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Brown Bodies, Brown Worlds: Creating Cadence and Crafting Karma

*Seeking to trouble monolithic (and at times pejorative) constructions of South Asian girls and females, as part of my doctoral research I engaged in a long term multiperspectival narrative inquiry (Clandinin) into the storied experiences of two girls, their mothers and teacher over the span of several years. My research puzzles were shaped and contoured by the experiences I embody as a woman of colour, a South Asian daughter born, raised, educated, and living in Canada. In the unfolding of this research, in ethical relationship with co-learners, we narratively inquired into our experiences of identity-making and identity-living as crafting an artistry of our lives by shifting away from more traditional and presupposed understandings of academic research. In doing so, this study illuminated and honoured different artful and feminist ways of knowing, being, and learning (Menon, *An Artful Narrative Inquiry*) infused within a narrative understanding of social justice (Caine et al.). To invite these multifarious ways of knowing and living, I deliberately invoked artwork spaces to create, think, and muse personally and collectively. I came to call this type of engagement heart-full work (Menon, *A Story Cloth*).*

*Within this relational space of this piece, selected heart-full musings paired with poetry are brought forward to highlight the nuanced experiences of South Asian girls and women, as daughters and mothers who are empowered (O'Reilly, *Outlaw(ing) Motherhood*, 20) creative, agentic, and artistic architects of our respective coloured worlds (Menon, *An Artful Narrative Inquiry*).*

Keywords: Artful, Daughters, Imagery, Maternal Activism, Mothers, Narrative Inquiry, People of Colour, Poetry, Racialized, Resistance, Stories, and South Asian



Lighting Diyas of Hope



A long (research) journey unfolds,
Unearthed and unexpected, the treasure
Of friendships reveal hues of gold...
Diyas lit and fanned within those measures,
Flickering flames of hope—oh so bold!

Contouring Context

Demographically speaking, the number of South Asians¹ residing in Canada has grown significantly over the years. Census data drawn from Canada's National Household Survey (NHS), reported 1,963,330 people of South Asian origins and of those individuals, 969,735 were females as of 2016 (Statistics Canada). Given the increasingly diverse composition of Canada's population, it is crucial to recognize South Asian girl students may arrive in schools embodying complex notions of culture and identity which shape in profound ways *who they are and who they wish to be* (Menon, *An Artful Narrative Inquiry*). At the same time, it is important to understand that South Asian girls and their mothers live in interconnected, overlapping, and conflicting familial, cultural, and institutional narratives (Gill and Mitra-Khan 687-693; Kallivayalil 807-808). Clandinin et al. pointed to conflicts that teachers, children, and families experience when co-composing curriculum within Canadian schools (17-39). These points of tension can be exacerbated for children of colour. Insofar as South Asian females are concerned, it is vital to consider how multifarious narratives imbue their identity-making and what shapes their life-in-the-making as racialized individuals who carry the weight of intergenerational stories of colonization and violence. Compounding these embodied experiences are the cultural and sometimes, familial stories of South Asian girlhood and womanhood that restrict choice and agency. Thus, what is taught and learned within the (brown) worlds South Asian girls and women, mothers and daughters live and travel to and within (Huber, Murphy, & Clandinin 105-117; Lugones 3-19; Menon, *A Story Cloth*), proffers opportunities for growth and challenges which need to be negotiated. Yet little is known about these lived experiences.

Rendering Visible What Is Often Left Invisible

Recognizing this paucity in academic literature, school practice, and elsewhere, I found myself wanting to actively hear, listen, and amplify the stories of brown girls and brown women especially. To trouble simplistic renderings of what it means to be a racialized South Asian female, I also wished to make more visible the plotlines lived by brown girls and brown women across and within multifarious worlds of experiences. As such, for my doctoral work I engaged in a multiperspectival narrative inquiry over a span of several years alongside two South Asian girls, their mothers, and teachers (Clandinin, 21-33; Clandinin and Connelly, 34-48; Menon, *Making Masala* 70-87). Positioned as a daughter, learner, a teacher, and a researcher (amidst other plotlines), engaging in this nuanced work, I held close my storied understandings as a woman of colour, a South Asian female born, raised, educated,

and living in Canada. My research is especially concerned with the identity-making experiences of South Asian daughters alongside their mothers and teachers as they shifted between worlds of home, school, and other community places. To help think with(in) these stories of experience, I found myself gravitating towards imagery and metaphor. In particular, the conceptualization of a collaged composition. A collage refers to both the technique of assembling or compiling different materials in order to create a new form. In my work alongside research friends, the experiences we shared as well as the stories that emerged in conversation with one another and in moments of reflection, assumed novel form(s) in my musings. Collaged upon the canvas of this narrative inquiry, a vibrant palette of stories emerged when in conversation with one another and additionally, through the living artistry of our lives.

As co-learners² and research friends, we narratively inquired into our personal stories of experiences within and across a multihued *cartography* of home, school, community, and geographical worlds. Multiperspectival narrative inquiry understands that *both* researchers and participants are irrevocably shaped by and through the inquiry. By narratively inquiring into our (diverse) life experiences, querying and complicating commonplace notions of what it means to be a mother, a daughter, and a good Indian woman (amongst many other prescriptive plotlines)—various stories of strength and challenge were told, lived, and shared amongst us (Menon, *An Artful Narrative Inquiry*; Menon, “Making Masala” 70-87).

Maternal Activism as Ways of Being and Living

In coming alongside the two mothers in this work, I am drawn close to O’Reilly who illuminates, “I am suggesting that any understanding of mothers’ lives is incomplete without a consideration of how becoming and being a mother shape a woman’s sense of self and how she sees and lives in the world” (“Matricentric Feminism” 14). Both Vam³ and Barb⁴, the two mothers who made the deliberate choice to be part of this nuanced work, work which we deemed as necessary and evoking both heart and mind connections, demonstrated time and time again their resistance to imposed pejorative characterizations of who they were and who they were becoming. Turning once more to O’Reilly, it is important to recognize: “The term “motherhood” refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood, which is male defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, whereas the word “mothering” refers to women’s experiences of mothering and is female defined and potentially empowering to women” (“Matricentric Feminism” 22). Upholding this profound distinction, I came to appreciate the intensely personal ways in which these two South Asian women were taking up mothering. In particular, their experiences as Indian mothers strongly defy monolithic representations

of motherhood, thereby refuting the simplistic tropes depicted in stereotypical narratives or single stories⁵ (Adichie; Menon and Saleh 53-64). For instance, while both mothers strongly emphasized the significance of their daughters being educated well, they differed in the educational plotlines envisioned for their children. By passionately advocating for their children and themselves in their everyday lives, these women embody distinctive representations of maternal activism and “maternal empowerment” (O’Reilly, “Outlaw(ing) Motherhood” 20). This understanding imbued the lives of the mother-daughter pairs who joined me in this research and aligns with the “governing principles and aims” of matricentric feminism outlined by O’Reilly (“Matricentric Feminism” 18). For the purposes of this piece, the point which is especially significant to the work taken up and shared here, is the following aim: “commits to social change and social justice, and regards mothering as a socially engaged enterprise and a site of power, wherein mothers can and do create social change through childrearing and activism” (“Matricentric Feminism” 18).

Highlighting that maternal activism can take place at home and outside of the home, O’ Reilly, moreover, directs attention to the import of change:

Such maternal activism—in rendering the personal political, blurring the boundaries between the private and the public and in inverting traditional gender roles—both disrupts and dislodges the gender essentialism (the naturalized opposition between the masculine-feminine, the private-public) that grounds and structures modern patriarchy. (“Matricentric Feminism as Activism” 129-130).

I have further come to understand that the girls, too, assumed unique mothering roles with their younger siblings and also, friends when they felt it was necessary. As O’Reilly makes clear, “mothering is not limited to biological mothers but to anyone who does the work of mothering as a central part of their life” (“Matricentric Feminism” 14). Frequently, in Deepika’s⁶ and Katrina’s⁷ told stories of their siblings and close friends, love and care in their countless gradations, shaded their narrations. Over time, sfumato-like and less gradually, immersing myself in this deeply personal research endeavour, I also found myself dwelling in the stories that colour(ed) my relationship with my mother. I reflected upon how our responsibilities with one another have shifted as we contoured one another’s lives over time in different ways.

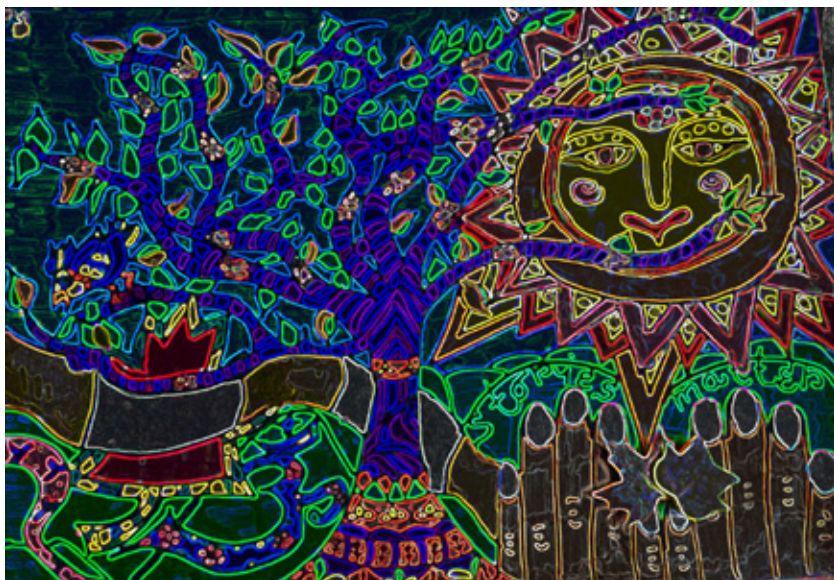
Through experiences shared, lived, and told, I was also better able to appreciate how each girl, (each daughter), each mother, and I were artistically seeking and finding our own cadence. We did so by performing, individually crafting, and keeping our karma while simultaneously resisting pre-set images of dharma (duties or rather, expectations of what is deemed appropriate for Indian girls and women as daughters and mothers).

Keeping Karma

I entitled this section, *Keeping Karma*, but what do I mean by karma? Karma has been appropriated in Western popular culture to casually mean one's actions, typically assuming karma in the form of bad deeds will eventually catch up to a person. To put it another way, if you behave negatively, your negative actions will rebound on you in negative ways. However, I do not employ karma in this rudimentary Western conventional manner. I adopt the more cultural and Hindu faith-based understandings of Karma. Karma is dynamic and involves the recognition of one's thoughts, inclinations, and actions in terms of the past, present, and future. Each of these qualities—weighed in of themselves and weighed against one another—can help to build one's path(s) in what has already happened (in the past), is happening (now), and is going to happen (in the future). In this way, we (research friends and myself) troubled predetermined, predestined, and foregone understandings of what we cannot do and what we can do. Instead, continuously reimagining our karma as ever evolving and in constant flux, as opposed to merely accepting one's karma as a consequence of our dharma (often depicted as unmalleable and insurmountable), empowered us in unique ways.

Heart-full Work Within and Amidst our Storied Worlds

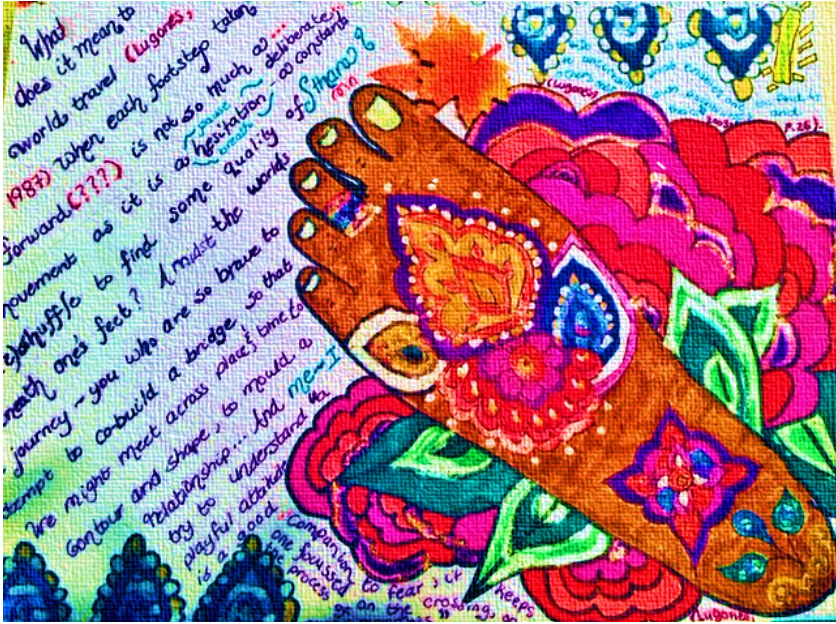
My narrative inquiry is informed and infused with art. To invite heterogenous ways of knowing and living, I deliberately invoked artwork spaces to personally and collectively create, think, and muse. I came to call this type of engagement *heart-full work* (Menon, *A Story Cloth* 92-110). These are the courageous stories of the heart, contoured by art which emerged in (research) conversations and within my own personal musings. Some of these stories brought to light the incandescence of wisdoms passed from mother to daughter and daughter to mother, revealing the bright luminosity of their special relationships. Subsequently, many of my research notes assumed the form of painted and/or coloured drawings, as well as illustrated considerations. In this piece, I present several *heart-full* renderings accompanied with poetic musings to create conversational spaces between us. I imagine this space as one being actively collaged. That is, being layered and juxtaposed by each of us (you the reader, and me alongside research friends) in this moment now and expectantly, later upon deeper reflection. Likewise, I do this as a means of drawing forward our stories as South Asian daughters and mothers creating the many-hued multiplicity of our experiences.



Story Matters



Stories matter,
They might scoff,
But we know better.
Night swallows day,
Day births night.
We live our lives, *breaking* out
From confining categories
Refuting to be i/m/p/r/i/s/o/n/e/d
Stories matter,
We whisper first
And then
Grow more **bold**



Dancing within and across Storied Worlds



Taking tentative steps into storied worlds, a delicate dance
of whirling, swirling

Swooping, stirring movements—

South Asian mothers share their wisdoms, daughters take their leads,
stamping their feet:

Thi thi thittee thi, Thi thi thittee thi

Choreographing, blazing plotlines of Indian female power.



Upon Wings Words Do Soar



Once upon a time,
When I was young, my Amma urged me to hold my tongue
In this inquiry, I see moms *PUSH* their daughters to speak
I see the girls open their mouths...
Their songs—a complicated symphony of knowing
and (be)longing
I said, Amma, come listen along with me
Slowly she came, but came she did
She opened her eyes, she opened her ears
She opened her mouth
Daughter, she cried, your tongue is your strength
Use your voice to write, to draw, to speak
Once upon a time,
When I was older, my Amma urged me to unleash my tongue.



Mothers. Daughters. Sisters.



Our stories punctuate the spaces between us...
Our eyes are aflame with our sacred wisdom.
Draw close to our burnished flames,
See that we burn with fire.
Fire needs to be respected,
Don't get burnt.



Mother Kali



Destroyer of evil, Amma vanquishes our fears,
Let our stories ring out as never before.
Let our lives not be flattened through the silencing of ignorant others.
Let our experiences remind all that we too are people,
Deserving of respect and dignity.
Let our narratives be storied images of hope,
For cherished ones and new friends.
Let us be brave in the ways we paint our lives.



Sunbeams and Starlight



We clamour for the sun that shines so bright—
 Courting shadows in novel ways,
We hunger for the moon that climbs such heights—
 Imploring luminance to linger...
We dream of hopes and possibilities,
We dream of sunbeams and starlight.

Endnotes

1. In my doctoral work, to refute the tractability of a singular identity and to encourage border-crossings, I employ the names *Indian*, *Indo-Canadian*, *Asian Indian*, and *South Asian* interchangeably to refer to those who self-identify as such and/or who reside in Canada and can trace part or all of their ancestry to South Asia. For the purposes of this piece, I use the terms *South Asian* and *Indian* as these are the names that my research friends most often defaulted to in speech.
2. I use the terms *co-learners* and *research friends* to encompass the people (mothers, daughters, and teachers) who have helped to compose this multiperspectival narrative inquiry.
3. *Vam* is a self-chosen pseudonym for one of the mother co-participants in this research.
4. *Barb* is a self-chosen pseudonym for one of the mother co-participants in this research.
5. *Adichie*, in her famous 2009 TED Talk, spoke at length for the need to look beyond negative stories that tend to emphasize a singular experience. She noted, “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” The mothers in this narrative inquiry refract a kaleidoscope of experiences, thus troubling static stories of Indian mothers and Indian mothering.
6. *Deepika* is a self-chosen pseudonym for one of the young South Asian girl co-participants in this research. She is the daughter of *Vam*.
7. *Katrina* is a self-chosen pseudonym for one of the young South Asian girl co-participants in this research. She is the daughter of *Barb*.

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