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Juggling Two Rich Cultures: How Diasporic Mom Bloggers Negotiate the Hyphen

Sarkar, Sucharita

D.T.S.S. College of Commerce
Mumbai, India

sarkarsucharita@gmail.com

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Sarkar, Sucharita
 D.T.S.S. College of Commerce, Mumbai, India
 sarkarsucharita@gmail.com

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Abstract

The ‘in-between-ness’ of the diaspora is a flux where the diasporic subject has to constantly negotiate between acculturation and nostalgia. This negotiation is intrinsic to the construction of identities—of the self, of the community and of the ‘other’. For the diasporic Indian mother, this process is complicated by normative expectations of a ‘good mother’. She has to transmit the cultural legacies of the country of origin (through food, language, dress, rituals) as well as to equip them to engage with the culture of the country of destination in enabling ways. Although the Indian diaspora has been divided into two distinct phases – the colonial-era sugar diaspora and the post-colonial masala diaspora – the mother’s role in post-colonial diasporas retains traces of older patriarchal constructs and the ‘burden’ of motherhood, despite changes influenced by generational and geographical shifts.

In this context, the paper attempts to investigate selected blogs written by diasporic Indian mothers located in the United States as sites of identity re-negotiation for self and family. These blogs use multiple strategies to engage with the hyphenated and complex identities of diasporic subjects. The blogs function as archives that record and perpetuate cultural markers of the homeland; as coping strategies against alienation; as a shared nurturing resource for rearing children as global citizens; as sites of empowerment by writing the self. But are these blog spaces still colonised by hegemonic patriarchal assumptions about motherhood? Or do such blogs resist such assumptions only to be re-colonised by commercial compulsions? Through discourse analysis of the authorial blog-posts and readers’ comments, the paper aims to critique how diasporic mom-bloggers negotiate maternal agency, mother-work, and the politics of identity and difference, searching for balance.

Keywords: Blogging, diaspora, hybridity, Indian, mothering

Mothers Crossing Margins

Why aren’t the Top Bloggers people of color? Where is the Black/Hispanic/Asian/Indian Dooce?”MochaMomma, “Inclusion and Exclusion”, August 2, 2007: qtd in Connors 98-99.

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I deliberately begin this paper with a quote from a Black mom-blogger to foreground the marginal and largely non-radicalized space inhabited by Indian mothers in the blogosphere. Although the self-publishing and participatory nature of the internet promises democratization of communication, this is belied by replication of real-life hierarchies in the virtual sphere. Judith Stadtman Tucker exposes the “predominance of white, professional-class voices in the maternal blogosphere” (“Small World” 13). She points out the “overwhelming silence on the subject of race” by even the ghettoized mother bloggers who choose not to address “questions concerning race and identity” (99; 103).

This virtual discursive invisibilization needs to be contextualized against the growing visibility of the Indian diaspora, both in national and global markers. A 2014 study estimates that, with “25 million people scattered across the globe” (second in size to only the Chinese diaspora), the diasporic Indian presence on the web is the “online manifestations of one of the world’s largest, most diverse and most dynamic diasporas” (De Kruijf 1-3). Since the introduction of neoliberal economic policies from 1991, the NonResident Indian community has become a lucrative target group of governments and corporates. The diaspora’s social positioning has moved towards the centre since many host countries of the global north have adopted multiculturalism policy-making. Vijay Mishra writes: “in the context of multicultural theory as ‘postcolonial condition’, it has to be argued that literary/cultural histories of nations can no longer be correctly written without considerable reference to diaspora lives” (210).

In this paradoxical condition—where the growing importance of the postcolonial Indian diaspora is juxtaposed against the persistent minoritisation of online diasporic voices—this paper attempts to investigate two blogs written by diasporic Indian mothers located in the United States—*The Indian American Mom* and *Mom with a Dot*. I will also refer extensively to three other blogs, *Devis with Babies* (a US-based mom blog, now defunct), *Bong Mom’s Cookbook* (a US-based cookery and mothering blog) and *Masalamommamas* (a group blog by diasporic Indian mothers). The methodology used is close reading and textual analysis of selected authorial posts from these blogs.

It needs to be emphasized that the diasporic mother-bloggers studied in this paper are situated at privileged intersections of class, education and opportunity of internet-access in the global digital divide. This selection of bloggers represents only an elite minority of diaspora mothers. I have not attempted to study, for instance, the problems of mothers disadvantaged by neocolonial practices like the global surrogacy trade (Pande), or of poor mothers of the global south who are forced to migrate to provide paid care to first world families (Cheng).

I would, however, argue that the mother-bloggers use their privileged location as an empowering opportunity to interrogate patriarchal and diasporic discourses. South Asian diasporic mother-bloggers, grouped as “SAW-net women” by Landzelius, are in a “privileged position to re-present their homeland largely on their own terms” and to subvert the stereotype of the subjugated third world woman (29). Despite the relative irrelevance of Indian voices in the vast and distributed virtual network, within the maternal ‘Indian’ nodes of the blogosphere, there is close interconnectedness and mutuality of influence. To obliquely answer the question with which I began this paper, although the diasporic Indian mother-bloggers are not ‘top bloggers’, they often creatively use their niche positions to intervene in current debates surrounding gender, society and identity.

This paper theoretically operates at the intersection of motherhood studies, diaspora studies and social media studies. I locate the selected diasporic mother-bloggers in Third Wave Mothering, which means “mothering in an intergenerational space...mothering from a site of unusual multiplicity, positionality, opportunity...mothering in a time characterized...by ‘global capitalism and information technology, postmodernism and postcolonialism’” (Kinser 1). Andrea O’Reilly’s concept of “empowered mothering” impacted my analysis of the potential effect of these bloggers. The notion of diaspora used in the paper is defined by four characteristics: “an ethnic consciousness”, “an active associative life”, real or imaginary contacts with the land of origin, and “relations with other groups of the same ethnic origin spread over the world” (Raghuram et al 2). I will also use post-colonial diasporic concepts of the “transnational” and “thirdspace” to explore how these mother-bloggers use new, expanded and participatory digital spaces to reformulate their individual and collective identities (Sahoo & De Kruijf). In exploring these reformulations of identities, I am indebted to Vijay Mishra’s concept of the “diasporic imaginary”, which he uses, with multiple nuances, to “refer to any ethnic enclave...that defines itself...as a group that lives in displacement” (14).

Diasporic mother-bloggers, then, negotiate their triple—and triply fluid—identities as mothers, bloggers and transnationals to navigate the changing politics of family, race, nation and culture, searching for balance amongst agency, mother-work, and multicultural subjectivities. Despite their positions at the margins of the mamasphere, social mainstreams and patriarchal families, we shall see how diasporic and digitized Indian mother-bloggers use the agency of their blogs to connect, collaborate and create the self-as-embedded-in-community as a complex identity layered across the hyphen.

1. The Strategies of Self-Making

“Mom with a Dot: Indian Mom to American Kids—Expanding Horizons, Together”

- Madhavi. *Mom with a Dot*. Tagline.

“The Indian American Mom: Juggling Two Rich Cultures Thru Life and Parenthood”

- Roshni. *Indian American Mom*. Tagline.

“Masalamommas: An Online Magazine for Today’s Moms with a South Asian Connection”

- Anjum Choudhry Nayyar. *Masalamommas*. Tagline.

“Devis with Babies: The random musings of a random mom who randomly happens to be Indian”

- Deepa. *Devis with Babies*. Tagline.

“Bong Mom’s Cookbook: A Bong, A Mom & A Cook...”

- Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta. *Bong Mom’s Cookbook*. Tagline.

Within the “publicly personal narrative” of the blog, the blogger is “engaged in a strategic construction of the self” (Raman & Kasturi 28). The first strategy of self-presentation is the act of naming the blog and the blogging self to construct a visible or discernible online identity, and this asserts the right to a self-defined identity. Selecting a name that resonates with a specific community is a deliberate effort at building communities, of consciously imagining a specific readership. Madhavi’s reference to the “dot” or *bindi* acknowledges her visible marker of

ethnicity, which familiarizes her immediately to other South Asian Hindu mothers. Blogs are spaces where subjectivities and socialities intersect to shape individual and group identities. Both Madhavi and Roshni choose blog names embracing the duality of their identities—the Indian past and the American present—although they both indicate the conscious effort required to do so, in Madhavi’s use of “expanding” and in Roshni’s use of “juggling”. Deepa’s self-positioning as a “Devi” seems ironical when juxtaposed against the repetition of “random”: she subverts the fossilized glorification of motherhood in Indian culture by destabilizing the connection between her own subjectivity and ethnicity. Sandeepa embraces her multiple identities, straddling ethnicity, maternity and agency. Her self-definition as a “Bong”, rather than Indian, recognizes the cultural/culinary diversities within India, and resists the homogenizing tendencies of diasporic discourse to pack these diversities and differences within the convenience of the term “Indian”. In a post, Sandeepa refers to her growing up in a non-Bengali culture within India—“different culture, same country”—and how her mother “only followed what she was comfortable with”, participating “in the new, on the fringe and that was it” (Mukherjee Datta, *Baked Phoren Thekua*, par. 7). This selective participation in other cultures perhaps makes Sandeepa resist the generalized Indian-American label, and instead use her self-comfort as agency in making her own unique hybrid.

Interestingly, this process of selecting one’s identity from a plethora of available choices is akin to the “Indian spice box analogy” which Madhavi uses to describe her diasporic experience: “It’s like getting used to a new home”, where she finds a lot of commonality with the “locals”, where her status as an “outsider” does not make her “uncomfortable” (*Adoption*, par. 3-6). Unlike the old diasporic trope of alienation, these twenty-first century bloggers claim to be much more comfortable with their hyphenated existences.

Masala Mommas, for instance, with its emphasis on “today’s moms”, locates the bloggers firmly in the new diaspora. The term ‘masala’ recalls Sudesh Mishra’s metaphorical distinction between the old colonial indentured “sugar” diaspora and the new “masala” diaspora of “post-Independence emigrants from the subcontinent to sundry metropolitan centres, [who] are the willing subjects of—or unwillingly subjected to—a postcolonial and transnational political economy” (276). Recognizing the transnational, urban trend of ‘willing’, cross-cultural relationships—marital or otherwise—this group blog reaches out to a wider readership beyond old diasporas: “South Asian working mom or stay-at-home mom, a masalamomma married into a South Asian family or someone who just wants to incorporate a little South Asian flair into your family’s lifestyle” (Choudhry Nayyar, “About Us” par. 4). Here, “masala” is not just an ethnic marker, instead, in a more literal culinary sense, it becomes a cultural artefact anyone can experience. By selecting names that foreground and emphasize their hybridity, diasporic Indian mom bloggers make a strategic attempt to find a sense of belonging in their neither-here-nor-there positionality, to consciously use their liminality as a ‘visa’ into the multiple cultures they straddle.

Vijay Mishra comments about the contemporary diaspora: “Their race to occupy the space of the hyphen... signals the desire to enter into some kind of generic taxonomy and yet at the same time retain, through the hyphen, the problematic situating of the self as simultaneously belonging ‘here’ and ‘there’” (185). Yet, the very fact that none of these bloggers actually use the visible sign of the disjunctive-connective hyphen may signify an ease of movement across the trajectory between home country and host country. Raman and Kasturi concur that transnational women

bloggers project a “comfortably polymorphic existence ... living across cultures, cuisines, contexts” (29).

Vijay Mishra’s concept of the ‘diasporic imaginary’ uses the term ‘imaginary’ to identify the projected self with images representing what we would like to be—as opposed to what we are (14). Such consciously chosen acts, of self-naming and blogging about the self, become reflexive identity projects that create understandable and communicable narratives from personal experiences in order to provide a sense of certainty for better mastery of the self: this is a necessary process of self-actualization in an uncertain postcolonial, postmodern world (Giddens). This desire for claiming and projecting an ethnic-embedded yet self-actualized identity is made explicit in Choudhry Nayyar’s self-definition:

Masalamommas are strong, passionate, ambitious and sexy. *Most of all, we’re empowered women and mothers, with let’s face it, a little bit of spice.* But masalamommas don’t do it all without the help of good friends and family — they’re the masala that gives us our kick. (“About Us”, Par. 8. Emphasis mine).

The self-actualization in the diasporic Indian mamasphere is enmeshed in diverse intersections of familial, ethnic, racial and gendered identities, and this diversity is projected through a heteroglossic, counter-hegemonic discourse which this paper will explore further in the next sections.

2. Re/membering Home/s

“Thank you America, for helping me make a home away from home.”

- Madhavi, “Happy Diwali at School”, par. 2.

“I occasionally suffer from identity crisis about where I belong (classic case of *dhobi kakutta*), but I’m rapidly getting comfortable about identifying myself as a citizen of the world.”

- Roshni, “About”, par. 10.

The definition, discourse and imaginary of the diaspora is inextricable from the notion of home/s, both physical and imagined. To quote Pandurang and Munos:

The notion of a ‘diasporic subjectivity’...derives from the assumption that dislocation from one specific geo-cultural milieu, and re- location to another, ensues in shifts in identity construction. However, it is not merely the journey of the individual, but that of a collective movement of a people from the homeland to the host-land that leads to the formation of a diasporic or third space, a space which goes beyond geo-territorial terms of referencing. (2)

Since diasporic existence destabilizes the concept of home, the desire to be emplaced is a recurring theme in immigrant narratives, although the concept of home itself is not fixed or homogenous. To Roshni, India continues to be her home (“Welcome Home!”), to Madhavi, India is now ~~home~~ (not erased, but physically distanced), while the United States is home (“Back”). The fragmentation of the diasporic home is reflected in the multiple ways in which diasporic mom-bloggers locate and define their homes.

Distanced spatially and temporally, the imaginary home becomes both an object of nostalgic reconstruction as well as subjected to an “estranging alchemy”, where the familiar

becomes defamiliarised (S. Mishra 287). Madhavi writes that during her “lovely vacation at home in India”, she had no desire to eat the street or restaurant food (although food is a potent anchor to imagined homes) as her “concern for hygiene reigned above desires of the palate” (“Back” par. 1).

Yet, these diasporic bloggers reiteratively re-create cultural markers of the homeland in the host land, using various strategies of translocation and transformation. As “new cosmopolitans”, transnational mother-bloggers use “technology to position themselves in motion between at least two homes” (Rajan & Sharma 23). Madhavi herself uses a reductive and imaginative approach, reducing her nostalgia for India to her longing for her family, and imagining how she can re-produce the specificities of past sensory experiences: “I don’t miss India anymore. I miss my family. I miss strands of Jasmine. And sipping coconut water....But I don’t crave them. I can grow jasmines here. Will probably try growing coconuts too” (“Adoption”, par. 3). Food-bloggers like Sandeepa Mukherjee Dattare-member the home through the powerful sensory mnemonic of homeland recipes, to “connect to their Bangla roots through the smell and taste of Bangla cuisine” (“Welcome” par. 5). Like food, festivals and rituals are cultural performances that are re-enacted in the diaspora in multiple ways. *Masalamommas* reconstructs the home performatively through ethnicised community rituals like “*godhbharai*” ceremonies for mothers-to-be, which are “the perfect way to celebrate culture”; it is strategically inclusive in defining the ritual in Hindi, Bengali, Tamil and “South Indian” (Choudhry Nayyar, “Masalamommas Host” par.s 1-3). However, the ironies of non-natural transposition of cultural markers is revealed through Choudhry Nayyar’s detailing of how mothers attending this manufactured ceremony could pose for photographs against various stage backdrops, like “a traditional adorned Indian elephant...[or] the Taj Mahal, a palace in Rajasthan and more” (par. 8). Such diasporic re-enactments of cultural legacies are simulated masquerades, offering variety without authenticity. Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta, too, realizes the slippages between ordinary homeland festivals and their generic diasporic reconstructions, but she still feels the need to connect and participate: “Though Pujo here is not same as back home, I am still excited about going to Pujo tomorrow” (“DurgaPujo” par. 13).

Upon scrutiny, these re-constructions of homes become politically charged. The commercially-manufactured nostalgia offered by *Masalamommas* become complicit with larger postcolonial neoliberal policy-making that invites “bourgeois immigrant Indians...to feel stably affiliated and/or emotionally at home...at once by the American and the Indian nation states and their respective markets” (Niyogi De 332). Bloggers like Madhavi express this strong sense of affiliation to their adopted homes: “I’ve reached a state of mind that enables me think of how I can add delight to my life here instead of wishing I were in a place 7000 + miles away!” (Madhavi, “Adoption” par. 6). In her transnational narrative the sense of loss is being erased through a gradual realization of “delight”—which may be both material and relational—enabled by neoliberal economic and social changes. This delight and comfort may partially have been made possible by strong bonds of community in the blogosphere, as all the posts referred to in this paper mostly evoke positive responses of support, approval and friendship from the readers.

However, the discomfort that Madhavi feels in India and the clear-eyed, critical awareness of Sandeepa subvert the fossilized stereotypes of home/s perpetuated in commercially-produced nostalgia—for instance, the yellow mustard fields, the families praying together, and the mother lovingly cooking soul food, repeatedly iconized in Bollywood films. The internet “offers a

vehicle whereby the subaltern can resist ‘mummification’ as a seductive stereotype of nostalgia, whether neo-colonial or diasporic in tenor” (Landzelius 29). Through their interventions, personal bloggers can make such tropes of ‘home’ more indeterminate and fluid.

There is another way in which bloggers negotiate the notion of home/s. The blog, which is a personally constructed and controlled space, functions as a virtual home for the blogger, albeit one open to public scrutiny. Raman & Kasturi use the metaphor of the “private living room or the salon” to describe blogs (28). Just as domestic agency is expressed through the way we decorate our homes, the blogger’s agency is expressed through her deliberate selection of memories and stories to fashion the virtual home of her own.

3. Archiving Storylines

“I had created a capsule of my thoughts to revisit and take away from, at any future point in time. Especially the kids, after they grow old enough to get it.”

- Madhavi, “In a Good Place”, par. 1.

“I want to pass on my legacy of Bengali food to my two little daughters and all the other little ones out there who growing up in a foreign land.”

- Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta, “Welcome to my Cookbook”, par. 5.

A defining feature of the internet is that it transcends the limitations of time and space (De Kruijf; Friedman). Friedman considers blogs to be diverse, multitudinous, relational, atemporal, and performative (11). Blogs are limitless and persistent spaces where stories can be narrated, exchanged, circulated and perpetuated, which is why they can become important diasporic archives of stories of self, family and community.

Diasporic Indian bloggers use their blogs as archives to create legacies for their children and memory-banks for themselves. When Sandeepa uploads recipes on her blog, she is creating a culinary and cultural resource that can be accessed to re-make the homeland in the other land. This continuous archiving or personal or recipe stories is linked to the immigrant’s anxiety about the loss of traditions, and their repeated performing of these traditions to prevent this erasure (Ray 157). To this is added the maternal anxiety about the swift passage of childhood and it attendant affects. Madhavi, who opted out of her career to become a stay-at-home mother (SAHM), is driven by a “sense of urgency” to “build bonds, fill memories, instill values, cherish successes, hold hands, tell bed time stories” to her children, and to record these performances of maternity in her blog (“The Math” par. 1). The incremental accumulation of memories and/or recipes on the blogs functions as a therapeutic bulwark against such maternal and diasporic anxieties.

Another reason to document stories of daily life in the blog is to enable family and friends in the home country to remain intimately connected to the blogger’s family in the host country (Madhavi, “In a Good Place”). By connecting families across geographical spaces, blogs—along with other digitized social networks like Facebook and Skype—offer a “reassessment of the notions of presence and absence” and a “reconsideration of the relevance of physical proximity for the maintenance of family ties” (De Kruijf 10).

Since blogs are unbound by time and space constraints, the archiving of stories is always unfinished, and the subjectivity of the blogger also becomes an evolving project. Madhavi says of her blog that “it steadily became another side of the prism through which one could see me. So from that perspective, it's now, a part of me - who I am. There is so much growing to do here, I know” (“In a Good Place” par. 1).

Along with the recording of daily incidents and childhood memories, the subjectivity of many diasporic Indian mothers develops through their strategic selection, narration and documentation of stories of female role models from their past. Bell hooks, in her seminal essay on homeplace as a site of resistance, regards her remembrance of her grandmother as a “conscious gesture” that recognizes the struggle of her foremothers as a “radically subversive political gesture” (267). Roshni has written a three-part series of posts on her “grandmother’s clash with the conservatism”—how she contested the patriarchal subjugation of women in those times—vividly narrativising her “initiation into the cruel realities as a Hindu widow”, her subsequent “shrugging off ‘tradition’ and harsh rules”, and then, “the final rebellion: remarriage” (“Hindu widows” par. 2). Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta also writes about the covert resistances to patriarchal strictures by her widowed foremothers, who were socially prohibited from eating non-vegetarian food: “Vegetarianism only made her hone her culinary skills and...she conjured meals so good that my father and uncle preferred sharing her meal than their own fish or meat options” (“ChingriAloo”, par. 6).

The variety and individuality of the stories archived across blogs resist the homogeneity of mainstream diasporic discourse, in which “multiple identifications and contested affiliations are to be muffled, congealed into a publicly expressed singular narrative of belonging” (Raghuram et al 3-4). Archiving individual storylines of resistance disrupt this congealed patriarchal and diasporic normativity.

4. Resisting Normativity

“If our kids were to learn anything of our culture, it would be because we wished to teach them and they demonstrated the interest! This is not to criticize anyone whose kids are more immersed in Indian culture than ours are; it’s our own personal preference to parent this way!”

- Roshni, “How Indians view American-born Indian Kids”, par. 3.

“If accepting social norms made for everyone else’s convenience is included in ‘values’, then I’m sorry, I’m a little less Indian...
If classifying skin, neighborhoods, brands and even food into status symbols is norm, then I’m sorry, I’m a little less Indian...”

- Madhavi. “Americanized Hindu”, par. 3-6.

Diasporic Indian mothers have to continually encounter cultural expectations about their roles and responsibilities in the family and community. Andrea O’Reilly enumerates the “rules of good motherhood as dictated by contemporary patriarchal ideology”: these include that notions that the mother is the best caregiver, the mother must be present 24/7, the mother must put children’s needs before her own, the mother must feel fulfilled by motherwork, mothering is time

and labour intensive, motherwork is personal undertaking without political import (801). To this we may add the diasporic expectation that the mother will uncritically idealize, follow and teach eulogized traditions of the homeland. Recent feminist research on neoliberalism's impact on gender have shown how contemporary neoliberal policies also create untenable pressures on mothers to be producers (wage-earning contributors to the economy), reproducers (mothering children to perpetuate societies) as well as consumers (Simon Kumar; Vandenberg Giles). Hence, we may classify the expectations faced by contemporary diasporic Indian mothers as patriarchal, diasporic and neoliberal. The blogs studied in this paper engage with these expectations through selective resistances to some of them and by accepting some of these norms through reiterative performativity. According to May Friedman, "Mommyblogs present a lived tension between mothering and motherhood...[and] reveal a self-reflexivity and an honest grappling that resists an easy label of 'feminist' or 'patriarchal'" (15).

The bloggers negotiate the notion of the "feminised and authentically Indian home", which is the "pursuit of an essentialist Hindu bourgeois patriarchal (upward) mobility" in individual and often contradictory ways (Niyogi De 344). Madhavi chooses to reify certain patriarchal Hindu customs like "wearing a Bindi, Sindur on the forehead, or the Mangalsutra", or "teaching [her] kids simple slokas", she however refuses to follow "mindless traditions devoid of purpose" in the name of culture: her strategy being a conscious self-selected tightrope walking between being "a little less Indian" and "a little more Hindu" ("Americanized Hindu" par. 3-13). She further complicates her patriarchal and diasporic non-normative positionality by refusing to be a "conventional Mom with a Dot": she is both unconventional (teaching western music to her children, knowing French, having "best friends who are Caucasian", etc.) and "extra conventional" (taking spiritual classes) ("Complex" par. 3). She conforms to the ideal of good motherhood by opting out of her high-salaried career to stay at home and perform "daily pooja, cook nutritious meals thrice a day" and wait at the door for her school-returning children ("My Reasons" par. 4). Yet the sacrifice and silence implied in such normative performances of motherhood is undercut by her eloquent enjoyment at being a "constant presence" in her children's lives, at being sure of her choice and having no regrets (par. 6).

On the other hand, Roshni, despite initially battling "Mommy guilt" at leaving her children in daycare to go to work, resists the negative normative judgment of working mothers, and, by narrating her own story of how well her children adjusted to daycare, attempts through her blog to reach out and help others who suffer from similar feelings of inadequacy and guilt ("WOHMs"). Yet, her constant juggling of home and work is proof of the pressures of neoliberalism on mothers who are forced to live up to impossible standards of multitasking supermoms. Roshni, however, resists the diasporic pressures on mothers to imbibe Indian culture in their children, deliberately opting for a more diversified and less xenophobic approach. "Unlike some people from minority communities who may shelter their children from wider exposure, we as a family, have always made it a point to embrace the opportunity to learn more about the variety of cultural and social experiences that we have around us" ("Multicultural", Par. 6).

Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta, who conforms to neoliberal maternal standardizations of working mothers, seems also to reify patriarchal stereotypes of good motherhood through her feminized role as family cook. Yet she subtly resists culinary/cultural stereotypes by inserting her innovations to fracture the norms of 'authenticity' prevalent in ethnic culinary discourses. For

instance, although she decides to follow the tradition of making ‘patishapta’ on the Sankranti festival, she uses maple syrup and Nutella instead of the traditional coconut-kheer filling, choosing to please her children’s palate than any standards of authenticity (“PatiShapta”). By choosing to insert the global into the local, the foreign into the ethnic, Sandeepa constructs not only her own recipe but her own diasporic imaginary.

One of the features of the diaspora is that it acquires the symbols of modernity in its own terms, so that “global and local interests remain in tension” (V. Mishra 197). In the next section, the paper will look at how this tension permeates the bloggers’ negotiation of their hybridity.

5. Negotiating Hybridity

“This revelation that “OMG! My kids are becoming ‘Amreekan’” is what causes Indian parents abroad to run and sign their progeny up for shloka classes, Bharatnatyam classes and tabla classes! A lot of it boils down to the fear of ‘what will people say?!”

- Roshni, “How Indians View American-born Indian Kids”, par. 4.

“The label of ‘Indian’ and the label of ‘mom’ are firmly mine and firmly entrenched into my identity... being of Indian origin affects many little and not so little aspects of daily life in subtle and not-so-subtle ways.”

- Deepa, “To Blog or Not to Blog”, par. 1.

For Chandra Talpade Mohanty, living as an immigrant in the United States meant being “conscious of and engaged with the script of American racism” (192). This script includes intentional racialised micro-aggression and marginalisation to unintentional but still noticeable differential treatment: Madhavi ironically narrates an encounter where her “good, white” American friends, despite trying repeatedly, continue to pronounce her name as “Ma-the-wee” (“Hi, My Name”).

Patricia Hill Collins theorized that, for mothers of colour, “the subjective experience of mothering/motherhood is inextricably linked to the sociocultural concern of racial ethnic communities—one does not exist without the other” (312). Madhavi articulates this maternal and cultural concern when she asks of her diasporic readership: “Why do you expect a ‘good’ child to make the same choices you did [regarding]... Indian food v/s Western; Indian dresses / Western, within culture marriages v/s multicultural partners?” (“Parenting” par. 3).

The oppositional pressures of retaining the cultural legacy of the home country and adapting to the often racially-skewed environment of the host country is the key tension of the hyphen that diasporic mothers experience. Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta expresses this tension when she writes of the confusion of immigrant mothers during festival time: she wants to share the “immense joy” of homeland festival-rituals, like lighting brass lamps during Diwali, and yet she has “also grown to like Halloween” with its warmth-giving orange pumpkins (“Baked Phoren”, par.s 2-3). The tension escalates into anxiety of loss, when, on asking her daughter to name her favourite festival—“secretly hoping for the answer to be DurgaPujo”—the daughter replies that she prefers Halloween (par.6).

We have seen before that members of the new diaspora deliberately position themselves in “the liminal or threshold zone of intercutting subjectivities that defines migrant experience” (S.

Mishra 288). The diasporic Indian mother blogger uses this locational vantage to work through the memories (personal and shared) of home to creatively re-produce homeland cultural imaginaries for her family. Instead of indoctrinating her sons with the ritual significance of Hindu festivals, Roshni, creates her own meanings of these festivals. Inspired by childhood memories, she chooses to start “a new tradition of painting individual ‘diyas’” with her boys during Diwali (“A Tradition”par. 1).

Vijay Mishra exposes the deceptive “politics of the hyphen” which, “in the name of empowering people...disempowers them; it makes them, to use a hyphenated term, ‘empoweringly- disempowered’” (184). Yet, the bloggers studied in this paper do not express any negative sense of hyphenated disempowerment. One possible reason could be that many of them, like Madhavi and Roshni, have chosen mixed ethnic marriages—Roshni is a Bengali married to an Andhraite, and Madhavi is from South India married to a North Indian. Adjusting to intra-national hybridity within the home imbues them with the skills to navigate inter-national hybridity outside the home.

May Friedman reads postcolonial hybridity as both oppressive and enriching: “Hybridity...serves a dual role. On the one hand, it acknowledges the tension inherent in undertaking a practice under oppressive conditions.... On the other hand, it sees the circumstances that this tension creates as rich with possibility” (48). Roshni resolves the tension by willingly embracing the cultural diversity she has access to, creatively focusing more on the inherent excitement of new experiences rather than on the persistent differences between cultures. She blogs: “We do celebrate Diwali, but we also do celebrate Christmas and we enjoy Halloween, so I think our kids have just come to think of it all in one giant aggregate of fun holidays rather than differentiate each for what it’s worth! (“How Indian Kids”par. 2). Madhavi selectively hybridizes the resources of both cultures in her parental lessons: she explains the tradition of the Sankranti harvest festival to her children by referencing it as an “Indian Thanksgiving” (“Sankranti”par. 1).

Friedman feels that the “transnational sensibility” of even less overtly politicized mom-bloggers is broadening the largely white canon of mothering on the web and making “perceptions of motherhood” more inclusive and enriching (49). The bloggers studied here, while not radically critiquing the politics of the hyphen, do try to negotiate the hyphen in their personal and creative capacities as mothers and communicators, for instance through their customized adoption of multiculturalism.

6. Engaging with Multiculturalism

“We now live in such a multicultural, cosmopolitan neighborhood that my sons’ closest friends are of Chinese, Korean, Polish, and Hispanic descent. We are so happy that they mix with such a wide variety of cultures and that nothing seems ‘weird’ or ‘not something that we people do’!”

- Roshni, “The World is Your Oyster”, par. 8.

In postcolonial societies, the colonial model of overt racial discrimination and exploitation has been replaced by the multicultural model of harmonious integration of races in the ‘melting pot’. The multicultural model has, however, been variously contested by diaspora theorists. Germinating from the demands of recognition by the diaspora, multiculturalism, though

supposedly aiming at “universal equality”, is, in fact, premised on “the persistence of difference located in the in-between” (V.Mishra 136). The persistent minoritisation of ethnicities in contemporary multiethnic and multicultural states is a legacy of colonialism and reflect prior colonial relations (Stuart Hall, qtd. in V. Mishra 197). Deepa, for instance, blogs about always being “classified” as the “other”, and how she hopes that Obama—“the literal ‘other’”—will inspire white Americans to “rethink their attitudes about or treatment of us, and possibly even treat us with more respect” (“Obama”). Diasporic existence is embedded in this constant awareness of racialised difference, of living amidst people who will always pronounce your name incorrectly (Deepa, “Obama”; Madhavi, “Hi, My Name”).

TalpadeMohanty critiques the defanging of the radical potential of difference in the multicultural model of harmony-in-diversity: “Difference seen as benign variation (diversity)... rather than as conflict, struggle or threat of disruption... suggest[s] a harmonious, empty pluralism”, whereas “asymmetrical and incommensurate” difference “cannot be accommodated” (193). The inclusive agenda of multiculturalism is “located within unthreatening humanist parameters” and “remains a thing of the past, a way... to accommodate the ‘alien’ within” (V. Mishra 135). By and large, the diasporic Indian mombloggers studied in this paper engage with multiculturalism in conciliatory and unthreatening ways, conforming to the role of the ‘model alien’, who retains the often-exotic cultural markers of her home while adopting the social practices of the host country, and, most importantly, never openly contests her socio-political minoritisation. Madhavi claims: “I fit here at various levels. My personality fits very well into the American way of life” because she is “organized”, “progressively curious” and “comfortable communicating with total strangers”; although she is still not “as comfortable as [she would] like to be”, she is “convinced that [she will] get there” (“Adoption” par. 3-6). Her transnational sensibilities make her an ideal multicultural citizen who willingly traverses cultural distances: both by selectively experiencing other cultures, and also by strategically sharing her homeland culture with others. She collaborates with her son’s schoolteacher to organize a “30 minute activity around Diwali”, making the “cultural experience complete” by wearing a saree, sharing information through coloring and quiz sheets, and gifting scented candles (“Happy Diwali”). By creatively engaging with multiculturalism, and by strategically inserting the margin into the mainstream discourse, these bloggers are attempting to “shift the center”: a mutual process in third wave “feminist theorizing that embraces difference as an essential part of commonality” (Hill Collins 327). Such processes are often reciprocal; Roshni’s blog was selected as one of the Voices of the Year at the annual BlogHer ’14 conference (“The Indian American Mom’s”, par. 14)

Roshni participates in offline and online events like “Multicultural Children’s Book Day” to “not only raise awareness for the kid’s books that celebrate diversity, but to get more of these types of books into classrooms and libraries” (“Multicultural”, par. 2). Her post reveals not only her enthusiasm about promoting multiculturalism but contains the list of sponsors, along with hyperlinks connecting to websites selling such books. The close links between multicultural propaganda and neoliberal markets are exposed—maybe unwittingly—through this post, and raises questions on the authenticity and intentionality of the author.

7. Commerce and Colonization

“Nowadays, it’s not just that you write great content, it’s also all about the marketing!”

- Roshni, “Should I Blog or Should I Write”, par. 1.

Niyogi De opines that “neoliberal capital’s production of autonomous diasporic Indianness... makes the individual isomorphic with collective identity” (344). This raises the debate whether the authenticity of blogs is compromised if the blogger commercializes the blog. For instance, when Roshni is blogging about her visit to Kolkata, she uses the standardized tropes of street food and Park Street that encapsulate the Kolkata experience, thereby making her personalized memories ‘isomorphic’ with collective nostalgia (“Welcome Home”). The authenticity is compromised when, at the end of the post—after the affect of nostalgia has been created—Roshni embeds sponsored links from British Airways. Instead of a genuine articulation of homeland-love, the post reads as an advertisement of the global travel industry targeting the affluent diaspora market. Roshni’s desire that her blog becomes a “forum for Indian Americans, NRIs...and for others interested in learning a bit about Indian culture” becomes suspect: is she genuinely desiring to connect or does she want to appease wider markets? (“About” par. 2). Is the postcolonial blogger becoming recolonized by neoliberal commercial imperatives?

This problem of tainted authenticity is complicated in the case of monetized mombloggers, who are socially judged to violate “certain implicit codes of virtue and self-sacrifice that are understood to be embedded within the culture of mothering” (Connors 94). *Masalamommas’* attempts at reaching out to a wide, cross-cultural readership by offering “a bit of everything” may be critiqued as marketing exoticised ‘masala’ cultural stereotypes of Indianness (Choudhry Nayyar, “About Us” par. 4). The neo-colonized, commercialized underpinnings of the blog are revealed when Nayyar mentions that the South Asian themed baby shower that the blog hosted “to celebrate culture, motherhood and new life” was sponsored by “a brand that also celebrates motherhood, Huggies Canada” (“Masalamommas Host” Par. 1).

Bloggers like Roshni express the contradictions within the debate about the inauthenticity and homogenization of diasporic discourse controlled by neo-colonizing market hegemonies. Although she strategically markets her blog through monetization, sponsored linkages and by actively promoting it across social networking websites, she also problematizes her complicity with the processes of commercialization: “Now I find that I spend all my time...on email, Facebook, and Twitter.... I just want to get back to writing.... I want to take inspiration from all my bloggy friends, but in the end, I *must* trust that my content *will* speak for itself” (“Should I Blog”, par. 7). Roshni’s post reveals the commercial and socio-cultural pressures that coerce diasporic Indian mombloggers, but it also articulates her determination to balance these pressures and construct her own self-empowering narrative.

8. Empowerment through Provisional Balance

“I believe increasingly that only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world which will be truly ours.”

- Adrienne Rich, Foreword, *Of Woman Born*, 16.

“I founded *Masalamommas* because I felt a need to build something where moms could have these cultural conversations, share stories, their triumphs and challenges and hopefully learn from each other.”

- Anjum Choudhry Nayyar, “When Motherhood Meets Community”, par. 9.

Niyogi De contends that diasporic “reclamations of belonging and authenticity” is centred on the role of women in home and community: in “teleological border-crossing”, the woman’s role is “isomorphic” to the “patriarchal and masculinist notions of community and home”, while in the “anti-teleological crossing”, women’s relationship with patriarchal social structures “grows tension-filled, dialectical and partially interventionist” (334). The blogs studied in this paper balance these two contradictory roles in diverse ways.

Third-wave mothers of various identity intersections “have been willing and active participants in the creation of a mother-centric alternate culture in the digital sphere” (Stadtman Tucker, “Mothering”, 199). The agency and authority of blogging creates a counter-discourse to the patriarchal idealization of submissive, self-sacrificing motherhood, and transforms the personal online journal to a political declaration of reclaiming maternal selfhood. The *Masalamommas* homepage defines itself as a “space to foster open conversations on all things culture and parenting” that enables mothers in “balancing cultural expectations with motherhood” and in “sharing perspectives on cultural norms” (Choudhry Nayyar, Homepage). The focus is not to radically alter these cultural expectations, but to insert and exchange individual perspectives that interrogate from within. Friedman uses Foucault’s notion of minor resistances coming from multiple points to theorize the “potentially empowering” agency of non-radicalized, racialised mombloggers (54-55). Using their complicated and hyphenated positionality, they interrogate both the patriarchal lessons of ideal/good motherhood and also the dominant western assumptions of maternity. Here, it may be useful to differentiate between the notions of “empowered mothering” and “feminist mothering” as theorized by Andrea O’Reilly. Feminist mothering “begins with the recognition that mothers must live her life and practice mothering from a position of agency, authority, authenticity and autonomy” (O’Reilly 802). On the other hand, empowered mothering is not so consciously political, rather it “signifies a general resistance to patriarchal motherhood” (O’Reilly 798). The blogs studied here may be classified as narratives of empowered mothering with an undeclared—and sometimes intermittent—but evolving feminist consciousness.

Contextualized against the diasporic tropes of uncertainty and fragmentation, these blogs can be read as attempts to create and communicate coherent stories from discrete experiences in order to strategically re-appropriate a sense of certainty, control and balance: this is their value as self-reflexive identity projects (Giddens). The blogosphere is defined by connectivity, community-creation and friendship formation: this is often supportive and therapeutic. Thus, blogs are a valuable resource in negotiating the dual isolation of mothering and the alienation of the immigrant. Madhavi connects with her readers: “I know you personally and feel a certain warmth when I see your comment here. Not very different from hearing a baby’s first words” (“In a Good Place” par. 1). The individual and group blogs studied in this paper “find connection in common cultural experiences and shared identities” (Stadtman Tucker, “Small World” 13).

Talpad Mohanty proposed the concept of “solidarity” instead of the “hastily derived notion of universal sisterhood” as a “basis for mutually accountable and equitable relationships

among different communities of women.” (193). These blogs, by their individually differentiated voices, by their democratic system of commenting and reciprocation, and by their attempts to construct a collective discourse while retaining their individualities, form such a solidarity. May Friedman terms the mamasphere as a “relationality” where “motherhood is contextualized and debated” (75).

The Indian diasporic mom-bloggers studied here, each in her individual way, resist but do not aim to overthrow patriarchal family structures and cultural expectations. What they do in their blogs is consistently perform an ontological or “working hybridity” that fractures “dualist narratives”—of good/bad motherhood, of desh/videsh stereotypes—to create new, contingent, heteroglossic and shared knowledges (Wilson 499).

The diasporic Indian mamasphere functions as a transformative thirdspace where transnational Indian mothers, through their diversity and discursiveness, collaborate and construct a “creative reconstitution of a new, hybrid, empowering self” (V. Mishra 193). Although the blog discourse is an under-construction terrain, where roles are unfixed, often contradictory, and subjected to multiple structural pressures, diasporic Indian mombloggers bravely continue to create what Vijay Mishra calls “provisional meanings” (210) from the minutiae of their hyphenated existences.

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Sucharita Sarkar is an Assistant Professor in English, at D.T.S.S College of Commerce, University of Mumbai. She is currently pursuing her doctoral studies on Mothering Narratives in Contemporary India at the University of Mumbai. Her research focuses on issues and intersections of gender, family, media, diaspora, identity and culture studies. She published several research papers in academic journals, as well as chapters in edited books and e-books.
