Indian functions and my daughter does Indian dancing. I sing but I’m not overly active.’ This is because she feels it is a big commitment and does not have the time to be totally involved. ‘My family is my first priority. Then I’ve work and my studies.’

Agniya tells me she has made an effort to be part of Australian society, especially when she goes to work and mixes with others. She works at a bank as a property investment analyst. She explains, ‘I do basic analysis to get the financial statements for the year-end. I also have to extract figures so comparisons can be made on their profits and cash flow.’

Agniya also makes up progress payments. ‘At the different stages of building, the contractors will need the payment for the work they have done.’ Thus her progress payment reports help the companies to budget their finances.

She enjoys her work. ‘I always wanted to work in a bank.’

She had worked as a teacher in India, but after coming here, she found teachers were being retrenched. ‘And the education system here is so different,’ she complains. ‘Only on Friday, I went to my younger daughter’s concert and I saw the teachers and the kids. There were so many kids. I don’t think I want to go through that again.’
‘Did it bring back nightmares?’ I want to ask her as a joke, but before I can write down my question, she continues, ‘I would rather sit in the office with a computer and do my analysis.’

Agniya is currently doing a postgraduate diploma in investment finance. She studies because she wants to do more analysis work. She tells me ‘I find it easier if I study at the same time as I work. It helps me do my job better. And also for career advancement.’

She looks at the last question and reads it out aloud, ‘What do you see as the roles of women in this new millenium?’ She pauses for a little while before she answers.

Agniya feels it is definitely a more challenging role. This is because women are struggling to hold full-time work and balance it with household work ‘As a mother, it’s never-ending. No matter how advanced technology is, there’s still a lot of work that falls on the hands of the mother. Kids’ activities increase and the mother has to learn how to drive. It’s shared between the parents, of course. That’s the only way to be able to cope. I feel the concept of single mothers is not good, because how is it possible for only one person to look after the kids?’

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As I make my way out to the taxi, I glance back at Agniya and her family. Ninisha is playing with her mother’s hair. Agniya caresses her daughter’s face. I hear Sukanya, her voice sharp, calling her father. I search in their faces for my own family. But this is a different family circle, a self-contained private space where I am an intruder. I feel the sharp ache of emptiness and otherness.
A Golden Retriever bounds up on the pink leather sofa and licks me on the face, her tail wagging. Shocked, I look up at Mary Raj.

‘Stop it, Ally,’ Mary remonstrates. ‘Bad dog, Ally,’ she says, using a slightly sterner tone.

The frolicking dog cocks her head at her owner as though to ask, ‘Am I doing something wrong?’ then barks and continues to lick me.

‘This is the first time she has done that,’ Mary offers as an apology.

Trust me to spoil a dog, I think.

‘We got Ally as a pup about four months ago,’ Mary adds. I look at her in disbelief: How could this adorable but large animal only be a puppy? She laughs and confirms, ‘Yes, she’s only a puppy. A big puppy.’

Dressed in a pale pink sweater and grey tights, Mary looks outside at her garden through the window. Her manicured fingers tug at the gold chain around her neck. Is she as nervous as I am?

The black sky of this spring morning has an ominous quality. The clouds are so thick they are almost tangible. Suddenly, rain begins to pelt down. As though she had read my thoughts, she says, ‘Melbourne needs this rain.’

From the mantelpiece, a reclining Buddha, his features carved in metal, smiles down at us. On the walls hang Indian art pictures. They are woven in silk and depict kings and soldiers riding elephants and horses, on their way to wars. Mary looks at me gazing at the pictures and smiles.
‘I like Asian paintings. I have a great deal of appreciation for Asian art. My cultural values are very Asian, very Indian,’ she continues. I believe in Indian values, especially in the marriage relationship. The husband is important and the wife must pay attention to what he needs. I am a very Asian wife in that regard. But I also believe in equality in the marriage. However, I find in modern marriages today, it comes to such a point the two partners are always fighting with each other. Most Indian women, like me, believe in compromise in a relationship.

‘I also have respect for elders, which I think is a very Asian attitude. I respect their experiences. I have noticed how young children these days have no respect for elders at all.’

When I ask whether she has blended into Australian society, she calmly answers,

‘I feel I’m a blend in a sense - an external blend of both cultures. Internally, I think I am very Indian in how I behave and interact with people. When you see me, physically, I don’t look very Indian.’

I laugh as I write, ‘When you opened the door, I thought you weren’t Indian.’ When I came into the living room, I had heaved a huge sigh of relief when I saw a photograph of her in a red saree. Only an Indian woman would know how to tie the saree with its many tucks and folds.

She laughs too and says, ‘A lot of people think that. They think I am either Maltese or Italian.’

I ask her how she sees young Indian girls blending in with Australian society.
She replies, after a moment’s thought, that adolescent girls who migrate with their families, although accompanied and protected, confront the question of how to ‘become Australian’ without completely losing their own cultural heritage.

‘Girls who have been socialised here from a very young age do fit in rather well. They have gone to the right schools; they have the right sort of peer influences. They have also been able to interact with the dominant culture. They don’t feel ill at ease when they go out in social situations or when they go looking for jobs.

‘If the culture at home is pre-dominantly Asian or concentrated with Indian values, then there is a problem of living in that sort of society. When they go out, they are trying to make it in a Western-dominated world, so these girls have to present a different persona of themselves. And both society and their families have to encourage that persona to develop.

‘So I think a lot of Indian girls face that conflict a lot of times in their day-to-day interactions. These girls frequently express their adolescent rebellion against the parental culture by refusing to speak the mother tongue at home, rejecting cultural customs and generally reacting negatively towards their parents and the Indian culture. But I think many girls have a nice blend of the two. They realise they have to behave in a certain way with their parents and this is how they act in a Western-dominated environment.’

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Mary and I exchanged e-mails for almost two weeks before we met for the interview. From the e-mails, I knew Mary had been to Dubai and Singapore. Now I learn she has led a nomadic existence – this feeling of being between worlds and at home nowhere.

‘Two moves amount to a fire,’ a Turkish saying goes. Multiple migration ends in the loss of our homes, possessions and memorabilia. When the smoke clears, one is
faced with charred pieces of identification, shards of language, burned tongues and cultural fragments. But from the site of a fire, this woman has arisen like a phoenix.

'I was born in Malaysia and though I was born in Malaysia, I wasn't a Malaysian citizen. When I was seventeen, my parents decided to return to India. India was my father's homeland. I wasn't too happy about that,' she says grimacing.

Mary attributes the changes in her life to the constant movement from that time onwards.

'My parents thought they will get me married to someone in India and I will live there forever,' Mary says with a knowing smile. The plight of every Indian woman. Were not daughters members of a family that put its hope in sons? Were not daughters, after all, fated someday to leave their parents' home, only to be claimed by strangers?

She continues, 'After I was married, we moved to Kenya and then to Hong Kong.' She smiles and nods her head, to my amazed look. 'Yes, I've lived in many places. We were living in Hong Kong at the time we decided to migrate to Australia. We thought Australia would be the best country to migrate to because it is developed and English speaking. Also we did not want to return to India.'

Disarmingly candid, Mary answers the briefest questions at length, weighing her sentences and her words carefully.

For Mary, her first experiences of Melbourne were bewildering. 'After living in Hong Kong, I had the biggest shock of my life. Compared to Hong Kong's crowds, there was hardly a soul on the streets here. When I walk down the streets and I am the only person, it's a bit worrying.'
She likes the cooler climate in Melbourne. ‘People hate the winters here but I like the cooler weather. I hate the summers,’ she says, as my teeth chatter in the cold. She also likes the fact that there are ‘a lot of opportunities to pursue hobbies like knitting, sewing, cooking, doing a writing course or taking part in sports.’

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Ally barks from her corner in the room, thinking we had forgotten her.

‘What is it?’ Mary asks.

The dog puts its head on its paws and goes back to sleep.

In an emotion-choked voice, she tells me, ‘We don’t have any children. Ally is part of my home and family now.’

I look at her face. It is the face of history, of a broken and nomadic life and of unborn babies.

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Careers also had a role to play in their decision to come to Australia. ‘My husband is an accountant and there are opportunities for his profession here.’

Although Mary had been trained as a social worker in India, she never had the opportunity to work in her chosen career there because she had constantly been on the move since her marriage.

When I ask Mary what made her choose social work as a job, she explains, ‘I am a good listener and I find people are comfortable with me. And I think a social worker needs to have that and the ability to do things for other people. To be able to give them support and make them feel as though they are worthwhile people; that there is a reason for living,’ she says.

Now, however, her interest in social work has waned. ‘I lost that ability to be involved in other people’s lives,’ she confesses. ‘I think that has to do with the time
spent overseas. The fact I had just done the course, had to leave and come back – I myself was going through a traumatic period of adjustment in my own life. The one thing I’m searching for now is what is it I want to do.’

She found the social work course here more relaxed than the one she had studied in India. She explains, ‘Here it is a bachelor’s degree. In India, it’s a master’s degree. It’s also a bookish education system over there. You study from the book and you pass exams. There’s also coursework. But over here, it is more coursework. The emphasis is on your own research and your own experiences. In my second year, I had to do a research paper on the adjustment problems of professional migrants to Australia. My interviews dealt with eight migrant professionals. And I didn’t use a tape-recorder then, of course. It was actually quite a stressful period. I can understand how you must feel. Like you, I had difficulties trying to get the subjects.’

‘Finally, someone who had been in my shoes. I smile to myself.

‘It is difficult for migrants to come in, especially if they have foreign qualifications because their credentials are not recognised.’ The couple had no choice but to go back to study. Mary’s husband did his MBA while Mary studied social work. ‘It was a difficult period in our lives because going back to school at an older age is not easy.’

After her husband had finished his studies, his previous employer called him to work in Dubai. ‘We went to Dubai. We lived there for three and half years. The company transferred us to Singapore because they had another office in Singapore. So we lived in Singapore for a year and a half, and we then decided to come back to Australia because the company was going to transfer us to Japan, and we didn’t want to go.’
How do they feel after all these moves? I wonder.

She smiles slowly and tells me, 'He's settled. I'm still settling. Let's put it that way.'

The lines of Thomas Mann come to my mind: 'I stand between two worlds; I am at home in neither and I suffer in consequence.'

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'Living as an expatriate,' she says, speaking of her experiences in Dubai, 'was a very positive one. Most people would find it very terrifying but for me, it was exciting.'

In Dubai, she worked in a library. It gave her the opportunity to get out of the house. 'I had a social life, I had friends; I had something to do every day. I think it is the need to identify with a group. I felt I was making a start in something in Dubai. But my husband got transferred to Singapore,' she says, laughing.

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She finds one of the difficult aspects of migration is the need to prove oneself all over again. She laments, 'It is a very difficult market for migrants. It depends on the culture you are coming from, over here, people are very articulate in how they express themselves. A lot of migrants who come here have a problem with how they communicate with other people. When we go for interviews here, we don't tend to come across as very smart or efficient. We don't tend to communicate that across. I found going to interviews here very trying. Looking for a job is difficult enough.

'Why do we have to put ourselves through the adjustment process?' she asks rhetorically. 'When we make the decision to come, we go through a difficult period. Firstly, we are living with a relative, so we don't have our own space. That is a problem. We are trying to make contacts, network, get leads for jobs and look for a place to stay. All these things are added pressures. That's why I always tell people
“Think carefully before you decide to migrate. It’s not the best of experiences. Don’t think your whole life will change for the better.”

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One major change Mary has noticed in the ten years she has been here is the acceptance of people of other cultures, especially in Melbourne, because a lot of migrants have come in.

‘There’s a lot more variety in food. One can go to a Thai, Japanese or a Vietnamese restaurant because of the different kind of cuisine the migrants are bringing with them. It has even impacted the Australians, because even they have come to like Asian food. They like the spices in the food because their food is so bland.’

She pauses to take a sip of steaming tea and then continues, ‘This influence is wonderful. Not only in food, I can also see the influences in the styles and the decorations of the houses. Things being imported into the country – the furniture is brought in from Asia. The Australians learn a lot more about other cultures. They read a lot more, travel a lot more … and that tends to be an eye-opener.’

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I ask her how she perceives the changes in both her homelands.

‘Both Malaysia and India have changed a lot,’ Mary says. ‘There have been a lot of technological and material changes in both countries. In Malaysia and India, poverty is still there. It’s terrible for the common man there.’ She shudders as she repeats, ‘Terrible … if one doesn’t have a job or one is begging on the streets, life is terrible.’

She feels there have been a lot of Western influences in Malaysia and in India, which have changed the cultural values of the local people. There is also a lot of insecurity about what the future holds for the non-Malays in Malaysia. ‘I suppose the
same thing holds for Singapore,' she says, taking on the interviewer's role, as she asks about my place in Singaporean society as a minority group.

I nod my head, as I tell her how I had been bypassed for a promotion in Singapore when I was working there as an accounts assistant, and how a junior Chinese girl had landed the job. Maybe it had nothing to do with my skin colour. Maybe all it had to do with was the fact I am disabled.

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Mary believes racism comes out of ignorance. 'In Hong Kong, there is plenty of racism. They can be very rude to people from different countries, especially the shopkeepers. Some of the people there don't like to rent homes to people from India because they think the food smells. I found that happening even in Singapore. The Chinese people had a problem renting to Indians because they thought the food stinks and they won't take care of the house. The cab drivers in Hong Kong are also very rude. To put it in a nutshell, Asians are very racist towards each other.' She laughs.

I ask her if she has been racist herself. Not wishing to commit herself, she says, 'I guess, to a certain extent, all of us have been. Not racist but more prejudiced. I think a lot of people from India are very prejudiced. They have got this thing about dark-skinned boys and girls. That's prejudice. It is not being racist. And people are very community-minded in India. They will not allow their child to marry from a different community or caste because they have a different food habit. It's more so out of the need to want to preserve their own identity.'

To give me an example of what she thinks of as racism, 'I know of many couples here who are bi-racial. Their kids tend to be more like the whites. The wives, if they are Asian, allow it because they feel it is better for them in this country if they are totally white than be half-Asian. The Asian part of their identity is totally wiped out once the
dominant white culture takes over. It is being racist, if it is the Asian mother who is creating that kind of situation."

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I look at the time and gasp. It is almost two-thirty. I have been here for more than two hours. I thank Mary for the interview. Ally comes up and puts her head on my knee. I pat her. She wags her tail.

As I walk out, I see faintly sandwiched between the clouds, the hint of a rainbow. Barely visible are the bands of color, with a straining, subtle expectancy as the dim colours arch upward. The hint of a possibility of something beautiful, magical and rare – like this migrant. For her, only in this home away from home, can the past be confronted and finally exorcised.

She is a woman with a force tranquille, a gentle strength. Her round form exudes a combination of nurturance and sexuality. There is a comforting kind of homespun wisdom in her words – in what she says as well as how she says it. You know you are listening to a woman who is not spewing forth theory, but bounteously sharing her life experiences. She seems like the kind of best friend of whom everybody dreams, someone who will listen to your troubles and offer solace, feed you a restorative bowl of chicken soup and tuck you into bed. You know when you wake up, things will be better … because they already are.
Sometimes, I think too much is made of the homeland. The stories some of these migrant women related have made me wonder if their identity is taken exclusively from that piece of soil they were nurtured on in their formative years. Why do most of them yearn to go back?

But this is not the case with Vimala Shankar.

'I spent the first half of my life in India – I came to Australia when I was in my mid-thirties. India has given me the opportunity and all the experiences to be able to do what I want. But I definitely consider Australia as my home, because this is the place I've chosen, the place I came to, with eyes open.'

But she also confesses, 'I still have family in India and as long as I have family in another country, I can never ever consider that country not to be also my home. The Australian immigration authorities and the government should always consider that because they expect migrants to come and be loyal only to this country.'

She does not regard herself as being assimilated in Australian society. 'I most probably am, though,' she confides in a whisper, as though it is a secret, with a laugh. She explains: 'I define assimilation as someone taking on the other culture's absolute values, rules and way of life. I don't think there is anything absolute about it. You can take on some of their values, you can take on some aspects of somebody else's lifestyles or life choices.'

Giving the example of the recent Olympics she says, 'I enjoyed the Olympics, but it annoyed me that we only saw the Australians. I might have taken part in chanting
"Aussie! Aussie! Aussie! Oy! Oy! Oy!" but if I was totally incorporated into Australian society, I would have enjoyed seeing only the Australians.’

She goes on, ‘The only country where you get coverage of everything is India because we have no team that is doing well, so we used to see everything in India!’ She laughs.

Looking around Vimala’s house, I see she has brought much of her old country to the new. In the hallway is a tapestry silk painting of Radha and Lord Krishna dancing with gopis. On another wall, behind a white sofa, is a picture of an Indian wedding procession, with elephants and horse-drawn carriages surrounding the bride and groom. Ornately etched brass pots sit on the carpeted floor.

But I also notice traces of the West in this Indian migrant’s house. On one of the walls are four prints of paintings by Rembrandt. The one that draws my attention is St Jerome Reading in an Italian landscape. Maybe it has something to do with the fact he is reading, one of my favourite hobbies, but I think it also has to do with the lion standing behind him. Is this symbolic? Does St Jerome devour words, only to be in turn devoured by the lion? The thought amuses me.

On a small table stands a group of horses: small sequined horses, mosaic horses, red painted horses with multi-coloured dots, and a little clay rocking horse.

‘You like horses?’ I ask.

‘Yes,’ she says laughing, her gaze on two hand-painted portraits of horses on the wall of the dining room.

Vimala’s conversation is peppered with gentlebursts of hearty laughter. There is a great deal she seems to find funny, even in serious matters. She smiles almost constantly: a
smile that always reaches her eyes. Dressed in a black skivvy and blue jeans, her hair short, she sits beside me at the round kitchen table. Around her neck hangs a thin gold chain with a cross and a ring as lockets. Her ear-lobes bear silver ball earrings. Her fingers are ringless.

I am not as nervous as I thought I would be. Maybe it is because we have been exchanging e-mails for about two weeks, though I have to admit I was slightly surprised at how she looked when she arrived at the railway station to pick me up in her grey station wagon. I had conjured up this vision of her being tall, having long black hair and wearing a saree -- a typical Indian woman.

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Birth changes a place to a homeland: birth land, children, our childhoods, where our parents have buried our umbilical cords, where our children will bury us and bear their own children. These are homelands of the memory and the future, and for many of us, they are not the same.

Vimala says, ‘We chose not to have children. My husband and I decided there were enough children, especially in India.’

There is sadness in her eyes but she laughs. I think of Mary and Lakshimi, who both do not have children for different reasons.

‘Do you ever feel torn between the desire for adapting and blending in and the pain of letting go?’ I ask, hurrying onto the next question, worried she might break down and cry.

She replies in the negative, smiling ‘I think I would have if I had children. Not so much for me; but more for the children. The children don’t understand the Indian traditions, customs and the festivals, having been brought up in the Western way. I think it is good for Indian migrants in Australia who have children to be part of one of
the organisations and the Indian community. The kids get an idea of what it is like and how festivals are celebrated. But I don’t have children, so we don’t have that responsibility.

‘I’m not involved with the Indian community,’ she says openly. ‘But I do have Indian friends. The trouble with Indians here is there is no outstanding Indian organisation. There’s a Tamil, Telungu, Kannada and Bengali organisation. I don’t belong to any of them because I identify myself solely as an Indian.

‘India is one of the most racist countries in the world. Just take a look at the marriage columns. “Tall, fair, beautiful.” Hello, we’re here in India,’ she says, chuckling.

She laughs again as she answers my next question. ‘Have you ever been a racist?’ ‘Yes. I’m sure I have. Often if I see a bad driver on the street, I’ll say, “Ah! Must be Chinese or Indian.” I think we have all made such comments. I’m not a racist, where I don’t like a person because of their ethnicity. But I’m sure we have all grouped people like that together and made jokes. You know, like the Irish jokes.’

She reaches down to pat Gemma, a brown Golden Retriever who is lying down quietly by her side. ‘Good dog,’ she whispers. Gemma cocks up her ears. Smudge, her black dog, puts its head up to be patted as well.

For this Indian migrant, Australia seemed like a nice place to live permanently. ‘I had visited Australia but my husband had not.’ Vimala worked as an air-stewardess with Air India and used to fly to Australia often. She had cousins here, so she would come on holidays as well.
'Every time I visited, I thought this was a good place to live in. My husband was doing his Ph.D. in Seattle, and we decided to move to Australia. I fell in love with the place and that's why we migrated here.

'It's strange we ended up in Melbourne, though, and so near the mountains.'

To my querying look, she explains, 'My impression of living in Australia was to be beside the beach. I had mainly visited Perth and Sydney. I had only been to Melbourne for three short days and it rained all the time.' She laughs again.

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A tree clings by the wall of the house Vimala and her husband built together. Through the window, I see a line of mountains beyond the fields.

She continues, 'My first experiences of Melbourne were strange. My husband got a job immediately and I was alone at home. I felt very depressed because I knew nobody. The only other person I knew was my cousin, and she was working. Everyone was busy. My neighbours were older people, and though they said "Hi," "Bye" and things like that ... I don't want to sound snobbish, but intellectually we weren't on the same level at all. One of my neighbours was a cleaning woman in a school and another one was something else. Plus they had no idea what to expect from an Indian. They thought I would be some sweet, ignorant black person. They were nice to me, but they thought, "Poor thing... what would she know?" I was depressed and I didn't know where I was. Once I entered university, it didn't matter.'

Entering the university, she studied social work for two years. Then she underwent special training at the Bouverie Centre. 'I studied family therapy at the Bouverie Centre in Melbourne. It is now affiliated to Latrobe University. I did a postgraduate diploma there. And I had to do clinical hours and get supervision to get registered. My
designation is as a social worker in the Aged Psychiatry Assessment and Treatment Service.

Vimala smiles and continues, 'I feel there are lot of misconceptions in the community about mentally ill people. There is definitely a stigma attached to mental illness. I feel every year we get better and better at it. In the old days if you had a mental illness, they would just lock you up. Some people never ever got out. These days, we treat them in a least restrictive manner.'

When I look perplexed, she explains: 'Least restrictive manner means you can be treated at home in the community. If you can't, then you are taken to hospital. And when you are able to go back to the community, you go back. People are not forced to go into an institution.'

I ask, 'Do you think there are any cultural differences between the way the patients are treated here and in India?'

'In India, there is ignorance about mental illness,' Vimala says. I don't think there is sufficient treatment for people who are mentally ill. There are not enough services. If you happen to come from a privileged family that can afford good psychiatric help, then you are treated. Otherwise, you just wander the streets. Some of the cultural differences are the people who are mentally ill who talk to people and see things are treated as though they are talking to God and seeing things. They are treated for being possessed, when actually they are ill. In India, that's the way most people look at it. They don't think of it as an illness that can be treated.'

I remember being horrified once when I saw a woman: her eyes big, her long hair tousled and her tongue sticking out. People were going to her and praying 'Kali has visited her,' my mother said.
Vimala tells me it is a very emotional job. 'Social work can be really trying, because you come across some of the worst aspects of human nature. You are also taking on the problems of somebody else.'

But there are enjoyable aspects as well, she points out. 'It is just great to work with people. I love working with older people and older people who are mentally ill, also. They give me a lot of fun. And when they are engaged in therapy and respond well, I feel like I have achieved something.'

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'There are a lot of differences between Australia and India,' she says and pauses for a moment. 'It is much harder here to make friends.' As I shake my head and think of the multitude of friends I have, she smiles and says, 'Unless you have some link, like you’re studying together.'

Although Vimala is gregarious, she has found it difficult to make friends with colleagues. In some places where she has worked, her work-mates have felt they should not mix work and social life.

She tells me, 'In India, if my husband is a senior executive in a company, one of the first things they would do would be to invite my husband and me for a meal and get to know us. Over here, it doesn’t happen. It’s a very slow process. After maybe two years, they might go out for a meal.

'And, of course, the crowds,' she says beaming a smile. 'In India, you can’t move without bumping into someone. Over here, there’s nobody. One also has more opportunities to say what they want to say. In India, people can say what they want to say, but then there’re a hundred million other people saying things as well, so who does one listen to?'
‘It’s also cleaner and greener here and that’s one thing I like. Bangalore, where my mother lives now, used to be green and beautiful, and now it’s just concrete and filthy,’ she says with a look of disgust.

I went to Bangalore when I was nine years old, I say, and thought it was one of the cleaner cities in India.

‘Bangalore has changed,’ she says, her tone firm. ‘In the 1980s, it tried to become the Silicon Valley of India and the big businesses came in. Houses were broken down and big, ugly concrete buildings took their place. There was no consideration for the environment. It is so hot now. Bangalore used to be cool – even in the warm months, I needed a light shawl to keep me warm.’

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Vimala is a woman of strong feminist principles. She tells me when she was working in the airline, she was a member of an organisation called the Association of Air Hostesses. ‘It was formed as a breakaway association to gain parity with the men. Both the men and women belonged to the cabin crew association. We were supporting the men and achieving all they wanted but we, the women, were not getting anything. Every time we put forward something for ourselves, we would not get it. It was very frustrating.’

I write down, ‘That’s very feminist, especially coming from India. In India, the patriarchal system rules, doesn’t it?’

She explains, ‘India also has one of the biggest and strongest feminist movements. It’s a different kind of feminism. It’s feminism where you get to have your say; where you rule. If you have a look at ancient Indian civilisation before the Aryans came and invaded India, there were women in power. Some East and South Indian communities still are matriarchal. There are also quite a few feminist books written by
Indian women. It sounds strange, but we have more feminists in India than anywhere else in the world, simply because there are so many of us.’ She breaks out laughing.

For Vimala, being a feminist is being able to live how she wants to live. ‘To be able to give people – not just women – choices, knowledge and raised awareness and consciousness.

‘I still can’t understand why women change their names when they get married. They need to respect themselves as individuals. Why do they want to be identified as somebody’s else property?’ she asks, her voice smouldering with passion.

‘Did you change your name, then?’ I ask.

‘No, never.’ She laughs, her eyes crinkling with laughter, and continues, ‘Not even if you paid me, I would not change it.’

I gaze at this woman who considers her name more than a title. It is a home she has lived in all her life and feels attached to. If she had been attached to her home in India, I would never have had the opportunity to interview her today on Australian soil. She is the first woman I have interviewed who has initiated the move to Australia, while the rest came for the sake of their husbands.

Vimala is a woman like any other, and yet she is not. She is different. She is special. She is liberated.
Padma Sen is absolutely sure where home is. She says without a moment’s hesitation, ‘I call Melbourne home.’ When I show surprise, she continues, ‘Though I have lived in four different countries – America, India, Fiji and Australia – I have lived in Australia longer than any other country. Even when I return to Fiji, I don’t know much about the place, because I was a teenager when I left,’ she declares. Her eyes flash from under her large-rimmed glasses.

Seated opposite me, in a black silk blouse and long skirt that clash glaringly with her track shoes, she reflects, ‘My daughter was doing a project on ecosystems. We were talking about the niche and the larger circle, and how the animal has its own niche and yet it can roam around a larger circle.’ It is the sense of having a niche that makes her feel at home.

She continues, ‘Physically, I have a place to live. I belong. My things are with me. My family is with me. Where I have my things tucked away here, and my kitchen is there, my bedroom is there. It’s my own lounge room and my own bathroom. That is a sense of home in the physical sense. When I have finished work, I know I am going somewhere, and I know it is my own place. I can kick off my shoes and I can relax. Most importantly, my home is a place where I can be myself.’

She and I sit in her office as her conversation echoes. She is an outspoken and intense woman, although physically small. She recounts her migration experiences, speaking with the velocity of someone who still has much to complete in her day and in her life.
Padma came to Australia in February 1973 from the Fiji Islands. Like me, she had come to study. She tells me: "I came here to study an Arts and Law degree. I really liked Melbourne. It was a beautiful place; it was clean; it was different. It still is. People were also very nice to me because I was the only Indian there. I was very warmly accepted and everybody loved me," she recalls with a smile.

Her fellow-students at the university were intrigued by the colour of her skin.

'They used to ask me silly questions about the colour of my blood and how I spoke English so well. One of them asked me if I cut my hand, what the colour of my blood would be.

'I asked them "What colour do you expect it to be?"

"It might be blue," was the answer I received,' Padma says laughing.

Like Mary, Padma has noticed the shift towards multi-culturalism in Melbourne.

'When I came, I probably was the only dark person around. Now there are more Indians here. There is a vast change now in ethnic communities. This is due to different types of people coming from many countries.

'With the advent of cable TV, multi-culturalism and the influx of different races, the Australians have more contact with them. There have been efforts made by Australians to celebrate diversity, minorities and cultural differences. After all, they go to school with them. They don't look at somebody as dark or brown ... even though my daughter, Rohini, everybody thinks she is an Aborigine. She says, "Mummy, I'm very happy. In school, they think I'm an Aborigine." I say to her "Wonderful. Of course, you are."' Padma smiles, looking fondly at the photograph of her daughter stuck to the glass panel in her office.
I smile at the mother’s pride in her daughter. In the picture, Rohini is dressed in a gold coloured pavada. Gold bangles decorate her little wrists. ‘My little girl loves to wear Indian clothes and jewellery. The bangles, the dangling earrings, the chains ... she loves them all.’

Talking about Rohini brings a light to her eyes. I notice another photograph of a young boy of about ten hugging her.

‘Who’s that?’ I ask

‘That’s Rohini’s half-brother. He’s gone to stay with his mother in the States now. My husband was married before,’ she tells me. Her eyes cloud over with other thoughts.

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‘With the many coups that Fiji has gone through, it is not the best of the little island that it once used to be. The roads aren’t in a good condition. People don’t have a good lifestyle, thus many Indians are leaving Fiji.’

With her elfin face, hands, arms and indeed her entire torso gesturing vividly, Padma speaks of the contrasts between Fiji and Melbourne. ‘It is only a tiny island compared to a large city like Melbourne. Population, food, clothing, culture, weather, education, building, way of thinking and the way of doing everything,’ she lists in an excited voice.

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She asks me where I am from. I write down Singapore.

‘Singapore is a beautiful city. I don’t think Fiji is like that,’ Padma says.

I retort, ‘Singapore is all buildings. How can you consider that to be beautiful?’ I shudder at the thought, remembering what a friend said about the country of my birth: ‘There are no horizons in Singapore.’
‘Yes, it is all buildings but there is a sense of cleanliness and orderliness there. My personality is … what do you call it? … Excessive neurosis or neurotic obsessive or obsessive behaviour, where everything has to be neat and tidy. I drive everybody crazy. Singapore is the type of country that would be ideal. Every country should be like Singapore. Everybody should be told when to cross the road, how to cross, not to cross, be orderly. People think I’m crazy,’ she replies, laughing.

I see signs of her neat and orderly behaviour in her office. She opens up big metal cupboards, and there are papers all filed away in the dividers. Not a single sheet seems out of place.

I think of my own rented bed-sitter in Melbourne and cringe as I remember the mess it was when I left this morning. The place was in pandemonium. Clothes lay strewn across the floor where I had dropped them. Drawers were left open because I had not closed them. The bed was unmade. I could not even see what there was of the brown carpet. My books and papers had taken over.

‘Are you all right?’ she asks, concern written all over her face. She must have seen me cringe.

I nod my head as she continues talking about her work: ‘I keep all the information. Record keeping.’ The organisation she works at does research on the family and family care.

Padma has worked at the same place for ten years. I ask her whether she ever gets bored.

She says, ‘I’m very happy with it. I don’t feel like changing it. I don’t like the feeling of being bogged down to work five days a week. I don’t work on Thursdays,'
you see.' Furthermore, she adds, 'I don't have aspirations to be the director of a company. I'm happy the way I'm. I'm secure.'

She feels women are natural nurturers but these days they also forgo having children because of their ambitions. She thinks women are wrong in that aspect. 'It's all a matter of balance,' she tells me. 'We can do it all; excel in work and still return home to take up the "feminine" roles of mother and wife.'

She is also grateful to the organisation for giving her the job. 'When I came back from America, I had Rohini. She was a little baby. I needed to work and this place also allowed me to bring my child to work.'

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When I ask whether she clings on to any aspects of her culture, she says, 'Virtually everything. We don't hang on to it in the sense we're going to lose it. We don't lose it. It's a part of us. It's a way of life.'

She admits sadly that children, especially if they are born and brought up in Australia are not given the chance to learn the mother-tongue.

'We tend to speak in English most of the time. Like my little girl Rohini, she understands Hindi but I wish she would just stand there and talk to me.'

This is the problem of many immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor language. How many people today speak in a language, not their own?

She warns me some of the questions I have asked her could be answered differently by new Indian migrants. 'Not the Indians from Fiji, because we are very exposed to the Western world. We speak English, live with whites and are very cosmopolitan,' she says proudly.
‘The Indians from India, on the other hand, will feel the pain of letting go because I’ve known of a lot of Indians who have gone back.’

Being the vice-president of an Indian cultural society in Melbourne, she deals with many Indian women. ‘The problem is they don’t want to assimilate and they want to hold on to their identity. I think Indian women ... well, I don’t know if I should say it or not ... they lack etiquette and they can become a bit intolerant. When they go to a shop, they demand to buy something. It is their upbringing. They have been dealing with servants all their lives,’ she says, taking a sip of coffee.

‘The servants do everything for them. Suddenly, they come here. They have to do it by themselves and as a result, they become very frustrated. Our life in Fiji was different. We have been taught since we were little how to do housework, how to cook and how to manage the world.’

Padma says she has experienced great rapport and friendship with Indian families. ‘I mingle with them. We invite people home for dinner and they invite us to their homes for dinner.’

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I was brought up in a similar way to the Indian women she speaks of. At home in Singapore, there was no personal joy in cleaning. Every morning, the maid dusted the house, swept it, mopped the floor till you could see your reflection glimmering in the white tiles, cleaned the bathrooms and did the laundry. Sometimes my mother would run her finger along the wood furniture to see if there was dust. She would call out for the maid so that she could tell her to do it again, and properly this time.

But in Melbourne, I have gained domestic independence. I have discovered laundry is not a chore. I love smelling the detergent together with the rose-smelling rinse when I put out the clothes to dry. I have learnt how to make simple meals and
elegant three-course dinners. It feels like playing at real life - cooking meals and doing laundry and cleaning up my messes.

Padma flicks a speck of dust off her computer. ‘I need to go back home today and clean,’ she says out aloud, forgetting I am there.

Maybe, I should do that too, as I thank her for the interview. But, I think again. I’ve too much work on my hands at the moment. Why bother? The sky won’t fall in, if I don’t vacuum, or do the laundry.

There is always tomorrow to use my Hoover.
A New Arrival

‘Asian women who have come here have sacrificed their careers to bring up their children. They tend to stay at home because they feel they cannot cope. That’s the end of their careers, until the children are much older. Then they go out to work and do something totally unrelated to their qualifications.’

Will she be one of these women? I wonder.

Rose Kumar continues, ‘The role of a woman as a career person is restricted. Not many women seem to be having full-time careers. And that’s something I miss. I also notice there aren’t very many women ministers in Australia.’

I feel like telling this soft-spoken woman, ‘Well, there aren’t many women ministers in Singapore, either. Don’t forget that.’

I don’t.

I have only been in touch with Rose through the e-mail. This is our first meeting. She wears jeans and a T-shirt with peach and white horizontal stripes. Her long hair, dishevelled, is tied into a plait. She is thin. Around the house are framed photographs of her, fair-skinned in a white wedding saree, with her husband, dark-skinned in a dark suit. No look of regret in her eyes then, though now I notice a remorseful gaze.

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Having migrated from Singapore in March 1998, Rose says, in her soft voice, ‘Home for me is still Singapore. Even though I don’t like to think about it, I’ve only been here for two years and I don’t think I can identify myself totally as an Australian.’
We are seated at a table in the hall. In front of me is a glass of apple juice; Rose
munches away at biscuits, dunked in a cup of hot tea.

‘Help yourself to the biscuits,’ she says, pushing the plate towards me.

On the window sill in front of me is a photograph of Rose, with her two children
and her husband, taken at Sovereign Hill. They are all dressed in period costumes. I
notice the look of amusement on her daughter’s face. Rose’s eyes follow my gaze, and
she smiles fondly at the memories the photograph evokes. She says slowly, ‘The
children were my main reason for coming here. I thought they were at an age where
they could actually try and experience a different lifestyle. My son was starting Primary
Two and my daughter was in kindergarten. The kids do like Australia, because it is
more relaxed. Melbourne is also more creative and flexible. The children are given
room to express themselves. Thus, their confidence is developed. Both my kids have
adapted well,’ she says proudly.

Another reason for Rose to come to Australia was that she wanted to try a new lifestyle.
It had been part of a teenage dream for her to come to this continent.

She explains, ‘When I was doing my A-Levels in Singapore, I went to Sydney to
visit my two uncles. I liked the city and the lifestyle. It had sunny skies and there was
so much of space, and I thought it was a lovely place to live.’

Yet she eventually migrated to Melbourne because her husband had relatives
here. ‘I thought while we were studying, the children would have some support. My
husband wasn’t too keen to come because he felt there were not many opportunities for
him in the manufacturing sector.’
I had been briefly introduced to Rose’s husband earlier. He was at home studying for exams.

‘Why didn’t your husband want to migrate?’

‘It was some months before my husband got a job. When you don’t have a job, it’s hard to get references to get a place to rent. It’s all an uphill struggle,’ Rose says. She struggles to find the words to describe the difficulties she experienced at first. ‘You come on a high and with all these apprehensions, it takes quite a while to settle in. So, we came for the right reasons and the wrong ones as well,’ she ruefully admits.

For Rose, what she liked about Melbourne was ‘the open space, the air being fresh and the whole atmosphere being peaceful and relaxing. Also, I can have a big house,’ she says as she notices my gaze wander around the house from my perch at the table. In land-scarce Singapore, Rose would probably be living in a flat.

When I hear Rose’s story, I am reminded of Vasantha and Srinivas, two characters in Kamala Markandaya’s novel, Nowhere Man?

Vasantha, in the novel says:

‘At last we have achieved something. A place of our own, where we can live according to our rights although in alien surroundings: and our children after us and after them theirs.’

Srinivas, her husband, ‘experienced no such emotions’:

‘He did not feel like a founding father. It seemed to him that what they had done was to shackle themselves to bricks and mortar and it filled him with misgiving. ... [H]e liked to believe the way back to [home] lay open.’

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During Rose’s one trip back to Singapore, which lasted for about two weeks, the first thing that hit her was how congested everything was. ‘I felt claustrophobic. It was hot because of the tropical climate as well.’ But after a week she acclimatised, and she remembered how vibrant and lively Singapore was. She could go out at night and it was safe. She complains, her lips pouting, ‘There’s no life here in Melbourne. I find it very dead. If you live in one of the outer suburbs, it’s isolated because it’s far away from the city.’

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Rose was working as a lawyer in the government service in Singapore.

‘I worked in the government sector in Singapore, as I hated the profit-centeredness of the private sector.’

She smiles wryly at my next question: ‘What made you choose a career in law?’

She shrugs her shoulders and answers, ‘At seventeen when I finished my A-Levels, I thought, “What degree should I do?” I loved History, but what could I do with that subject other than teach?’ she asks, her eyes full of unanswered questions. Finally, she was persuaded by family and friends to take up Law at the Singapore University.

Rose had to do a postgraduate course at an Australian university to convert her degree so she could practise here. She discovered while doing this course that Australia has lots of different laws. ‘It is a big country and I think they are modelled more on the American legal system. Singapore is more pro-British and has simpler laws.’

She worked for six months in a suburban law firm in Melbourne for experience. ‘I didn’t like it,’ she comments.

An incident with a fellow employee brought her close to tears. ‘The way we pronounce names ... lots of Indians, they will say Th-omas. And they enunciate the ‘h’. 
That was pointed out to me. I didn’t realise I had done it. I guess it’s how it’s pointed out to you but it made me feel unnerved. With the Asian reserve, one doesn’t actually point out mispronunciations or any errors or mistakes that people do openly. It’s always done subtly in Singaporean society.

Rose enjoyed the social interaction at work in Melbourne, though. ‘The young people were friendly and open. We used to go for lunches once a week.’

At my next question, ‘What advice would you give to a young person seeking to become a lawyer?’ Rose smiles worriedly. ‘I would suggest they study the market and also see if they’re passionate about it. I wouldn’t recommend it to my children because I wasn’t enthusiastic about it.’

When I ask whether she feels she has assimilated into Australian society, she says it is a very hard question. ‘I would probably mix more with migrants than I would with Australians. I have met one or two Australian parents, but I have not developed strong friendships with them. If they are Australians, they will be polite to you, but it doesn’t mean they will go out of their way to foster any great friendships. The neighbours are also peripheral. But when they’re migrants, they go out of their way, because they are equally as lonely as you are.’

Assimilation is a difficult question for Rose. She feels there is a real struggle when you migrate because you have to decide, if you want to blend in or if you want to maintain your own culture and live your own lifestyle.
‘And that might be pretty isolating. I notice with the older people who migrate, they tend to mix within their own ethnic group. The younger people, when they enter the job market, it’s easier.

‘I’m conservative. For my kids, I notice the TV is very open here. There’s a lot of material that I might find … not objectionable, but which I wouldn’t want to expose my children to. I realise Singapore is very rigid and I don’t think that’s the best way to go. But here it is also a worry, especially when I read in the media about drugs, sex, corruption and a lack of a strong family unit.

‘And even in terms of going to church, in Singapore, people are more religious. There are a smaller number of people going to church here, especially young people. I wonder what sort of system, what blend I should apply in my own family, so I can control the way my children turn out.’

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The rain is pouring outside as Rose gives me a lift to the railway station. As she chats to me, I think how different we both are.

I find my visits to Singapore painful and distressing. I am a stranger and yet not a stranger there. During the summer vacations, when I go back, I miss Melbourne. As I walk the crowded roads of my early years, I find myself wondering if Melbourne is a fantasy, a child’s make-believe world.

In his story One Out of Many, V.S. Naipaul tells the story of a servant in Bombay who comes to Washington with his master. In Washington, he discovers the immigrant’s truth: ‘Stay away long enough and you belong nowhere any more. In the conclusion, he says, “I was once part of the flow, never thinking of myself as a presence. Then I looked in the mirror and decided to be free.”'
This is what had happened to me. I had looked into the mirror and taken myself out of the flow. I had decided to be free, and now there was no going back — not in the same way, not ever. Nor did I really want to go back, although I continue to long for what I had once been part of.

As I open myself to the vastness within me, the world too opens up with me. In Australia, I have found my voice. My real voice. A voice that can talk when it is cold. A voice that can write when it is hot. Unlike Rose, in Australia, I am happy. I can become. I have. I am.
Coming in on the train from one of the outer suburbs, I turn my face to the window where the world rushes by. The morning light cracks blood red along the Yarra River. Towering skyscrapers of the city advance spectrally huge.

It is a cold November morning. I arrive at the office of the Herald Sun newspaper. I wait for a little while, breathing in the cold air and watching as my breath puffs out in small white clouds. Don't be nervous, I tell myself, as the revolving doors whirl and make me feel giddy. I stand, watching people entering and leaving. I notice some men smoking outside, on a coffee break. Newspapers are tucked under their arms. They are wearing white identification tags with photographs for security purposes. I am amused. Is there any chance of a newspaper company being held hostage? Well, maybe, but I hope not today.

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'I don't feel any different from anyone in Australian society,' says Harbant Gill, the Arts Editor of the Herald Sun. We are seated side by side, in the conference room. My notes are on the long table. She looks relaxed and amiable as she leans forward in her chair.

'I'm surprised in this new millennium when I do hear of problems,' she says. 'For instance ... I interviewed the founder of SaltShakers, which is a conservative Christian group. He was commenting on the Body Art Exhibition at the new Melbourne Museum.

'Body art,' she explains, 'includes body piercing and tattoos. He was against that and he said my nose-stud was where I came from.' I look up at her face and notice for the first time the glimmer of an unobtrusive gold nose-ring. 'The nose-ring is cultural and I said, "That's part of Australian society."'
For Harbant, it was a real shock, 'because if we still think Australia is Anglo-Celtic, we're lagging behind and stepping back into the Dark Ages.'

Harbant's voice is like silk – it shimmers like light with softness one can almost feel. I could stay here all day, listening to her speak. I love her voice. It weaves the world together. And I catch my breath as I realise for the first time I am jealous of this woman, like all the other Indian women I have interviewed. They all have something I do not have. Voices. Clear audible voices with different pitches and tones. Clipped, charming accents. When they open their mouths, poetry flows ... Music to my ears, at least. And I envy them their voices.

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Harbant comes from Malaysia, where she always regarded herself as a foreigner. It is difficult to imagine that this intelligent, educated and accomplished woman has experienced racism.

'When I was a child, especially, there was a distinction between the Chinese and the rest of the population.' One incident is still vivid in her mind. One afternoon when she was in school, her family had forgotten to pick her up. 'I walked to a Chinese shop and asked if I could use the telephone to call them. The phone was sitting on the counter, and the man looked at me and said "No phone."'

She says she thinks she also has some racist attitudes. 'I do tend to stereotype people, especially the Chinese, as being materialistic, crass, and as a race, I would quote Tiananmen Square as an example of that kind of lack of regard for humans.'

But, it was not the fear of being different or a foreigner in the country of her birth that made her migrate to Australia in October 1982. She tells me, 'I came here because
journalism in Malaysia is suffocating, and I found it very limited in terms of speaking the truth. So I came here for a free form of expression.’ For Harbant, Australia is a land of opportunity. A place to write freely. A place where she has found her own voice.

I ask Harbant what made her want to become a journalist in the first place.

She replies, ‘It was a love of people, sociology, psychology and a burning curiosity about life that drew me to journalism.’

A typical day for Harbant starts at nine in the morning. ‘I give the sub-editors the stories and the photos that are going into the paper for the following day. After which I attend a news conference at ten-thirty, where what is coming up and issues to be focused on are discussed. Then I might go through the stack of e-mails and faxes to decide which story we want to pursue, which ones would serve the public the best, that is always the bottom line. I get one of the several staff who work in the arts area to pursue those. We might discuss the angle we want to take or the approach we want to take. I write myself, so I might have my own interviews, like today.’

She glances at her wrist and looks at the time. ‘We still have heaps of time to finish,’ she says. I heave a sigh of a relief.

‘There might be a new story breaking on that particular day which we will cover. I liaise with heads of arts organisations, publicists and contacts to decide what’s going on. I might suggest to different sections of the newspapers – for example, the magazine – if we should do a profile on someone.’

As she finishes listing her daily chores, I remember the six months of trying to arrange a mutually convenient meeting time and place to meet this busy woman. How many e-mails had it taken before she had finally agreed to see me? I have lost count.
She gazes at the next question, on my questionnaire, my medium for interviews, which asks: ‘How do you stay organised and productive, yet not avoid burnout?’ She smiles and reaches for her red pen and strikes out the ‘not.’ I feel like an idiot, the colour of my face changing to a deep red.

She says, still smiling, ‘I have to be careful about the burnout, as I tend to work long hours and run on adrenaline when I get excited. So I need to be more aware of resting and going home and switching off and playing my music. That helps, and going to the cinema is a big relaxation for me. I don’t think of work when I’m at the cinema or when I’m playing my music or walking in the bush or by the sea.’

Though Harbant is passionate about the arts, she worked as Foreign Affairs Editor for five years before deciding she would apply for the position of Arts Editor when it became vacant. ‘I believe the arts is for everyone,’ she says enthusiastically. ‘Arts is about the human experience. I am very much against the idea that the arts is only for the elite and the converted, or even the theory that arts is elite.’

This generous woman enjoys sharing the arts with everyone. ‘It is like a celebration for me,’ she says, then corrects herself: ‘It is a celebration for me.’ She continues, ‘I love doing interviews with people who are so inspiring that I come away feeling bigger than I was when I went to speak with them.’

I wonder if she has any difficult interviews as I have had. I ask her that question. She shrugs her shoulders and says ‘I don’t know. I really enjoy the interviews I do. They are all different. I can talk about the one with Peter Ustinov, which I enjoyed tremendously because he is a very generous man. I think I enjoy most those who are generous, accessible and who are ready to share their passion and their art with the whole world.’
You can say that again, I think to myself, remembering some of my bad experiences.

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For Harbant, home is not where the heart is, as the old cliché goes. She puts it simply, ‘It is where my bed is, really.’ She continues on, like an express train, listing what in her opinion makes a home: ‘Love and warmth and celebration of life. Throwing open the doors in summer or even in winter when the sun is streaming in, cooking up a curry and sharing it with friends. One where a lot of music is played – a lot of live music – and one where yoga is done and there’s a lot of chanting and meditation. Where it is a refuge. Where you feel totally at home within and without. A place of rest.’

When she first arrived in Melbourne, she stayed in a tiny room at the back of a student house in Brunswick. ‘I stayed there for two weeks until I got the job at the Herald Sun. And then I moved and shared a house with a nurse in South Yarra.’

And now, ‘Home for me is St Kilda, by the beach, where one can gaze as far as the horizon,’ she says, with a tranquil look on her face.

She inhabits two sites, geographically and emotionally: her present life in Australia, where she relishes her independence and her opportunities for autonomy and growth, and her past life and roots with her family.

Coming from a family where she was the youngest of six children, she was overprotected by her parents and siblings. ‘I’ve a greater sense of independence now. I am more confident. I am more determined to live the truth. I am able to define my own path a lot more clearly, in terms of what the truth is for me.’
I look at this dark-skinned woman, dressed in a lime-green jacket and black pants, and watch the choker on her neck quiver as she flicks back her fringe. ‘Being far from my family has given me the space to explore who I am and how I want to determine my life. It has also triggered periods of intense loneliness, which I have realised are to do with the human condition and not created by external factors. This distance, plus seeing my father’s body ablaze on a funeral pyre ten years ago, have made it an imperative for me to heal myself, to face the chasm within,’ she says, in an emotion-choked voice.

She stares at her clasped hands on the table while tears roll down her cheeks. I lower my eyes from her wet ones. I wish I could say something to comfort her, but words do not come to me. My own sad thoughts whirl around in my head as I remember Betty.

Betty was beautiful, graceful and funny. I was awkward and gangly. She never had plans because life never touched her. She had wanted to be a writer ... and she wanted me to be one too.

She was the reason I am in Melbourne today. Betty was killed in a car accident in Fresno, California. I flew back to Singapore for her funeral, knowing she would want me there. She lay still in the coffin, her eyes closed. My beautiful friend, dead.

‘Shall we continue?’ Harbant asks, shaking me from my own thoughts, her voice more composed now. The face that had been filled with sorrow has now gone blank.

I nod my head.

When I ask her where she considers to be home, she tells me she could never live in Malaysia. She shakes her head slowly.

‘But,’ she continues, ‘when I go back to Malaysia for holidays, it’s home. I’m familiar with the sounds, the music of the language as it is spoken, all the different
languages. I start talking with a Malaysian accent without even realising it. When I'm in Melbourne, I'm at home too. I'm at home with the social norms and how things are done here. I can celebrate the differences.'

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'Differences between Malaysia and Australia?' She pauses for a little while to think, then says, 'The people here not as open as they were in Malaysia ... nor as generous in terms of bringing you into their lives, which happens very much in Malaysia. My house stood at the crossroads of two different cities: Kuala Lumpur and Malacca. Often there would be foreign hitchhikers standing around. We would invite them in, give them a meal and a bed. We ended up having friends from Canada, Russia and from all over the world. My mother usually cooked enough food for five extra people, so if anyone dropped in they were very welcome to stay. And if they dropped in during a mealtime there wasn't even a question of whether you were going to stay for a meal.' She smiles, her eyes now filled with memories of yesteryears.

Harbant has noticed that people in Melbourne have changed. In recent years, she has met more people who think as she does. 'People whom you can drop in on, people who are very open to that kind of thing and actually welcome it. They are the kind of people I'm drawn to. I don't make it a point of hanging around with Malaysians only. I have one Malaysian friend here.' She laughs at the amazed look on my face and nods her head as I hold up one finger. 'Yes, only one.'

One thing Harbant does miss about Malaysia is that there is more variety of food there and it is cheaper and better. 'There's a huge celebration of food which there isn't that much of in Australia. People tend to map out the cities according to the food. For
example, Kajang would be famous for its satay, and another town would be popular for
its char kway teow or its fish-head curry.’

She adds, ‘One big difference for me is the way people take off their shoes when they go
into a house in Malaysia. I actually don’t wear shoes at home here. I have some friends
in Melbourne who have a sign outside the house, “Leave your shoes with your ego at the
doorstep.” It is a reverence of someone else’s space to not wear shoes into their home.

Like Harbant, I too do not wear shoes in the house. Asian culture does not
permit it. I remember not knowing what to say when some of my friends did not take
off their shoes when they entered my room. My inner sanctum defiled by footwear.
These days, I do not mind. I have learnt to accept it a part of their culture and allow
their shoes into my home. Some of my friends have also learnt to respect my culture,
and they now take off their shoes at the front door.

‘In Malaysia, it is always hot,’ Harbant continues. ‘I like the four seasons here. I like
the difference. I like being able to appreciate the variety. And my hair curls in
Malaysia, which it doesn’t here. For my hair, at least, it is good to be in Australia,’ she
says laughing.

There is also lot more freedom in Australia. ‘Freedom to live as you want. In
St. Kilda, nobody raises an eyebrow if you walk up with pink hair one day and green the
next. They will probably love you for it. In Malaysia, people tend to be more
conservative. I think it is all right to live with a lover now, but when I was growing up,
even having a boyfriend was a big deal.’
There is also no freedom of speech in Malaysia. 'In Malaysia, the government has a stranglehold on the media, and thus the people fear speaking out against what they believe is wrong or should not be happening.'

'What about Mahathir?' I ask.

She says, 'I think the Malaysians love him because he stands up against the Westerners and speaks his mind. I think because Malaysia was one of the British colonies, they take great pride in saying, "We do not need to kow-tow to your opinions." Australia hasn't been able to do this because we still have this colonial hangover – anything that comes from London has got to be good whether it is theatre or sub-editors. It is probably one reason why we as Australians have such a problem getting rid of the monarchy,' she says.

Another difference Harbant finds is that the boundaries within families are not as clear in Malaysia as they are here. She gives an example. 'My partner’s parents live in Melbourne and yet he sees them very few times a year. When my parents were alive, I had more contact with them than he did with his parents who lived in the same city. It's all a question of balance,' she reasons.

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She gazes at her watch again. 'Another ten minutes.'

Harbant believes it is not easy to forget one’s own culture. She remembers, with a wry and embarrassed smile, 'I rejected it when I was at school because I wanted to be like everyone else.' She does not elaborate and I dare not ask because of the time limitations. She continues, 'Now, it is so deeply ingrained, it’s at the core of my being and I'm proud of those aspects I’ve kept.' One aspect of her culture she has kept is her love for Punjabi devotional music and the prayers. 'I enjoy listening to the music of the
language in the prayers, because it was what I grew up. It brings me closer to my parents as well. They are both dead, but I still have a bond with them.

She recalls that when her mother was alive, they would go to the Sikh temple together on Sundays. ‘I still go on special celebration days. For me, it is like a spiritual coming home, although I can have the experience in any spiritual space, be it nature or any place of peace.’

Harbant has hung on to all the basic tenets of Punjabi culture: respect for family and friends, generosity of spirit, and the concept of sharing and seva. ‘I have edited the annual reports of the Sikh community in Australia. The year I came here, I became a voluntary Lifeline counsellor and did that for three and a half years, and then I joined Community Aid Abroad as a volunteer and spent six years organising quizzes and book sales.’

‘Time’s up,’ she says and shakes my hand. I thank her for giving me some time from her busy schedule.

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Writing is a ‘journey towards strange sources of art that are foreign to us,’ says Helene Cixous, a French feminist. ‘It does not happen here; it happens somewhere else, in a strange and foreign country.’

Leaving through the revolving doors, I am reminded of a writer’s role – one moment to be on the outside, observing; the next, to be inside looking out. How true of my own experiences as well I think as Salman Rushdie’s words come back to me: ‘We are at one and at the same time, insiders and outsiders in this society.’
Living away from my original culture for the past seven years, Melbourne has become home. But never quite. Then, when I go back to Singapore for my holidays, I realise I can't be at home there either. I have thus become an outsider to both cultures.
Cultural Divides

‘That’s where we’re going to.’ Joseph, my companion points as he drives into a lookout beside the road. I step out of the car and see Mt Beauty for the first time. My long green skirt flutters in the summer breeze. The vast landscape before me creates an existential fear. I imagine giant eagles coming to carry me off from my vantage point. The grass looks a yellowish green, dried by the hot summer sun. I see tiny doll’s houses dotting green hills, the grey sparkle of shoelace-thin metal roads, with toy-like matchbox cars skimming across the countryside. A little Lego town.

Joseph had given me a lift because he had come to visit his daughter, Danielle. From Danielle’s last trip to Melbourne, I had heard about Vicki Revell.

We arrive in Mt Beauty late in the afternoon, after a long journey. Like a local tourist guide, Joseph rattles off, ‘Mt Beauty is a small country town of about 2500 inhabitants. It’s situated in the shadows of Mt Hotham in the Kiewa Valley.’

I smile but my thoughts are elsewhere. I have come to interview Vicki, who came from Malaysia some twenty years ago as a new Australian bride. What did it mean for this young woman following her husband to a country where she could not dig into her own history for sustenance? What did it also mean for her to live now separated from her husband?

Coming from Melbourne, where there are tall buildings and busy shopping centres, I find it difficult to understand why Vicki would come out to this ghost town. The main street is deserted when we drive by at 4 p.m.
That night, we stay at Danielle's house. She warns me Vicki is tight-lipped when it comes to telling others her story. 'It must be a cultural thing,' she says, smiling, as she washes lettuce leaves for a salad dinner. 'I'll call her tomorrow and make an appointment for you.'

So, I will not have her story till tomorrow or the day after, if I can hear it at all.

**

Saturday morning dawns. Danielle has made arrangements for me to meet Vicki at noon. 'She has to take her daughter to ballet at eleven and right now, she is standing around in her pyjamas,' laughs Danielle. I smile but my hands shake nervously as I pack my tape-recorder in my bag, along with the questions I have prepared.

Joseph decides we should all go for breakfast in the little township. After breakfast in a fresh bread bakery, we take a stroll through the small weekend market. I notice everyone seems to know everyone in Mt Beauty. Danielle and her two daughters, Carmen and Ronnie, are continually greeted by people as we walk along the main street. A lady sells Carmen a blue bead bracelet from the handicraft section of the market.

'Where's your little sister?' she asks, as Carmen marvels at the blue crystal beads and turns it round and round, watching the sunbeams dance on it.

The hot sun rises. On our way to Vicki's house, we see a white Ford station wagon driving in the direction we have just come from.

'That's Vicki's car,' Danielle exclaims.

'Are you sure?' her father asks.
We decide to drive back to the town to look for Vicki. I wonder if this is her subtle way of saying she is not interested in doing the interview.

I noticed a Sea World sticker with two dolphins on the window of Vicki's car.

Danielle gets out and walks to the supermarket in the hope of finding the elusive Vicki. Minutes later, five-year-old Ronnie shouts to her grandfather, 'Grandpa, that's Vicki.' A slim, tall woman walks past us. Her skin is as dark as cinnamon. She is wearing a sleeveless knit blouse and a knee-length green skirt.

That can't be Vicki, I tell myself. Why, she looks younger than I do.

As though Carmen had heard my thoughts, she points at the fast-disappearing woman and nods her head vigorously, 'That's Vicki, Sharmini.' Danielle beams a smile as she reaches the car.

'She'll see us.'

**

We arrive at Vicki's house and are invited in. In her living room, gold sequined orange cushions lie on top of a blue couch.

'That's nice,' remarks Danielle. 'It's new, isn't it?'

'Yes, it's new,' Vicki grins. 'I bought it with the money I got from the tax reimbursements from working in childcare for ten years. About time I bought something for myself.'

On the mantelpiece are photographs of Vicki's four children – three daughters and son. In one of the photographs, her daughter, an olive-skinned beauty, has her arms entwined with a white boy's.
'Black bitches. That's what some of the locals used to call her daughters,' I recall Danielle saying.

And I remember my own experiences with racists.

**

'Brown skinned bitch. Brown slut,' shouts a youth at the bus stop in Melbourne. His breath assaults my nostrils with the smell of alcohol. The sun is disappearing over the horizon and brings out a lovely hue to my brown skin. I know he is addressing me. The rest of the people standing at the bus stop are white. I had never thought of myself as brown - a certain colour. What wrong had I done to be called such names?

At the Clayton railway station, an old man assumes I will be easy prey for providing him with sexual pleasure, simply because I am Asian. He asks if he can be my boyfriend. To be the father of my children. Then he touches my red sweater. I cringe. On the train, he sits opposite me. He tries to part my legs with his knees. I leave my seat. He gets off at the next stop.

As I cross a busy road, a young man in a green car lowers his window and shouts 'Get out of my Australia.'

**

I wonder how much more difficult it must be for Vicki and her daughters to tolerate being called such names on a daily basis, especially in such a small town where gossip is rampant.

Had she broken down as I had and wondered why she had come here? Or had she taught her daughters to be brave?

**

Vicki ushers us into the kitchen.
‘Would you mind excusing me for a little while?’ she says. ‘I forgot to buy the Tattslotto earlier … and you never know, I just might get lucky.’ She runs out of the door in her black track-shoes. I notice she has a white sock on one foot and nothing on the other.

A gambler. Had she taken a gamble with her life by coming to Australia? I would find out soon enough.

**

Seated at her hexagonal-shaped kitchen table, I take a sip from the bottle of cold mineral water to ease my parched throat. Through the kitchen window, I see sunlight dapple through the trees in the garden. There is birdsong. My friends have left us alone for the interview. I notice on her inner lower arm, tattooed in black, is a swasti with the words A.S. and M.V.

‘What happened there?’ I ask.

‘When I was thirteen, I was bored during class, so I just tattooed it using Chinese black ink. I didn’t know it wouldn’t come off. It’s a flower,’ she explains smiling. Well, it looks like a swasti, I think. Does Vicki know that in Indian mythology the swasti is a symbol of the sun, fire and lightning?

I trace my finger on the outline and a strange feeling overcomes me – it is as if I have received a boost of energy.

Outside it is hot and sultry. Inside Vicki’s kitchen, it is cooler. I take another sip of water and ask her what the letters stand for.

‘They’re my parents’ initials.’

‘Weren’t your parents upset when you showed it to them? I know mine would be.’
‘My mother said my father would be with me for the rest of my life.’

But things did not turn out the way Vicki’s mother had prophesied. Twelve years later, Vicki left the place of her birth, Kampong Setapak Pasir in Kuala Lumpur, for Australia. ‘Even though we lived in a big city, there were little villages called kampons everywhere. When translated from Malay, Kampong Setapak Pasir means Sand Village,’ she explains.

‘The Chinese, Malays and Indians lived together harmoniously. Chinese women used our sarees. I still have the Malaysian costume, the sarong kebaya, and the Chinese cheong sam. Living in a village environment, the doors of the houses would always be open and children would run in and out. There was interaction amongst everyone. You couldn’t stop people from coming to your house. During the festive seasons of Christmas, Chinese New Year, Hari Raya and Deepavali, the houses would always be open and anybody could visit. It is so different from here,’ she says, her eyes filled with nostalgia.

She remembers: the tropical heat enveloping her in the days of her childhood; the walks on dust-laden roads to pasar-malams where vendors sold sarongs, artificial jewellery and food; cockroaches escaping the swift broom as they ran across the wooden floors of the kampong houses; weekend escapes to grey sand-covered beaches to wallow in the aquamarine depths of the sea; the taste of the sweet, yellow flesh of the pungent smelling durian fruits encased in pliant green shells.

**

‘Why did you come here, then?’ I ask her.
‘Australia has always fascinated me. I knew about it from Geography and History lessons. I met my husband, Robert, through a pen-pal club. We exchanged letters. He visited Malaysia to meet me. Then he came back again and we got married,’ she states simply, as though there was nothing else to it. The equivalent of an Internet romance in a bygone era.

‘But surely, your marriage must have been frowned upon,’ I ask her, inquisitive for more details.

‘Yes, it was frowned upon, though we lived in a multi-cultural society,’ she says refusing to divulge more.

I can understand the prejudices Vicki must have faced both from her family and society.

When I was about seven, I mentioned to the maid that I would like to marry a white man. I had seen them for the first time on our colour television and the colour and texture of white people’s skin had fascinated me.

She had replied, without even thinking, ‘Well, you’ll have a kopi-susu child and your parents will love you and your child less than they love your brother and sister.’

That response taught me more about the way bigotry and prejudice is maintained and about the way culture is instilled, than it did about assessing marriageable men.

A choice between the people who had brought you into this world and a man who promised you a future in a foreign land. A young woman of twenty-five in a tug-of-war between two worlds. Loyalty or rebellion? Conformity or freedom?

She continues, ‘But these days, people have grown to accept interracial marriages. My brother has married a Filipino.’
‘It was difficult for me to come to Australia,’ Vicki recalls. Though she was married to an Australian man, there were legal hurdles to cross before she could get her citizenship. She laughs now, remembering, ‘I had to go to the Australian embassy many times. I was almost living there. They made it difficult at first but in the end, it worked out.’

Coming from a multicultural society in Malaysia to Mt Beauty was a shock to Vicki’s system. It was mostly unsettled back then, what might be called a frontier town.

‘Twenty years ago, when I arrived, this was like a ghost town. It had a population of around 1200. There were very few houses. There was no Settler’s Tavern. There was no pizza parlour. There was no Tawonga store. There was only a very old store. There was nothing here,’ Vicki exclaims as she lists the differences between the Mt Beauty of the past and the present.

Bob went to work at the timber mills as a machinist. ‘I just stayed at home and cleaned the house a lot,’ Vicki says. She laughs as I laugh too.

In her kitchen, I notice there are no cups or dishes left in the sink to be washed. Everything seems to have its place, like my own mother’s kitchen. The spices are neatly arranged in little glass bottles on the spice rack above the oven. The kitchen walls and the cabinets are painted a light blue. Facing her, on the wall, is a cross-stitch of two geese with the words ‘Friends are the gifts heaven sends.’

And I think of my friend Joseph to whom I shall always be grateful for bringing me here.

**

Vicki caresses the handle of the porcelain cup and continues, ‘I worked in Malaysia as an electronics instructor. A year after I came here, I had my first daughter and two years later, I had Regina,’ she says, smiling proudly as she thinks of her children.
I went to playgroup one day and I was asked if I wanted to be part of the playgroup committee. I agreed and was elected to be treasurer of the committee. Also, at this time, they were looking for family day care givers.

Vicki volunteered her services because it was convenient as she had two little children of her own. While taking care of the children, this quietly ambitious woman did a course in childcare.

After ten years of being in childcare, when her children were growing up, Vicki decided she needed to do something else.

'I love children and I love people and I wanted to do something similar. My father-in-law was elderly and he loved his home carer. And the frail and the aged are a bit like children as they head for their second childhood,' she states, smiling.

She then studied Aged, Home and Community Care at TAFE. At the same time, she put her name down at the local shire. 'I received a phone call to go for an interview. They looked at my background and I was offered a job.'

When I ask her about the duties involved, Vicki says, 'I've patients with dementia. I'm also working with a child who is autistic. Some of the elderly need geriatric care. So I shower them and give them their meals. Sometimes, I put them to bed.

'I love what I am doing. It's very challenging. I feel like I'm doing something for society. I'm hoping someday somebody nice will look after me.' She is clearly a believer in the Hindu principles of karma.

Vicki finds there are many cultural differences between looking after the aged in Australia and Malaysia. 'Take my father, for example. My dad was well looked after at home. His children, their wives and husbands and his grandchildren surrounded him.'
He was never left alone, whereas here, people are just forsaken,' she says shaking her head as the two braids in her long black hair swirl.

She believes one of the reasons is that Australia is such a vast country. She says ‘The children grow up. They have to go away to look for work. There is no other choice. Malaysia, on the other hand, is a small place and they all remain together. It is very different.'

**

On her neck are two gold chains. One has a locket with her name inscribed on it. The other chain, which is slightly longer, is tucked inside her blouse. She laughs at my next question: ‘Are you involved in the Indian community in Australia?’ and replies, ‘There’s no Indian community here in Mt Beauty. I’m it.’

Vicki has integrated so well into the society of Mt Beauty that when her father died in early 2000, the entire township chipped in funds for her airfare to go back to Malaysia to say her final goodbyes. She explains, ‘It started with my children’s initiative. They were going to give me their savings from baby-sitting, and somehow the word got out. And the people thought if the children are going to give their savings, they would do something about it as well. I was overwhelmed.’

This caring woman misses her siblings and mother. She says sadly, ‘It hurts me at times. I do miss them, and the closeness we share. Especially during Christmas and other festive occasions and birthdays.’ She gazes at me with large black lustrous eyes ‘But then when I look at my children, I realise that’s why I did it. And I’m happy.’

The emphasis on family and nurturing her children is one of the aspects of the Indian culture, she will always hold on to. ‘But my eldest daughter is eighteen. In Malaysia,
she would not be allowed to have a boyfriend and go out on dates. She has a boyfriend here. I’ve to bend. I can’t say, “You can’t go out. You can’t do this.”’

It would be mayhem, I suppose, if she tried to lock her daughters up.

She explains, ‘The culture is different. I’ve to adapt to the Australian way of living. Indian culture is very harsh and I would never want to expose my children to the way I was brought up.’

She talks openly about her separation from her husband. How does one paint an unshed tear, the pain and the sorrow? I wonder if pictures of them together rise into her mind, from the locked place in her heart.

‘I feel I’ve done my best to make my marriage work.’

Coming from an Indian background, where the wife bears the blame for all problems, she tried to keep the marriage alive for a long time, but ‘It got to the point where it was not good for me or for the kids. Even though we had four children together, he did not trust me to go out alone at times. I couldn’t even wear what I wanted. When there is no trust, the relationship suffers.’

She says slowly, ‘Bob has a problem with alcohol. And he doesn’t think there’s anything wrong with it. He’s a good person and a father really, but alcohol spoils everything, doesn’t it?’

I nod my head in answer and ask her, ‘So if Bob went to Alcoholics Anonymous and straightened his life out, would you be able to put your lives back together again?’

She looks at me, an honest gaze, and says regretfully, ‘If he does that, yes. But I don’t think he will. We have been apart for eight months and he hasn’t done anything.’

I remember a poem, Lost Name Woman, that I had read before:
Are you looking for the rich ghost
who will buy you a ticket to the west? ...

You speak English like the radio,
But will it let you forget your father?

Was this true of Vicki’s situation as well? I think not.

**

I hear Ronnie cry in the garden, ‘When do we go home?’

Listening to Vicki talk has made me lose all track of time. I gaze at my watch. I have been here for two hours. I thank her for the interview while she signs the interview consent form. As she passes me the paper, she says, ‘You will come back here again, won’t you.’ Not as a question … but as a statement of fact.

I hug Vicki, hoping her wishes for me, like my wishes for her, will come true.
Journey's End

In 1994, I left Singapore and came to Australia to study. The day I left Singapore, I never knew I would not go back there to live. I was only leaving a place I had been born to.

Sometimes we have to leave a place to realise the impact it had on us. Though I have come to acknowledge Australia as home, I shall always remember the things I loved and was nourished by – my family, the small white jasmine flowers my grandmother planted in the garden and the altar where my mother burns joss-sticks daily, praying for the safety of all my family members. Sometimes we have to leave a place to realise what sort of impression it has on us.

I have lived part of my adult life removed from my country of birth. Like all of the women I have talked to, my life too has been marked by the experience of migration. I possess the vague certainty that I could have been a different person were it not for the particular circumstances that migration brought into my life. I do not know and will never know the person I could have been had I not left Singapore. The only me I know is the one that incorporates the consequences of migration.

I know whatever I have succeeded in creating has been developed at the expense of some significant losses. Of these losses I am only vaguely aware. Far more clear are the undeniable opportunities, achievements, successes and fulfilments brought about by migration.

**
I gaze now at the tapes, all neatly labelled on my shelf, and tell myself I have at last come to the end of this journey.

I have listened to the voices of these Indian migrant women countless times. The listening was essential for an accurate rendition of the interview. But it was also important for me to remember the women’s voices; they were, after all, the people I was writing about.

Malika, a Sindhi woman poet, says it so well:

\[ I \textit{am not} \]

\[ \textit{A song on life's tape recorder} \]

\[ \textit{Which you can} \]

\[ \textit{Rewind again and again} \]

\[ \textit{And erase from your heart.} \]

I listen to the voices. Some of them are buried in the silence. I can almost hear the words those voices were saying; words of love and anger, ecstasy and pain. Some are filled with a suppressed rage.

In most of the tapes, I can hear my voice guffawing with laughter, sometimes making incomprehensible noises; most of the times, though, I am totally silent. In finding my own silence, I am finding my own power of transformation. And I have come to realise how silence could speak and be silent – how silence can be filled with noise and also be still.

**

Having rummaged through the baggage of these Indian women who have migrated to Australia, I have discovered these women can never be wholly Indian, but they can never be wholly Australian either. There will always be this lingering attachment to
distant legends, religions and a culture which will always be in their blood, no matter where they live. They are both Indian and Australian – and the richer for it.

At the end of this journey, I am not sure what it means to become Australian. Not in any definite terms. There have been moments when I have felt completely ‘Aussie’, completely at ease with my patchwork identity. Yet again, there have been moments when I haven’t known how or what to feel.

Nor am I certain, if Australia is indeed the paradise some of these women claim it to be.

All I know is that Australia is home. I might have to take another journey to find out otherwise.
Women are, in fact, caught in a very real contradiction. Throughout the course of history, they have been mute, and it is doubtless by virtue of this mutism that men have been able to speak and write. As long as women remain silent, they will be outside the historical process. But, if they begin to speak and write as men do, they will enter history subdued and alienated; it is a history that, logically speaking, their speech should disrupt.

(Gauthier, 1981, p.32)
Women's Migration

The United Nations estimates at least half of the people who migrate internationally for economic reasons are women. It declared in a 1994 document: 'Women's migration, both internally within developing countries and internationally across borders ... to developed countries, is inextricably linked to the status of women in society (U.N. – INSTRAW, 1994, p.1)

This statement is accompanied by questions yet unanswered:

But what do we know about women's migration? ... For example, does migration lead to improvements in the status of women, breaking down patriarchal structures and enhancing women's autonomy or does it ... perpetuate dependency? (U.N. –INSTRAW, 1994, p.1)

These are facts and projections; why would they be concerns? Why would one want to contemplate the plethora of facts and statistics regarding the number of women migrants, especially when women's experience of migration is an often-overlooked aspect of migration studies?

Male chroniclers of cultural history have often devalued the voices of women. Even when male researchers have acknowledged their female informants, the women are eclipsed by the voice of male authority and social dominance. Edwin Ardener (1971), an anthropologist, was the first to disclose the considerations that prevented scholars from writing about women. He points out if one exchanged anecdotes about women in some situations, especially at parties, writing about them would cause one to be laughed at. Even women anthropologists who considered writing about other women
did so after producing their masterpieces. This is no longer the case these days, of course.

**

In preparing this thesis, I conducted a research project that involved asking women to talk about their migration experiences, attitudes, values and beliefs. The women I interviewed ranged from their thirties to their fifties in age, and a number of them had migrated to Australia almost ten years ago. For many of them, the experience of being asked to remember specific moments was both painful and exciting. Recalling the past for these women was not easy but involved revisiting, and perhaps defending, the reasons they had chosen to migrate. I asked them about their family backgrounds, life in their homeland, factors that triggered their emigration, preparations for departure, the journey to Australia, arrival and reception in Australia, work experiences, family life, identity, racism and the assimilation process. The interviews gave me an opportunity to document these women's experiences and show my appreciation for their struggles to survive in what Australians call a multi-cultural society.

**

The first chapter of the exegesis, 'Women and Voices', takes a brief look at patriarchy and the silence it has imposed on women. It also summarises the role of Indian women in the story-telling process. Whether Indian feminism exists is also looked at in this chapter.

The next chapter, 'Life Stories', looks at the psychological theory behind these stories. This part of the exegesis also illustrates the use of life narrative as a valuable life research method, while also taking a look at how telling their life stories for these women makes them feel empowered.
The third chapter is about interview theory and the use of feminist methodology in the interviews.

The last chapter takes a look at the links between biography and autobiography and discusses some recent feminist works that encompass both these genres. It also raises the question of 'Who is the ideal biographer?'

**

*The past is myself, my own history, the seed of my present thoughts, the mould of my present disposition.*

The words are Robert Louis Stevenson's. Yet in some ways they describe beautifully the outlooks of the Indian migrant women I have talked to for my dissertation. These women remember a past that was 'another country' in more ways than one. They have experienced both Australia and their homelands and they tell outsiders, like me, what it was like from within. They look back on another world, their homeland, which has disappeared into their memories.

They are shaped by pasts different from the people they have come to live among. They are all different. Their backgrounds have influenced their thoughts and guided their actions, even as events in Australia, in turn would alter and form them also. These effects would live on in them, 'the seed of present thoughts.'
Women and Voices

There is a silence that cannot speak.

There is a silence that will not speak. ... The speech that frees comes forth from the amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say is to embrace its absence. (Kogawa, 1994, p.2)

So writes Joy Kogawa in Oyasan. I read this excerpt many times, understanding this struggle and desire to speak and be heard, not only as a struggle of Japanese women, but also of every Indian woman. After all, was not ‘the experience of being embodied as silent, unable to speak – an experience fundamental to growing up female?’ (Davies, 1997, p.237)

**

When Tillie Olsen, a black American writer, wrote, ‘We who write are survivors, “onlys”’, (Olsen, 1978, p.39) she meant among other things that the woman who writes has found a voice; she has spoken. When I first read her essay, ‘Silences in Literature’, in my early twenties, I had not yet found my voice. Even though I wrote, I could not write about my own life, the life of a woman who was silent. I kept my silence by writing what I thought was acceptable in a world in which men are dominant and domineering. In my case, the silence goes deeper: as well as being a member of the mute sex, I am also mute. The words uttered by the women I interviewed – although not directly – could be my words. Like a medium at a séance, I feel their messages, no matter how small, channeled through my pen, my silence.

Although to speak, write and act out of one’s own experience is regarded as a revolutionary idea, it is not new. Whenever a woman opens her lips to speak from her own experience, something new is revealed. It is something that has been regarded as
taboo. For in most cultures, female experience has been silenced and it is therefore unknown.

The Indian culture in which I was brought up has also served to silence women. It excludes women's speech from awareness. Indian women 'often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions.' (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 11) These women are often overlooked and repressed. Traditionally and even to a large extent, now, their roles in society have been defined by motherhood. All possibilities of taking an active part in the community at any other level – cultural, social or political – have been denied to them. Indian traditions and culture bind them. The Indian woman's life has been one of self-sacrifice, subservience and deference to the male. An example of this can be seen in Indian mythology:

[The god] Rama's wife, Sita, exemplifies the behaviour of the proper Hindu wife. [She] devotedly follows her husband into forest exile for twelve years ... proving her wifely virtue by placing herself on a lighted pyre ... Throughout North India, the women yearly worship Savitri, a goddess whose renown emanates from her extreme devotion to her husband, through which she saves him from the god of death. The story of Savitri is held up as a prime example of the lengths to which a wife should go in aiding her husband. The good wife saves her husband from death, follows him anywhere, proves her virtue, remains under his control and gives him her power. (Wadley, 1986, pp. 122-3)

Anita Desai, an Indo-Anglican writer, has argued the deification of Indian women in Hindu religions and mythology indirectly propagates incarceration of the women. She says in an interview:
Around [the ideal woman] exists a huge body of mythology. She is called by several names – Sita, Draupadi, Parvati, Lakshmi and so on. In each myth, she plays the role of the loyal wife, unswerving in her devotion to her lord. She is meek, docile, trusting, faithful and forgiving. (Desai, 1990, p.14)

Desai also points out that myths are ‘the cornerstone on which the Indian family and therefore Indian society are built. … [they keep the women] bemused, bound hand and foot.’ (Desai, 1990, p.14)

Indian women are often depicted as being silent, a picture Desai conveys in her novel, In Custody.

Sarla never lifted her voice in [her husband’s] presence – countless generations of Hindu womanhood behind her stood in her way, preventing her from displaying open rebellion. Deven knew she would … go into the bedroom and snivel, refusing to speak at all, inciting their child to wail in sympathy. (Desai, 1984, pp 145-6)

Yet these very women are firmly empowered in oral traditions. They have traditionally been storytellers. They have a special purpose as the bearers of important elements of the culture – ‘the chief upholders of and contributors to a powerful oral tradition which embraces myths, legends, fables, folklore and songs stretching back millenia.’ (Jaggi, 1993, p.220)

Women’s voices resonate in song. Lullabies, defined as a female genre, are usually the first songs an Indian baby hears. A mother usually points to the moon and asks the baby to look at it and then proceeds to feed the child, singing as she does so.
Women's voices are also essential to the transmission of knowledge. As Trinh Minh-Ha, a feminist critic, says:

The world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women, patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. The speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted and touched. ... Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission. In Africa, it is said that every griotte who dies is a whole library that burns down. (Minh-Ha, 1989, pp.121-2)

It is thus important that women articulate these memories and pass them on to subsequent generations as bearers of traditions. They have to create an atmosphere in which the children are less likely to reject the culture of their parents.

Most of the women I spoke to were worried their children could not speak in their mother-tongues and would also reject the Indian culture in time to come.

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Who are they? Who are Indian migrant women to Australia?

Political or research attention levelled at immigration communities has rarely focused on Indian women. As Karobi Mukherjee says, 'Not much is known about these women [and] their experiences while establishing themselves in the Australian environment.' (Mukherjee, 1992, p.51)

This is because Indian women are a very complex group to study, based upon their cultural definitions and strong beliefs regarding male and female roles within their communities. They are a very close knit group who project a strong sense of conformity and security. Their cultural identity is strengthened and considered as important to the well-being of the community, culture and individuals. Outsiders who do not identify
with the group are viewed with suspicion and seen as a threat. This is because the women’s stories are private and personal and, according to their cultural traditions should normally remain in their family and not be publicised in the wider community, especially not in an adopted country. ... Matters related to their family and their kin which have been expressed in their life stories may become available to the public and ... be a source of ‘gossip’ which may threaten their family status and respectability. (Mukherjee, 1992, p.55)

Furthermore, fear of the consequences of ‘speaking out’ has ‘always been in the back of the minds of these women living in Australia.’ (Mukherjee, 1992, p.55) The White Australia Policy has fuelled this fear, together with ‘restricted immigration policies, the “Asian out” debate both in public and in media [and] adverse treatment of Indians all over the world ’ (Mukherjee, 1992, p.55)

When strangers find out I am writing Indian women’s profiles, their first question is nearly always ‘Where do you get the material?’ or ‘How do you do your research?’ They suspect, rightly, that material and information are not as readily available about women as about men. Furthermore, their tongues start wagging in a way my interviewees’ did not. They already have a preconceived notion of how silent Indian women are.

The general populace still tends to perceive us in stereotypes: docile, subservient, passive, politically unaware, asexual and bound by traditions. Parmatma Saran, an Indian immigrant scholar, reinforces this mainstream viewpoint about Indian womanhood. He says:
Generally Indian women are less assertive than their [Australian] counterparts and the majority feel relations cannot be changed by being too assertive. They recognise that being too assertive and demanding is not the right approach to correct things. (Saran, 1985, p.97)

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Does Indian feminism really exist, or is merely a myth?

Feminism, as appropriated and defined by the West, has too often become a tool of cultural imperialism. The definitions, the terminology, the assumptions, even the issues, the forms of struggles and institutions are exported from west to east. (Kishwar, 1990, p.61)

The politics of East and West make up the background to philosophising about, for and by Indian women. There is also a strong awareness an Indian woman cannot be the same as a Western woman.

Gayatri Spivak, an Indian-born feminist theorist, explains the silencing and speaking of the subservient woman in an Indian context. She blends Marxism, feminism and deconstruction in a dialogue that shows Indian women to be restrained by colonialism and patriarchy, both of which silence them. Spivak’s work, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, questions the Indian women’s silenced position.

Spivak uses the example of a queen’s situation on the death of her husband to show the silence and absence and thus the disempowerment that woman suffers. The queen was caught in a situation between imperialism and patriarchy. If she chose suttee, to burn as a widow, she was seen as adhering to patriarchal discourse, but if she rejected it, she was conforming to the discourse of the English rulers who condemned the practice. There is no space for her, nothing she could be or speak.
Substantiating this view Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, a professor of English and Women’s Studies at the University of California, writes:

Colonial and post-colonial women have suffered a double colonisation, alienated from the free exercise of their power by a foreign race and also by a native patriarchal society. Whether the society is Confucian, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jain, Parsi, Buddhist, the female is always already a colonised subject. (Lim, 1994, p.14) [italics mine]

Susheila Nasta also notes in her introduction to Motherlands:

In countries with a history of colonialism, women’s quest for emancipation, self identity and fulfillment can be seen to represent a traitorous act, a betrayal not simply of traditional codes of practice and belief, but of the wider struggle for liberation and nationalism. Does to be ‘feminist’ therefore involve a further displacement onto another form of cultural imperialism? (Nasta, 1991, p.xv)

One cannot deny that a lot has been done to help the status of Indian women. Access to women’s education has improved. Most of the women I interviewed are degree-holders. Autonomous women’s organisations have also sprung up and grown. Yet, although there has been an increasing awareness of the independence and self-identity of Indian women, it has not completely eradicated the familial roles through which women are identified.


Under patriarchy women have found it far from easy to perform themselves. To do so has often been difficult to the point of horror. A woman might rather be a
mad woman in an attic or dead on the floor, than to be a real person in public, so strong [is] the determination of men to keep her from the ability to perform her will. Women are learning slowly and painfully to display their own truth in public, through a process of trying by increments to enact themselves. (Driver 1997, p. 117)

But given Indian society’s patriarchal structures, any shaping of its traditions can rarely be seen to allow for the development of a woman’s philosophy. Myths form a large part of this baggage we bring to our self-image. How we see ourselves collectively or individually depends greatly on myths. They are part of the human psyche, part of our cultural histories.

The ideals of the epic world obviously do not have much to share with women, nor do the women enjoy the heroic values. There is little they can do there - other then get abducted or rescued, or pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or other.

Even if a feminist version of these traditions were possible, the difference in the models of traditions can create an uncertainty about obtaining a feminist philosophy.

Ethnic influences, such as those from women who migrated to Australia from Singapore, Fiji, and Malaysia, may creep into what ordinarily be recognised as Indian feminism because they come bearing a new cultural tradition.

Thus Indian feminism, as I see it, is only in its beginning stages. It has begun to look deep inside many aspects of the Indian woman, personal as well as social. It will ultimately be successful, however, if only because women’s studies are necessary in orienting and reorienting the changes in Indian society.
Acquaintances used to ask, 'When you first came to Australia, what was the most difficult thing for you to adjust to?' There was something my friends wanted to know and expected to hear. The stories they were waiting for — of a brave and disabled immigrant woman trying to understand an unfamiliar language, missing the customs and the foods of her homeland; overcoming one culture shock after another — had nothing to do with me. I hated being expected to tell such stories because I had none to tell.

People who are not immigrants interpret the migration process from the naïve presumption that migration is simply a geographical relocation, followed by a short period of acculturation, a move generally undertaken with the aim of improving one's economic status. Tales about immigrant ancestors always seem to have happy conclusions. If any reference to difficulties is included, the impact of the hardship is minimised. After all, the point of the stories is to tell us that the hardships would finally result in happiness.

**

As psychologist George Rosenwald observes, 'When people tell life stories, they do so in accordance with models of intelligibility specific to the culture. ... Accounts bind individuals to the arrangements of the society enforcing the models.' (Rosenwald, 1992, p.265)

In short, stories and lives develop through compromise between the individual's desires and stabilising societal influences. As Ocheberg, another psychologist reasons, 'the tales we tell each other [and ourselves] about who we are and might yet become are
individual variations on the narrative templates our culture deems intelligible."

(Ochberg, 1992, p 214)

Scholars of life narrative point to this interplay. The culture speaks through the individual narrator and provides that individual with the support they need to live, develop and feel ‘normal.’

What then happens when the cultural narrative changes abruptly, as it does through migration? How is one’s individual life, sense of self, and life story altered? Although ‘the story about life is open to editing and revision’ (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.154) some life-altering events may require more intensive revisions of the ‘plot’ than others. Sometimes major life changes demand the rewriting of one’s story. Events that happen out in the world are not only social, but psychological as well.

Migration is such an event. Migration has been known to completely alter individual lives for days, weeks and even years. For others, it changes their life course. These events change the cultural plots of the expectable and the ensuing social context. Sometimes this occurs because the culture itself is transformed. In other instances, the individual finds herself in a new cultural context that allows for telling a different kind of tale.

The previous chapter has shown how culturally ingrained silence is to an Indian woman, especially when it comes to talking about themselves and their experiences. But some of these women straddle two cultures -- the white culture where women tend to talk about everything, and the Indian culture of silence. When an Indian woman can begin to talk about living with a married man or her reasons for not wanting to have children, especially in Indian culture where a good woman is one who gives birth to children, it shows how much she has assimilated into Australian culture. But the
reluctance and uneasiness to talk about such matters can be put down to the Indiananness within her. Some of my interviewees had experienced self-discovery through the more liberal and liberating circumstances of a multi-cultural society. It is my impression that those who did not experience a freer life style were still clinging to their old cultures.

As Carol Boyce Davies, a Black writer, says the female migratory subject’s enterprise is one in which ‘at each arrival … we begin a new analysis, a new departure, a new interrogation of meaning, new contradictions.’ (Davies, 1994, p.5)

**

One of the objections raised against the use of life narratives in research is that the researcher needs to be wary of the trustworthiness of interviewees. Yet it is equally important in studies with sensitive topics – regardless of the particular research methods used – to be aware that the information is being developed in a context of intersubjectivity.

The women I interviewed were all volunteers. They had no reason compelling them to participate. I am confident the bulk of the life narratives contain honest information. Yet, as with all narrative, one needs to keep in mind that ‘whatever else a story is, it is not simply the lived life. It speaks all around the life … [and] suggests links between a life and a culture.’ (Plummer, 1995, pp.168-9)

This brings us again to the social construction of the story telling process that was talked about in the previous chapter.

The women I interviewed are not representative of any universe or population of immigrant women. Nor do they represent a true cross-section of the different groups, countries and languages found among Indian women in Australia. Theirs are the stories of eleven women’s unique life paths.
The objection could be raised these women are not ‘typical’ migrants because they are all educated and quite fluent in English. Yet it is a misconception that the typical immigrant is poor, uneducated and unable to communicate in the language of the host culture. In any case, there is no typical immigrant because there are multiple differences among immigrants, as my dissertation clearly shows.

Researchers and researched mutually influence each other, and this invariably affects the quality of the data gathered. Feminist scholarship has challenged traditional research methodology and its myth of objectivity. Feminist researchers have emphasised ‘the very fact that a researcher poses a particular question can have major social implications even if the research is never performed.’ (Renzetti & Lee, 1993, p.27)

When the researcher’s experiences share characteristics with those of the researched – as in this dissertation – trust may be increased. This may mean truth is more easily forthcoming. By the same token, similarities of experience may create a sense of competition in the research participants. They may try to measure up to the imagined expectations of a researcher who has shared some of their own experiences

Conversely, the interview process may be impaired by the interviewees’ belief that they need to protect themselves from outsiders. This may be especially true in the case of women immigrants, who by definition are in a less powerful position than many others in society.

In narrative studies, the researcher cannot forget that ‘story telling flows in a stream of power ... The power to tell a story, or indeed to not tell a story, under the conditions of one’s own choosing [is part of this process].’ (Plummer, 1995, p.26)
Most of the women I interviewed found the process interesting, because of the chance it gave them to give voice to their experiences of being an Indian woman in Australia. Nobody had ever heard what they wanted to say and they were thrilled that somebody actually was inclined to ask them about their experiences and wanted to give voice to their concerns. Many interviewees found indirect support through knowing that there were other women in the study who shared similar experiences to themselves. To this extent, the research could be seen to provide a voice to a group of women who would otherwise remain silent.

**

Life narrative research focuses on the personal rather than the collective. The development of knowledge in narrative research is not ‘accomplished by setting aside subjective factors, but by focusing on them intensively. [Interviewees] are not considered interchangeable. Because each contributes [her] own distinctive appreciation of the totality, [her] viewpoint is indispensable.’ (Rosenwald, 1988 p.256)

The women I have interviewed experience themselves both as active subjects who make a difference in their social worlds and as subjects in a different sense, experiencing gender and ethnic or racial inequalities. Women’s subjectivity is complex, not only because of its multiplicity, but also because my interviews show women experiencing similar circumstances themselves, simultaneously as subject and subjected, as experience is often confusing and sometimes painful. It is not always easy for a woman to determine the boundary between her active subjectivity and subjection.

How then do we understand the commitment to treating women as subjects of their experiences? In my view, it requires an emphasis on women as narrators of their experiences, thus bringing back their role as story-tellers. To me, this preserves the
feminist interest in empowerment. As a narrator, a woman has the power to speak as she chooses: she controls the telling of her experiences. The telling of their life stories does not only help the teller. It is also of benefit to other members of their community. These personal narratives also provide the threads to reweave one’s own life after migration. Retelling one’s life story, including the story of migration, has been shown to have a healing effect.

Is this power of speech possible for all Indian women? I think not. The forces of the oppressions of culture, race, gender, class and their status in society will render many Indian women powerless to speak. For those who do, the journey can be one fraught with pain and tears.
Interviewing

"Where are you from?" asks the tram-driver. "Are you from India?"

I shake my head.

"Sri Lanka, then?"

I shake my head yet again, this time slightly more vehemently, hoping he will get the message and leave me alone.

"Where are you from?" he asks again.

The strange anger I feel each time someone asks that question, I know, is an inappropriate one. I have lived in Melbourne for eight years; that's about a quarter of my life. I can hardly think of another place as home. And yet when someone asks me such a question, it makes me feel as though I am still considered a foreigner, someone who does not belong. It makes me feel defensive.

Yet it is with this very question that I open my interviews. The question is on the paper before me: "Where are you from?"

Words are necessary for the stories of these migrant women. The spoken words of their voices forming a counterpoint to my silent one. I wish I could talk to them, talk with them; interview them by asking them verbal questions, cajole them into responding to my questions but I cannot. I am a mute. As I write these words down, a roar erupts in my throat, threatening to defy the words. Instead, a tear makes its way down my cheek. There is silence.

Before I became an interviewer, I had read what some text-books said interviewing ought to be. However, I found it very difficult to put most of the theory
discussed to any use because of my own special circumstances. There is no book that
touches on the notion of being a mute interviewer.

**

Interviewing is ‘merely one of the many ways in which two people talk to one another.’
(Benny and Hughes, 1970, p.191) but it is also, more importantly, an instrument to gain
information. An interview is also a way of finding out about people; a way of
discovering what makes them tick.

Thus, I approached my subjects with certain expectations about what I could
find. I was hoping to find strong, intelligent and chatty women whose struggles in
migrating to Australia were worthy of feminist celebration. I wanted to unearth ordinary
heroines from extraordinary circumstances. I also expected to discover these women’s
limits were restricted by patriarchal standards.

I quickly found out the women I talked to were not heroines and they were not
very talkative either. Where had the gossipy women of Bollywood disappeared? Were
they only meant for the celluloid world? Were they not real?

My interviews were like opening clams: some were hard to open and had very
little meat inside; while others opened easily and were lush with meat that left me
wanting to hear more and more.

**

In carrying out my research, I had been guided by my understanding of feminist
methodologies. Most writers on feminist methodological issues agree there is no one
method that can be termed the feminist methodology; there are many different feminist
methodologies.

Feminist research methodology has some rules that are regarded as important at
all stages of the research. First, women’s lives must be approached on their own terms.
Secondly, feminist research should not just be on women but for women. That is, it should give women explanations of their lives that can be used to better their circumstances.

Thirdly, a feminist methodology involves putting the researcher into the process of production. The researchers can make explicit the reasoning procedures they used in carrying out the research and be open about their own perceptions and prejudices they bring to the research.

Feminist perspectives have offered radical, often revolutionary frameworks for explaining and understanding women's lives, but, like any perspective, these alone cannot necessarily provide all the answers.

Within feminist methodologies, the debate between quantitative and qualitative methods includes the claim that quantitative research techniques, because they involve the translation of individuals' experiences into categories predefined by researchers, may distort women's experiences and result in a silencing of women's own voices. Advocates of qualitative methods reason individual women's understandings, emotions and actions in the world can be explored in women's own terms. Jayaratne and Stewart (1990), however, argue that much of the debate has been sterile and based upon a false polarisation, and that the solutions offered for methodological problems have frequently been too general. Many feminist writers have used qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews or ethnography in pursuing feminist research.

**

My position as an Indian woman has influenced my research and has allowed me to explore the many complications in woman-to-woman interviewing. The feminist approach to interviewing is illustrated in Ann Oakley's work. Oakley argues that the interviewer-respondent relationship is crucial for any interview. She states:
... the goal of finding about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationship of the interviewer and the interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship. (Oakley, 1981, p.41)

This view is also supported by Finch (1984) who says women are more used to accepting intrusions into the more private parts of their lives than men.

I thought those who agreed to be interviewed would be more likely to tell their stories in the security of their own homes, and where possible chose that option. Most of the women preferred to be interviewed in their homes or offices. The positive outcome of this was that they were relaxed in a familiar environment and appeared to be in a better mood to talk about their experiences. On the other hands, many distractions were present in the office setting. For example, urgent telephone calls and movements of the staff outside the room would bring the interviewee back to her work. If the interview was held in the residence, the environment was much more conducive. But having the husband or the children present could disrupt the interview.

It was intended the interviews would be conducted in private, but sometimes the husbands were present, and answered the questions for their wives. The sole reason for interviewing the women alone was to get an account of their lives; not their husbands’ versions of how their lives should be.

Some women had to stop the interviews to cook their husbands a meal. There were also frequent interruptions from children. Also, it was hard to slot interviews between the cracks of taking children to school, laundry and other domestic chores. The difficulty of trying to get ‘time of one’s own’ is a problem indicative of women in most cultures.
A feminist sociology can open up standard topics from the descriptive, building more from what we share with respondents as women do:

...women interviewing women bring to their interaction a tradition of 'woman talk', they help each other develop ideas and are typically better prepared than men to use the interview as a 'search procedure.' (Devault, 1990, p.101)

I felt some of the women were able to open up, trust and confide in me, which allowed them to reveal very personal and intimate details of their lives, for example the reasons why they did not have children. The same information might not have been shared, if a male had carried out the research.

Gender, however, may not be enough to make up the shared meanings that are essential to comprehend the experiences of women’s lives. Each woman has different cultural experiences. The lack of shared norms about how an interview is organised and unfamiliar cultural themes in the context of the interview can create barriers to understanding:

Gender congruity is not enough to overcome ethnic incongruity, the bond between the woman interviewer and the woman interviewee is insufficient to create the shared meanings that could transcend the divisions between them. (Riessman, 1987, p.190)

Issues of race and culture insinuate themselves into the research process and into the interview situation in much the same way that it has been argued a feminist methodology should do and shared gender or sex does.
Is it possible for a white woman to carry out research within an Indian community, especially when there are barriers to understanding the culture? As Spivak defiantly claims:

The problem of speaking about people who are ‘other’ cannot, however, be a reason for not doing so. The argument that it’s just too difficult can easily become a new form of silencing by default .... But whites can never speak for Blacks. (Spivak and Gunew, 1986, p.137)

**

Bonnie Friedman quotes Charles McGrath, when he was an editor at the New Yorker:

If you want to be a writer, somewhere along the line you’re going to have to hurt somebody. And when that time comes, you go ahead and do it. If you can’t or don’t want to tell that truth, you may as well stop now and save yourself a lot of hardship and pain. (Friedman, 1993, p.53)

What sort of ethical standards are these? That my work is more important than someone else’s misery? That my writing is more significant than the feelings of my friends or a relative? And what if the suffering caused by my questions is too hard for the person written about to bear?

**

When there was sensitive information, the interviewees were only prepared to talk about it privately but not on tape. This was a nightmare to me. Since the information was given off the record, they could talk about it in a carefree manner and without reserve. These conversations were always more interesting and candid than the tape-recorded information. Sometimes, the confidential information was very important but because it
would hurt or embarrass someone, they would not allow themselves to be taped. Once an informant started the interview, a great deal of material was generated, some of a very private nature. Indeed, it was not uncommon for an interviewee to tell me she had never said some of these things before, but was telling me this now only because I had asked. Still others broke down at points in their narration, noting how they had never put this or that in words before. It was at times like this that I wondered in which role I should be there. That of a researcher or a guest or a friend?

As a woman in my early thirties, brought up to respect my elders, I found myself at times, bowing to the interviewees' understandings and value systems. The cultural norms of honouring the elderly meant my identity as adult friend and feminist researcher in the interview situation was constantly challenged. My feminist belief that good research ethics had to give back knowledge to the researched was jeopardised by my fear of contradicting or disregarding the viewpoints and convictions that had informed the women's experiences. Courtesy, and the worry that I might 'ruffle their feathers', meant I was seldom able to question their views, however delicately, even when I was annoyed by vague replies.

The circumstances in which I discovered myself, having to reject my feminist identity on entering the research setting, were heightened by the settings in which the interviews took place. I 'invaded' these women's homes and workplaces as a guest and a professional researcher, and thus was obliged to play out the functions traditionally associated with this role. Many of the women perceived me as 'a favoured guest,' serving me drinks and biscuits on their best crockery, quite obviously dressing up for the occasion and taking me into the 'best room' ... never the kitchen. I conducted only one
interview in the kitchen. In such circumstances, even had I felt it ethical to do so, I would have violated their graciousness had I questioned them further.

Thus, I can now see my responses to the women’s stories were as changing as the positions in which I placed or found myself (feminist, interviewer, guest, younger woman). At the time, I grappled to uphold one position and identity, that of a feminist researcher.

During many of the interviews, not only were comments made in addition to the direct answers to the question being posed, but there were sometimes long ‘side conversations or side chats.’ (Gollop, 1997, pp 149)

These unanticipated narratives were related to the question being asked; at other times I would be on the receiving end of a question. The women would ask about me: my research, my disability, my family and what roads had led me to Melbourne. All of that is stuff I find fairly interesting … we all like to talk about ourselves, after all but it didn’t get me any closer to my interview subjects and their stories. For that I had to work. It was worth working at, though … these women have interesting stories to tell.

The textbooks do warn of the possibility of the interviewee turning the tables and beginning to interview the researcher. They recommend various solutions to ward off such questions.

‘Never provide the interviewee with any formal indication of the interviewer’s beliefs and values. If the informant poses a question… parry it,’ suggest Sjoberg and Nett. (1968, p. 212) If the interviewer ‘should be asked for his views, he should laugh off the request with the remark that his job at the moment is to get opinions, not to have them.’ (Selltiz, 1965, p.576)
Johan Galtung offers this piece of advice 'When asked what you mean and think, tell them you are here to learn, not to pass any judgement, that the situation is very complex' (Galtung, 1967, p.161)

Similarly, other texts also advise interviewers not to interrupt when taping life stories; they should pay attention and be both non-evaluative and reflective.

I tried not to become involved and voice my own opinions, though at times I felt tempted to do so. Also because I lacked the ability to exercise spontaneous rapport, much of my interviews were lost because the lapse of time between the interviewee's expression and the written reply left much unsaid and unasked. The books also say researchers should not take for granted commonsense understandings and presumptions.

As an Indian migrant woman, I found people took it for granted I knew about, and would be sympathetic to, certain aspects of an Indian woman's living in a white man's land. For instance a phrase such as the 'usual arranged marriage' appeals to the commonsense knowledge that binds one Indian to another. I could not ask for clarification. What was left unsaid was important.

Asking respondents to talk and explain a bit more could give valuable information on their feelings, although they could also get defensive.

The interviewer's elaboration strategy poses some important questions for me. To what extent should I explore the details of particular remembered events? Should I differentiate the typical from the exceptional, and how should I encourage elaboration? The most difficult part was staying out of the dialogue while at the same time participating in the conversation. It was very difficult for me to limit my responses to simple nods of understanding and affirming statements.

**
With some of my interviewees, conversations went on long after the formal taped interview ended. A friendship had grown between us. During my interviews, I was sometimes treated as one of them. I am an Indian woman, who like them had come to Australia. I shared their experiences of the culture. In some cases, I spoke their language, my mother tongue, Tamil. I was able to understand their experiences of living as an Indian woman in a society which values male power. I also understood women’s anger at being racially abused in a society that gives pre-eminence to white power. Yet I was also different and regarded as privileged by being a Masters student, a member of the academic elite. I was also the one writing about their lives in books. And there were times when I was also seen as not one of them. I am a disabled person. I am both same and other.

The ‘outsider-insider’ relationship made me feel lost in my own research. I did not entirely belong to either group. However, shared experience reveals diversity as much as diversity shows shared experience:

...see what is there, not what we’ve been taught is there, not even what we might wish to find, but what is. (Du Bois, 1983, p.108)

Interviewing these women, I felt I could identify with them. If an Indian woman is able to get another Indian woman to speak about her life, they have a shared experience, shared empathy and shared identity. It enabled me to move closer to their view of reality. At the methodological level, an awareness of the triple consciousness that arises from being a member of an oppressed class (women) and a privileged class (scholars) and a different class (disabled) has enabled me to explore women’s perception of their
situation from an experiential base. Feminist researchers can use methods and adopt methodologies that best answer the particular research questions facing them, but to do so in ways that are conforming to feminist values and objectives. Questions about who is conducting the research are, relevant to the interview process and can be made clear in order to better understand it.
At the time I was writing *Pappadums in Paradise*? I was slowly altering my own position. Because of this, sometimes I found myself disagreeing with some of the principles my participants held dear. Nothing, however, prepared me for the nostalgic impact the interviews would have on me. For example, when one of the interviewees spoke of her failed marriage to a white man, it brought back memories of my own relationship with my ex-boyfriend. Sometimes it was just a phrase, a word or even a sad look that would trigger a memory. These interviews drew me back towards a cultural identity I thought I had long grown apart from.

It was also interesting for me to discover many of these Indian migrant women’s memories were also mine. The conversations brought back recollections of my own childhood, and life experiences in connection with migration and the feelings of where home is.

Like Anees Jung, an Indian-Muslim writer:

I find the microcosm of my own experience repeated and reaffirmed in the macrocosm of a vast land . . . Coiled within the lives of these women I find myself transformed. (Jung, 1988, p.5)

In the course of writing this dissertation, I became increasingly aware it was a reflection of my past and the future I believed I was headed towards.

I understand now I have used the migrant women’s profiles to work out issues that were important to me at the time as I was myself seeking to become an Australian migrant – issues of autonomy, independence, migration, home, relationships to the male gender and my own identity.
No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way, that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. (hooks, 1990, pp. 151-2)

Is that what I have been trying to do, I wonder. Trying to write myself anew? I shake my head. Voiceless, I have been attempting to give a voice to the Indian women who have migrated to Australia.

But then I rewrite these stories, not only in terms of what has been said to me during the interviews, but as tales, providing alternative scripts of my life. Like Maxine Hong Kingston, in *The Woman Warrior*, 'Unless I see [their] lives branching into mine, [they] give me no ... help.' (Kingston, 1976, p. 8)

Phyllis Rose, a biographer of Virginia Woolf, confesses.

I am sorry to say that I want to write about myself. That is the mark of a burned-out biographer. The burned-out biographer is no longer willing to suppress herself in the service of another. She no longer wants to express indirectly in terms of the narrative of another's life the burning issues of her own. The interrogation by the self of another which animates a good biography no longer works. The self wants center stage, the whole enchilada. (Rose, 1996, p 131)

Though I had written an autobiographical work about two years earlier and decided it was too painful to write personal factual accounts, I steered myself towards writing non-fiction again ... this time with a difference. I was interweaving the story of myself, with that of my interviewees, engaging the other in a dialogue and speaking for a collectivity.

Liz Stanley, another feminist biographer, says that auto/biography is influenced by the inter-textuality of biography and autobiography, and also of fact and fiction.
Stanley has also made use of the phrase ‘intellectual autobiography’ to describe how researchers can use their life experiences to make their position clear. She describes this as ‘an analytic (not just descriptive) concern with the specifics of how we come to understand what we do, by locating acts of understanding in an explication of the grounded contexts these are located in and arise from.' (Stanley, 1990 p 62)

Using others’ accounts of their lives also makes research biographical, so that the final research product is both autobiographical and biographical. The links between autobiography and biography are signified by the term ‘auto/biography’, and the ‘I’ represents a process in which the researcher is active. Betty Bergland’s study of immigrant women’s autobiography, for example, concentrates on ‘situating the autobiographical subject in the time and space of the narrative [and] placing the autobiographical subjects in their historical and discursive contexts.’ (Bergland, 1992, pp.104-5) As Bergland illustrates:

In order to understand an ‘I’ who speaks, especially the voice of the immigrant woman, we must appreciate not only the historical circumstances surrounding immigration but also the ideologies of the language systems in which these women were situated, including patriarchal ideologies of the old and new worlds. (Bergland, 1992, p.104)

These concepts have made it possible for me to analyse my own experiences and to think about being categorised as ‘Indian’, ‘migrant’ or ‘woman’. They have also helped me to understand how others view such categorisations. I have used my own experiences to construct what the term ‘Indian migrant women’ might mean and the women I have spoken to have presented another option.
While doing my research, I also began to become drawn to finding out more about the influence of the researcher on the research. I have come to see my dissertation as both biographical and autobiographical in nature. I have selected an area I am interested in, the migration of Indian women to Australia, and I have used my own viewpoint to choose parts of the lives of others in order to produce an account.

For me, there were many benefits of entering into feminist and autobiographical/biographical discussions. First, such approaches allow querying from a position using the researcher's own experiences as well as those of others. Secondly, they do not discourage an examination of the relationship between researcher and researched. The positions of both parties are not straight-forward. These two points are linked in that stipulation of who the researcher is.

A feminist perspective also makes it possible to discuss the power relations at play in research. For example, the dynamics of my interviews with some of the women were different from others. How people saw me inevitably influenced the type of information they gave me. Although both researcher and subject are active in what is constructed, they are active in different ways. The people in my research were not powerless; they only told what they wanted me to know. My account was dependent on what they were willing to discuss. Another researcher might well have been treated differently and presented a totally different account. 'Who the researcher is matters in that it affects the dynamics of the encounter.' (Temple, 1999, p.25)

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The idea that stories of the self always linked to stories of others, and that ways of being are entrapped in ways of knowing, has caused some critics to query the inevitable collision and conflation of autobiography and biography. Stanley again suggests a useful definition of such works: 'our understandings of our own lives will impact upon
how we interpret other lives, maximally it mounts a principled and concerted attack on conventional views that "works" are separate from lives, and that there can be an epistemology which is not ontologically based." (Stanley, 1994 p.i)

There are several texts that position themselves within the tradition of women's autobiography and biography. In Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986), her own and her mother's stories are connected to each other in a relationship that not only furnishes the contents of the narrative but also gives rise to a re-evaluation of the possibilities of the traditional autobiographical way of narration. Zola Neale Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* can also be interpreted as posing questions about who owns life stories and who has the responsibility to tell them. A moving passage in Hurston's autobiography for me is the scene where her mother dies and how she understands it: "But she looked at me, or so I felt, to speak for her. She depended on me for a voice." (Hurston, 1986 p.87)

Maxine Hong Kingston's postmodern and postcolonial autobiography, *The Woman Warrior*, tells stories that both tie her to and exclude her from the cultural and verbal group of her female relatives. All three of these autobiographies concentrate on how much our story of the self is immersed in the stories of others. They also tell us of the concern that life through story is never self-present or self-contained. These novels, though they might be termed autobiographies, re-emphasise the claim of French feminist theorist, Helene Cixious, that "All biographies, like all autobiographies, like all narratives tell one story in place of another story." (Cixous, 1997, p.5)

**
Barbara Tuchman asks the question, 'Who is the ideal biographer?'

She points out some of the most arresting biographies are those written by the subjects' friends, relatives or colleagues. She gives as examples, the biographies of Sir Thomas Moore and Sir Walter Scott by their respective sons-in-law William Roper and John Lockhart; Abraham Lincoln's written by his secretaries John Nicolay and John Hay; Gladstone by his colleague Lord Morley; and President Johnson by his special Assistant Doris Kearns. While such biographies have an unique intimacy, Tuchman also highlights the need for objectivity and at the same time draws attention to the other side of the coin, that the biographer with too much knowledge can produce 'a warehouse instead of a portrait.' (Tuchman, 1979, pp. 141-2)

The advantages and disadvantages of interviewing as an in-group member are also discussed in Lynn A Bonfield's interview of Arthur M Schlesinger. When Schlesinger was interviewing for his books on the Kennedy era, A Thousand Days: John Kennedy in the White House and Robert Kennedy and his Times, he was very much an insider, having been Special Assistant to President John F Kennedy. He makes a strong argument for the insider as interviewer and author on the basis of rapport and inside knowledge, but he also makes an equally strong argument for professionalism. Ideally, he said, one interviewer should carry out a related group of interviews, for cross-referencing and for building on the knowledge already attained from interview to interview.

While being an Indian made me an insider ethnically, it did not necessarily translate into being the ideal biographer because of the many internal cultural differences.
Conclusion

The 'ordinary' lives of these Indian migrant women unfold and evolve. There is nothing much to document, or so it seems.

Yet the commonness is tempting. Even people who would view their own lives as being of little significance still see the importance in recording them: letters, diaries, photographs, tin boxes of pebbles, dead roses, old cards and other trivia steeped with special and personal significance.

Researchers like me, out to discover these silent voices, must know that our queries are accidental. Even without our presence, grandparents tell life stories to grandchildren, children ask questions about the stranger in the picture they have found, and people sift through their collections of mementos.

For most people, however their ordinary lives are just that – of little consequence to the world at large. Indeed when asked to tell their stories, many informants I have talked to say there is nothing much to tell.

My interviews provide a means for eliciting what is there already. The researcher who walks in that door with the tape recorder in hand, and a simple question to start the interview flowing, will be gifted with records that are intriguing, complex and, very often, richly ordinary. As a process, the individual record thus recovered becomes but a thread in a tapestry that constitutes life in its extraordinariness.

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As I sift through my mail, I see the envelope. The one I had been waiting for. For a lifetime, it seemed. It is just an ordinary envelope. Pale white with my blue address label on it.
I slowly take the envelope into my hands. I stare at it. I slit the top and the contents slip out.

The final transcript certification is here. I dance a dance of joy in my bedroom, the door wide open. My housemates, who peep in, mutter to themselves, ‘Is she all right?’ Fearing for my sanity, they move on quickly to their rooms and lock their doors.

As I pick the empty envelope to throw it into the wastepaper basket, my mindset shifts.

In the emptiness, there is abundance. I remember all the conversations I have shared with the migrant women during the past fifteen months. With some women, it was only one meeting. With others, it was more. And then there were those whose migration stories were too painful for them to talk about. Then there were the few who were not educated enough to be able to understand my questions.

I pause for a moment to reflect on each woman. In my journal and journey, I have penned descriptions of our sessions together: how I got to their houses, taking in details of their homes, what they wore and how their voices sounded.

I smile now, remembering how very special these women are. They have gifted me with kindness, love, constructive support and continued friendship, and for that I will be grateful.
Glossary

Abhinaya: expressions.
Arangettam: debut performance for dancers and musicians.
Ashayam: idea.
Attam: dance.
Batik: Indonesian cloth that has been printed with a design.
Bharata-Nataya: a dance form of South India.
Char kway-teow: Chinese noodles, usually served fried.
Chutti: White facial outline of dots.
Da: a term of affection, usually used with a child.
Deepavali: Hindu festival of Lights. It is usually celebrated in October or November.
Devadasis: women who were married to God.
Dhoti: white cloth which Indian males tie around their waists.
Edakka: the sacred drum of Lord Shiva.
Gamaka: oscillation to the notes.
Gamelan: Indonesian percussion instrument.
Gopis: cow-herding maidens.
Gurus: teachers.
Hindi: national language of India
Hokkien mee: prawn noodles.
Jalebi: Indian sweetmeat made of orange sugar.
Kampong: village.
Kathakali: a dance form of Kerala.
Kolusu: anklet.
Koodiyattam: a group folk dance of Kerala.

Krithi: composition.

Mahabaratha: a Hindu epic.

Malayalam: language spoken by the people of Kerala.

Mirdangam: drum.

Muruku: savoury food made of rice flour.

Namasakaram: greeting.

Nasi-Biryani: saffron rice.

Onam: a festival commemorating the legendary golden rule of King Mahabali in Kerala.

Pappadums: flat, crisp breads with a particularly crunchy texture. Available in either plain or spiced, and in different sizes. Can be served to accompany main meals, or as a starter with a sauce or chutneys.

Pasar-malam: night-market.

Putti: grandmother.

Pavadai: Indian skirt suit, usually worn by young girls.

Pottu: a dot that a Hindu woman wears on her forehead. Married women traditionally wear a red dot.

Purandasa: a saint.

Raag: melody type or melody pattern.

Ramayana: a great epic in Sanskrit literature.

Salangais: dancer’s anklets.

Salwar kameez: trouser and loose tunic worn with a shawl.

Saree: a piece of clothing worn by Indian women. Consists of a long piece of thin material wrapped around the body.
Sarong: a piece of clothing worn especially by Malaysians. Consists of a long piece of cloth attached around the waist.

Satay: grilled meat, threaded in skewers.

Seva: doing service to the community without expecting anything in return.

Taal: rhythmic beat.

Talam: beat of the music.

Tamil: an Indian language, spoken mostly by people of South India.

Tatta: grandfather.

Thali: string or chain that the husband ties around his wife's neck. It is usually not removed till one of them dies.

Thirnuru: holy ash.

Vedas: knowledge. A collection of poems, containing the mythology of the people who used to recite them.

Veena: an Indian musical stringed instrument, which looks like a sitar.

Vindaloo: a fiery hot Indian curry.

Yama: God of Death.

Yamapura: Land of the Dead.
Appendix A: Sample of Interview Questions

Where are you from?
When did you migrate here?
Why did you come here?
What were your first impressions of Australia?
What, if anything, did you know about Australia before you came?
How have those impressions changed over the years?
Can you describe your first experiences in Australia?
Have you returned back to your homeland?
How many trips have you made back?
How do you perceive the changes in your homeland?
What would you say are the differences and similarities between your homeland and Australia?
Where do you consider to be home?
How do you define home?
Do you think home is a mental or a physical state - or perhaps both?
Are there times where you have felt homeless?
Have you ever experienced racism - here or anywhere else?
Can you tell me something about those experiences?
Why do you think some people are racist?
Have you ever been racist yourself?
Do you feel assimilated into Australian society now? How have you gone about doing it?
Have you ever resisted assimilation?
Are you involved in the Indian community in Australia?
If yes - how? If no - why not?
What aspects of your own culture do you hang onto?
Is it easy to forget one's own culture? - Yes/no - Why?
Appendix B: Plain Language Statement

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY ETHICS COMMITTEE

PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT

Dear

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research project I am conducting for my thesis at Deakin University, and to outline what your participation would involve.

My name is Sharmini Kannan, and I am studying towards an MA in Professional Writing under the supervision of Jenny Lee. My aim is to write a series of profiles on the journeys of Indian women migrants to Australia. I hope this work will give readers in Australia and elsewhere an insight into what it feels like to be a woman migrant and how Indian women have negotiated the process of adopting another country as their home.

For this purpose I am interviewing Indian women of different backgrounds, with a particular emphasis on women involved in the arts -- including yourself, if you agree to participate.

The initial interview will take about one-and-a-half hours. After I have transcribed the interview, I will send you a copy of the transcript. I may also ask a few follow-up questions at this stage. This should not take more than an hour.

Before making use of any of the material, I will send a copy of the final version of the transcript to you for approval. I am also happy to change names and identifying
features if you would prefer to remain anonymous. I will also supply you with a copy of
the final transcript for your own use.

Your participation will be entirely voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the
project at any stage. If you decide to withdraw, I will return interview tapes and
transcripts, and will also delete all copies of the information from my computer. Until
you have approved your transcript, I will make sure that it is free of any identifying
features (headings etc.).

I have enclosed copies of the interview consent form and the form consenting to the
use of the material. All materials collected for my research will be securely retained in
accordance with Deakin University guidelines for at least six years.

If you wish to contact me, my email address is sharmini@alphalink.com.au. Jenny
Lee, my supervisor, can be contacted by phone on 9244-3954. She can also be
contacted in writing by email at jennylee@deakin.edu.au. She can be contacted by mail
at the School of Literary and Communication Studies, Deakin University, 221 Burwood
Hwy, Burwood, Victoria 3125.

I hope you will agree to participate in the project, and am happy to discuss any
questions you might have about the processes.

Yours,

Sharmini Kannan
Should you have any concerns about the conduct of this research project, please contact the Secretary, Ethics Committee, Research Services, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, BURWOOD VIC 3125. Tel (03) 9251 7123 (International +61 3 9251 7123).
Appendix C: Interview Consent Form

Interview Consent Form

1, ________________________________ 

________________________________

grant permission to Sharmini Kanan to record an interview with myself for her study of Indian women’s experiences of migration to Australia.

I consent to the following conditions:

1. That I will receive a copy of the interview transcript and will have the right to correct the transcript.

2. That I will have to give my permission in writing before the material is used, either for publication or thesis purposes.

3. That a copy of the transcript will be left in my possession.

4. That, on request, my name and identifying features will be omitted.
That, subject to the fulfilment of the above conditions, I assign to Sharmini Kannan every copyright I have in any of the tape recordings, transcripts and any other material made in connection with the interview.

SIGNED

of

Date
Transcript Certification

I, ____________________________, have read a transcript of the interview conducted with me by Sharmini Kannan on ___________ 2000, and agree that it is an accurate rendition of the interview.

* I consent to its use in this form

OR

*I consent to its use for thesis and publication purposes, provided that my name and all identifying features are omitted.

______________________________

______________________________

* Cross out if not applicable
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