

Imaginary Homes, Transplanted Traditions: The Transnational Optic and the Production of Tradition in Indian Television

Newspaper representations of television in India often offer a stereotypically prosaic image: a huddled mass seated on the floor, transfixed by the television set jammed between articles of everyday living. Incommensurability is the defining feature of these images; the television set becomes sign and symbol of modernity and the West while the cluttered room with its bags, calendars, utensils, crude objects of everyday life encapsulates the lack of development characteristic of the East. The incongruous juxtapositions rehearse a familiar script of modernization and reveal the limited manner in which globalization and the transnational figure in the popular imaginary, as a unidirectional flow from the West to the rest of the world. According to New York Times correspondent Barry Bearak, “the east is east, the west is west and this is where (at the television set) the twain have met.”¹ Indeed, he is correct in such an assessment but not in the simplistic idea that development comes to India from the West. If we look beyond the surface signs of these images to the content of television programming that entrances these audiences we embark on a different journey. The content of Indian television programming reveals a bewildering web of exchanges, flows, and translations between the global and the local. In this essay I argue that the Indian instance exemplifies a transnationally mediated television apparatus: a transnational optic governs the form and content of programming, the processes of program production and reception, as well as its technologies of distribution and delivery. Contemporary Indian

¹. Barry Bearak, “Many, Many in India want to be a Millionaire,” New York Times (August 30, 2000): A1.

television, the second largest market in the world,² is enmeshed in an interconnected network of contact zones; its storylines and rhetorical strategies are shaped by the transnational traffic of programming and peoples, and the national-cultural identity it articulates is transnational in character.³ Consequently, its programming is, at least, double-sited and offers a double-vision, simultaneously referencing the transnational and the local to produce a global-parochial sensibility.

The television industry in India has become increasingly embedded in the transnational. From being a state-run industry, it was liberalized in the 1990s to include foreign satellite and cable channels, with their off-shore production sites. This structural change coincided with the emergence of television program production in the diaspora, in the United Kingdom and the United States by individuals of Indian origin. Together, these two axes of production have radically reconfigured the televisual landscape producing narratives that emerge from and foreground the intersections of the national and transnational, they produce a rhetoric of the interstice and a transnational optic. The interstitial influence is captured by a visual in the New Yorker, which contrasts sharply with the newspaper images I alluded to earlier. A two-page spread presents the cast of the blockbuster soap opera Shanti (which was dubbed in five regional languages and commanded an audience of 200 million viewers) resplendent in middle-class fineries and vamping for the camera. The six women and three men reveal the luxe and consumer glamour that characterize the contemporary Indian middle class. The image also captures

². John Zubrzycki, "India May Block the Global Village of Foreign TV," Christian Science Monitor (March 26, 1997): 6.

³. I borrow Mary Louise Pratt's definition of contact zone as an "attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographical and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect." See her Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (New York: Routledge, 1992), 7.

the ways in which the soap opera genre has been reworked to produce “Indianized” programming.⁴

Marking the paradigmatic shift entailed by the technology of the camera, Walter Benjamin has theorized that it made possible a new optic. The camera’s ability to zoom in or out, to enlarge, its use of slow motion and other technical capabilities allows the viewer to see images that escape natural vision. This optic makes visible a new structural formation of the subject.⁵ Homi Bhabha has used this insight to formulate an exilic optic: “the point of the non-visible, a gap in the frame, an erasure at the moment of exposure, a lack in the structure of the look ... (that makes) at once contiguous, and in that flash, contingent, the realms of human consciousness and the unconscious.”⁶ The exilic optic is a flickering movement that occupies the borderland between domestic and exilic spaces. I modify this formulation to forward a transnational optic, a way of seeing that defamiliarizes the metropolitan subject (in the nation and in the diaspora) and introduces a visual grammar that is simultaneously familiar, domestic, national, and global. The transnational optic emerges from and foregrounds the politics of dislocation, disruption, and ambivalence. It addresses the nation and the diaspora in the present tense, a view that is transnational and local; it expands and contains definitions of the nation. Above all, the transnational optic captures the ways in which flows and concerns relating to cross-border traffic inflect the contemporary television apparatus. It allows us to understand the ways in which the national imaginary is enhanced and internationalized by the diaspora. It forces as well an acknowledgement that images and narratives of India

⁴. Vijay Seshadri, “As India Turns,” *New Yorker* (June 23, 1997): 62-63; photograph by Max Vadukul.

⁵. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 219-53.

⁶. Homi Bhabha, “Arrivals and Departures,” in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media and the Politics of Place*, edited by Hamid Naficy (New York: Routledge, 2000), vii-xii, xi.

emerge not just from within the nation, but also from an international arena which is aligned across nationalist vectors. This formulation goes beyond a new way of seeing, it underscores how transnational capital and media produce subjects and publics that are no longer confined within the representational politics of a single geographic nation.

In this paper I use the genre of the soap opera, or serialized melodrama, to unpack the modalities through which television's representational grammar of cultural identity addresses the intersections of global and local vectors. The open-ended, family-centered sagas with multiple, overlapping storylines offer several points of entry for an analysis of cultural identity construction. I focus, however, on the manner in which the trope of tradition is mobilized to address the anxieties and affiliative longings of audiences in the Indian diaspora⁷ and within the geographic space of the nation. "Tradition" becomes a fruitful and generative trope because these storylines invest the concept with a range of characteristics that are considered typically Indian. A focus on the Indianness of the programs and how this Indianness is constituted, rather than on other generic features, provides greater clarity to the manner in which the transnational optic shapes the movement of these storylines. Within the transnational optic, as the following analysis reveals, the trope of tradition functions as a regulatory mechanism. In particular, I examine the multiple ways in which the figure of woman is deployed in these uses of

⁷. Diaspora is a contested term. Although it originally referred to the dispersal of Jews it has increasingly been used in more secular contexts to refer to (voluntarily or involuntarily) migrated populations. James Clifford offers a very useful synopsis of its many uses in contemporary scholarship. I use the term in this spirit and throughout the essay the term appears with invisible quotation marks to signify my acknowledgment of the ambivalences surrounding the term.

Over 18 million people of Indian origin are scattered around the world; fairly large diasporic communities exist in North America, the United Kingdom, the Gulf countries, parts of the Caribbean, Fiji, Madagascar, and several countries of Southeast Asia, notably Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong. Within the U.S., according to the 1990 census, Asian Indians number 890,000. The median income for a family of Indian origin was \$60,000 against the national median of \$38,000; this relative economic strength often bestows on the group the label, model minority.

tradition and isolate the definitions of femininity that are valorized to produce identifications of home and belonging.

The essay shuttles between two different sets of soap operas, melodramatic narratives emerging from and seeking to address viewers in antipodean locales: (i) those that are geared primarily for audiences in the South Asian subcontinent,⁸ often produced outside the geographical contours of the nation, but which also find an audience in communities of Indian origin both in the U.S. and elsewhere around the world; and (ii) those that are produced primarily for the diasporic Indian, people of Indian origin residing in North America or the United Kingdom, and find audiences in India too. An analysis of these two sets of soap operas reveals how media and migration are interconnected in constituting subjectivity in the diaspora and in the nation. The transnational optic transcends national space and provides audiences in the diaspora and the subcontinent with a vocabulary to locate their experiences within a transnational “community of sentiment,” a group that begins to imagine and feel things together.⁹ This particular “way of seeing” allows national and émigré subjects to situate themselves historically, creating locally situated global communities of address.

Before I turn to an analysis of the soap operas I offer an overview of the generic features of the soap opera and the insights offered by feminist criticism of the genre. I then examine the soap operas that are produced within the diaspora, limiting myself to those produced within the United States. Finally, I turn to the brand aired primarily in

⁸ While many individual programs are sponsored by foreign companies, many cable and satellite stations are also owned by non-resident Indians (NRIs). For instance, although the Hindi-based programming of Zee-TV is often considered an Indian channel, NRIs from Hong Kong are its primary owners. JAIN TV is owned and operated by a consortium of NRIs from the U.S.

⁹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 8.

India. In this section of the paper I limit my analysis to the ways in which the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law (saas-bahu) dyad is mobilized to articulate and work through the crises and contradictions of “tradition.” In the concluding section I outline the significance of such representations of family, tradition and woman and their political consequences, particularly in India.

Melodrama and the Female Viewer

Categorized in a derogatory fashion as a feminine genre, soap operas have come under the scrutiny of feminist scholars. Normally a day-time genre, it is characterized by multiple, overlapping storylines that lack resolution and pivot on the family; storylines invariably explore relations between family members and the threats posed to the stability of the family.¹⁰ In the 1980s, as Jane Feuer has noted, this formulaic narrative form found a space in prime time episodic television.¹¹ Although this shift in scheduling and the move away from a daily to a weekly narrative form necessitated some changes the prime-time version continued to be geared toward female viewers.

Drawing on and recasting scholarship on melodrama, feminist television criticism has signaled the narrative devices through which soap operas solicit women viewers. Despite the seeming predictability of the storylines the genre resonates with its audiences because it addresses and draws upon a range of social concerns. The soap opera form, like the melodrama, permits the portrayal of moral issues within a binary form that

¹⁰. Numerous scholars have outlined the defining features of the genre. See Ien Ang, Watching Dallas: Soap Operas and the Melodramatic Imagination, trans. Della Couling (New York: Methuen, 1985); Mary Ellen Brown, ed., Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994); Christine Geraghty, Women and Soap Operas: A Study of Prime Time Soaps (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity, 1991). Some scholars have underscored the genre's ability to cross successfully national and cultural borders. For an understanding of the reasons for its success see Robert C. Allen, to be continued ...: Soap Operas Around the World (New York: Routledge, 1995); Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz, The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dallas, 2d ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Polity Press, 1993).

¹¹. Jane Feuer, Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

repeatedly heralds the triumph of good over evil. Seemingly simplistic and formulaic, this narrative strategy allows us to engage with the contradictions of modernity, the traumas of class struggle, and the search for identity. Melodramatic narratives, as Ann Kaplan, Laura Stempel Mumford and other scholars have elucidated, reveal and conceal cultural conflicts; national crises are displaced onto the domestic realm, particularly that of the mother-daughter relationship.¹² Through clearly delineated solutions they seemingly offer a cure for the crisis at hand. In soap operas issues are couched in the language of feeling and sentimental affect, characteristic features of feminine discourses, muffling not only the social critiques offered but also allowing critics to dismiss them as yet another installment in the ongoing saga of (feminine) complaint.¹³

Bollywood Images

The melodramatic form has been a staple of Indian popular culture. The themes I have just delineated about the soap opera are equally relevant to a vast range of commercial film making in India, which is commonly designated as Bollywood. As numerous scholars have noted, for many Indians, in the diaspora and in the subcontinent, Hindi films and the songs embedded within them offer poignant and effective means of asserting their cultural affiliations.¹⁴ Predictions and fears that the proliferation of

¹². Ann Kaplan offers a good summary of the different ways in which melodrama has been theorized. See Ann Kaplan, "Trauma Aging and Melodrama (with Respect to Tracy Moffatt's Night Cries)," in Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice, edited by Marianne DeKoven (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 304-28. For analyses of the melodramatic imperative in soap operas see Laura Stempel Mumford, Love and Ideology in the Afternoon: Soap Opera, Women, and Television Genre (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

¹³. Lauren Berlant, "Poor Eliza," American Literature 70, no. 3 (1998): 635-68.

¹⁴. R. Radhakrishnan, Nasreen Kabir and Ashish Rajadhakshya offer detailed accounts of the characteristic features of Bollywood cinema. Other scholars such as Ashis Nandy, Vijay Mishra, Madhava Prasad, and Sumita Chakravarty isolate the politics and social formations that are promoted by this narrative form; while Indian Cinema Superbazaar provides a dated yet relevant account of Bollywood's signifying system and practices of signification. See R. Radhakrishnan, "Adjudicating Hybridity, Co-ordinating Betweenness," Jouvert: An Online Journal of Postcolonial Studies (2000): <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v5il/radha.htm>; Nasreen Kabir, Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story

television channels would destroy the Bollywood industry have proven false; instead, the Hindi film industry and its form seem to have found a new home. Not only do films and film-based programming continue to garner the highest audience ratings its representational grammar has been transported to the television apparatus.¹⁵

Consequently the depiction of women in soap operas is akin to those in Bollywood narratives and facilitates an intertextual process of meaning making.¹⁶

Most Bollywood narratives, like the soap operas I analyze in this essay, center on the family. “Family relationships, their ramifications and consequences are central to the plot” of mainstream Indian movies, Sudhir Kakar points out.¹⁷ Most often, the figure of the woman is cast as posing a threat to the unity of the family and the narrative movement pivots on the restoration of the family order.¹⁸ These narratives use the family as a metaphor for nation. This rhetorical turn recasts an imagined community into an organic construct. In turn, such a formulation, presents women’s roles within it as biologically determined rather than as ideological constructs. The clarification of cultural and national identity in such narratives helps reassert gender difference.

(London: Channel 4 Production, 2001); Ashish Rajadhakshya and Paul Willemsen, Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema, 2d ed. (London: Fitzroy Daerborn, 1999); Vijay Mishra, Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire (New York: Routledge, 2002); Madhava Prasad, Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Sumita Chakravarty, National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993); Ashis Nandy, ed. The Secret Politics of our Desire: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema (London: Zed Press, 1998); Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet, eds. Indian Cinema Superbazaar (New Delhi: Vikas, 1983).

¹⁵. Give one of the Outlook India cites.

¹⁶. Robert Deming has theorized that viewers have television archives – memories of past programs and surrounding discourses – that frame their interpretations of programming. In the Indian context the process of meaning making is further complicated as the television programming I analyze in this essay requires audiences to draw on filmic archives as well. See Robert Deming, “Kate and Allie: ‘New Women’ and the Audience’s Television Archive,” in Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer, edited by Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 203-16.

¹⁷. Sudhir Kakar, “The Cinema as Collective Fantasy,” in Indian Cinema Superbazaar, edited by Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet (New Delhi: Vikas, 1983), 89-97.

¹⁸. Rosie Thomas offers an excellent and sensitive account of the manner in which the female figure is deployed in the blockbuster Mother India. See Rosie Thomas, “Sanctity and Scandal: The Mythologization of Mother India,” Quarterly Journal of Film and Video 11, no. 3 (1989): 11-30.

In Bollywood films, female characters are often sketched into a very limited binary form of good and bad. The good woman is characteristically depicted as chaste, virtuous, faithful, and self-sacrificing. She is the perfect blend of modernity and tradition, doting on all members of the extended family. The bad woman is not just the contrary she is also seen as ‘westernized,’ a trait that is signaled through her clothes, her lifestyle choices, her sexual promiscuity, and often her rejection of the institution of marriage.¹⁹

The conflict between tradition and modernity is also repeatedly invoked in Bollywood narratives. “The binary modernity/tradition, whether it is employed to indicate conflict or complementarity, amounts to an explanation, ‘a conceptual or belief system’ which regulates thinking about the modern Indian social formation.”²⁰ Invariably this conflict is resolved through a disavowal of modernity and recuperation of “Indian tradition.”²¹

Significantly, the meanings about Indian culture and the tradition/modernity conflict are materialized on the bodies of the good and bad Indian women I described above. In Bollywood narratives, (the good) woman is a signifier of a pure authentic India. She is a repository of cultural values and has to be shored against threats from evil forces, of external origin and increasingly from within the borders of the nation-state. This problematic construction of a gendered cultural nationalism is not a new phenomenon. As Christopher Pinney has asserted, throughout India’s collision with

¹⁹. Aruna Vasudev, “The Woman: Vamp or Victim,” in Indian Cinema Superbazaar, edited by Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet (New Delhi, Vikas, 1983), 98-105. Also see Shoma Chatterji, Subject: Cinema, Object: Woman – A Study of the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema (Calutta: Parumita, 1998).

²⁰. Madhava Prasad, Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) 7-8.

²¹. Ashis Nandy, ed. The Secret Politics of Our Desire: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema (London: Zed Press, 1998); and Rosie Thomas, “Sanctity and Scandal: The Mythologization of Mother India,” Quarterly Journal of Film and Video 11, no. 3 (1989): 11-30.

colonialism, woman as a figure has been continually reinvented as a repository of an interior, purer and more valuable tradition that stood opposed to the moral compromises and degradation of rule by foreigners.²² Nor is this invocation of the female figure as representative of the nation unique to Indian popular culture. Indeed, it has been an abiding concern for feminists in different countries. For instance, Susan Friedman theorizes that the relation between gender and nation is fraught with contradictions and ambivalences. Women are often “caught between identification of national aspirations and the recognition of men’s special privilege within most state formations. The use of the female figure to iconize the nation ... often obscures or even embodies the inequities of gender relations within the nation.”²³ Within the Indian context this symbolic function, however, assumes greater salience from the colonial past.

As David Morley has pointed out, boundary maintenance and boundary transgression are key acts in definitions of home and homelessness.²⁴ The soap operas I examine emerge out of and repeatedly reference Bollywood. (Indian cinematic representations have not remained static though. As the analysis reveals, the time-frame which the soap operas reference is key to the meaning of tradition and nation articulated.) They use “tradition” as a boundary marker and vigilantly monitor its maintenance and transgression. They visually and rhetorically narrate rituals of exclusion. They deploy specific and narrow definitions of the foreign, which has to be eliminated to purify the

²². Christopher Pinney, Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs (London: Reaktion Books, 1997).

²³. Susan Stanford Friedman, “Locational Feminism: Gender, Cultural Geographies, and Geopolitical Literacy.” In Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice, edited by Marianne DeKovin (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 13-36. See also Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcon, Minoo Moallen, eds. Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

²⁴. David Morley, “Bounded Realms: Household, Family, Community, and Nation,” in Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media and the Politics of Place (New York: Routledge, 1999), 151-68.

sacred space of the home and Heimat. In the analysis that follows I underscore these processes of identification and affiliation.

Homeland of Nostalgia

Soap operas and other Indian television programs have for long been broadcast on cable channels in cities with large populations of Indian immigrants, such as New York City, Chicago and Houston. They are largely composed of reruns of programs originally aired in the subcontinent; inevitably a significant time lag was the characteristic feature of the programming and these shows offered a very small sampling. Over the last decade, though, with the availability of satellite channels the range of programming Indian Americans can access has increased manifold. They can now view the same shows as their counterparts in India, contemporaneously. This development has been accompanied by production of programs in the U.S., specifically geared to Non Resident Indian (NRI) populations. These programs aim at addressing the specificity of the experience of being Indian in America and the condition of hybridity.²⁵

The availability of an array of contemporary programming from India has no doubt significant effects on the ways in which diasporic communities conceptualize “home.” I focus on programs produced within the United States that are geared primarily for a transnational diasporic audience. These products tend to shun an assimilationist model of immigration and instead offer trajectories that permit the maintenance of an

²⁵ Hybridity is a problematic term that refers to people’s experiences of multiple cultural affiliations. While this term has been used extensively in postcolonial scholarship, Robert Young cautions us of the term’s racist etymology. Similarly, John Hutnyk and Rey Chow among others remind us of how this term is used to erase histories of colonial violence and ongoing practices of cultural appropriation. Aware of these diverse criticisms I still use hybridity, as do most postcolonial scholars, to refer to immigrant’s sensibility of displacement, dislocation, and fragmented identities. See Robert Young, Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race (New York: Routledge, 1995); John Hutnyk, The Critique of Exotica: Music, Politics and the Culture Industry (London: Pluto, 2000).

Indian cultural identity even as émigrés work and live in the United States, or what is often referred to as “American lifestyles with Indian values.”

As self-produced popular culture, diasporic media products “help displaced populations form and maintain cultural identities from a distance and across national and geographic borders.”²⁶ They reveal the processes through which immigrant communities understand their experiences of separation, liminality, and incorporation as well as resistance to assimilation, their efforts at differentiation and dissimulation. This area is only now gaining scholarly interest. For instance, in his growing body of work, Hamid Naficy provides a nuanced and complicated account of the manner in which the Iranian exile community in the United States produce media to address the specificity of their experiences, which in turn shapes their experience and discourse of exile.²⁷ In his ethnographic study of Serbian and Croat communities in Australia, Zlatko Skrbis underscores the manner in which diasporic media facilitate long-distance nationalism.²⁸ Each of these studies outlines the singular features of diasporic media and their ability to help individuals articulate their experiences of hybridity as well as sustain their affiliations with “home.” Drawing on this body of work, in this section of the essay, I focus on the nature of identification such programming makes possible; I analyze the definitions of tradition and India that they make possible, and the effects of such

²⁶. Hamid Naficy, “Between Rocks and Hard Places: The Interstitial Mode of Production in Exilic Cinema,” in Home, Exile, Homelands: Film, Media and the Politics of Place (New York: Routledge, 1999), 125-47, 135.

²⁷. Hamid Naficy, ed. Home, Exile, Homelands: Film, Media and the Politics of Place (New York: Routledge, 1999); and Hamid Naficy, The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

²⁸. Zlatko Skrbis, Long-Distance Nationalism: Diasporas, Homelands and Identities (London: Ashgate, 1999). John Hutnyk, Sunaina Maira, Gayatri Gopinath and other scholars have examined the ways in which Indian youth in the UK and in the US use music to carve out a space for the expression of hybrid experiences. These products are primarily aimed at youth culture (most often second generation Britons or Americans) whereas my analysis examines products that are aimed at a broader audience and perhaps address more specifically first-generation immigrants. Sunaina Maira, “Ideologies of Authenticity: Youth, Politics, and Diaspora,” Amerasia Journal (1999/2000): 139-49.

identifications. I also examine how media products created in the diaspora travel to the homeland and the meanings of India and Indianness they make possible.

Diasporic cultural production is located at the intersection and interstices of multiple cultures and problematizes the politics of location. It speaks from multiple locations and seemingly speaks in multiple tongues. Diasporic media producers often function as cultural translators; situated at the intersection of the local and the global they address both communities simultaneously. Producers of Indian diasporic soap operas, and increasingly even the national variety, can be characterized as operating within what Naficy terms as an interstitial mode of production.²⁹ For instance, Sunil Hali, the producer of the two diasporic soaps, Aadhey-Adhorey and Mausam, and more recently the national soap opera Dollar Bahu, invests in his own productions. His narratives seek to articulate the concerns of a larger diasporic community, and he participates in the soap operas at more levels than just producer, often playing the lead role.

I am singling out Mausam (1995) because it marketed itself as “the first international” Indian soap opera. A thirteen-part Hindi serial produced by an Indian immigrant in the United States, the show was billed as one that would first be broadcast in the diaspora and then later within India. The producer characterizes it as an Indian-American story, about life, love and reincarnation in New Jersey.³⁰ It foregrounds the ways in which immigrants struggle to locate themselves within the United States, both

²⁹. Naficy defines the interstitial mode of production to refer to projects that lack financing; this results in an acceleration and multiplication of labor (instead of a division of labor); the narratives often include an autobiographical tone and the filmmaker often undertakes multiple functions, often playing the lead role; and the products are multilingual, serving multiple communities of address. See Hamid Naficy, “Between Rocks and Hard Places: The Interstitial Mode of Production in Exilic Cinema,” in Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media and the Politics of Place (New York: Routledge, 1999), 125-47.

³⁰. Quoted in Ashley Dunn, “As the World and Soap Operas Turn: Blondes, Brain Tumors and Buckets of Tears on Hindi TV,” New York Times (September 26, 1995): B1.

wishing to blend into dominant society and yet assert their difference through an affirmation of their Indian-ness.

Mausam adheres closely to the melodramatic genre I outlined earlier in the essay. It is primarily about the intricacies of the domestic space, familial conventions, and power struggles. Yet, the contents of the program and the ways in which audiences comprehend the family drama take on a different salience when the narrative is situated in the diaspora. The site of enunciation alters in significant ways the storyline.

Based on a Marathi storyline about a father coming to terms with the death of his young daughter, when relocated in the United States Mausam's narrative takes on a different tenor. What was once a story of inter-generational conflicts becomes more, it is now significantly about the different ways in which India and Indianness are conjugated within diasporic communities. The narrative expresses ambivalence, resistance and even subversion of the cultural codes of both U.S. and Indian societies. Mausam evokes a politics of place that is neither unified nor stable, instead it forwards an-always-in-formation hybrid sensibility.

Mausam is about the Saran family in Montville, New Jersey. The mother is a doctor and the father a lawyer. The daughter, who dies, is a New Jersey high school tennis champion while the brother is married to an American, Jenny, defying his parents' wishes. Through the son's marriage the show explores the incommensurability of American and Indian ways of life. The daughter's death from a brain tumor propels the narrative but the episodes also deal with the ways in which Indian men are tempted by and succumb to the evils of the West: blond women, alcohol, clubs and dancing. The series ends when Raj divorces his American wife to marry a traditional "Indian" woman

and has a child who is considered a reincarnation of the dead sister. The majority of the actors are Indian immigrants (the producer plays the role of the father) and the three white Americans in the narrative are all women, symbolizing the dangers posed by American culture, the allure of sex, drugs, and material lives. The storyline not only recuperates Indian tradition but through its caricature of American excesses serves also to assert its superiority.

Like Bollywood films from the 1950s and 1960s, this soap opera evokes an “innocent idea of romance, emphasis on family values, reverence of old world customs ... and most importantly, ... neatly resolving the conflict between good and bad.”³¹ Although inspired by the American series The Bold and the Beautiful and All My Children this narrative adheres closely to earlier Bollywood conventions of decorum and representations of desire. (Sexual attraction and intimacy are signified when a couple holds hands, there are no kisses or any other steamy scenes characteristic of mainstream soap operas or even of contemporary Hindi movies.)³² Its characterization of the female characters adheres closely to the Bollywood repertoire. Like the “good” women of early Bollywood narratives, Mausam defines the desirable Indian woman as one who shuns all signs of ‘westernization.’ She is chaste, virtuous, patient, long-suffering and defined only by her relationship to family.³³

The American women represent the other end of the binary; they represent the threat that the West poses to Indian culture. Mausam crudely portrays these women within the limited grammar made available by the Bollywood vamp. They drink alcohol,

³¹. Nasreen Kabir, Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story (London: Channel 4 Books, 2001), ix.

³². In his interview with the New York Times correspondent Mr. Hali and his associate list as one of their achievements the absence of even a single kiss. See Ashley Dunn, “As the World and Soap Operas Turn: Blondes, Brain Tumors and Buckets of Tears on Hindi TV,” New York Times (September 26, 1995): B1.

³³. Nasreen Kabir, Bollywood: The Indian Cinema Story (London: Channel 4 Books, 2001), 59.

smoke and are sexually aggressive, and/or promiscuous. The threat they pose to the stability of the Indian family can be eliminated only through the presence of the “good” Indian woman. Effectively, the narrative asserts that while immigrants should adopt the lifestyle and veneer of Western culture they should structure important decisions by relying on traditional values. Specifically, Indian women are enjoined to remain traditional within the domestic and public realms to ensure the maintenance of Indian cultural identity. Mausam’s recuperation and celebration of “traditional” values offers an object lesson for diasporic audiences; it provides an unambiguous definition of what it means to be Indian in the United States and the values by which Indians must live.

Within the transnational optic, the family emerges as the moral, ethical and political horizon of national and cultural interest. It is produced as a site of vulnerability symbolizing the danger the culture faces. Family is the primary location from which individuals can feel their affiliation with one another as part of a cultural nation and negotiate their (long-distance) relation to it. Significantly, anxieties about the loss of cultural identity in the diaspora are displaced on to woman’s conduct. Although Indian masculinity is depicted as vulnerable to the predations of the West, it is woman not man whose behavior comes under scrutiny and regulation. Partha Chatterjee has theorized that the anti-colonial nationalist movement of the nineteenth century rhetorically and strategically sealed out the domestic arena and the space of the home from the influences of colonialism. Within such a configuration woman not only became the bearer of Indian culture, she was also the site of past freedom and future nationhood.³⁴ Within the diaspora the family and domestic sphere are conceptualized in a manner akin to the

³⁴. Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

colonial era; external threats to the stability of the family are countered by recuperating the “traditional” Indian woman, one who will help sustain and maintain a cultural imaginary.

Mausam articulates the affective experience of dislocation and displacement; it gives voice to the experience of social marginality. Looked at from a distance, India and Indian traditions take on an anachronistic quality while America is hollowed out as a cliché and filled with the truths of the immigrant condition. It helps address the condition of South Asian immigrant lives but lacks the specificity that would subtly address the manner in which gender and class intersect to produce different sets of realities/lived experiences. Despite its outdated depictions of Indian women and tradition, Mausam was aired by Zee TV in India in 1997, where the imprimatur of America made the narrative desirable. The series offered glimpses into immigrant life in the United States —the narrative asserts its American identity by depicting grocery stores in Manhattan, landmarks in the City, and quotidian scenes from New Jersey.

Mausam offers a familiar storyline: the glib forgetfulness of the past embodied by diasporic sons and daughters and their belated realization of the value and superiority of Indian tradition. The narrative also inscribes the inability of the parental generation to let go of the past or to connect it with the present. Unlike the traditional soap opera with its distinctly feminine address and point of view, the protagonist here is clearly male. The producer describes the Indian-American saga as one following the traditional path of the male immigrant, “You come here with nothing in your pocket, you drive a cab, you work

at Hudson News and then you become successful. But then your son marries an American and you have a heart attack.”³⁵

R. Radhakrishnan characterizes hybridity as “making meaning without the repression of a pre-existing normativity or teleology ... The two worlds need to be thought through co-terminously and co-evally through processes of negotiation and narrativization that are not ‘always already’ anchored in the guarantee of an inevitable denouement. The interiority of each ethos is always and perennially in reactive and polemical production in response to the inevitable adjacency and simultaneity of the ‘other’ ethos.”³⁶ From within such a definition, Mausam’s hybridity is skin deep; it is an alibi that masks a more complex reality.

Through a sentimental narration of Indianness, the diasporic soap opera masks the fact that the India it constructs is not so much based on originary facts as it is based on an adherence to a common imaginary construction. It produces a symbolic and fetishized community, infused with past memory, loss and nostalgia. Like other diasporic soap operas, Mausam creates the space for the articulation of a long-distance nationalism and permits an ascriptive affiliation with the homeland.³⁷ Its distant view of homeland promotes a relatively static and selective view of India. Nostalgia, in this instance,

³⁵. Quoted in Ashley Dunn, “As the World and Soap Operas Turn: Blondes, Brain Tumors and Buckets of Tears on Hindi TV,” New York Times (September 26, 1995): B1.

³⁶. R. Radhakrishnan, “Adjudicating Hybridity, Co-ordinating Betweenness,” Jouvert: An Online Journal of Postcolonial Studies (2000): <http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v5il/radha.htm>

³⁷. The concept of long-distance nationalism was formulated by Benedict Anderson to account for the imagined communities facilitated by the transnational traffic in people and media. Through the example of the Sikh nationalist movement based in Canada he offers a very critical assessment of the irresponsible politics it promotes. Other scholars who have elaborated on this concept though have toned down these criticisms to focus on the affective affiliations it facilitates. In his ethnography of Bosnian and Croatian immigrants in Australia, Zlatko Skrbis defines long-distance nationalism as transcending locality through the use of global communication networks; it crosses ethno-national borders and implicates a variety of groups, collectivities and individual who directly engage in ethno-national discourse and others who are accidental participants in the discourse. See Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1991); Zlatko Skrbis, Long-Distance Nationalism: Diasporas, Homelands and Identities (London: Ashgate, 1999).

functions as a special optic on the world, helping to create a romantic, pastoral image of India and Indian tradition. The next section outlines just how nostalgic and anachronistic such an image is when juxtaposed with narratives that address audiences in the geographic space of the nation.

“Desi” Soaps

In India, contemporary soap operas offer a very different trajectory to tradition. As has been noted by numerous scholars the woman question has been central to prime-time episodic television’s portrayal of issues pertaining to modernization and development. But the depiction of women has shifted dramatically over the last two decades as the television industry has moved from being a state enterprise to a commercial one.³⁸ While earlier television programming was didactic in its efforts to address women’s subordinate status in Indian society (and by extension India’s status within the world order), more recent narratives offer ambiguous and complicated portrayals. With the advent of commercial programming in 1982 the television landscape offered a range of female characters. Alongside the stereotypical “feminine” characters of melodramas, who were either cementers or destroyers of families, resided a range of “radical” roles in women-centered storylines. They were portrayed in traditionally male occupations; they were depicted as strong, assertive and independent.³⁹ These changes

³⁸. Purnima Mankekar, Nilanjana Gupta, and Arvind Rajagopal each offers very thoughtful accounts of the development of the Indian television industry. They underscore dominant shifts in programming and the political and ideological consequences. Early entertainment programming from the 1980s addressed issues such as hygiene and health practices and the need to end discrimination against the girl child. See Purnima Mankekar, Screening Culture. Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Nilanjana Gupta, Switching Channels: Ideologies of Television in India (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Arvind Rajagopal, Politics After Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³⁹. Most television commentators attribute these portrayals of women to the vibrancy of the 1970s’ feminist movement whose demands coincided with development goals. Emblematic of this trend were

reflect middle-class women's growing participation in the arena of paid labor and the different roles outside the domestic arena they now perform (prime-time programming specifically solicits the female viewer and extends well beyond 10 pm).⁴⁰

The 1990s liberalization of the economy and the accompanying changes in the television industry are most visible in the roles allocated to women in episodic television. "Gone were the long suffering wives and oppressed victims. In their place was a new breed of young, self sufficient, aggressive and manipulative hussies who smoked and drank and manifested all the habits of the archetypal vamp" without the attendant shame or the punishment.⁴¹ These women's modernity was marked by their boldness and ability to transgress various social boundaries. For instance, Banegi Apni Baat featured a single mother, in Dard the story centered on the extra-marital affairs of the female protagonist, Swabhimaan's lead character, Svetlana, challenged social stereotypes about women and is the chair of a corporate empire (although significantly most of the narrative and

programs such as Adhikaar which focused on women's legal rights; Kashmakash, a series based on short stories by women writers; Stri drew portraits of female role models; Airhostess explored the lives of single working women; and Udaan depicted the life of a police officer. For a description of these and other shows articulating the woman question see Amita Shah, Hype, Hypocrisy and Television in Urban India (New Delhi: Vikas, 1997); Sevanti Ninan, Through the Magic Window: Television and Change in India (New Delhi: Penguin, 1995); Shoma Chatterjee, Subject: Cinema, Object: Woman – A Study of the Portrayal of Women in Indian Cinema (Calcutta: Parumita, 1998).

As a state industry, early television followed the government mandate of "women's uplift" in its entertainment programming. But this was never clearly articulated. The government, though, developed a very elaborate code for commercial advertising, which is still current. The code stipulates the parameters of "positive" positive televisual representations of women but this does not extend to the realm of entertainment content. Specifically, women cannot be presented as passive, submissive or in a subordinate, secondary role. Anil Dharker has elaborated on the minutiae of this code. See Anil Dharker, Sorry, Not Ready: Television in the Time of PMdarshan (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1997).

⁴⁰. Amrita Shah, Hype, Hypocrisy and Television in Urban India (New Delhi: Vikas, 1997), 178.

⁴¹. If the earlier programming could be seen as a celebration of women's achievements Amrita Shah characterizes these newer representations and other social responses as constituting a backlash, one that equated "a certain kind of womanly behavior with 'Indian culture'" and condemned any deviation from it. In particular, representations of self-reliant, independent women or those who sought sexual gratification were singled out for criticism. See Amrita Shah, Hype, Hypocrisy and Television in Urban India (New Delhi: Vikas, 1997), 183-84; Anjali Monteiro, "Official Television and Unofficial Fabrications of the Self: The Spectator as Subject," in The Secret Politics of Our Desire: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema, edited by Ashis Nandy (London: Zed Books, 1998), 157-207.

commentaries about this show focus on her status as a mistress of a corporate executive). But this trend did not last too long. As the competition among cable and satellite channels grew, in an effort to draw audiences episodic television reconfigured once more the roles assigned to female characters, this time recuperating the “tradition-bound” woman as a role model. Significantly, these shifts in the presentation of idealized femininity coincided with the rise of the Hindu right and its emergence as a dominant political force.

Contemporary prime time narratives have reverted to formulaic depictions, which some commentators have characterized as constituting a “backlash.” Independent women are presented as those requiring regulation and by narrative’s end revert to being doormats or shadows.⁴² The “traditional” Indian woman whose activities center on and are limited to the domestic realm is celebrated in these narratives. The ‘New Indian Woman’ configured in these melodramas is modern, western and cosmopolitan in her lifestyle yet remains true to her “Indian” values. She is a “dramatic and polished breed” integrating and yet quite distinct from the mythological archetypes that have been celebrated and upon which most entertainment narratives were based.⁴³ Her presence allows the narratives to deal with the anxieties surrounding globalization processes but in a manner that reconfigures the global within the space of the nation and not vice versa. Woman becomes the terrain for the articulation of a cultural critique of globalization.

⁴². Ironically, the material lives of rural women has improved with the spread of satellite and cable channels. In his ethnographic study of television use in rural Maharashtra Kirk Johnson documents the different ways in which the presence of the television apparatus has altered interpersonal relations between men and women. Most notably, men have started helping women with their domestic tasks to accommodate their viewing preferences. See Kirk Johnson, Television and Social Change in Rural India (New Delhi: Sage, 2000).

⁴³. Biswadeep Ghosh, “More Bold than Beautiful,” Outlook India (December 20, 1995): <http://outlookindia.com/full.asp?fname=television &fodname=19951220&sid=1>

These narratives reveal the complex ways in which global cultural products and a globalized material culture has suffused the Indian socius. The transnational optic facilitated by such criss-crossing and interpenetrating vectors of the global and the local necessitates that Indian characters mark their place in the world through “Western” clothes, music, food but not allow these material goods to contaminate their Indian values. Contemporary prime-time episodic television thus reconciles the interests of a market-driven consumer economy with the dictates of “tradition.”

Like diasporic soaps these narratives too share Bollywood’s representational grammar but because they reference a different archive their depiction of female characters is significantly different. As in contemporary cinematic narratives the features dividing the good and bad woman have become increasingly blurred and paradoxically reinforced by displacing goodness onto the terrain of the domestic sphere. The heroine maybe a cabaret dancer but within the home she is doubly submissive and virtuous.⁴⁴ As in the films, in contemporary soaps the instability of the family is caused not by the West or an external threat but often from within. The New Indian Woman is compatible with the West and she shores up the nation by warding off internal threats. Significantly, the most potent threat is offered by other Indian women who are either too modern or too traditional.⁴⁵

⁴⁴. Ashis Nandy, “Indian Popular Cinema as a Slum’s Eye View of Politics,” in The Secret Politics of our Desire: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema (London: Zed Press, 1998), 1-18.

⁴⁵. Ravi Vasudevan, Tejeswani Niranjana and other film scholars have noted the manner in which Hindi cinema reconciles anxieties produced by globalization with their espousal of a market-driven economy. Significantly, the binaries propelling the melodramatic narratives shift axis to produce an evil from within the nation-state rather than the west. Ravi Vasudevan, “National Pasts and Futures: Indian Cinema,” Screen 41, no. 1 (2000): 119-25; Tejaswini Niranjana, .

War Among Women

Beginning with the mid-1990s, the threat and savior of the cultural nation were encapsulated in a series of prime-time melodramas that centered on the figures of the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law, what has been named the saas-bahu serial. The New Indian Woman comes into being in these narratives that center on the conflicts between the two women as they inhabit the space of the joint family home. The saas-bahu dyad has traditionally provided the generative power of Bollywood narratives and when first transported to television emerged in a sitcom, Tu Tu Main Main. Its outstanding success resulted in a number of prime-time episodic shows that centered on the dynamic saas-bahu relationship. Some of these include Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi, Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki, Sanskriti, Khabi Sautan, Khabi Saheli, Tu Tu Main Main, Kora Kagaz, Shagun (all on Star), Heena, Ghar Ek Mandir (Sony), Mehendi Tere Naam Ki, Amanat, Koshish Ek Asha, Aashirwad (Zee TV). Indeed, the popularity of these narratives has led to a saas-bahu industry, with variations proliferating on regional language channels.⁴⁶ Advertisers have even extended the prime-time slot beyond 10 pm because of their popularity with women viewers.⁴⁷ Not only have these programs drawn larger audiences than any other genre, save Hindi films, they are more economical than game shows and have thus proven to be very lucrative.

⁴⁶. Ekta Kapoor, a young female producer, and her production company, Balaji Telefilms, are associated with the most popular of these serials. For a while not only did this subgenre become a staple of television programming it also led to game shows and contests based on this dyad, both on and off television. See "Sony to Air JCPK saas-bahu specials," Indian Television (May 11, 2001): <http://www.indiantelevision.com/tube/y2k1/may/maytube6.htm>; "Madhu, Tina are 'Perfect Saas-Bahu'," Ludhiana Tribune (January 31, 2001): <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2002/2002131/ldh1.htm#14>

⁴⁷. Surveys indicate that over 70 percent of ad revenues in the television industry result from advertisements targeting women making prime-time a "female bastion." See Manu Joseph, "Better Ha(l)ves," Outlook India, (April 2, 2001): <http://outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20010402&fname=television&sid=1>

Production factors could partially account for the proliferation of this subgenre. Namrata Joshi reckons that the saas-bahu storylines have been enacted by satellite channels as part of a larger strategy of “back to desi roots” programming, an approach evolved to avoid the foreign channel label.⁴⁸ These factors alone though cannot explain the popularity of this formula among women viewers or the identification processes it fosters. The transnational optic, I argue, reconfigures a conventional archetype and the domestic sphere into a resonant televisual space, one where a range of anxieties and ambivalences about globalization are worked out. The doubling of the female figure allows for diverse issues to be inscribed on the female body. Woman becomes a supersymbolic site from which to manage the destabilizing contradictions globalization produces.

At first glance, the saas-bahu dramas reenact the cavil of women competing against each other to gain control or at least seek the attention of the same man – the son/husband. Unlike in the traditional melodrama that celebrates the triumph of good over evil, these narratives are primarily concerned with the older woman learning to cede control.⁴⁹ Repeatedly and endlessly the narratives focus on the Machiavellian machinations of the mother-in-law while the daughter-in-law submits obediently, if not cheerfully, to this degrading behavior. As the one who propels the action the mother-in-law is the more fully developed character while the wife/daughter-in-law is the foil who inevitably triumphs. Screenwriters acknowledge that “saas is an easy plot device, her

⁴⁸. Namrata Joshi, “A Babel in the Skies,” *Outlook India* (June 12, 2000): <http://outlookindia.com/full.asp?fodname=20000612&fname=television&sid=1>

⁴⁹. These storylines could be read as a generational conflict where the older woman is enjoined to cede her power and control over the son. Although they could be read as women warring over a man, I believe that this conflict is significantly different from the conflicts enacted in Western soaps, where we often have two women (of more or less equal stature) vying for the sexual attention and favors of the same man. The Indian instance is more blatantly about regulating and controlling the power wielded by an older woman.

intrigues and scheming nature inspire complicated plots and keep a show running episode after episode. Every lull is followed by a confrontation. You start off with sparks flying between two strong characters and then the story follows the trajectory dictated by the ratings. So, most soap moms-in-law are given an ambivalent character as they keep swinging from good to bad to downright ugly.”⁵⁰

These storylines though represent a significant modification of the trite women-are-each-other’s-worst-enemies storyline. The mother-in-law figure is a crucial node of narrative and discursive significance. Repeatedly the older woman is cast in a negative light for being too demanding, for being too faithful to the anachronistic joint family system and archaic lifestyles. Indeed, her strict adherence to “tradition” is presented as not just alienating but as causing the instability of the Indian family. And thus her behavior is cast as being un-Indian. Unlike the diasporic soaps that celebrate traditional values the saas-bahu narratives are unequivocal in their dismissal of this brand of tradition. Some narratives even go so far as to suggest that the mother-in-law is living out a NRI dream of tradition. She is sometimes cast as a NRI who has returned to India and is out of touch with contemporary society.⁵¹ The West no longer threatens India

⁵⁰. Namrata Joshi, “Mother-in-law Fixation,” *Outlook India* (May 28, 2001): <http://outlookindia.com/full.asp?sid=1&fname=Mom%2Din%2Dlaws+%28F%29&fodname=20010528&secname=Arts+%26+Entertainment>. Some regional language soaps have included over 500 episodes. See Soutik Biswas, “Swimming in Lather,” *Outlook India* (June 21, 1999): <http://outlookindia.com/full.asp?fname=features6&fodname=19990621&sid=1>; Sevanti Ninan characterizes these trends as “regression dressed up in tradition.” Sevanti Ninan, “Regression as Tradition,” *Hindu* (November 25, 2001): 3.

⁵¹. Media critics and the sponsors of these programs concur that these storylines are unrealistic and are the products of the “NRI” imagination in which “the consumption-oriented global market with its neon signs is married to a kind of nostalgia for the good, old but lost traditional ways of life.” See Namrata Joshi, “Mother-in-law Fixation,” *Outlook India* (May 28, 2001): <http://outlookindia.com/full.asp?sid=1&fname=Mom%2Din%2Dlaws+%28F%29&fodname=20010528&secname=Arts+%26+Entertainment>; Neera Chandhoke, “Counter-revolution in Soaps,” *Hindu* (December 2 2001): 5. Ironically, *Dollar Bahu* and *Desh Mein Nikla Hoga Chaand* are produced in the diaspora.

instead it is Indians who have absorbed the negative values of the West, such as a fondness for material culture, who are cast as the enemy.

Through the negative characterization of the mother-in-law these narratives make subtle claims about women's proper role within the family and limn the ideals of femininity. The mother-in-law figure is depicted as a powerful un-feminine figure who has wrested some power away from the men in her family. This is the threat to the family. The daughter-in-law, on the other hand, gains her strength to fight the mother-in-law with the sanction and approval provided by the men in the family. Such a hierarchization and valuation of women's access to male power inevitably pits women against each other and not against men. Such storylines set up the clichéd Manichean division of the modern and tradition. But this binary is rarely presented as a generational conflict instead it is presented as representative of competing definitions of womanhood, indigenous and those that are foreign-born.

The saas-bahu narratives outline a new ideal of Indian femininity, one that carefully blends the modern with the traditional. The mother-in-law figure lives out an archaic lifestyle and is unable to reconcile the demands of the marketplace with Indian values. Indeed her brand of femininity is cast as inimical to the nation, its present and future. I argue that anxieties about the undue influence of diasporic populations – in the economic, social and cultural realms – are mobilized by and sublimated onto the figure of the mother-in-law; she becomes the flashpoint around which contesting definitions of nation and tradition are negotiated. The daughter-in-law is inevitably well educated, often with training for a career in computers, management or the law, but opts to focus on the needs of her extended family. She is held up as a role model, who asserts a non-

western modernity, shunning the values espoused by the diasporic community. These narratives present “neo-tradition” and the family as the means to propel the nation into the modern world. The New Indian woman represents the ideal modality through which Indians can negotiate their position in a globalized order, without being overwhelmed by the West. The celebration of the daughter-in-law reinserts women into the cramped space of the joint family and normalizes women’s isolation within the domestic realm.⁵²

These storylines also articulate women’s sexuality with the nation in a very provocative manner. Negative characterizations of the mother-in-law, the older menopausal woman, are also suggestive about the ways in which ideas of fertility are closely linked with that of the future of the nation. The biological body of the woman is collapsed onto that of the nation. The mother-in-law is inimical to the nation and has to learn to cede her place within the family and of the nation to the (putatively) fertile, younger and modern woman.

Identity Politics

The two sets of soap operas I have examined in this essay politicize the domestic domain and the role women occupy within this space is configured as central to the maintenance of the cultural nation. But the subcontinental and diasporic versions espouse different understandings of the Indian nation. Nor do they produce a homogeneous or uniform definition of Indian womanhood. Rather, they enable a plurality of understandings, multilayered definitions that intertwine the global and the local in different proportions. Indeed in these narratives that ultimately center on different definitions of tradition, the global and the local acquire a palimpsest quality.

⁵². Neera Chandhoke, “Counter-revolution in Soaps,” Hindu (December 2, 2001), 5.

Difference is no longer conjugated as taxonomic but is presented as volatile, negotiated, and constantly shifting.

In both locales, televisual space deploys the vocabulary of identity, culture, and heritage deliberately and strategically. The sepulchral figure of the woman functions to produce a sense of the local that is shot through with the dynamics of the global.

Together, the diasporic and subcontinental versions of 'good' Indian womanhood present a complex repertoire of images, narratives and representational practices in which the world of commodities, the world of news, and politics are profoundly mixed.

In the transnational optic, the family is linked with a global public sphere; issues pertaining to the stability of the family come to define the urgencies of the present. In the diasporic imagination, the Indian family and women's roles within it are depicted as representing a pure, "traditional" space, the ground zero of an Indian culture that must remain untainted by the outside world, the geographic space the family inhabits. In the subcontinental version, the family and Indian values are seen as constantly evolving. The static model of tradition espoused by diasporic population indeed comes in for special criticism. Thus, the family and the domestic sphere are transfigured from "private" concerns into the fulcrum on which debates about what "India" stands for, and appropriate conduct for citizens are worked through. Through the amorphous trope of tradition the zone of the family is transformed into the locale for articulating the nation's virtues and values. The space of the family is revealed repeatedly to be shot through with the influences of global flows.

Both sets of narratives expand the horizons of domesticity, adding politicized dimensions to femininity, but a dimension that specifically erases concerns with social

and gender justice to foreground the interests of a unitary family. These narratives contest modern secularism; they offer ‘traditional’ notions of community obligations and mutuality as liberatory. The paradox of partial legibility structures these narratives – the family is both made visible and yet its complex workings and the operations of power within it are underdescribed. These narratives set up the intimacy of the domestic sphere as providing the core context for national identity.

Both sets of narratives produce what McKenzie Wark identifies as telesthesia, perception at a distance, geographies of experience enabled by a range of intercrossing media such as the telephone, television, and telecommunications that together double, trouble and permeate our experience of the space we experience firsthand.⁵³ The transnational optic endows these narratives with a specular mobility; they permit a journey to an imagined nation. Their invocation of a mythical tradition and Indian nationhood remains always beyond grasp, out of reach and unattainable; it is a virtual reality. Nevertheless this utopian nation must be vigilantly monitored since the globalized economy has increased dramatically the possibilities of cultural miscegenation. Both diasporic and subcontinental programs emphasize the need for purification rituals to guard their version of tradition.

These programs require a double consciousness; they speak in two different languages, that of the nation and the transnational, and translate between them as definitions of individual and group identities are carved out. This doubling is the product of the transnational optic. They reveal the manner in which the category of tradition is not just invented and imagined but is buffeted constantly by global and local pressures.

⁵³. McKenzie Wark, Virtual Geography: Living with Global Media Events (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

When juxtaposed with each other, diasporic and subcontinental media reveal poignantly the constructed nature of tradition. They reveal how this signifier is untethered from the geographic space of the nation-state and endowed with characteristics specific to and relevant to the site of enunciation, a location that is inevitably one of betweenness and permeable to global and local pressures.