Multicultural Spectacles

Producing the Indian American Woman in Indian Matchmaking

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Abstract. *Indian Matchmaking* (2020–), a popular reality romance TV show, forwards the Indian American woman as an influential conduit of a marketable multiculturalism. Using contemporary arranged marriage as a framework, this article explores how racialized femininity acts as an attractive commodity spectacle. The Indian American woman is a crucible within which multiple, familiar axes of multicultural selfhood—cultural in-betweenness, gender trouble, and generational conflict—are transformed into popular entertainment. Ultimately, *Indian Matchmaking* shows how contemporary multiculturalism creates space for itself on the US national stage by turning potentially threatening differences into desirable commodities.

THE BIG FAT INDIAN (AMERICAN) WEDDING: SELLING MARRIAGE IN *INDIAN MATCHMAKING*

Immediately after its debut on Netflix in 2020, Smriti Mundhra's reality romance show *Indian Matchmaking* became a flashpoint for transnational discussions about arranged marriages. While the show has been touted as a "guilty pleasure," it has also been extensively criticized for its presentation and apparent endorsement of the class, caste, and gender hierarchies that underlie the institution of arranged marriage. Mundhra has rebutted these accusations with

the claim that her show is primarily invested in illuminating Indian identity. She stated in an NPR interview that it "would have been very easy to have scrubbed out references to skin color, or religion or caste or what have you, but it wouldn't feel authentic."[1] According to her, the show is visibilizing an uncensored version of Indian matchmaking that can then be discussed and critiqued. It is also highlighting a representationally neglected group who deserve visibility since they are "not just representing a niche audience or speaking to a niche point of view."[2] Rather than dissect these statements as truth claims, I am interested in Mundhra's focus on the idea of visibility, particularly her contention that the show refuses to hide the social tensions and limitations that underlie Indian marriage.

According to her, the value of *Indian Matchmaking* lies in its ability to showcase and make legible a quality of Indianness to a wide audience, including, crucially, an American one. To do so, it mobilizes a vision of US multiculturalism as a useful, consumable, and, most importantly, entertaining product. This entertainment is primarily produced through the figure of the Indian American woman. As the most visible, dense, and spectacular node of diasporic identity production, she is an embodiment of cultural contradictions that *Indian Matchmaking* converts into a reliable source of ratings (each season having made it into Netflix's weekly Top Ten in the United States for multiple weeks upon release). Bearing the Sisyphean burden of successfully representing "Indianness," the Indian American woman's internal tensions reveal the centrality of failure, paradox, and incoherence to the successful multicultural spectacle.

Indian Matchmaking takes on Indian American femininity as a site of evolving cultural heterodoxy and turns it into a form of entertainment—a blueprint for a product that appeals to a broad American audience. Like Herman Gray's contention that popular media "representations of black youth culture are major conduits through which the commodification of multiculturalism—sexuality, youth, race, and gender—proceeds,"[3] I argue that the Indian American woman in the show is also a channel by which minoritarian identity is transformed into a consumable product. While it introduces multiple participants from India and the diaspora looking to find love through a matchmaker (Sima Taparia from Mumbai), the Indian American woman emerges as a major focus of the show. Foregrounding upper-class, upper-caste, young female protagonists who are trying to find their way in the world, the audience follows their fraught romantic and marital journeys. A central component of these stories is the much-discussed immigrant dilemma of a hyphenated identity that splits the self between two cultures. This very split is made into a form of representation as entertainment. The points of cultural difference that I examine through the story lines of these women also appear in the narratives of the masculine participants. However, the women's stories have an intensity and density that is driven by gender expectations:

they are keepers of familial and cultural norms within the spaces of the home and the diaspora. The conflicts that are then extended to the rest of the Indian American community make their most complete and elaborate appearances in the narratives of the diasporic women on the show.

Indian Matchmaking walks the line between identification and otherness, as is the wont of reality shows; its novelty lies in its extensive and detailed use of the language of multiculturalism to frame this tension as a major attraction for viewers. Indian American femininity—with all its associations of gender oppression, cultural difference, and generational conflict—becomes fertile ground for the exact kind of consumable drama that reality TV thrives on. The show's use of an all-American narrative form, the reality romance, foregrounds the Indian American woman as a desirable national-cultural product. This is borne out by these women emerging as the most visible, compelling, and popular participants, with their time on-screen resulting in much discourse among viewers.[4] In search of positively coded, popular representation, *Indian Matchmaking* uses the spectacle of the Indian American woman to perform, hybridize, and create multicultural tropes—and showcase the appeal of their paradoxical natures.

I use the term "Indian American" in this article, holding it in tension with both "Asian American" and "South Asian American," to emphasize multiple critical axes: the relatively marginal position of the South Asian within the category of the Asian American; a potential change in this much-marked fact due to significant demographic shifts in the twenty-first century (the Indian American population, in particular, is now the second largest group of Asian Americans per the 2020 census data);[5] and the often-invisible replication of India's dominance in South Asia in the US cultural context. Asian American studies has traditionally focused on East and Southeast Asia. This is unsurprising considering these geographies' entanglements with the United States, driven by histories of imperialism and migration spanning multiple centuries. Significant South Asian migration is a much more recent product of the 1965 Hart-Celler Act.[6] While historically and culturally meaningful, earlier South Asian American diasporas were demographically modest.[7] This, combined with South Asia's distinct relationship with British imperialism, has led to the development of South Asian American identity as only partially connected to the values, stereotypes, and ideals that are evoked by the term "Asian American." Following critics like Rajini Srikanth, Bakirathi Mani, Kavita Daiya, and Inderpal Grewal, this article both pays attention to this distinction and explores how a renewed focus on the South Asian can change how Asian American studies perceives its critical objects.[8] It answers Bhalla and Dhingra's call, in their recent overview of South Asian American studies, to remedy the "insufficient attention to major components of the population, those who are most visible as the so-called model minority."[9]

I seek to undo this paradoxical neglect of the "most visible" by questioning the apparent homogeneity and transparency that is often automatically connected to majoritarian visibility in both the popular and critical imagination.

This interrogation is accompanied by an opening up of the term "South Asian" for scrutiny, particularly the equivalence that is often drawn between India and South Asia. South Asians in the United States are often socially classified as "Indian" regardless of their actual nationality due to India's cultural and economic visibility across the globe. This false equivalence hides the actual specificity of "Indian American" as a category and its close relationship with caste and class dominance. While purporting to represent all South Asians (or at least Indians), "Indian American" has become synonymous with a Hindu-Brahmin version of Indianness, thus demonstrating how religious and caste hegemonies are still operational within an apparently minoritized group in the United States.[10] As the dominant vision of South Asian Americans, "Indian American" is less a factual descriptor and more a politically potent fiction of identity.[11] I am invested in examining the contents and methods of this fiction—specifically, its use of gender strategies to make itself successfully marketable in the United States—and my use of the term "Indian American" is a signal of that intent.

The guiding questions of *Indian Matchmaking* are: What does it mean to be Indian (especially in the diaspora)? How does marriage become a site of negotiating cultural, religious, and national values? How do women figure themselves as keepers of cultural authenticity? These questions emphasize the emotional complexities of diasporic identity within a global, neoliberal economy. The show often portrays its participants as confused and overwhelmed, unable to choose in a neoliberal dating market of endless options. Sima Taparia, the matchmaker, enters the scene as a knowledgeable savior who can provide an alternative method: arranged marriage with one of the eligible men/women in her Rolodex, with the entire process directed toward flexibility and compromise on both partners' ends (but largely the woman's) to make it work with one's destined match. The bedrock of this version of marriage is the preservation of caste, class, ethnic, and sexual hierarchies. A divorced woman or a Guyanese Indian candidate, for example, are immediately demoted in Taparia's eyes in terms of their eligibility. Within her—and often the show's—frame, individual choice and control must be given up for marital happiness. This point is driven home by the *When Harry Met Sally*–style mini-interviews of married couples that periodically punctuate each episode from the second season onward. The overwhelming majority of these interviewees are couples in arranged marriages who focus primarily on how little they knew of each other before marrying and how happy they are now. Mutual anonymity before commitment seems to be the recipe for marital success. The show highlights the conflict and contradiction

between what is framed as traditional arranged marriage, with its abrogation of romantic love, attraction, and individuality, and the modern woman's focus on independent choice and personal empowerment.

The spectacle of the Indian American woman enacting these cultural conflicts is often to the detriment of the arranged marriage logic—and the flexible, submissive woman it holds up as its ideal—that the show purports to foreground. However, in reality, it is this incoherence that makes *Indian Matchmaking* a rich text, both commercially and critically. As Kalyan Nadiminti notes, the "1965 immigration act collapses the difference between the immigrant as knowledge worker and reproductive laborer,"[12] making the Indian American woman's negotiation of the private and the public especially fraught—and ripe for reality TV. While *Indian Matchmaking* is part of a whole slew of US dating shows that attempt an alternative to conventional dating and romance (its most well-known cousin being the long-running *Married at First Sight*, where couples get married via matchmaker without having ever met each other), it is distinct in its use of an already-established social structure—arranged marriage within South Asian communities—that then becomes a metaphor and stand-in for "Indian culture" as an object of interest. As a recent member of an already-established reality TV genre, Must Marry TV, where the stated goal is for the participants to find a life partner, *Indian Matchmaking* emphasizes both compulsory heterosexuality and marriage as its only logical end.[13]

I focus on the story lines of three highly professionalized, second-generation Indian American women—Aparna, Viral, and Nadia—as they chart the marital waters. All of them are presented as sites of eternal contradiction. None of these women's story lines reach the happy ending that the show upholds as the ultimate and only sign of success: marriage. Overall, Taparia's interventions have an absurdly low success rate, with most couples either failing to launch or breaking up fairly quickly. As such, rather than a successful resolution, the show's engine is the struggle toward cultural reconciliation via marriage. As viewers and critics have pointed out, having people unproblematically settle into marital bliss would make for boring reality TV.[14] The entertainment comes from watching the contestants be messy and fail. This is a universal of most dating shows, including those that fall under the Must Marry TV category. However, the specific success of *Indian Matchmaking* emerges from this drama taking on the form of a cultural conflict. Rather than a resolution, the clash itself is the product. The Indian American woman becomes a site for that conflict to be enacted and reenacted as a point of entertainment.[15]

My focus on the Indian American woman is driven by her complicated participation in the more critically developed category of the Asian American woman. While the Asian American woman as a robotic and/or sexualized manager

of national meaning has purchase in discussions of East/Southeast Asian American femininity,[16] this framework is more complicated when it comes to the Indian American woman. A very different (and much less direct) history of American intervention in South Asia and a relatively more recent history of immigration keeps the Indian American woman from participating fully in long-standing stereotypes like the geisha girl, the sexy cyborg, and the Iron Lady. Due to her belated arrival on the stage of Asian American womanhood, the Indian American woman is not *exactly* the submissive/subversive machine/thing that is often the frame for the "yellow woman."[17] At the same time, she does partially participate in the gendered, racialized, and diasporic meanings that are currently attributed to the broad category of "Asian American woman." The more recent iconicity of Indian femininity in the United States thus allows us to expand the category of the Asian American woman, looking at how its making can take up different but overlapping forms. Alongside the Asian American woman as machine, I propose the Asian American woman as spectacle. The form of the spectacle both emphasizes the performative essence of this figure, and focuses on her fantastical, contradictory nature as foundational to her potency.

Using the spectacle as a governing image to analyze the Indian American woman helps us discuss how Asian American femininity has updated itself in its search for "positive" representation. As Herman Gray argues in his work on American TV and its depictions of race, positive representation can mean very different things: minoritized characters whose positive presence on-screen is defined by their distance from their cultural origins, a "separate but equal" regime of multiculturalism where the nonwhite characters lead de facto segregated lives, or a more nuanced vision of minoritarian identity as complex, heterogenous, and grappling with white America.[18] In *Indian Matchmaking*, Aparna, Viral, and Nadia show how Indian Americanness on TV is a similarly protean construct—each participant rendering a different vision of the Indian American woman—that is constantly contending with the question of what so-called good representation means when the category itself is fundamentally riven with contradictions.

"I DON'T WANT TWO DEGREES. I WANT THREE": THE STRONG, INDEPENDENT, MODEL MINORITY WOMAN

The initial participant introduced in the pilot episode is Aparna, a thirty-four-year-old lawyer from Houston looking for the perfect husband. As the opening narrative, her story highlights certain overarching conflicts as central

to the multicultural spectacle. The first season emphasizes her difference from what is implicitly put forward as the normative American audience member, as Aparna participates in the "spectacle of the 'Other,'" a central aspect of Western identity formation.[19] The racial/ethnic/cultural Other introduces a set of visible differences that creates a sense of self via contrast, setting up the Other as a commodity to be consumed and used in the process of self-creation. This "spectacle" of consumption is a cornerstone of modern commodity culture. The raced subject becomes an essential and desirable object.[20] Aparna's story line shows how the Other as a site of spectacular meaning; the creation of race, gender, and ethnicity via the spectacle; and the commodified nature of these identity markers is central to a discussion of contemporary multiculturalism.

Aparna is initially figured as the quintessential woman who is trying to have it all. She is a successful white-collar professional, and instead of being content, she has now set her sights on what the show frames as a hyper-specific vision of the perfect man that she needs to complete her life. One of her first lines emphasizes her pickiness: she tells her friends, "There's many a man I've rejected . . . that hasn't fit what I want in my life partner."[21] Aparna is immediately defined by two major traits: her academic/professional prowess and her ambivalence about the whole enterprise of marital heterosexuality. Right after telling the camera that she is shocked by how much time her married friends spend with their husbands ("Is that a thing that people have to do? Because I'd rather not, I think"),[22] Aparna's own voiceover informs the viewer of her professional persona. As she gets ready to leave the house, presumably for work, she gives us a snapshot of her life and background: "I had the kind of school education where, by fourteen, you're slammed with college courses and extracurriculars. I was always so motivated, and I was always putting so much pressure on myself. I'm a lawyer, and I volunteer, and I travel everywhere I can."[23] The juxtaposition of her busy life with her exacting approach to dating draws a connection between these two parts of her self. The over-ambitious woman who wants too much is a well-worn category. Through Aparna, it is given a new lease on life via a novel cultural framing. Her conundrum is particularly highlighted as a problem of the professional Indian American woman. She is a high-powered lawyer who travels the world for business and pleasure. The qualities—an exacting vision, a critical eye, and perfectionism—she brings to her search for a husband are framed as part of her masculinized model-minority professional persona.

Aparna is exemplary of the conflicts that arise when the model minority enters the arena of love and marriage, an argument buttressed by her mother Jotika's visible embodiment of the tiger-mom stereotype. Jotika tells the camera that when Aparna and her sister first arrived in the United States as young children, she told them, "Please don't ever let me down and don't let me look

bad in our society. . . I don't ever want to see a B on a report card. I don't want two degrees. I want three."[24] This almost comically exaggerated picture of an achievement-obsessed, overbearing single mother is in keeping with how the show treats Aparna: the mother-daughter duo's exorbitant aspirations are a source of laughs for the audience. Aparna's list of desired spousal attributes includes but is not restricted to him being an Indian American man with origins in North India, professionally successful, extensively traveled, and well dressed.[25] On the other hand, she believes that there is nothing about herself that she needs to "change, evolve, or grow into to be a better partner for someone else."[26] The juxtaposition of what Aparna wants and her own inflexibility is set forth as a comical spectacle that makes visible the erosion of her femininity by her over-exact embodiment of a masculinized model-minority role. This "manly" woman is representative of the diasporic woman's conundrum. She wants a husband and children by thirty through traditional matchmaking channels but also inhabits a highly professionalized American identity that keeps her from accessing her Indian femininity.

Aparna's popularity in the first season is due to her comical otherness as an overqualified and over-masculine Indian American woman. However, to preserve a broad audience and participate in the benefits of positive representation, this otherness cannot be absolute. Her exhibitionary difference must be balanced with an equally public-worthy relatability. Thus, the second season of the show remakes Aparna as a far more sympathetic character, a distinct revision of the woman who wants it all. At this point, Aparna's TV performance draws on what Marshall McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard, and Guy Debord have all identified as a core element of twentieth-century popular media culture: its distance from any referent in the real world as it mediates a social relation with a fantasy.[27] Aparna does not just mirror a socially existent version of the India American woman, but, over the course of two seasons, creates something different. As a Baudrillard-esque simulacra, she, and the Indian American woman at large, not only reflects a multicultural persona that exists in the world but also makes one for the consumer market, producing a hyperreal and socially influential multiculturalism and creating a new reality.[28]

This novel multicultural spectacle is both affectively explicit and programmatically deployed to create certain feelings in its viewers. Unlike the machine-like, inscrutable, submissive (East) Asian American woman, Aparna's emotional makeover is exemplary of a more recent version of this figure as a creature of "right" and "good" feeling via the Indian American. Aparna can generate similar emotions in her consumers by producing a friendly and understandable multiculturalism. Instead of solely focusing on otherness (whether desirable or not), she balances difference with relatability. She could be a potential role model

and a relatable figure for all Americans. Hers is not only a threatening, obscure, or unattractive otherness. Instead, the Indian American woman creates a model version of difference—she demonstrates the right kind, degree, and variety of difference necessary for a citizen of the multicultural United States.

This attempt at balancing audiences has been a marker of multicultural entertainment and is rooted in a second-generation diasporic experience. If "heterosexuality [is] a structuring mechanism of both state and diasporic nationalisms . . ., particularly as they are mapped onto the bodies of women,"[29] then the second-generation Indian American woman must be an especially generative site for producing multiple kinds of performance that are coded as authentic and relatable across cultural borders. Sunaina Maira, Bakirathi Mani, and Shalini Shankar have examined the ways in which these diverse allegiances are constructed and (tentatively) reconciled in social performance spaces like the bhangra remix dance floor, the desi beauty contest, or the high-school multicultural-day Bollywood dance.[30] As Bandana Purkayastha et al. assert, "performances become a key way of bringing diasporic Indians with diverse experiences together, and offer ways to assert positive identities to the mainstream."[31] *Indian Matchmaking*'s imagined audience includes white American viewers who can identify with this performance of the Indian American woman instead of only positioning her as an attractive but separate Other: a move that is essential to the show's project of positive representation. Yet this desire for cross-cultural identification must constantly be balanced by an articulation of visible cultural distinctiveness, often marked as authenticity. The interplay of relatability and difference creates the marketable spectacle of the Indian American woman as a model of multicultural being.

The balance between these two aspects of Aparna becomes clear in the second season, when she is no longer using Taparia's services; but the show continues to follow her love life. The same qualities that singled her out as an Other are now reframed as a set of relatable problems that the audience can identify with. Her introduction in season two significantly differs from her framing in season one. She is transformed via what Rachel Dubrofsky identifies as reality TV's "therapeutics of the self," a process by which dating-show contestants identify the act of being on reality TV itself as one of growth and change, even if they do not achieve the desired romantic end.[32] Instead of the obnoxiously self-assured Aparna who is being set up for a fall, this new version is much more vulnerable, discussing how she went through a "huge grieving process" as she realized that she was never going to have the ideal life she had imagined: "I was never gonna get married at thirty, have my first kid at thirty-two . . . you have to go through the grief, the anger, the defeat . . . [then] just do away with any notion that your life is gonna be what you thought it was gonna be, and then see

what happens."[33] This is a far cry from her planned, meticulous persona from the first season. Instead of an off-putting armor of expertise and control, she now performs an equally calculated but much more positively framed vulnerability. The old, go-getting Aparna is still there—for example, she says she moved to New York City because she does not want to remain in Houston and become "stagnant"—but is significantly softened by its revision into a woman who pursues her ambitions while still missing her friends and family back in her home city.[34]

Thus, if Aparna's story begins with her differences, it ends with a more visibly sympathetic viewpoint, one where the audience is brought closer to her. Her final appearance on the show is a conversation between her and her mother that revises not only Aparna's season one self-performance but her mother's as well. After returning from a disappointing date, she confides in her mother about how defeated she feels. At this point, Jotika, instead of pressuring her to marry (as would be expected of a stereotypical Indian American parent), reassures her that she does not have to find someone immediately and that when the time is right, the right person will appear. She tells the camera, "(T)he decision could be the right one, the wrong one, its hers to make, just as a mom I want to see her happy, feel settled, feel fulfilled in anything that she does."[35] This show of motherly acceptance, advice, and support transforms Jotika from the forbidding, cold tiger mom in the first season into a warm and empathetic figure. A spectacle of family love and maternal support is enacted in such a fashion that it is no longer about the specific and alienating oddities of Indian American families but about the universality of the mother-daughter bond.

Aparna herself is similarly reshaped into a globally relatable figure. As she opens up to her mother, she focuses on how unstable everything is in her life. Instead of being married and settled, she has shifted careers, moved to a new city, and has yet to find a man. She compares herself to her friends with white-picket-fence lives in the suburbs and asks, "What did I do? . . . How did I pick *this* life for myself?"[36] At this point, she is no longer an Indian American woman who has given up her femininity and is desperately looking toward an arranged marriage for a solution to her culturally specific romantic troubles. She is remade into a universal American figure who speaks to the contemporary professional woman's fears about being overeducated and over-professionalized such that love and domesticity have passed her over. Her relationship with the audience is now one of sympathy and empathy, rather than amusing difference. Her last words on the show reaffirm her focus on herself: "The most important relationship I will have in my life is with myself."[37] This moment recodes what was seen as her stubborn, selfish self-absorption at the beginning of her story as an empowered feminist and individualist quality. She is not an unfeminine model-minority spinster but a strong, independent woman who can inspire others.

"OVO-LACTO-SEMI-VEGETARIAN": CULTURAL CLASH AS COMMODITY

In Aparna's story, multiculturalism oscillates between a spectacle that is aspirational and interestingly Other for an American audience. The move toward women's empowerment in the end does not necessarily transform the earlier readings of her as a comedic exhibit. Instead, the two are held together in tension with no clear resolution to the conflict between the marriageable domestic Indian woman and the professional model minority. In her study of modern arranged marriage, Marian Aguiar points to how contemporary visions of the institution—both in India and the diaspora—incorporate elements of what is seen as its opposite, love marriage, "creating an arranged marriage discourse that is compatible with neoliberal ideals [especially of individual choice] that give shape to a transnational community."[38] Aguiar stresses that this is a fantasy, and media objects like Bollywood movies and women's fiction are essential to smoothing over the disjuncts present in real-life attempts to reconcile the caste, class, and heteropatriarchal structures of arranged marriages with a postfeminist, neoliberal vision of individual agency. The reality-TV romance occupies an interesting position within this context. While participating in the fantasy making of explicitly fictional media, its unique connection to "reality"—that these characters are playing versions of themselves and we are viewing a version of their lives—keeps this fantasy from being entirely smooth or successful. A permanent happy ending cannot be manufactured since most of these romances break up both on- and off-screen—a conundrum that is absent in Bollywood films or novels. The reality romance offers a glimpse into how these fantasies both struggle and persist, and most importantly, how this lack of smoothness, indeed the visibility of its conflictual format, enhances its potency.

In *Indian Matchmaking*, the jagged edges of the hybrid love-cum-arranged marriage are visible through the paradoxical nature of the Indian American woman as spectacle. The limits of her coherence in the face of internal tensions become apparent from the two very different romantic selves that Viral, a participant from Durham, North Carolina, puts forward as she negotiates her search for a partner. The audience first meets her in season two as she narrates her attempts at meeting an eligible man. Viral has a methodical approach—going to temple to meet men, listing and closely analyzing their qualities—to finding her match. Her friends must remind her that love is not a "research project."[39] The initial impression of Viral as an extroverted, confident, professional woman is further strengthened during her first interview. She tells the camera that her plan is to "be a boss, date [and presumably marry] a boss, build an empire."[40]

This is a hyper-individualist and capitalist vision of married life, with the marriage itself being imagined as a corporate merger between two people whose vision of marital success is the creation of wealth and status. Viral talks about how her married friends are all "damsels in distress" who are less professionally successful than her single friends.[41] Thus, while marriage is desirable for the social status and security it provides, Viral is also wary of it detracting from her deeply held vision of individual success. Having her own house, BMW car, and a well-paid job in the pharmaceutical industry, she feels like she is an extremely desirable woman who should be able to exercise a high level of individual choice in terms of her partner.[42]

This initial version of Viral foregrounds her as a modern woman whose choice of an arranged marriage is just that: a choice that is in keeping with her girlboss persona. This spectacle projects an easy, consumable multiculturalism that does not contradict the vision of the empowered woman. However, underlying this shining surface is what Bakirathi Mani calls the "tense negotiation between embodying race and performing multiculturalism onstage." While this fraught encounter must be invisibilized for this multiculturalism to offer through "the spectacle of racial recognition . . . the consolation of identity,"[43] the discomfort nonetheless exists in subterranean continuum with the successful multicultural persona. By framing the Indian American woman via this critical lens, I illuminate what is often easily ignored: the relationship between positive and negative representation, and the connection between the uncomfortable complexities of an Indian American identity and its attractive commodified version. While the raced and gendered Other is a model rather than a negative stereotype within a multicultural schema, she still exists as an instrument of identity, always being defined in relation to the self as white American. This is why I continue to mark the Indian American woman as the Other, exploring how this category can retain the visible, recognizable contours of otherness while being interpellated into a positive representational politics of contemporary multiculturalism. The re-inscription of the Indian American woman as a changeable and shifting performance whose form is not hardened keeps the category flexible and ready to fit the changing (and often contradictory) cultural needs of the American nation and the Indian diaspora.

The different, paradoxical performances required of Viral become clear when her hyper-individualist public selfhood comes up against who she is within her family. During their direct-to-camera interview, her parents, in the same breath, say that she "is free, absolutely" in her personal life and state that she should get married now that she has turned thirty since the young women in their community are doing the same.[44] The vision of the neoliberal American girlboss and her equally attractive and successful spouse is not in keeping with

the very specific communitarian requirements that Viral expresses in her role as the daughter of a conservative Gujarati family. They want someone who is of Gujarati origin, speaks their language, is Hindu and of the same caste (expressed in code as someone who will "blend with us," i.e., the family) in the United States.[45] This alternative version of the ideal spouse bases itself on distinctive features of the diasporic community that do not participate in an all-American manhood. It is not simultaneous with an American neoliberal vision of "dat[ing] a boss" that Viral so strongly espouses in her first interview. Within this method of marriage, Viral's own choice is curtailed. Taparia presents her with no more than one match at a time since, as she says, she does not want to give Viral too many options and confuse her; this is a clear departure from the open capitalist marketplace of girlboss romance.

While many of these inconsistencies—and Viral's desire to satisfy a conflicting set of desires—are attributed to selfishness or entitlement by Taparia, I argue that these contradictory requirements of a spouse externalize a set of conflicts that are at the heart of the Indian American woman in the show. Theorists of South Asian American visual media have highlighted both the potency of this impulse to speak equally to the Indian and the American, and the fraught nature of that desire. Whether indie films, MTV, or streaming television, these spectacles of national performance are "caught between the nationalist logics of two powerful media industries" and often speak, covertly and overtly, to various forms of cultural hegemony.[46] Multicultural entertainment, instead of the multidimensionality that it purports to support, often mobilizes flattened versions of different cultures.[47] The difficulties of juggling disparate cultural performances, and the cracks that appear as a result within the performative persona, are especially clear in a reality-TV context, where the Indian American contestant is simultaneously managing multiple audiences watching their "real life."

The pitfalls of creating a consumable multicultural persona—not through straightforward fiction but through a version of reality, however attenuated—are clear when Viral has her first date with a match set up by Taparia.[48] While discussing religion, her date, a Jain man, asks her if she is vegetarian as would be traditional for her background.[49] Viral repeatedly dodges the question and says she does not like to be categorically restricted. When her date, quite rightly, points out that she is not answering his question, she eventually tells him that she is "ovo-lacto-semi-vegetarian,"[50] an absurd and comical term that, more than revealing anything about her dietary observances, tells on her attempts at merging her dual identities. Throughout the rest of the conversation, Viral refuses to confirm either meat-eating or a vegetarian diet. When, in another attempt at getting an answer, he asks her if she eats meat, she asks him to define the term: "What do you define as meat? . . .What does that mean to you?"[51] His

incredulous laughter in response underlines the absurdity of the situation. Viral walks a tightrope between being an observant Hindu, a persona that is codified as unfashionably traditional and un-American, and a modern American woman. The individualist postfeminist boss whose diet is not mandated by external strictures like religion, but is driven purely by personal choice, is brought into contact with the dutiful Gujarati Hindu daughter whose food preferences are driven by the religious requirements of her family and community. Viral tries very hard to indicate that she is an empowered American who does not hold onto archaic ideas of religious consumption *and* that she is a "good" Indian woman who can keep up the cultural and domestic specificities of her community as a wife and mother. The consumption of animal products becomes a site where the simultaneous coexistence of these disparate models of Indian diasporic personhood comes into visible conflict and threatens the formal integrity of the Indian American woman's spectacular performance.

However, this incoherence within the neoliberal model-minority woman does not destabilize her as a commodity. Indeed, it is this very quality that makes her selfhood a profitable product. Susan Koshy argues that one of the primary functions of neoliberal femininity is to reconcile the ever-increasing need for capital with the shrinking structural support for its production by turning the realm of the private and familial into a capitalist space.[52] Thus, Indian (American) femininity is a crucial site that both transforms the private and, in the process, inducts it into the realm of profit. As Amy Bhatt and Asha Nadkarni note, women—as wives, lovers, and mothers—lubricate the gears of neoliberal multicultural capital,[53] but "this vision of security is founded on contradictory conditions."[54] Koshy's own reading of Amy Chua's famous *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (2011) highlights the inconsistencies that structure the neoliberal woman as an agent of reconciliation. Chua's polemical advocacy for her parenting methods (which are closer to a Gordon Gekko–like professional mentorship) is juxtaposed with her children's negative responses to and rebellion against them. Indeed, it is unclear if her children succeed because of or despite their tiger mother. I argue that this ambiguity within the feminine model-minority self is what makes it an interesting product—like the tiger mother in Chua's memoir, it can generate an ever-increasing amount of engagement (both positive and negative), making it profitable. Similarly, in *Indian Matchmaking*, the clash between individual romantic choice and arranged marriage is carefully stage-managed to turn both toward neoliberal schemas of profit.

Viral's post-date interview comes closest to acknowledging this managed incoherence. She tells the camera: "I was just kinda, like, just, you know, throwing things out there. . .Like, Can I keep him on his toes? . . . I wanna see as much emotion and expression as possible, so I'm probably saying all kinds of things."[55]

Viral acknowledges the strangeness of her approach and her unwillingness to give straight answers, but she frames her inability to reconcile the different parts of her persona as a test. Instead of it being *her* failure, it is her date who cannot pass her rigorous checklist. Significantly, rather than going along with Viral's attempts at creating a harmonious self, the show focuses on its absurdity. The term "ovo-lacto-semi-vegetarian" dances on-screen as she describes it, and her date's incredulous reaction is accompanied by awkward music. This divergence between Viral's self-making and how the show portrays her reveals something crucial: the threat of disintegration does not disturb the commodified nature of the spectacle. Instead, the very lack of coherence becomes a form of entertainment, generating the drama that keeps viewers interested in the show. The episode in which Viral declares her status as an "ovo-lacto semi-vegetarian" also highlights this moment by making this phrase its title, thus focusing on its absurdity and inviting the audience to feel the oddity of her stance and judge her attempts at hedging. Clearly, Viral's cultural inconsistencies are the most visible and interesting part of the episode. A point of easy social derision—having hyper-specific dietary preferences without any medical reasoning—is channeled through a fresh conduit: the Indian American woman who is trying to negotiate her participation in contradictory systems of religion and food practices. Her performance of this conflict, the so-called culture clash, is a desirable commodity, bringing a sense of novelty to the format of the dating show.

"A LITTLE SMITTEN KITTEN": NEGOTIATING FEMININITIES VIA ROMANCE

If Aparna and Viral showcase the conflict between what is framed as modern professional individuality and an Indian-coded domestic femininity, Nadia's story focuses on one of the show's other central clashes: arranged marriage versus individual romantic choice, and how they stand in for a wider struggle between different forms of "traditional" femininities. Nadia is a dancer and event planner who lives in Morris Plains, New Jersey. She is Indo-Caribbean (her family is from Guyana) and is looking to marry a man of Indian origin. While she engages with multiple men across the first two seasons, her story line ends with her still single and lamenting her inability to find a good man. She showcases one of the paradoxes that the show highlights as its emotional crux: the confusion between the affective requirements of arranged marriage versus romantic love in the Indian American diaspora. Importantly, for this conflict to be entertaining, neither American nor Indian schemas of marriage can be engaged with in any

detail. The commodifiable nature of Nadia's persona depends on her drawing on visible, easily recognizable markers of Asian and American femininities and projecting familiar binaries—of the family versus the individual, romance versus filial duty, and sexual chemistry versus social compatibility—for the viewer. This familiarity and its expected narrative beats make her story a paradoxically comforting spectacle of diasporic romantic failure to an audience that has seen these tropes repeated across multiple Asian American narratives. The lack of a happy ending does not produce audience discomfort or unlearning but instead functions to reassure them that they are getting what they expect.

The language of Americanization has historically been ambivalent about the inclusion of Asian Americans as model citizens in a domestic/romantic context. While designated as advantageous economic subjects in terms of their lawfulness, work ethic, and focus on education, they are not considered affectively American. Indeed, Asian Americans are often framed as "affect alien[s]";[56] their restrained, inscrutable, and worker-bee-like affect at odds with American expressiveness and individuality.[57] Contrasting with this version of the implicitly masculinized model minority is the Asian American woman as a domesticated wife/mother. The latter's potential for crossing over from a racio-sexual otherness to a domesticated identity has a long history.[58] The foreign, Orientalized woman—with her sexual availability, submissiveness, and acceptance of gender hierarchies—could, and did, become a desirable domestic partner when read against the feminist white woman in the latter half of the twentieth century. The frame of the "sexual model minority"[59] transformed the heavily Orientalized Yellow Peril–esque allure of the Asian American woman into a domesticated, marital sexuality.[60] It is important to note that the Asian American woman as Americanized wife and mother does not replace the Asian American woman as forbidden fruit but develops alongside it; the two are often intertwined.[61] The sexual model minority thus retains significant elements of their racial and sexual otherness. This otherness is re-coded as positive and combined with a domestic femininity, but it is not dismantled.

Nadia reformulates the tension between familiarity and difference by channeling her self through multiple forms of femininity (Indian and American) that are coded as normative within their own gender hierarchies, but not necessarily outside of them. She plays with different kinds of gender roles within a neoliberal marketplace of gender, demonstrating what Inderpal Grewal calls "the use of the concept of 'choice' as a central ethical framework for feminist as well as neoliberal consumer practices and the imbrication of feminism with consumer culture."[62] However, this does not mean she is a radically free agent who can be whoever she wants. As a Guyanese American woman, Nadia's participation in the arranged-marriage process with Taparia—whose focus is upper-caste, Hindu,

North Indian clients—is a curious example of how "strategies of oppression can be transformed into strategies of empowerment by an act of will and imagination."[63] Her cultural background makes her significantly less desirable in Taparia's eyes, and yet Nadia persists, framing arranged marriage as an empowered alternative to the vicissitudes of American romance. What is a form of assimilative femininity that comes with its own violent attempts at remaking her selfhood to make her more palatable to Taparia's clientele is reformulated as an act of agency and freedom. Even if the assimilation is not into white Americanness but into a hegemonic Indian American identity, it is still assimilation. Nadia's narrative demonstrates how the language of choice and freedom can be used as a form of alchemy, transforming what is a hierarchical and oppressive system into a symbol of difference and feminist empowerment. The ideological violence that the arranged-marriage market visits upon a less-than-ideal candidate like Nadia, both through its understanding of her as such and its attempts to make her more desirable, is imaginatively transformed into a positive aspect of neoliberal choice feminism. Through this tense negotiation between Indian and American ideals of femininity, *Indian Matchmaking* shows how the proliferation of choice can be a site of continuous, visible conflict that draws attention. It is the very lack of resolution in Nadia's life that becomes the thing that attracts a viewership. Nadia's story extends what we see in Viral's—that incoherence is the heart of the attractive, neoliberal, individual self.

However, unlike Viral and Aparna, Nadia is not especially focused on a selfhood that is deeply career oriented. Instead of being a professional model-minority persona, she is the heroine of a romantic comedy. In her introductory interview, she says she is "fun [and] adventurous"; her motto in life is "try everything once."[64] She describes herself as being an independent woman who runs her own business and has many hobbies, but they are largely framed as obstacles to her romantic happiness since they intimidate otherwise eligible men. Nadia characterizes her busy life as a waiting period: "I fill my time so that I don't sit and realize how single I am."[65] While Nadia uses a traditional matchmaking service and wants to remain within certain class, caste, and ethnic markers, she also desires physical attraction and romance through that same process. Her conflict is framed as a hybridized enactment of two different versions of conventional marital choice and, thus, marital/romantic femininity: the "traditional" Indian woman who accepts an arranged marriage and the values of submission, compromise, flexibility, and endurance that go with it, and the more "modern" American woman who determines her own partner and values beauty, physical attraction, and romantic gestures.

Significantly, both of these are forms of conventional femininity. Nadia desires the maintenance of traditional gender roles as they are conceptualized

within each system—whether arranged marriage or romance—expecting her partner to take charge, support her financially, and act as the head of the household. Her case makes clear how even an embodiment of hyper-femininity does not necessarily eliminate the conflictual format of the Indian American woman in *Indian Matchmaking.* Rather, Nadia's performance of a conventionally feminine, attractive version of the figure visibilizes her as fundamentally contradictory. She is an exemplar of what Vanita Reddy terms "Indian beauty," a "conceptual shorthand for a dynamic network of bodies, desires, events, performances, clothing and adornment practices, and commodities that are negotiated within a specific set of conjunctures in diaspora."[66] This network is potent and compelling precisely because it can speak to a range of apparently disparate desires without collapsing. Much like the first Indian American Miss America (crowned in 2013), who, according to Reddy, produced an equal degree of praise and outrage—bringing new attention to the declining beauty pageant either way[67]—the success of Nadia's racialized performance of Indian (American) beauty does not depend on it being happy and harmonious. Instead, her position as a commodifiable cultural spectacle relies on her femininity's visible failures.

These failures are clear from her two major relationships in the show: one with Shekhar, a lawyer from Chicago whom she meets via Taparia in season one, and the other with Vishal, whom she dates independently in season two. The initial success of both relationships is identified via formulaic markers of romance rather than any actual demonstration of closeness or compatibility.[68] The show itself is invested in this limited, surface display rather than a deeper examination of how these connections grow. The superficiality of these performances is a central feature of their success as multicultural commodities. As has been repeatedly emphasized by theorists of multiculturalism, most famously by Charles Taylor, the dialogic relationship between minoritarian self-performance and its majoritarian social recognition is central to multicultural identity.[69] However, this social recognition can also be fraught, and fix identity to rigid, oversimplified stereotypes that do not necessarily represent intra-community heterogeneity.[70] While more attention has been paid to negative versions of this flattening of differences, like stereotypes of the hijabi or the terrorist, positive representations also exist. As Rey Chow and Sara Ahmed have shown, the figure of the ideal multicultural subject is closely tied to their performance of the majoritarian group's version of their identity,[71] and, subsequently, the role of this multiculturalism is to "produce individuals of value for globalization."[72] For this positive, valuable multicultural performance to be successfully transmissible and commodifiable, it needs to be familiar and shallow.

Nadia's story line demonstrates the necessity of this superficiality; the viewers see only one brief date per relationship on-screen. On Nadia's first date with

Shekhar, they go on a riverboat ride in Chicago and then share food and wine on a picturesque outlook. They banter and discuss how they are both invested in their careers and are family oriented. It is clear from her direct-to-camera interview that it is the indicators of romance—the riverboat ride, wine, Shekhar's attentiveness—that attract her attention. She calls this her ideal date; she is "a little smitten kitten" who is finally having her "rom-com moment."[73] When she starts her relationship with Vishal in season two, a similar script plays out. The one date that we see them on, they talk about the chocolates—"choco kisses," to be precise—he has brought her and how he is ready to settle down despite their age gap: "I am . . . very excited to be a dad and wear, like, dorky clothes . . . get a minivan and pick my kids up from school."[74] After the date, Nadia gushes to the camera about the kiss they shared. This use of the language of romance identifies Nadia as a conventional, feminine woman looking for a traditionally masculine man. While this *should* make her a more harmoniously constructed figure, that is not the case.

The visible conflict between different forms of the feminine—and its centrality to the popularity of her story line—is clear from her breakups with both these men. While her narrative arc in the first season ends with her smitten with Shekhar, season two intimates their eventual breakup from the very beginning. They talk on the phone every day, and each has visited the other's city, but Nadia is waiting for Shekhar to make "that big move, . . . a big, grand gesture" that sweeps her off her feet.[75] She wants him to declare his romantic intentions very clearly—"if I don't feel desired by my partner, that puts you in the friend zone,"[76] she says to the camera—and is becoming increasingly bored of him since he lacks what she sees as masculine confidence, and that is a "turn-off" for her.[77] When Taparia insists on knowing her intentions regarding Shekhar after they have been talking for several months, she says that she does not feel any "romantic feelings from him."[78] This is similar to what she discloses to Shekhar himself when ending the relationship. She tells him, "I was a little disappointed when I was in Chicago . . . I just kind of felt a little rejected by you."[79] While Nadia's "real" reasons for the breakup might be different, the ones she puts forward on the show are significant in terms of the confusion they engender between two distinct marital and/or sexual schemas. While going through a matchmaker who insists that traditional arranged marriages are between families, with caste, class, family background, etc. being far more important than the romance expected within a love marriage, Nadia frames her rejection of Shekhar as premised on the requirements of the latter. She wants him to express a romantic masculinity and a type of courtship behavior that has no clear space within an arranged marriage. Thus, her affective demands of her potential partner contradict the marital system she is inhabiting.

This is not to say that Nadia is utilizing a traditional matchmaker but actually desires a relationship that is in line with American ideas of romance and love. Rather, she uses both schemas and scripts interchangeably, effectively creating the Indian American woman as a figure that hybridizes distinct systems of marital choice. Her final breakup on the show, which ends her story line, brings out the coexistence of these contradictory systems via her relationship expectations. This breakup is initiated by her partner, Vishal, whom she meets at a gathering for Taparia's clients. While they meet in proximity to Taparia, it is not a relationship that exists within the ambit of the arranged-marriage system that she stands for. When Nadia brings him up to the matchmaker, she rejects the possibility of their union because he is seven years younger than her and thus not a suitable boy. Nadia continues the relationship regardless and after a month, he breaks it off with her because he does not feel "that spark."[80] At this point, she activates a script that originates in traditional matchmaking. Accusing him of leading her on, she says that she is "not a quitter" and feels frustrated that she is "not good enough for [him] to try."[81] She tells the camera: "I just had a lot of frustration, and the frustration came from, I feel like, he didn't give us a fair chance."[82] This language of effort, compromise, and flexibility echoes Taparia's doctrine of a successful relationship. She invokes the idea of a promise at the one-month mark of her relationship with Vishal that would be more appropriate if they had been engaged through an arranged setup that would move much faster. Nadia exemplifies the Indian American woman as an affective palimpsest, carrying within herself a heterogeneous set of emotional scripts that originate within different schemas of Indianness and Americanness.

CONCLUSION

As a participant (even if partial) in constructs of Asian American womanhood at large, the Indian American woman has always been a container of competing gender, racial, and national ideologies. The popular success of Smriti Mundhra's representation of Indian Americanness is the result of a Mephistophelian bargain. While giving the diaspora its much-desired representation and visibility, *Indian Matchmaking* figures the Indian woman as a consistently conflicted vessel whose usefulness lies in its ability to bend but not break under competing semiotic pressures. As Laura Hyun Yi Kang notes, "'Asian American women' emerged as a political and syntactical formulation . . . at the agonistic intersections of feminist, antiracist, and anti-imperialist social movements in the late 1960s and 1970s."[83] Thus, the very genesis of the term is associated with both a self-conscious

self-making and a range of answers to the question, "What is an Asian American woman?" In addition to the radical and subversive forms of this figure that Kang focuses on, the Asian American woman has also gone on to define a more conservative version of cultural difference. *Indian Matchmaking* demonstrates this through marriage. The connection between the Asian American woman's assimilationist self-making and the romance plot is both significant and fraught. Gina Marchetti, Patricia P. Chu, Lisa Lowe, and Susan Koshy have all highlighted the interracial romance—specifically between an Asian woman and a white man—as a cornerstone of national assimilation narratives.[84] The tension between the Asian and the American and its articulation via romance is also integral to *Indian Matchmaking*. However, there is a crucial shift in how this connection is figured. Instead of the interracial romance, this fraught relationship is played out *within* the Indian American woman; she is both American and Indian, white and brown. The ultimate romance, and the resultant romantic conflict, is between different versions of herself. This situates the Indian American woman as a self-contained and solipsistic spectacle that makes for an even more effective and complete commodity since another actor is now unnecessary.

Aparna, Viral, and Nadia show the variety of spectacular performances that are possible within the form of the Indian American woman. The foregrounding of difference—whether different forms of conventionality or a combination of the normative and unconventional—is voided of any radical or even discomfiting potential and instead is refigured as entertainment. This is the foundation of contemporary multiculturalism in its conservative avatar. The conflicts that are generated via national, ethnic, and cultural differences all become spectacles, something to be viewed and enjoyed rather than generating any change. In this context, Taparia's failure in facilitating any successful matches is a feature, not a bug. Arranged marriage, matchmaking, and Indian Americanness all eventually confirm the rightness of the national status quo. *Indian Matchmaking* speaks to the flexibility of categories of otherness and their role in a multicultural nation. The discourses of diverse and positive (ethnic, racial, and gendered) representation are necessary for both disseminating the notion of multiculturalism and turning it into a profitable product. The Other is re-coded as positive and approachable, but they remain the Other. The frisson of this hierarchy—even as it is ostensibly questioned, challenged, and subverted—is the engine of multiculturalism. The Indian American woman is a generative exemplar of how contemporary multiculturalism preserves cultural hierarchies while simultaneously framing itself as a continuum where all difference is equal and benign. As the Other, she must work to preserve the spectacle of a multicultural nation and turn it into a commodity whose dual importance lies in its economic profitability and its cultural potency. The figure of the Indian American woman as the keeper

of cultural authenticity becomes a sought-after multicultural product that can spice up, but not fundamentally change, the implicitly white American nation.

NOTES

1. Eric Deggans, "'It's about time': How 'Indian Matchmaking' Found Love—and success—on Netflix," *NPR*, April 21, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/04/21/1170981913/indian-matchmaking-season-3.
2. Deggans, "'It's about time.'"
3. Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xvi.
4. The three shows that are often invoked as the precedents of contemporary reality TV—*Candid Camera* (1948), *An American Family* (1973), and *The Real World* (1992)—were all made in and about the United States. The first reality dating show that achieved national and international fame, and became a template for the genre, is ABC's *The Bachelor* (2002). While reality TV has now become a global phenomenon, it continues to have a strong association with the US entertainment landscape and is a prime genre of national self-making.
5. Brittany Rico, Joyce Key Hahn, and Cody Spence, "Asian Indian Was the Largest Asian Alone Population Group in 2020," The United States Census Bureau, September 21 2023, https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/09/2020-census-dhc-a-asian-population.html.
6. Census data shows that pre-1965, the South Asian American population was vanishingly small, numbering in the few thousand in the early twentieth century with a very low growth rate. While these numbers increased somewhat across the first half of the century, South Asian migration became a significant force only after the passing of the Hart-Celler Act. Chakravorty, Sanjoy, Devesh Kapur, and Nirvikar Singh, *The Other One Percent: Indians in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–27.
7. While traditionally more critical attention has been paid to post-1965 South Asian American immigration, there is a significant body of literature that has both undercut the idea that South Asian American history is a result of the Hart-Celler Act and recuperated modes of diasporic life that exceed contemporary model-minority configurations. A diverse set of groups emerge in this literature: nineteenth-century Punjabi immigrants on the East Coast, Bengali merchants in 1920s Harlem, and post–World War II Keralite student nurses, among others. For more on this, see Gary R. Hess, "The Forgotten Asian Americans: The East Indian Community in the United States," *Pacific Historical Review* 43, no. 4 (1974): 576–96; Sucheta Mazumdar, "Colonial Impact and Punjabi Emigration to the United States" and "Punjabi Agricultural Workers in California, 1905–1945," in *Labor Immigration under Capitalism: Asian Immigrant Workers in the United States before World War II*, ed. Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich, 316– 36, 549–78 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and*

Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Doug Coulson, "The Ghadr Party and the Indian Caste System in *Thind*," in *Race, Nation, and Refuge: The Rhetoric of Race in Asian American Citizenship Cases* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017), 45–89; Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); Sujani K. Reddy, *Nursing and Empire Gendered Labor and Migration from India to the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Manan Desai, *The United States of India: Anticolonial Literature and Transnational Refraction* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2020).

8. Rajini Srikanth, *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004); Bakirathi Mani, *Aspiring to Home: South Asians in America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Inderpal Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Kavita Daiya, "Provincializing America: Engaging Postcolonial Critique and Asian American Studies in a Transnational Framework," *South Asian Review* 26, no. 2 (2005): 265–75.

9. Tamara Bhalla and Pawan Dhingra, "The Privilege of South Asian American Studies," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 25, no. 2 (2022): 307–18.

10. See Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); see also Ketu H. Katrak, "Diasporic Alienness and Belonging: Selected Indian-American Cultural Expressions," in *Trans-Status Subjects: Gender in the Globalization of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Sonita Sarker and Esha Niyogi De (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

11. The fictitious nature of "Indian American" as a homogenous category is parallelled by the simultaneous remaking of "Indian" as a Hindu, upper-caste identity in contemporary India. The rising tide of Hindu fundamentalism in India in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries is closely connected to how the contemporary Indian American diaspora conceptualizes itself. Interestingly, the conflicted Indian American femininity that is focalized in *Indian Matchmaking* as a site of competition between Indian and American values has close parallels to a similarly tense and fragmented version of Indian femininity that embodies both so-called traditional Hindu (and therefore Indian) and modern Westernized ideals. A conflict between protean versions of the "East" and "West" are enacted within both national communities through the lives and bodies of women.

12. Kalyan Nadiminti, "'A Betrayal of Everything': The Law of the Family in Jhumpa Lahiri's The Lowland," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 21, no. 2 (2018): 239–62.

13. Jill Vejnoska, "Networks Say 'I do' as Couples Court," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 2002, quoted in Andrea M. McClanahan, "'Must Marry TV': The Role of the Heterosexual Imaginary in *The Bachelor*," in *Critical Thinking about Sex, Love, and Romance in the Mass Media*, ed., Mary-Lou Galician and Debra L. Merskin (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), 261.

14. Jackson McHenry, "As It Turns Out, None of the *Indian Matchmaking* Couples Are Actually Still Together," *Vulture*, July 22, 2020. https://www.vulture.com/2020/07/are-the-indian-matchmaking-couples-still-together.html.

15. The viewer response to *Indian Matchmaking* is testimony to its unsettling success. Multiple think pieces have critiqued the show's imbrication in the caste, class, gender, and religious hierarchies that define arranged marriages in both India and the United States while simultaneously acknowledging its popularity (it is one of Netflix's most popular dating shows, having inspired a spinoff, *Jewish Matchmaking*) due to the "entertainment value" provided by the spectacle of arranged marriage. See Mallika Rao, "*Indian Matchmaking* Is Just Telling It Like It Is," *Vulture*, July 25, 2020, https://www.vulture.com/2020/07/indian-matchmaking-dating-reality-tv-colorism.html; see also Scaachi Koul, "Why Does 'Indian Matchmaking' Make My Culture Seem So Burdensome?," *Buzzfeed News*, July 30 2020, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/scaachikoul/indian-matchmaking-criticism-family-karma.

16. See Josephine Lee, "Decorative Orientalism," in *Asian American Literature in Transition 1850–1930*, ed. Josephine Lee (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2021), 187–204; Ann Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Leslie Bow, *Racist Love: Asian Abstraction and the Pleasures of Fantasy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

17. Cheng, *Ornamentalism*.

18. Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 85–91.

19. Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" in *Representation: Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 225.

20. See Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (London: Verso, 1991) 2; Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 214.

21. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 1, episode 1, "Slim, Trim, and Educated," created by Smriti Mundhra, featuring Aparna Shewakramani, aired July 16, 2020, Netflix, 5:45–5:51 https://www.netflix.com/watch/80244462.

22. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 1, episode 1, "Slim, Trim, and Educated," Netflix, 6:36–6:41.

23. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 1, episode 1, "Slim, Trim, and Educated," Netflix, 6:54–7:08.

24. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 1, episode 1, "Slim, Trim, and Educated," Netflix, 27:30–27:36.

25. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 1, episode 1, "Slim, Trim, and Educated," Netflix, 9:45–11:10.

26. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 1, episode 1, "Slim, Trim, and Educated," Netflix, 11:30–11:36.

27. Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (London: Penguin, 1967); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Berkley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014).

28. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

29. Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 10.
30. Sunaina Marr Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002); Mani, *Aspiring to Home*; Shalini Shankar, *Desi Land: Teen Culture, Class, and Success in Silicon Valley* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
31. Bandana Purkayastha, Shweta Majumdar Adur, and Koyel Khan, "Performing Indian American Ethnicity in Mainstream America," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Indian Diaspora*, ed. Radha Sarma Hegde and Ajaya Kumar Sahoo (London: Routledge, 2018), 284.
32. Rachel E. Dubrofsky, "The Bachelorette's Postfeminist Therapy: Transforming Women for Love," in *A Companion to Reality Television*, ed. Laurie Ouellette (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 197–98.
33. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 1, "I've Dated Lots of Chicks," created by Smriti Mundhra, featuring Aparna Shewakramani, aired August 10, 2022, Netflix, 16:09–17:00 https://www.netflix.com/watch/81357439.
34. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 1, "I've Dated Lots of Chicks," Netflix, 18:49–18:54.
35. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 5, "The Looks of Clint Eastwood," created by Smriti Mundhra, featuring Aparna Shewakramani, aired August 10, 2022, Netflix, 33:43–33:52 https://www.netflix.com/watch/81357443.
36. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 5, "The Looks of Clint Eastwood," Netflix, 33:06–33:16.
37. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 5, "The Looks of Clint Eastwood," Netflix, 35:55–36:00.
38. Marian Aguiar, *Arranging Marriage: Conjugal Agency in the South Asian Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 187.
39. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 2, "Be a Boss, Marry a Boss, Build an Empire," created by Smriti Mundhra, featuring Viral Joshi, aired August 10, 2022, Netflix, 17:11–17:59 https://www.netflix.com/watch/81357441.
40. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 2, "Be a Boss, Marry a Boss, Build an Empire," Netflix, 18:30–18:32.
41. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 2, "Be a Boss, Marry a Boss, Build an Empire," Netflix, 18:09–18:20.
42. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 2, "Be a Boss, Marry a Boss, Build an Empire," Netflix, 18:45–20:09.
43. Mani, *Aspiring to Home*, 246–48.
44. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 3, "Ovo-lacto-semi-vegetarian," created by Smriti Mundhra, featuring Viral Joshi, aired August 10, 2022, Netflix, 2:10–2:23, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81357441

45. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 3, "Ovo-lacto-semi-vegetarian," Netflix, 2:48–3:07.

46. Aswin Punathambekar, "Programming Bollywood: Media and the Indian-American Diaspora, 1965–2010," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Indian Diaspora*,137.

47. In her discussion of the popular Mindy Kaling–led Netflix show *Never Have I Ever*, Rupa Pillai highlights an enduring feature of multicultural pop media: while the show makes fun of mainstream American stereotypes of South Asian religions that conflate Islam with Hinduism, it also performs its own form of flattening when it depicts India as a homogenously upper-caste Hindu country and all Hindus as Ganesh-worshipping vegetarians. As Purkayastha et al. argue, the "promotion of different cultures [within multiculturalism is] a political rhetorical device" whose prime objective within the arena of commercial entertainment is profit. Thus, rather than a nuanced and often uncomfortable vision of South Asian American identity, it is the prejudices and fantasies of multiple—instead of one—audiences that is catered to. See Melissa Borja, "Religion, Race, and 'Never Have I Ever': A Roundtable Discussion," *NPR*, June 25, 2025, https://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2020/06/religion-race-and-never-have-i-ever-a-roundtable-discussion/; Bandana Purkayastha, Shweta Majumdar Adur, and Koyel Khan, "Performing Indian American Ethnicity in Mainstream America," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Indian Diaspora*, 284.

48. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 3, "Ovo-lacto-semi-vegetarian," Netflix, 17:45–19:00.

49. This moment is also exemplary of another kind of conflation, this time between religious identities. Viral's date has been raised as a Jain, a religious minority in India. When she asks him to tell her about his religion, he explains it as "Hindu on steroids." This moment is particularly interesting as it reflects *and* flattens the complex alliance between contemporary Hinduism and Jainism in India. While an official "minority religion" that has striven to preserve its distinct religious status, Jainism in India has had a long history of being closely intertwined with Hinduism, specifically upper-caste Hinduism. Contemporary Jains are economic and cultural elites, with a majority being white-collar and upper-caste. These demographics are replicated in the Jain diaspora in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center, most Jains feel an affinity with Hinduism (as opposed to other minority religions like Buddhism or Zoroastrianism). Politically, an overwhelming majority support the Hindutva-leaning Bharatiya Janata Dal party currently in power in India. See Kelsey Jo Starr, "6 facts about Jains in India," Pew Research Center, August 17 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/08/17/6-facts-about-jains-in-india/; see also "Jains Granted Minority Status," *The Hindu*, November 16 2021, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/jains-granted-minority-status/article5598368.ece.

50. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 3, "Ovo-lacto-semi-vegetarian," Netflix, 18:28–18:30.

51. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 3, "Ovo-lacto-semi-vegetarian," Netflix, 18:44–18:48.

52. Susan Koshy, "Neoliberal Family Matters," *American Literary History* 25, no. 2 (2013): 344–80.

53. In her analysis of *Outsourced*, a short-lived sitcom set in an Indian call center managed by a white American transplant, Nadkarni demonstrates how the female Indian call-center worker metaphorically "contains the threat of a modernizing India" and makes it manageable through her romantic relationship with her white American boss. Similarly, Amy Bhatt's ethnographic study of diasporic Indian housewives married to Indian tech workers examines how these women support their husbands' threatened brown masculinity in white corporate America by preserving traditional heterosexual hierarchies at home. Asha Nadkarni, "Neoliberal Multiculturalism, Outsourced," in *The Routledge Companion to Global Television*, ed. Shawn Shimpach (New York: Routledge, 2019), 214–33 (quotation on 219); Amy Bhatt, *High-Tech Housewives: Indian IT Workers, Gendered Labor, and Transmigration* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018).
54. Koshy, "Neoliberal Family Matters," 347.
55. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 3, "Ovo-lacto-semi-vegetarian," Netflix, 18:58–19:18.
56. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
57. See David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu, eds., *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Margaret Rhee, "In Search of My Robot: Race, Technology, and the Asian American Body," *Scholar and Feminist Online*, 13, no. 3 (2016): https://sfonline.barnard.edu/margaret-rhee-in-search-of-my-robot-race-technology-and-the-asian-american-body/.
58. Josephine Lee, "Decorative Orientalism," in *Asian American Literature in Transition*, 187–204.
59. Susan Koshy, *Sexual Naturalization: Asian Americans and Miscegenation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 137.
60. Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Woman on Screen and Scene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 148–52.
61. As Shimizu states, "While familiar domesticity frames the couple, fetishization emerges in the interracial sexual coupling itself." Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race*, 152.
62. Grewal, *Transnational America*, 3.
63. Koshy, *Sexual Naturalization*, 148.
64. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 1, episode 1 "Slim, Trim, and Educated," Netflix, 21:50–21:53.
65. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 1, episode 1 "Slim, Trim, and Educated," Netflix, 22:48–22:54.
66. Vanita Reddy, *Fashioning Diaspora: Beauty, Femininity, and South Asian American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016), 6.
67. Reddy, *Fashioning Diaspora*, 1–4.
68. This is a standard move in reality TV; in fact, as Lindsay Brandon Hunter argues, reality TV is in the business of generating romance by cueing its participants to feel

appropriately when presented with the requisite stimuli (candles, roses, chocolates, etc.), rather than representing feelings that already exist. Lindsay Brandon Hunter, "Intimate Access: Performing Romantic Love on Reality TV," in *Playing Real: Mimesis, Media, and Mischief* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021), 43–64.

69. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Guttman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25.

70. Anne Philips, *Multiculturalism without Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

71. Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 107; Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 133–38.

72. Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 140.

73. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 1, episode 4, "I Want to See You Again," created by Smriti Mundhra, featuring Nadia Jagessar, aired July 16, 2020, Netflix, 9:01–10:11, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81014192?trackId=200257859.

74. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 2, "Be a Boss, Marry a Boss, Build an Empire," Netflix, 13:07–13:15.

75. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 1 "I've Dated Lots of Chicks," Netflix, 15:20–15:32.

76. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 2, "Be a Boss, Marry a Boss, Build an Empire," Netflix, 6:32–6:40.

77. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 2, "Be a Boss, Marry a Boss, Build an Empire," Netflix, 27:37–27:42.

78. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 2, "Be a Boss, Marry a Boss, Build an Empire," Netflix, 26:40–26:44.

79. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 2, "Be a Boss, Marry a Boss, Build an Empire," Netflix, 35:25–35:52.

80. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 3, "Ovo-lacto-semi-vegetarian," Netflix, 25:34–25:37.

81. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 3, "Ovo-lacto-semi-vegetarian," Netflix, 27:09–27:46.

82. *Indian Matchmaking*, season 2, episode 4, "I Love You Like a Friend," created by Smriti Mundhra, featuring Nadia Jagessar, aired August 10, 2022, Netflix, 30:46–30:55 https://www.netflix.com/watch/81357441?trackId=255824129.

83. Laura Hyun Yi Kang, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 5.

84. Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the Yellow Peril: Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Koshy, *Sexual Naturalization*.