

Queering Narrative Tropes in Bengali-American Fiction: *Bright Lines* and Keya Das's *Second Act* as Epideictic Family Epics

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Abstract

This paper considers how two novels (one by Tanais and the other by Sopan Deb, respectively) revise and reuse some of the formal tropes in transgenerational novels about Bengali immigration from South Asia to the United States in ways that are explicitly queer. Each novelist uses postmodern formal innovations, like free indirect discourse and transtextuality, to offer defenses and critiques of transcultural religious and communal values and kinship structures in the South Asian American diaspora.

Comparing style and characterization in Tanais's 2015 novel to Deb's 2022 novel reveals that kinship structures and attitudes about romance, sex and marriage shift across three generations of each fictional Bengali-American family living in the New York City metro-area in the early 21st Century, sometimes in surprising ways. Both novels consider the context of migration—displacement after the war for Bangladeshi Liberation and economic immigration for work and education, respectively—and the novels also thematize American xenophobia and Islamophobia as forces that necessarily shape immigrants' experiences, even within transnational contexts and diasporic communities. Because the novelists chose to frame their “coming-to-America” familial epics alongside personal narratives about central characters that come out as lesbian or transgender, the crafting of literary desire—to find belonging while holding on to an authentic self—operates in both books as a mode of building connection and acceptance across generational, cultural and religious differences. As queer Bengali-American characters express their sexualities and gender identities through diegetic discourse to each novel's readers, the novelists frame gender, sex and sexuality as integral parts of identity-formation within transcultural contexts, Deb and Tanais prompt readers to consider how homophobia and transphobia operate as neocolonial structures rather than conservative values consistent with Islam or Hinduism, as practiced by their characters.

Keywords: diaspora, xenophobia, postmodern, transcultural, belonging, self, queer