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

Sandra Cox

Novelists Tanaïs and Sopan Deb each craft nonlinear narratives about religion, gender and sexuality in the lives of two or more generations of Bengali families living in the North American diaspora in their respective novels, *Bright Lines* (2015) and *Keya Das's Second Act* (2022). Each work of fiction is sequenced and narrated in ways that present explicitly queer Bengal characters and plotlines that both stretch across generations and resist heterocentricist and trans-exclusionary ways of viewing gender and sexuality. Because the temporal structure of *Bright Lines* and *Keya Das's Second Act* is fragmented and nonlinear, the form and content of Tanaïs's and Deb's fiction serves similar didactic purposes—to actively contest some problematic misconceptions about homophobia and transphobia within Bengali culture in the North American diaspora. Tanaïs and Deb revise and reuse some of the formal tropes that scholars have marked as conventional in other transgenerational novels about Bengali immigration from South Asia to the United States, particularly in the works of other South Asian writers who set their fiction in the North American diaspora. As is not uncommon in fiction by canonical Bengali diasporic writers (like

Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai and Tahmima Anam, for instance), Deb and Tanaïs use Postmodern formal innovations, like free indirect discourse and transtextuality, to offer defenses and critiques of transcultural religious and communal values and kinship structures by imagining transgenerational narratives that ask readers to assign praise and blame as they encounter characters through free indirect third-person narration. Attention to how each fiction writer manages narrative suture with lesbian and transgender characters reveals how discourses about gender and sexuality are written to shape readers' affective responses to narrated incidents of homophobia and transphobia, which serve epideictic purposes in both pieces of fiction. Tanaïs and Deb use form to demand readers reflect upon the boundaries and values of the Bengali American communities they depict, and both novels operate by asking readers to assign praise and blame as each new plot point is revealed, often retrospectively. Many of the revelations about characters' identities and internal struggles are located at the intersections of colonialism, racism, homophobia and misogyny as each of those themes is represented in the familial narratives in both books.

Tanaïs's *Bright Lines* is narrated from that third-person perspective with the diegetic discourse largely focalized on three perspectives: Anwar, a first-generation Bengali immigrant living in Brooklyn in the early 21st Century, and the two nearly-grown children he and his wife Hashi have been raising. His younger daughter Charu was born after Anwar and Hashi immigrated from Bangladesh during the 1971 Liberation War, and the oldest child, El (initially called Ella by the narrator, and who is the subject of a pronoun switch in the indirect discourse in the last section of *Bright Lines*) is the biological progeny of Hashi's brother and sister-in-law, who came with their aunt and uncle to Brooklyn after their own parents, affiliates of the mukti bahini, are killed by Pakistani soldiers in the conflict. In the narrative present of the novel, Charu is a high school senior and El/la is a first-year college student. Middle-aged Anwar is depressed and feels emasculated by Hashi, who seems busier with her in-home beauty shop than he is in his apothecary business. His

feelings of emasculation are further complicated by his older and more successful brother moving into Anwar's family living room during a marital separation. Ella, who is visiting their family from college over the summer, spends much of the novel trying to figure out how to tell their adoptive parents about their gender dysphoria, while struggling with ongoing stress-related audio-visual hallucinations and against shameful feelings of attraction to her sister/cousin, Charu. As Anwar begins a disastrous affair with Ramona, the upstairs tenant renting the apartment above Hashi's beauty parlor, Charu's classmate Maya is kicked out of her family home by her conservative Islamic father, so Charu and Ella spend the summer conspiring to hide the fact that Maya has been staying in the family home until she goes to college in late August. The events of the novel are told out of order, with occasional flashbacks to the 1971 conflict, which are complicated by some issues of narrative reliability. Charu is a tumultuous adolescent; El is deeply traumatized by grief and experiences visions that make them doubt their own perceptions, and Anwar also either experiences hallucinations or is being haunted by his brother-in-law's ghost, with whom Anwar seems to be half in romantic love. Because of the use of floating third-person perspective, the temporal registers and modes of direct and indirect characterization may reveal how Tanaïs draws lines around the Bengali-American community in an outer-borough neighborhood at the turn of the century, and how the author encourages readers to assign praise and blame to the choices each of the characters makes in response to the ethical conundrums woven into the plot, and with El's disclosure of their trans-ness and their attraction to women.

Like *Bright Lines*, Deb's novel *Keya Das's Second Act* uses third-person direct discourse to focalize the novel on the experiences of a father-daughter pairing. Shantanu Das is not entirely unlike Anwar, in that he is middle-aged and depressed. Rather than smoke the prodigious volume of marijuana that Anwar consumes in *Bright Lines*, the *pater familius* in Deb's fiction is an alcoholic in recovery. He hits rock bottom after his youngest daughter, the vivacious titular character, dies in a car

accident just weeks after coming out to her family by casually suggesting that she should be permitted to bring her girlfriend, Pamela, to Durga Puja with her family. Shantanu, his wife, Chaitali, and their oldest daughter, Mitali (who is the other chief focalization point in the novel's free indirect discourse) respond poorly to Keya's self-disclosure, and her death becomes a cataclysmic event for the family. Chaitali immediately laments that the family will be socially embarrassed by Keya's same-sex attraction; Mitali becomes angry at Keya, and Shantanu, to his great regret, tells his daughter that she is going through a phase and may be mentally ill before suggesting that the family could pay a therapist to cure her. After Keya's death, Shantanu begins drinking and Chaitali eventually leaves him for another Bengali American man, Jahar. Although Mitali resents her father's poor behavior, she is even more angry with her mother for moving on and embarrassing the family in front of the community in their New Jersey suburb. At the urging of Shantanu's mother, Kalpana, and Keya's girlfriend, the family collaborates to stage Keya's play about her family, which was co-written with Pamela as a kind of adolescent wish-fulfillment exercise as the two prepared to come out to their parents. Although there is no parallel historical narrative about decolonization or nation-building set in Bangladesh or India in *Keya Das's Second Act*, Deb uses the Das family as a sort of synecdoche for Hindu Bengali-American communities' attitudes about gender and sexuality. As the Das family works together to produce the play, both Anwar and Mitali find new love interests and work to forgive one another and Chaitali for Keya's death. The ways that the spectre of Keya haunts the narrative—always the object of the discourse and never a direct subject of diegetic focalization—allow Deb to use several characters as foils for one another in order to produce an analysis of the ways gender and sexuality operate to shift positions in the Bengali-American social hierarchy that serves as the context for the Das family. Because Keya only speaks for herself through notes she wrote to Pamela before her death in the discourse of the novel, much of the maintext of *Keya Das's Second Act* features indirect discourse about its title character and

frames her through her surviving loved ones' perspectives. Before the end of the novel, Deb is investing a great deal of diegesis in the rendering diasporic spaces, like Durga Puja, as transcultural structures, like Pamela and Keya's play, that impose gender norms and specific kinds of sexual behavior and kinship structures. Deb presents readers with a series of epideictic questions about how queer subjectivity is marginalized, reclaimed and experienced by Bengali Americans within the world of the fiction.

By looking at the two novels together, the motifs used across texts are easy to spot, but complicated to interpret. The novelists make similar formal choices but produce very different discursive subject positions for their queer Bengali American protagonists. Comparing narrative perspective and formal characterization in Tanaïs's 2015 novel to Deb's 2022 novel reveals that kinship structures and attitudes about romance, sex and marriage shift across 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 to the outer boroughs of New York after the war for Bangladeshi Liberation or economic immigration from India to New Jersey for work and education, respectively. Both novels also thematize American xenophobia, including encounters with Christian proselytizing, the exoticizing of Hinduism and structural Islamophobia as forces that necessarily shape immigrants' experiences living in the North American diaspora. Because the novelists chose to frame their "coming-to-America" familial epics alongside personal narratives about central characters that come out as lesbian, as Keya does, or as transgender, as El does, 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 present gender, sex and sexuality as integral parts of identity-formation within

transcultural contexts, Deb and Tanaïs prompt readers to consider how homophobia and transphobia operate as neocolonial structures rather than conservative values consistent with Hinduism or Islam, as practiced by their characters.

First, of course, Deb and Tanaïs must work to build forensic narratives that counter misinformation about how gender, sexuality and kinship are constrained by the imposition of colonialist beliefs in the nearly 90-year long occupation of Bengal during the British Raj. One of those narratives suggests that "old world" attitudes and religious prohibitions against gender transitions or same-sex desire are indigenous to the subcontinent nor inherent Hinduism and Islam. While it is true that many theocratic rules imposed in some South Asian countries do explicitly outlaw gender affirming care and homosexual acts, those laws are often modeled on colonial mandates that are residually maintained during decolonization. Elias Jahshan notes that many penal codes in much of the Muslim world "stem from inherited European colonial laws that were informed by a Christian understanding of morality" because "[w]hen the West talks about homophobia [. . .] among global diasporic communities, the focus is on how Islam or traditional attitudes are at the root of hostility towards LGBTQ+" people (2022, 7-8); this trope is not only a reflection of a pervasively Orientalist attitude about both Islam and Hinduism, but also, to quote Jahshan, "an essentialist and simplistic approach" to understanding how narratives about queer identities are criminalized to such an extent that people are willing to believe that "rampant discrimination" and "deep cultural stigma" (2022, 8) are inevitable responses to queer identities in the South Asian diaspora in the United States. Tanaïs's exploration of explicitly reclaimed gender identities is clear in El's discussions of Swadhin identities with Rana during their trip to Bangladesh with their parents. Rana, a Pahari woman El befriends, tells them that "An Indian photographer [she] met told [her] that the word meant a woman turned into a man. Over there, they've got a lot of interesting words we haven't found yet" (2015, 204). The silences that surround El's gender

dysphoria and subsequent transition are perhaps paratextually explicated by this one line, denoting that Bengalis are capable of accepting and understanding even those things that they either don't have words for or that they reject the colonial meanings and terms for, which seems to be a transethnic value that Rana and El share. Tanaïs and Deb both use form and content to resist the sort of essentialism Jahsan critiques and use their fiction to prompt readers to abandon the sorts of biases that some of the characters display.

Both novelists use minor characters who do not benefit from the depth of direct characterization that focalization in the free indirect discourse affords to push back against the narrative trope that Jahsan describes. In *Keya Das's Second Act*, Deb uses the figure of Kalpana, the most devout Hindu in the Das family, similarly to the ways that Hashi, an ideal, faithful and industrious Muslim wife, is used by Tanaïs in *Bright Lines*. Deb's Kalpana immediately affirms and enthusiastically greets Keya's news that she has a girlfriend well before Keya works up the nerve to tell her parents and sister. In *Bright Lines*, Hashi lovingly cuts El's hair and gives them her brother's glasses and clothing in a tender scene where a maternal figure wordlessly accepts and nurtures a young trans adult as that trans person works to better understand and articulate their needs.

> She closed her eyes. She fest the chair pump backward so that her head lay on the cool ceramic sink, Hashi's tea-tree flavored breath on her face, her slight and saggy bosom pressed against her shoulders. It sounded like Hashi was rubbing her hands together; a moment later she felt warm olive oil on her head. Hashi rubbed it in, softening the frizz and then ran water through her hair and massaged in musky shampoo. The water sent a chill down her back. Hashi lifted her head to roughly towel her dry. She brought Ella to one of the salon's high chairs and spun her around. Hashi selected a pair of scissors and began snipping away dead hair; in minutes the back of Ella's neck pricked at the air of the fan.

> She ran her hand over her hair—it was short, like a boy's. An odd feeling, not unpleasant, but rather uncertain, tickled her. (Tanaïs 2015, 32-33)

The use of tender tactile imagery—the warmth of the water and oil, the literal softening of El's "dead" hair—gestures toward a social transition that is not only affirmed by the act of maternal caregiving and professional coiffuring in the fictional world. The scene also works to build narrative suture with Hashi at the same time as the narrator is inhibiting that narrative suture with Anwar, who doesn't know how to approach El about their gender issues, and is actively pursuing his tenant as his wife labors beneath the leased apartment. Hashi never once castigates her adopted child for failing to conform to the rigid gender roles the one might expect to see a first-generation mother impose upon her child in the sort of tropes my 2017 article noted in work by Mukherjee and Lahiri. While Mukherjee's and Lahiri's second-generation characters often struggle against their parents' expectations and disapproval, Tanaïs imagines what it might be like for that cultural and generational gap to be bridged through physicality—the tender touch of an aging maternal figure as affirmation—rather than widened through mimetic discourse, which might make for clumsy and imprecise diction as the "love that dare not speak its name" is performatively unuttered. Instead of asking or telling, without coming out or really any direct dialogue between the two, Hashi finds El despairing over their hair and seems to simply know how to replace the dysphoric feeling with the tickling uncertainty of El's own growing awareness of their gender identity.

Like Hashi, Anwar's mother, Kalpana, is the most devout member of her family, in several chapters throughout the book, she invokes Durgas's blessings on various members of the Das family, and even Keya's girlfriend on opening night of the play. In fact, Kalpana's ardent devotion is the only reason Anwar attends pujas after his wife leaves him, and the oldest Das daughter, Mitali, is also cajoled into religious

observances and community-building by her grandmother at least twice in the novel. In spite of the conclusions readers might have drawn from the several scenes in which Kalpana expresses her devotion to Durga, she is the first person to whom Keya confides her sexuality, and unlike the two generations of younger Das family members who reject Keya, Kalpana immediately rejoices at her granddaughter's disclosure. However, Kalpana is contrasted by the absent spectre of her late husband, Amitava, who in discourse focalized on Shantanu, Keya's father and Kalpana's son, who notes that his father had been vocally homophobic all of his life:

> When Don't Ask, Don't Tell passed in 1993, Amitava wondered out loud, "What is happening to this country?" Chaitali rolled her eyes. Amitava even avoided hugging me, opting for firm handshakes and shoulder slaps. If there was an evolving news story involving gay rights, Amitava would shake his head, cluck his tongue, and change the channel, sometimes in front of Mitali and Keya, who were too young to understand and push back. Kalpana never corrected her husband. Shantanu knew she believed it wasn't her place. (Deb 2023, 73)

Note how the direct discourse slips into the third-person narration in this passage. "Amitava avoided hugging me" (italics added for emphasis) in the second sentence, but then return to the third-person—"Shantanu knew she believed [. . .]"—by the final sentence. This is one of the ways that Deb encourages narrative suture with Shantanu through the contrast of his parents' attitudes about his daughter's orientation. The first third of *Keya Das's Second Act* is an excoriation of Shantanu's self-involvement as a haphazard husband and father who neglects his wife and shames his daughter. As readers watch the character unpack the toxic masculinity his father performed while recognizing how his mother, and indeed Chaitali as Amitava's daughter-in-law, silently but noticeably, resisted rather than reified the prejudices their husbands express. The inhibited narrative suture with the surviving members of

the Das family in the first few chapters gradually shifts to ever-increasing narrative suture that asks readers to sympathize with the characters through the narrative focalization of the direct discourse. Because Shantanu and Mitali are viewed from the third-person but with a close focalization, readers know how much they regret their treatment of Keya. In moments like this one, when that third-person narrative even momentarily shifts to a first-person perspective the formal choices seem to queer the conventions of prose even as the sympathetic renderings of queer characters work to revise tired cultural scripts that essentialize Bengali beliefs and practices. Deb and Tanaïs seem to use Kalpana and Hashi, who are both first-generation immigrants who have decided to remain steadfast in their religious beliefs in spite of cultural pressures to convert to the dominant religion of the diasporic host country, as the separate voices of reason in families struggling to accept a child's queerness in a direct refutation of the narrative expectation that Jahshan finds conventional in narratives about homophobia and transphobia among global diasporic peoples.

However, it is not simply that the two novels provide these kinds of positive models for inclusion and acceptance and repudiate problematic neocolonial tropes that becomes the ground for this comparative analysis. The novels also use a great deal of character foiling and structural innovations to withhold information to control readers' narrative suture with those characters. Shantanu's remorse, for instance, is slowly revealed through a series of conversations with his therapist, and as his alcohol use decreases and his commitment to showing up for Mitali increases, readers are encouraged to feel differently about him by Deb's astute use of tone and diction to shape those affective responses. Often characters in *Keya Das's Second Act* and *Bright Lines* are introduced and developed in such a way that an epideictic reading of the diegetic discourse in each novel reveals two different narrative modes through which the novelists use Postmodern form to question Modernist conceptions of Bengali people primarily as colonial subjects. One narrative convention in historiographic retellings of the partition and re-

partition of the Indian subcontinent after the end of the British Raj frames Bengali peoples as subjects to be assimilated into Anglo-American social hierarchies and (often mis-) understood through the lens of an Orientalist narrative tradition built by British and American writers imagining Bengali subjectivity (Kurodi and Jain 2019, 40) and history from a hegemonic perspective that flattens the nuances of gendered discourse in the cultural and literary traditions of the subcontinent (Mallick 2019, 52). Another narrative tradition exists that centers perspectives by writers from the varied subject positions created by colonial contexts, including the examination of Bengali culture in diasporic spaces outside of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh (Mudambi and Harris 2024, 303). In an issue of *Comparative Literature Studies* published the year after Tanaïs's novel, Auritro Majumder argues that literary critics who seek to account for any "fracture between Bengali literature and Anglo-American postcolonial theory" necessarily must analyze "the complex linkages and trajectories of modern intellectual history, of which the latter constellation of 'theory' is but one specific if dominant discursive form" (2016, 419). In crafting a multi-generational narrative and choosing a third-person perspective that floats between close-limitations based upon key characters' perspectives, Tanaïs and Deb have necessarily elected to tell a story that is obligatorily polyphonic and narrated from several points of view. Each novelist chose specific sorts of figurative language and makes use of shifting points of view to shape how readers feel about each character as that character is centralized in the family's story of migration and transculturation. Often the characters are foils for one another across generations; readers of *Keya Das's Second Act* see Amitava bully Shantanu into adopting some homophobic sentiments simply by refusing to allow any affirmation of gendered or sexual difference to be possible in mimetic discourse, and then later see Keya choose not to confide in her father until after her grandmother has already affirmed her identity. In *Bright Lines*, readers watch Anwar struggle to articulate his grief about the end of his romantic friendship with El's father, and then El seems to inherit this internalized homophobia and gender dysphoria, as they too struggle to

articulate their queer and trans identities to their mostly supportive family. These textual counternarratives to colonial historiographic traditions operate persuasively by allowing readers to decide which characters are most complicit or responsible for the generational transmission of colonial prejudices.

It may be even that the focus on Bengali-authored fiction about Bengali families as a homeland from which diasporic literature is necessarily derived (as is central to the claims made in both my 2017 article from *Postcolonial Interventions* and this article for the journal's tenth anniversary issue have considered) is evidence of a problem in the body of critical discourses about Bengali literature in English and in Bangla. The centering of cosmopolitan, British and American perspectives within critical discourses about identity and nationality in postcolonial studies that consider Bengali narratives as primary objects of analyses may reinforce some of those conventions that Deb and Tanaïs work to subvert through their writing. The focus in literary criticism on the decolonial narratives by Bengali writers may be indicative of a gap or oversight in the ongoing critical conversation about postcoloniality in South Asia. Majumder notes that "Eminent postcolonial scholars in both the humanities and the social sciences have drawn frequently and often eclectically on iconic as well as lesser-known texts of Bengali literature" and that this mode of ethnographic interpretation "contributed to the prominence of 'Bengal' as a site of South Asian postcolonial theory" in spite of the fact that there is a "distinctive body of South Asian/Bengali postcolonialism [that] has disarticulated the question of peripheral modernity from a systematic understanding of the capitalist world-system as well as the literary responses to it" (2016, 419). The centralization of Bengalis—specifically Hindu and Muslim Bengalis—in studies of fictionalized narratives is important context not just for that first conventional Orientalist narrative, but for other emergent and Postmodern formal modes of storytelling that would seek to subvert that set of colonialist narrative tropes by parodying, critiquing or rejecting them.

In adjusting their non-chronological but nevertheless transgenerational narratives, Tanaïs and Deb make use of what Majumder calls "the Anterior Time of Postcoloniality." (2016, 418). Majumder describes this temporal irregularity of narrative by arguing that "the moment of vernacular postcoloniality in Bengal as elsewhere was characterized by the search for an 'alternative modernity'" by which to more carefully describe "the Independence and Partition of India" as incidents that mark or presage "the first significant phase of decolonization in the formerly British-held territories" thereby "signaling the irreducible and concrete material relation between capitalist crisis and the struggle for postcolonial emancipation" (2016, 420). So interwoven are the stories told about Bengalis in the post-Raj diaspora with poststructural theories of shifts in economic production and political governance, argues Majumder, that one will have difficulty untangling the colonialist discourses of Modernism in the form of the fiction from the Orientalist conventions that informed the production of that form. Because there is rhetorical potential to subvert those conventions through the formal innovations of literary postmodernism, the nonlinear and fragmented nature of *Bright Lines* and *Keya Das's Second Act* put readers into the plot in such a way that they must adjust their conceptualization of time and consider how the imposition of values shapes transcultural identities. The distance between the events of each plot and the order in which the narrative reveals those events either deeply entangles the project of decolonization with the acceptance of trans identities, as Bright Lines does, or with the critiquing of exclusionary practices that risk retrenching problematic anti-queer narrative tropes into living transcultural practices for communities in diasporic spaces, as *Keya Das's Second Act* does. In either case, the twisted timelines of each novel mark the struggles toward postcoloniality as part and parcel of the important representational imagining of queer Bengali subjectivity that uses characterization to suggest that Bengalis can both maintain and preserve traditions and permute practices to be more inclusive of queer and trans community members, especially

within Bengali communities who find themselves spread across not just three countries by the partition and repartition of the subcontinent, but also spread across a multinational cultural grouping that transcends religious differences or geographic boundaries. Bengal itself is a liminal space; it is can be bound by no single nation-state or spiritual creed, and the linguistic and cultural differences situated together in both the homelands and the diaspora create, in Deb's and Tanaïs's reimagining, a shared community expansive enough to contain multitudes.

By permuting narrative time and using sequencing and diegetic discourse to control readers' affective responses to their characters, Deb and Tanaïs manage to use the form of postmodern fiction to offer transtextual critiques of the kind of reductive discourse about Bengali subject positions that Majumder describes:

> the problem with metropolitan postcolonial theory [. . .] has been its tendency to conceptualize the vernacular as the exclusive site of particularity, of community as a form of irreducible difference from the "West." Starting with a suspicion of "Western" historicism and foundational metanarratives, and concomitantly celebrating hybridity, in-betweenness, and plurality, such an approach, nevertheless, ends up reproducing precisely that Eurocentrism (as a fetish, at that) when it designates the postcolony as the alternative "Other." (2016, 424)

Neither Deb nor Tanaïs positions American culture as particularly queer affirming as a means of "Othering" Bengali characters' views of sexuality and gender as "savage" or "uncivilized." The foiling between characters who accept and affirm trans and lesbian identities is not a contrast between supposedly broad-minded white "Westerners" and "backwards" first-generation Bengali immigrants to the United States. In fact, in Deb's novel Pamela's extremely religious Christian family, who she and Keya believed would be harder to persuade to support them than the Das family, is the intended audience of the posthumous

staging of Keya's play. The ambiguous ending of Deb's novel does not reveal whether or not Pamela's parents reject her, as the comparison between Bengali American Hindu families and white American Christian families is not the intended didactic purpose of his novel.

Majumder's assertion pushes back against some modes of literary criticism that have been presented by other postcolonial literary critics, of course; there has been no small amount of ink spent on psychoanalytic, feminist, Marxist, or poststructuralist readings of fiction by Bengali writers living in the North American diaspora in the last few decades (see Mehmood, Nyman, Dutt-Ballerstadt, Kurodi and Jain, Mehmood, Mallick and Mudambi and Harris for examples). In fact, my own article "Loving Someone You Don't Know" from the second issue of the second volume of *Postcolonial Interventions* examines how gender and marital customs in Bengali American fiction by Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee use narrative tropes about arranged marriage that either reinforce colonialist and Neoliberalist ideologies or to revise and critique those narrative tropes by permuting the formal features of the fiction. In my own analysis, and in much of the discourse Majumder analyzes in that article from *Comparative Literature Studies*, the focus is often on considering how Bengali-authored texts work to confront or correct Orientalist tropes or to reinflate flattened nuance produced by careless applications of postcolonial literary theory to decolonial narratives. For example, I have argued that

> In Mukherjee's and Lahiri's fiction, this process of reconciliation and identity-formation is doubly complicated by the fact that marriage may be a conduit for entrance into that hyphenated state [of diasporic identity]. As an institution that requires spouses to redefine themselves as a social unit rather than as separate individuals, which also is historically unequal in both U.S.-American culture and in Bengali culture, marriage becomes a kind of fulcrum upon which gender and ethnicity are tenuously balanced (2017, 51)

for the characters in the short stories and novels I analyzed in that earlier article. While it remains structurally true that marital status has been and continues to be one of the ways that migration from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh to the United States can be managed, many economic migrants make the move through student or employment visas. Additionally, while kinship structures may be formalized through marriage, they are often built out of chosen families and the material conditions of diasporic communities as well.

Bright Lines and *Keya Das's Second Act* both use queer identity and relationality as central plot points, and both novels structurally make use of queer time as a narrative marker of departure from both the modernity of colonial discourses and the 'alternative modernity' Majumder describes as the outgrowth of the tropes and conventions of Bengali-American migration stories as an architextual grouping. For example, the narrative that is focalized on El reveals that they occasionally worry that Hashi and Anwar cannot love El as much as they love Charu. El can't even bring themselves to ring the bell and risk waking the household when they arrive from college late in the evening, and they instead scale a hibiscus tree past their cousin's window and into their childhood bedroom. Later El finds themselves inside Charu's bedroom, after being invited to watch a movie. However, when Charu's paramour Malik, Anwar's young apprentice, also climbs up the hibiscus tree to sneak into Charu's room, El immediately returns to that feeling of unbelonging. The narrative focalization stresses El's dysphoric feelings about gender rather than suggesting that the alienation is the result of some angst about coming from two cultures or not being Bengali-enough because they are trans. Tanaïs writes, "Ella Anwar, orphaned, adopted, with her wayward visions, her frizzy hair, her large hands and feet, a bass voice. She longed to nestle in the burning that filled the air. She edged off the bed, leaving them to each other" (2015, 22). It's noteworthy that none of the second-generation characters—Charu, El and Maya—feels any kind of traumatized or nostalgic longing

for a more authentically Bengali past, and that the trip El makes to Bangladesh is motivated by loss in the diasporic space rather than by a need to find themselves through a postcolonial encounter with a distant and unremembered homeland. Even in these moments of thematically necessary alienation, it is the normative narrative about how to embody womanhood that produces the tensions resulting from hybridity that Majumder critiques. El despairs that they cannot have the romantic love of their cousin and that they feel that their assigned gendered identity is as odds with their physicality and their experience of their own body, but never that they are too hybrid a subject to have more than a tortuous relationship to Bangladeshi culture or their family's Muslim faith. Likewise in Deb's novel, Keya's estrangement from her family is not a communal condemnation but a personal one; the Das sisters do not lament that they are trapped between colonizer and colonized for their childhoods. The novel's call for additional reflection upon communal obligations is intraethnic and doesn't consider dominant U.S. American culture a significant "Other" against which Bengali identity must be defined. Rather the rejection of Keya's sexual identity and her death both become sites of resistance and reflection, not that situate Bengali-American in competition with white Americans, nor in competition with more authentically Bengali non-migrants living in their homelands in Bangladesh and West Bengal.

In that *Comparative Literature* article, Majumder is largely concerned with contemporary writing by Bengali authors in Bangla. In positioning Bengali literature written in Bengali rather than in English as a discursive mode of resisting Orientalism, literary critics have erroneously positioned Bengal as "[t]he postcolony" which operates narratively as "the Other of the West, of 'Europe,' and of Western modernity" and produces "a deeply flawed view" that "is unable to come to terms [. . .] with the actual, lived expressions of human experience emerging from the world's margins" (Majumder 2016, 424). In their Anglophone diasporic novels, Deb and Tanaïs use form to show how Butlerian and Halberstamian claims about performativity

and heterochronology might be applied not as modes of centering the West in metanarratives about gender, sexuality and global migration, but rather as means of describing new narrative conventions that emerge to reclaim identity rather than geography as a mode of resisting the critical othering of imagined expressions of queer Bengali experiences in works by diasporic Bengali American writers in forms not anchored to modernity as a structural form of literary discourse.

In *Excitable Speech* (1997), U.S. American gender theorist Judith Buter considered how language and literature might be understood through performativity as "speech acts" that simultaneously constitute gendered and sexual differences and contest the meanings of the identities and relationships constituted through narrative speech in Modernist and Postmodernist aesthetic modes. Butler writes,

> with respect to the political discourse of modernity, it is possible to say that its basic terms are all tainted, and that to use such terms is to reinvoke the contexts of oppression in which they were previously used. Paul Gilroy points out, for instance, that terms such as universality have been premised upon the exclusion of women, of people of color, and that they are wrought along class lines and with strong colonial interests. But he adds very crucially, that the struggles against those very exclusions end up reappropriating [italics original] those very terms from modernity in order to configure a different future. (160)

In linking Gilroy's decolonial argument about the formal impossibility of universal narrative features—because to point out the limits of any "universal" narrative is necessarily to reinscribe the marginalization of those subjects excluded from that universal narrative—Butler also seems to suggest that the postmodern project is less an argument with the past than it is a futurist orientation on a more equitable and less hegemonic future imagined through the performance of identity (perhaps through narrative diegesis). By interweaving the past and the

present and building a great deal of distance between each novel's chronological plot and the sequence in which the events are revealed to readers, Deb and Tanaïs contest the historiographic determinism of situating the trauma of Partition as the inciting incident for all diasporic fiction, and, instead, ask readers to consider to take up the task of postmodern representation, which Butler suggests "is to compel the terms of modernity to embrace those they have traditionally excluded, and to know that such an embrace cannot be easy; it would wrack and unsettle the polity that makes such an embrace" (1997, 161). Indeed, *Bright Lines* and *Keya Das's Second Act work* to demonstrate how families and communities often must fracture and reform in order to perform that embrace, and that once an exclusion is insisted upon, the structural harm done to the community sometimes cannot be mitigated except by finding a way to make that embrace.

Readers of Deb's novel do not know how Pamela has chosen to end Keya's play—with the truth of her experience of familial rejection or with a more narratively satisfying reconciliation that was prevented by the tragedy of Keya's accidental death. Similarly, readers do not know if now El will find a way to romance Maya as they study at separate colleges or if Charu can sort out her complicated feelings about their parents in ways that allow her to fulfill her filial obligations and assert her individuality. In the denouements of both novels, however, there is a clear indication that the fear of exclusion is at an end and that neither the Saleems nor the Das will be further policing the gender or sexual identities of their youngest generations. The temporal and geographic settings *Bright Lines* and *Keya Das's Second Act* shift the reader and the characters forward and backward in time and the ambiguous ending of both texts leaves open possibilities. Butler claims that "If there can be a modernity without foundationalism (and perhaps this is what is meant by the postmodern), then it will be one in which the key terms of its operation are not fully secured in advance, one that assumes a futural form" (1997, 161). The terror at being discovered that El feels is unnecessary, as readers are reassured that they will be accepted and

loved. The point of Deb's recursive narrative sequence cold simply be that readers are called to experience some of the remorse and sorrow the Das family feels when they find that they are not able to, finally, take Keya in and accept her as she is.

Keya's eventual reintegration into the family narrative is paradoxically both foreclosed and infinitely possible in the final pages of Deb's novel. For the first time in the novel, the focalization of the diegetic narration is on Pamela in the first vignette, but all of Pamela's attention is on Kalpana, who has worn the same sari she wore to see her granddaughter perform in her high school's production of *42nd Street*, just after Keya told Pamela her grandmother had been delighted when she came out (2023, 264). The way that Deb has literalized the Western gaze on the postcolonial subject in his narrative choices operates metatextually. Pamela both sees and cannot understand the blessing from Durga that Kalpana offers her, but Hindu readers will recognize Deb's mimesis. The end of this last chapter does not close on Pamela's perspective, or even on the question of whether or not the play's second act will persuade her Christian parents to accept her, but on an epistolary return to the weeks before Keya's death. Because the queer Das daughter has been constructed retrospectively and because Deb's novel is narrated out of chronological order, the choice to close with a letter directly from Keya, in her own first-person voice seems to re-orient the nature of the text. Rather than Keya's last days being a palimpsest for her loved ones to scrawl their version of her identity over, Keya's own self-actualized words are positioned as of greater import than the events of the titular second act. In her note to Pamela about the play they are writing together, Keya offers a bit of metatextual guidance: "I was just thinking about what my favorite parts of the play are so far. I like the stuff about being an individual. And about feeling significant to someone. How do we get more of that into this? I feel 'significant' to you. And I feel like an 'individual' around you. That's what we're trying to say here, right? That's all we want. That's the theme" (2023, 267). There is a useful tension expressed in the

autocriticism by the author and his titular character here between being —significant *and* individual—between belonging to a long-stretching narrative storytelling tradition and offering a personal perspective in a literary style. Both these discursive modes are used and each operates persuasively or didactically for readers familiar with that long narrative tradition. Deb explicitly tells his readers that this is the theme and thereby subverts the colonizer/colonizer dichotomy that Majumder critiques as an unnecessary hierarchy that situates the West as a border against which Bengali subjectivity might be imagined. Deb elects to end his novel with Keya's call to exceed those boundaries, both through signifying—her own fictional playwrighting and Deb's very real novel-writing—and individualizing how stories about experiences of migration and maturation are told by and about queer Bengali subjects.

Perhaps just as noteworthy than the shared didactic purposes of the ends of the two novels are the transtextual gestures that begin both. Both Tanaïs and Deb make use of epigraphs as an intertextual device at the beginning of their longform fiction. *Keya Das's Second Act* begins with a line from Rabindranath Tagore, a Modernist Bengali polymath with the significant and individual distinctions of being the second non-European to win a Nobel Prize in Literature and of being the lyricist who wrote the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh (Chatterjee 48). Part I of *Bright Lines* also begins with an epigraph from a Modernist writer; Tanaïs chooses to quote Kahlil Gibran, the Lebanese American poet who combined Nietzsche's iconoclastic dialectical materialism with Blake's proto-Romantic idealism and the mystical religiosity of Sufism in his narrative epic poem The Prophet, which was translated into dozens of languages and sold several million copies. The Tagore epigraph, "You can't cross the sea by standing and staring at the water" and the Gibran epigraph, "Your house shall not hold your secret nor shelter your longing" both seem to be invectives to move outside of one's home and into an unknown future. The fact that the episteme centered in Tagore's philosophy is expressly Hindu and

that Gibran's is expressly syncretically Muslim may also be noteworthy, as the sentiments expressed are remarkably similar. Perhaps this is a coincidence, but it may also be evidence in a very tiny transtextual corpus that Bengali history cannot be distilled down to either the end of British colonialism or the problem of religious differences. For Tanaïs and Deb, in these works of fiction, these explanations for decolonial complications seem more like dominant histories than authentic explications of the cultural values of Bengali writers.

Perhaps the ambiguity of each ending is foreshadowed in the allusions to diasporic poems in each epigraph, almost to mark both the foreign—across the sea—and the familiar—the home that refuses to keep secrets or shelter longings—as two of many possible liminal spaces in which identity might be forged and maintained. Because the movement between epigraph and epilogue is neither continuous nor chronologically organized, the temporal settings of both novels have been queered in ways that work to inhibit or encourage narrative suture with characters. In considering how plot and narrative work to shape how readers understand time in queer narratives, Halberstam argues that "A 'queer' adjustment in the way in which we think about time, in fact, requires and produces new conceptions of space. And in fact, much of the contemporary theory seeking to disconnect queerness from an essential definition of homosexual embodiment has focused on queer space and queer practices" (6-7). Just as Majumder argued that Bengali-language texts that reify Eurocentric narratives are not inherently postcolonial because of their linguistic form, Halberstam argues that any narrative with a positive portrayal of a queer character is not necessarily queering either the temporal or geographic setting in which the fiction is placed. Instead, Halberstam argues that considering how epistemology and self-understanding inform narratives about disclosing queer identities requires readers to consider the diegetic discourse of identity rather than the mimetic discourse of performed gender nonconformity or same-sex attraction. This requires reconsidering how narratives about dynamic characters—who are, for instance, maturing from girl to woman and from bride to mother, in the convention of the *bildungsroman*—needs

must be augmented to contain subjectivities that are not oriented upon sexual maturation, coupling and reproduction as the chief markers of development—like those of trans adolescents like El or sapphic teens like Keya.

Just as Majumder's arguments suggest that framing Bengali diegetic discourse about nationality and community as a compulsory point of debate between colonial discourses and indigenous storytelling conventions excludes perspectives that do not lament or seek to quantify hybridity as the most desirable feature, Halberstam argues that the medial features of narratives about the development of queer subjects require different modes of interpretation. Halberstam opens *In a Queer Time & Place* by suggesting that

> Queer uses of time and space develop [. . .] according to other logics of location, movement, and identification [than reproductive heterosexual logics]. If we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity and come closer to understanding Foucault's comment in "Friendship as a Way of Life" that "homosexuality threatens people as a 'way of life' rather than as a way of having sex" (136). In Foucault's radical formulation, queer friendships, queer networks, and the existence of these relations in space and in relation to the use of time mark out the particularity and indeed the perceived menace of homosexual life (2025, 1).

Halberstam is not, of course, suggesting that migration is inherently queer because it destabilizes the ways that setting produces identity, but rather that ways of understanding development—from coming-of-age stories to coming-to-America stories—as linear and forward-expanding often results in a failure to understand how experiences of both time and development might be reorganized to include perspectives

previously excluded by narrow conceptions of personal, national and cultural histories. It is the very multivalence of queer relationality—oriented outside the boundaries of the nuclear family as a mode of self-reproduction on a communal level—that makes queer temporality an expressly postmodern mode of accumulating significance and individuality in less hierarchized modes of identity- and community-building.

Deb integrates some Halberstamian resistance to heterochronology as he explicates Mitali's feelings about Keya's coming out. In passages focalized on Mitali's perspectives in flashbacks to Keya's disastrous coming out conversation, readers discover that the older Das sister is not particularly bothered that her sister is queer, but rather her rage stems from the additional pressure she feels to produce grandchildren after Keya's disclosure: "'And so what? This all supposed to fall to *me* now? [. . .] Getting married. Giving *them* grandchildren,' Mitali said, a finger pointing at their parents." (Deb 2023, 25). Deb's novel seems to suggest that models of kinship outside the biologically family work better or as well as the American nuclear or Bengali extended family structures. For example, rather than have Shantanu and his wife Chaitali reconcile during the staging of the play and thereby restore order and re-establish the primacy of heterocentric marriage as is common in comedies, Deb's narrative finds Shantanu dating and careful readers may notice the smallest beginnings of a friendship between Chaitali's first and second husbands (2023, 259). Likewise, El's social transition in the epilogue seems to be a cathartic end for their ongoing narrative about dysphoria, but the complex network of affiliations and familial affections in *Bright Lines* eschews the primacy of the nuclear family entirely. Although Hashi seems more likely to reconcile with her husband than Chaitali, the end of Tanais's novel contains some surprising plot twists seem to have occurred between the end of Chapter 28 and the epilogue to *Bright Lines*. Maya has not been restored to her family of origin, and, instead, flees to Mexico with Ramona, the upstairs tenant whose husband assaults Anwar during the climatic scene of the maintext. There, Maya works and lives at a hostel while saving up

to go to Berkeley in the fall. Charu and her mother have reconciled, and a symbolic pixie cut is chosen to represent the motif of Hashi's continued acceptance of her children and her newfound respect for Charu's decision not to wear the veil. In another use of intentionally traditional figurative language, Tanaïs ends the novel with a shared bike-ride between Maya and El, without readers' spying to see how they say goodbye to one another, but not before El lovingly tends Anwar's seed garden (2015, 292)—the legacy of regrowth that seems to call to mind the original meaning of the word diaspora and to present an insight into the novels' themes; a scattering of seeds in new places does not change the origin of the cultivar grown from that seed.

The epideictic features that mark the discourse about queer Bengali identity in *Bright Lines* and *Keya Das's Second Act* do not codify trans or lesbian identities as anathema, and, in fact, take care to position homophobia and transphobia as individual biases rather than cultural predilections. Through figurative language and narrative sequencing that refuse modernist conventions drawn from Orientalist readings of Bengali narratives, both novelists forego any undue attention to hybridity as either a problematic or beneficial mode of understanding identity or diasporic spaces. Instead, Deb and Tanaïs use their fiction to consider how time and narrative sequencing might be used to extend the architexture for expressing queer experiences in longform fiction about families living in the Bengali-North American diaspora, and to develop a series of figurative motifs that make use of both innovative and traditional symbolism as part of their thematic explorations of kinship structures and affectionate attachments outside the colonialist centering of nuclear families and heteronormative temporalities of development. By considering how the fictionalized Bengali parents respond to their second-generations children's sexual and gendered identities, the novelists work to encourage readers to move beyond simple evaluations of representations as either pro- or anti-LGBTQ+ and to consider how structures of affinity and community operate in transnational and multigenerational narratives about cultural maintenance and queer inclusion in works by diasporic Bengali writers.

Works Cited

Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* London: Routledge.

_____. 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. London: Routledge.

Chatterjee, Kalyan. 2014. "The Biblical Imagination of Rabindranath Tagore." *Renascence* 66 (1): 47–56. https://doi.org/10.5840/renascence20146613

.

Cox, Sandra. 2017. "Loving Someone You Don't Know." *Postcolonial Interventions: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 2 (2): 72–102.

Deb, Sopan. 2023. *Keya Das's Second Act*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Dutt-Ballerstadt, Reshmi. 2012. "Gendered (Be)Longing: First- and Second-Generation Migrants in the Works of Jhumpa Lahiri." In *Naming Jhumpa Lahiri: Canons and Controversies*, edited by Lavina Dhingra and Floyd Cheung. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Foucault, Michel. 1997. *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, Vol. I*. Edited by Paul Rabinow. Translated by Robert Hurley et al. New York: The New Press.

Halberstam, J. J. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press.

Jahshan, Elias. 2022. "Introduction." In *This Arab Is Queer*, edited by Elias Jahshan. London: Saqi Books.

Kurodi, Shashikant, and Rakshitha Jain. 2019. "The Theme of Identity and Belonging in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Lowland." *PoetCrit* 32 (2): 38–42. https://doi.org/10.32381/POET.2019.32.02.6

.

Majumder, Auritro. 2016. "Can Bengali Literature Be Postcolonial?" *Comparative Literature Studies* 53 (2): 417–25.

Mallick, Saptarshi. 2019. "Debriefing the Satanic Gyres of Patriarchy: A Bengali Gynocritic and Her Daughters." *Meridian Critic* 33 (2): 49–63.

Mehmood, Sadaf. 2023. "Balancing Dualities and Fusing Opposites: Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies." *Journal of Critical Inquiry* 21 (1). https://doi.org/10.52015/numljci.v21i1.244

.

Mudambi, Anjana, and Leslie J. Harris. 2024. "Feminist Relational Agency and the Cultural Contestation of Heteronormative Gender Norms in the Indian American Diaspora." *Women's Studies in Communication* 47 (3): 292–316. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2024.2366175

.

Nyman, Jopi. 2009. *Home, Identity, and Mobility in Contemporary Diasporic Fiction*. Leiden: Brill.

Tanaïs. 2015. *Bright Lines*. New Delhi: Penguin.