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**Bollywood Homes: Queer Diasporic Identity in  
Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla's *Ode to Lata***

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**Abstract:** Examining queer cultural practices in the articulation of diasporic subjectivity, this article problematises a redemptive reading of queer diasporas. Through a close reading of Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla's first novel *Ode to Lata*, I underscore the significance of disputing logics of suppressing female sexual subjectivity in queer discourses and concurrently challenge the entrenched racial hierarchies in South Asian diasporic populations. Placing the (male) queer diasporic subject at the centre of debates on home, race and queerness extends the critical span of queer and diaspora studies. It enables multiple interpretations of conventional readings of both queerness and diasporas.

**Keywords:** queer diasporas, South Asian diasporas, Bollywood, South Asian cultures and race, home, Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla

This essay locates queer cultural practices in the broader context of local, global, diasporic, racial and transnational affiliations of queer subjectivity. I examine the analogous relation of racial and sexual position of gay male diasporic subjectivity in Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla's first novel *Ode to Lata* (2002). Dhalla's narrative is significant in the ways in which it disputes conventional conceptions of diaspora as theorised from a heteronormative perspective by challenging existing dominant paradigms of home. South Asian queer diasporic subjectivity recasts the vexed site of home as the repository of same-sex desire. However, the articulation of the queer diasporic male identity is dependent upon the simultaneous construction of embedded racial binaries and the elision of female sexual subjectivity. Although through explicit (re-)appropriation of film songs the novel highlights queer diasporic practices/memory of reading Bollywood as a specifically queer cultural export, I suggest that Dhalla rehearses Bollywood's uncritical obsession with Euro-American racialised conceptions of beauty to construct the protagonist Ali's queer identity.

As a theoretical framework, I extend Gayatri Gopinath's formulation of the queer diasporic frame of analysis that signals towards 'alternative forms of collectivity and communal belonging that redefine 'home' as national, communal, or domestic space outside a logic of blood, purity, authenticity, and patrilineal descent' (2005a: 158). Combining insights from studies of diaspora and queer theory to unravel the interconnection between diasporic

formations and queer cultural practices, I place the queer diasporic subject at the centre of discourses on queerness, diaspora, race and home. Such an approach undermines the rigid hierarchy that locates non-white queer subjects in peripheral boundaries and simultaneously addresses the absence of race as a useful category of analysis in postcolonial studies. By centring queer cultural practices such as Bollywood in diasporic narratives of home, history and belonging, this critique offers a new perspective on both queerness and traditional heteronormative frames of diaspora. As Gopinath suggests, 'suturing 'queer' to 'diaspora' points to those desires, practices, and subjectivities that are rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic and nationalist imaginaries' (2005a: 158). In this essay, I engage with those alternative forms of belonging and desire that suture together queer cultural practices to diasporic identities.

### **Queer diasporic homes**

Dhalla is an Indian-Kenyan queer migrant to the United States. Written in the first-person voice, *Ode to Lata*, places the queer diasporic subject at the centre of issues of migration, home and diaspora. The novel is significant in the ways in which it represents the homosexuality of its protagonist, Ali, and highlights competing claims to his Indian, Muslim, Kenyan Asian, diasporic identity in his new home Los Angeles. It parallels Ali's loss of and longing for home with his yearning for his lost lover, Richard. The alternating appearance of Richard and Kenya attests to the impossibility of their separation in Ali's consciousness and suggests a nostalgic framework of longing for Richard and belonging to Kenya. Although Ali attempts to construct his American identity and feel comfortable in it by regulating his life to the rhythms of American television, the constant eruptions of his Kenyan past and his Indian culture create a sense of loss, nostalgia and longing.

Dhalla's novel rewrites conventional accounts of home in diasporic imagination from the perspective of the queerness of its protagonist. In relation to the multiple definitions of home in diasporic discourses, Avtar Brah points out that 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination' (1996: 188). The construction of the imaginary geographical homeland of Kenya illustrates a mnemonic process, which becomes both parallel and similar to Ali's desire for Richard. Kenya appears as an imaginary location to which Ali returns as he constructs fictions of his past. At the beginning of the novel, for Ali, 'the image of the Kenyan

flag with its brilliant red and green colors' fades in comparison to the 'impregnable promise of benevolence' exemplified by the American flag (2). However, as the novel progresses, Kenya becomes a fiction that like Richard, unfolds within the confines of his imaginary belonging. The nostalgia for Kenya is charted in fictional reconstructions whereby he recreates the Kenyan railway and his attachment to it: 'I had freedom in geography only to be forever captured by the memories of the home I left behind. In my dreams, I still ride the railway' (4). Although these events once existed in the realm of reality, their nostalgic invocation locates them within the boundaries of his imagination.

For Ali, home represents an intractable link to non-normative desire. Homecoming in the novel re-signifies home which conventionally functions as a site of heteronormativity that obliterates queerness. The concept of home is a contested terrain in scholarship on diaspora. Home, family, homeland, community and nation assume the status of problematic sites, which reproduce dominant structures and reinforce their mutual legitimacy. Following scholarly work on the interconnectedness of home, family, community and the nation, feminist critiques of the nation examine the position of women in discourses of family and home. Inderpal Grewal and Gaurav Desai, for instance, assert the centrality of women as emblems of national identity through their role in home and family, whilst Sondra Hausner and Jane Garnett discuss the relationship of religion with diasporic belonging (Grewal 1996: 7, Desai 2017: 333, Hausner and Garnett 2016: 1). Within lesbian and gay discourses home typically functions in opposition to queerness and migration (away from home) represents a vital component of queerness. In this scheme, Ali's migration to Los Angeles renders Kenya by contrast as a 'home' of compulsory heteronormativity. However, Ali's brief return to Kenya and his constant nostalgic longing problematise any neat assessment of 'home' as a suppressor of queerness. On his visit to Kenya, Ali meets his bisexual lover Nawaz and even though Nawaz is awaiting his marriage, Ali feels 'a desire so urgent, it was acutely painful' and the 'familiar rush pulsating through my body' (94).

In her work on queer migrations, Anne-Marie Fortier challenges the 'tendency to oppose queerness and the childhood home, where the latter is a space where queerness does not fit (2003: 116).' Similarly, Gopinath provides an elucidatory account of the function of home in queer diasporic texts. She explains,

queer diasporic texts ... lay claim to both the space of 'home' and the nation by making both the site of desire and pleasure in a nostalgic diasporic imaginary. The heteronormative home, in these texts, unwittingly generates homoeroticism. This resignification of 'home' within a queer diasporic imaginary makes three crucial interventions: first, it forcefully repudiates the elision of queer subjects from national and diasporic memory; second, it denies their function as threat to family/community/nation; and third, it refuses to position queer subjects as alien, inauthentic, and perennially outside the confines of these entities. (2005b: 15)

For the South Asian queer subject, the heteronormative home, as Gopinath suggests, by generating homoeroticism becomes a signifier of same-sex desire. If Kenya represents a phantasmatic place, it also represents the possibility of queer belonging apparent in the dramatic reliving of Ali's sexual past as he awaits sexual deliverance from Nawaz. His Kenyan home becomes the signifier of his adolescent queerness. It exemplifies David Eng's formulation of 'horizons of being and becoming' (2010: 183). The resignification of home as a location of queer pleasure in Ali's imaginary disputes the claim that home can only be a place where queerness and non-normative desires exist as outsiders.

Crucially, Ali's encounter with Nawaz in Kenya serves to interrogate the assumption of non-western (queer) sexual experiences as either less emancipated or marginal. Ali shifts from a position of the newly acquired imperialist gaze to an acknowledgement of the complexity of sexuality in Kenya. Nawaz's impending marriage initially prompts Ali to look at Nawaz's covert bisexuality from his position of privilege as an American émigré. Contrasted to the discourses of American queer identity politics, Kenyan sexual experiences appear simplistically uncategorised, evident in Nawaz's engagement or later his friend Akil's 'imposed' marriage (107). However, Ali soon realises that American and Kenyan attitudes to homosexuality are not constitutive of a binary hierarchy. The novel contests the go-west narrative of queer diasporic subjects to find sexual freedom by re-energising Ali's desire for Nawaz in spite of his contempt for the latter. After the sexual encounter with Nawaz, Ali wonders who had 'made the right choice' (100). His own sexual discontentment in Los Angeles reminds him of the inefficacy of his choice. He concedes that 'perhaps labels are truly for cans of food. Not people. That we were all simply sexual beings' (99). Ali's statement provides an effective counterpoint to the homonormativisation of 'gay' identities based on the US frame of identity classification. It points to the universalising tendency of global models at the expense of local experience.

Critiquing conventional diasporic narratives, Gopinath observes that diaspora traditionally refers 'to a system of kinship reckoned through men' (2005b: 5). However, the mother-son diasporic bond in *Ode to Lata* is an exception in literatures of diaspora. Ali's father, like Richard, is an absent figure. Ali identifies with his mother, whereas Richard and his lovers stand for the lost father figure. He relates to 'the psyche of his dramatic Indian mother' and, wants to 'fuse back into her. To become one with her. To be her' (45, 130). Like his mother, he recasts himself as 'forgiving, enduring and perhaps even preventing him from straying again' (39). By presenting Ali's identification with his mother, Dhalla repositions the mother-son attachment as a primary site of affiliation within the diaspora. Further, his purportedly feminine subject position, implied by this identification, disrupts the logic of gender fixity whereby adult males must identify with masculine role models.

Creating an intergenerational connection, Bollywood opens up alternative ways to account for diasporic identity, which does not rely solely on geographical links. Studies of the Jewish diaspora suggest that generational links between Jewish peoples de-emphasise the significance of geographical territory as the basis for thinking about Jewish identity. Jewish culture becomes a critical site that disassociates the natural bond between 'this people and a particular land' (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002: 108, see also, Braziel 2008: 13-17). Similarly, Bollywood represents a cultural form that privileges the generational over the geographical link in the novel. The prominence of the product of export that Bollywood films signify illustrates the cultural attachment of Ali and his mother to India, a country in which they have never lived. The title of the novel invokes the renowned Bollywood 'playback singer' Lata Mangeshkar,<sup>1</sup> and draws attention to the significance of Bollywood in the narrative. Ali finds himself elated when listening to Bollywood music while his mother relates it to the past, '*those days*' with his father (149, emphasis in original). As a child in Kenya, Ali accompanied his mother to the screening of Bollywood films, which was like a ritual for the 'entire Indian community of Mombasa' who 'would prepare for the excursion as early as noon by packing tiffins of Indian viands' (150). Bollywood thus creates a generational link rather than a geographical link between diasporic subjects. Ali's migration from Kenya to America is an example of

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<sup>1</sup> In Bollywood, a playback singer provides the voice to the on-screen actor. Lata Mangeshkar was awarded the prestigious award *Bharat Ratna* (the Gem of India) for her contribution to music and is the playback singer par excellence.

geographical dislocation. However, in terms of his attachment to Bollywood, his Indian identity exemplifies the particularities of cultural displacement.

### **Queer Bollywood homes**

In implicit relation to home as an imaginary construct in Dhalla's narrative, Bollywood recalls the nostalgic homing desire of South Asian diasporic populations. Jigna Desai notes 'the increasing centrality of diaspora and the transnational class to the postcolonial nation-state due to the deterritorialization of the nation and other global processes' (2004: 184). Bollywood produces a fictional version of home, nation and nationalism through cinematic representation by representing the 'nation as a mythical community' (Viridi 2003: 1, see also, Prasad 2000: 28). It represents the anxiety surrounding the cosmopolitan, globalised image of India that the postcolonial nation aims to proliferate (Rai 2009: 30-32). Within diasporic circles, Bollywood constitutes a cultural tie with the lost homeland. As Ziauddin Sardar remarks, Indian films, the prime 'cultural referent' in Asian Britain, provide 'a direct emotional link with the subcontinent' (1998: 22). Viridi similarly contends that Bollywood 'resonates powerfully with the Indian diaspora, often becoming their only connection with the homeland and the main intergenerational culture diasporic families share' (2003: 2). For Ali, Bollywood represents a cultural conduit for his connection to an 'Indian' past in Kenya. It connects Ali to the other members of the Indian diaspora—Farida, Salman and Riyaz in Los Angeles.

Bollywood enables Ali to express his feelings about Richard in a Western context where men's expression of emotion is taboo since feelings 'feminise' men. Scholars such as Lalita Gopalan (2002) and Vijay Mishra (2002) show that as a paradigm of the interplay of sexual and gender tropes, Bollywood opens a cultural space for cross-gender and non-normative sexual identification. Emotional excess, traditionally associated with women in the West, serves to heighten the loss of Richard and gives a tragic expression to Ali's feelings. The first word of the title *Ode*, as explained in Webster's dictionary, refers to a lyric poem, which is marked by exaltation of feeling and style. Bollywood's exalted emotions and melodrama are reinforced if read in conjunction with the definition of the literary style of an ode. Additionally, the queer diasporic subject and his attachment to Bollywood decentre the global hegemony of American culture. By aligning Ali and Salman to the melodies of Lata Mangeshkar, Dhalla rewrites the identificatory practices of 'a new generation of Indians that had never been to India; Indians

who had become multicultural' (190). The resignification of Bollywood as a cultural practice, at the centre of identificatory structure, serves two purposes. It creates a world where 'Lata Mangeshkar ousted Barbara Streisand' such that local cultural practices precede dominant/global ones (176). The global becomes a site of contestation where different local sites interact in an equable relation. Second, it brings to the fore and emphasises the queer subtext of Bollywood, claiming it as a diasporic queer cultural practice.

Ali's identification with Bollywood actresses Rekha, Meena Kumari and the performer Helen reveals a potential for cross-gendered queer identification. Bollywood functions as a critical site that resonates with queer modes of gender and sexual non-normativity. Even though Bollywood articulates an anxiety about securing national, cultural and sexual borders through narratives of cultural purity and authenticity, critical analyses have sought to read the faultlines, which disrupt discourses of a coherent heterosexuality or national community. The focus on song-and-dance performances in Bollywood films, oft regarded as unnecessary to the plot, uncovers a thematic trope of erotic visual pleasures. Shohini Ghosh remarks that 'as powerful vehicles of emotions and aspirations, songs and dances often play out Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque' (2002: 211). As an embodiment of the 'carnavalesque,' song-and-dance sequences disrupt traditional hierarchies of class, gender or sexuality. Vanita suggests that 'while the plot of the films is heavily didactic and censorious of erotic pleasure, the half-dozen songs that punctuate every film tend to celebrate erotic life, including illicit eroticism' (2005: 288).

Ali's construction of his queer subjectivity through identification with Bollywood songs highlights the queer appropriation of a dominant cultural expression. The songs are particularly significant for queer subcultures because marginal or unconventional unions find expression in them. These bonds include cross-class love, inter-religious marriage and, to a certain extent, male and female homoeroticism. As Vanita explains, 'many songs, especially older ones, are in the first and second person ('I love you') and thus carefully avoid gendering either singer or addressee.' She adds that the strategy to leave the gender open to interpretation also functions through the use of 'the optative voice and the plural' (2005: 283). Ali's performance of Helen's song 'Piya tu Ab to Aaja' ('O my lover, please come Now') from the film *Caravan* (dir. Nasir Hussain, 1971) is exemplary of the gendered irresoluteness of the lyrics. Although sung as a



heterosexual cabaret duet, it can successfully describe any gendered position since the song, carefully omits any reference to the gender of the singer. By avoiding any reference to the singer or the addressee, the song can be sung by both the genders. Sexual desire becomes visible via an un-gendered position and can therefore incorporate non-normative identification. Ali's narcissistic cross-gendered identification with the female singer challenges the norms of gender identification like the expression of emotion afforded by the songs. Additionally, his re-appropriation of the song queers the most important cultural export of India, Bollywood. Ali's performance of Helen's song opens the possibility of queer self-fashioning in South Asian cultures in which Bollywood appears as a mode of expression where queer desire can be made intelligible.

Ali's identification with Helen further underscores the solidarity of marginal identities. Belonging to a non-Hindu/Anglo-Indian minority, Helen offers the most direct contrast to the idealised, traditional heroine of Indian films who occupies the role of the submissive, asexual subject position. Helen's hyper-sexualised performances function as a 'clutter of signifiers of Westernization,' often involving sexual licentiousness (Thomas 1989: 11). They define, by contrast, the cultural 'purity' of the Hindu/Indian heroine. As the racialised and religious outsider, Helen embodies the threat of corruption of the national body, which is symbolised by the non-Westernised and sari-clad Hindu/Indian woman. By making Helen a pivotal point in Ali's childhood narrative, Dhalla locates his queer diasporic subject in an alliance with other marginalised identities that challenge the fiction of a unified Indian culture. Ali's other strong identification with Bollywood icon Meena Kumari also places the marginal subject at the centre of discursive representation. Meena Kumari's portrayal of a courtesan in the film *Pakeezah* (The Pure One, 1971) has acquired an iconic status in Bollywood spectatorship. Ali suggests that one particular song from the film, in which Meena Kumari declares that she has been sexually exploited by all the members of the society from the postman to the policeman, is 'one of the campiest songs' (62). For him, 'this should have been the litmus test for any Indian parent to discover a son's homosexuality. The infamous *Pakeezah* song' (62). Like Helen, Meena Kumari represents the 'other' as the degenerate 'Muslim' *tawaif* (courtesan). However, the film condemns the society for its treatment of the prostitute, who remains 'the pure one'. Ali's identification with Meena Kumari thus conjoins queerness with stigmatised identities and calls into question the cultural stigmatisation of marginal subjects and non-normative desire.

### **Queer male subjects, elision of female sexuality and whiteness**

Paradoxically, the enabling queer diasporic identification with the oppressed female figure serves to reinforce male control over the female body in the novel. The glamorous figures of Helen and Meena Kumari efface the effects of exploitation of female bodies for male pleasure.

Asha Kasbekar contends that:

the Hindi film upholds the patriarchally determined feminine idealization through inflated rhetoric on chastity within the narrative, but resists the very same feminine ideals by offering the woman as ‘spectacle’ in the song-and-dance numbers, both idealization and fetishisation being themselves products of patriarchy. (2001: 294)

Additionally, Meg Wesling reassesses the enabling narrative of queer global mobility within diasporas as particularly disadvantageous to women who are forced into prostitution on transnational scale (2008: 37). Similarly, Ali’s mother appears both as an idealised and fetishised woman in Ali’s imagination. As the ideal Indian mother, Ali refuses to acknowledge his mother’s sexuality while his father is positioned as an active sexual agent. His mother explains that her husband did not even have ‘proper intercourse’ with her when she became pregnant because he does not wish to ‘defile her’ (5). For Ali, she is the template of the Mother India figure who sacrifices her life for the social good. At the end of the novel, he realises that as a mother she had sacrificed all her life so that he can have a better life. He feels an ‘appreciation for all she had endured’ (213). The guilt generated by not being able to give her grandchildren results from his view of her as the ideal Indian mother. Simultaneously, his mother embodies the threat of female sexuality who like Helen transgresses the legitimate boundaries of social order by desiring her son in an oedipal-castrative-incestuous frame. In his dreams, he imagines her ‘*hands ... on her breasts as if priming a weapon of torture*’ (205, italics in original). The desired female bodies of his mother, Helen and Meena Kumari therefore operate in a patriarchal structure that they threaten to rend as active agents of sexual desire.

The privileging of Ali’s identification with the courtesan and the performer in the narrative over the development of the female character Farida’s lesbianism inevitably marginalises the queer female diasporic experience in the novel. Apart from his mother, Ali’s Indian lesbian friend Farida is the only other female character in the novel. Gopinath argues that female homoeroticism is a problematic site in diasporic renditions of Bollywood films, pointing to the

‘elision of queer female diasporic sexuality and subjectivity’ within queer diasporic texts (2005b: 19). Farida’s character and lesbian negotiation of Indianness remain underdeveloped in the novel. As mentioned above, female homosocial play is one of the key subtexts in certain Bollywood songs along with an enduring history within South Asian folk cultures. However, Dhalla elides such references to female homoerotic pleasure and, as a result, Farida appears as the ‘social matriarch’ who conforms to the stereotype of woman as mother (197). Although Farida organises meetings for the queer South Asian support group *Saath* (togetherness), her lesbian identity remains relatively unexplored in the novel. For Ali, instead of being an actively desiring subject, Farida, like his mother, represents the intrusive woman who harasses Ali ‘with ten phone calls a day’ (201). He disregards Farida’s attachment to her lover Chastity as uninteresting ‘pussy problems’ (193). Unlike the other male members of *Saath* who are ‘far too simpleminded,’ he thinks of Farida as a cunning female who is responsible for his boycott from the group’ (203). Her character reifies the chasm between male and female homosexuality. She appears as the stereotypical power-hungry lesbian who threatens the order of their support group.

Another limitation of the male queer diasporic subject position and the gay recuperation of Bollywood icons is the resurrection of ‘whiteness’ as culturally superior and desirable. Helen, Meena Kumari and Rekha are all fair-skinned Bollywood stars in an industry, which relegates ‘dusky’ heroines like Smita Patil to the so-called art-house cinema. The South Asian queer project of exploding normative gender identifications becomes complicit in uncritically accepting fairness and whiteness as desirable attributes. In contemporary Bollywood, the fairness of the heroine in the songs is often accentuated by placing her at the centre of a dance troupe of Euro-American females. Also, the demand for fairness in men is increasing through the promotion of skin-lightening creams for men by using Bollywood male superstars like Shah Rukh Khan for publicity. As Ali admits in the novel, ‘as South Asians away from Asia, and, more painfully, away from the countries of our childhood, we tried to recreate the norms of our culture’ (195). In developing Ali’s racial prejudice, Dhalla upholds these very ‘norms of our culture’ to criticism.

In *Ode to Lata*, Bollywood’s uncritical appropriation and obsession of imperialist racist binaries of skin colour doubles in the form of Ali’s prejudice towards other racialised positions

in Los Angeles. Discussions of inter-racial imbrication (between various ethnic/racial groups for instance) have often been neglected in postcolonial analyses. Malini Schueller, for instance, interrogates the elision of racial parameters in postcolonial theory, suggesting that diasporic subjects interact with the question of race in a complex grid wherein ‘diasporas and transnational connections are significantly marked by the integument of race’ (2003: 36). In similar regard, the editors of the special issue of *Social Text* (1997) entitled ‘Queer Transexions of Race, Nation and Gender’ argue for the inclusion of race in queer theoretical frames because:

this deployment not only illuminates how various dimensions of social experience—race, sexuality, ethnicity, diaspora, gender—can cut across or *transect* one another, resulting in their potential mutual transformation; it also ‘queers’ the status of sexual orientation itself as the authentic and centrally governing category of queer practice, thus freeing up queer theory as a way of conceiving not just the sexual, but the social in general. (Harper et al. 1997: 1, emphasis in original).

Given the complexity of Ali’s racialised position in Los Angeles, I suggest that the novel deploys queerness as a formulation of Ali’s sexual as well as racial categorisation.

Mapping forms of imperial racist formulations, *Ode to Lata* offers an insightful account of the problematic issue of race within postcolonial theorisation. Ali’s interaction with his only black gay friend, Dar, reveals a process of ‘the ascendancy of whiteness,’ to borrow a term from Jasbir Puar (2007: 2). For Ali, the maintenance of a safe distance from Dar not only repeats the imperialist trope of blackness-as-abjection, but crucially becomes an important factor in his association with whiteness. Puar argues that queer diasporic subjects are under duress to conform to standards of ‘white’ homonormativity such that they disassociate ‘from others disenfranchised in similar ways in favor of consolidation with axes of privilege’ (2007: 24). Ali’s reproduction of racism relies on such strategies of identification with whiteness. I contend that diasporic formations can subvert the dominant and simultaneously reinstate the notion of a return to the primal past. After their little outing to the gay bars of Los Angeles, Dar and Ali return to Ali’s house. Ali gives him a separate glass of water and cannot overcome his racial barrier to sleep with Dar on the same bed. His racial prejudice in Los Angeles manifests itself as a return to his Kenyan past where ‘black’ is associated with inferiority. Friendship between Dar and Ali remains governed by the racial divide that separates them.

Bollywood as a queer cultural practice incorporated by Ali in the construction of his queer subjectivity also informs the understanding of his own racial position as the non-white 'other' in America. The novel critiques Bollywood's racial prejudice and Ali's replication of it by making Richard unavailable to Ali. Ali yearns for Richard, whose Latino ethnicity (his surname is Lopez) still appears as racially 'white' in Ali's Kenyan Indian imaginary (21). In his first sexual encounter with a soldier in the novel, Ali is evasive about declaring his origins. He finds his Indian features 'embarrassing' and wants to pass as a Latino (21). As Ali says, 'Was this not a curse of every South Asian whose standards of beauty were in conflict with his own appearance' (22). Although as an explanation he points to the racial colonial constructs of white/non-white binary, the postcolonial Kenyan and Indian cultures continue and reinforce the inferiority of black skin: 'Imagine growing up in a country where being white automatically meant that you were entitled to the privileges that everyone had to struggle for' (23). Moreover, in his dream about his mother as a tormentor, Ali cannot imagine her as dark-skinned. He asserts that the woman in his dreams does not resemble his mother because, for him, his mother '*is certainly not as dark in complexion*' in real life (204, emphasis in original).

### **Queer diasporas and race**

Ali's brief encounter with Nelson, his black lover, further problematises cross-racial desire in the novel. By framing the Nelson/Ali relationship in a configuration of lust without emotion, Dhalla clearly disputes the racial bias of his protagonist. In his interaction with the racialised 'other', the South Asian queer diasporic subject reveals the limitations of cultural practices like Bollywood, which reinforce entrenched racial hierarchies. Nelson figures in the narrative as the signifier of rapacious sexuality. Jessie Daniels argues that the fear of black sexuality 'intensifies when it is combined with homophobia' (2016: 39). Nelson's 'bulbous cock bobbing between his legs' connects him to the stereotypical image of the black man reduced to his sexual prowess (116). Ali and Nelson's aggressive sexual encounters are contrasted with Ali's romantic longing for Richard. Equating black men with brutal sexuality, he prefers Nelson when the latter is demeaning and distant, when he is 'facing the back of my head in the grasp of his hand and *grunting like a beast*' (121, emphasis added). Further, he does not trust Nelson with his car and sinks his car keys in the toilet tank when he meets Nelson (115).

Michael Uebel claims that in the presence of the racial other 'the subject is intensely ambivalent, poised between desire and fear, incitement and interdiction, mastery and anxiety'

(1997: 5). Certainly, Ali's suspicion of Nelson makes the latter more desirable: 'He aroused in me the kind of sexual compulsion that hits smack in the gut' (113). Even though Ali loathes his own ethnicity, he does not feel 'the need to conceal' his body from Nelson (117). Further, Ali uses Nelson as the final instrument in provoking the feeling of jealousy in Richard.

Ali's racial prejudice surfaces in his response to Nelson's infidelity. When Nelson and Ali's best friend, Adrian, have an affair, Ali refuses to forgive Nelson in contrast to his earlier clement behaviour towards Richard's betrayal. Compared to Adrian's 'little pale face, with the adoring amber eyes and prominent lashes, lashes that could make even his most venomous intentions seem benign,' Nelson is seen as a manipulator whose repentance is 'a cunning transference of blame' (164). Unlike Nelson, Ali pardons Adrian but given his complex relationship to whiteness, the forgiveness appears problematic. It functions as a medium to efface his sense of racial inferiority. By realising that Adrian is 'like the rest of us mortals,' both Ali and Adrian become equal in Ali's perception (171). Consequently, for Ali then, he belongs to the same world of whiteness that Adrian inhabits.

The contrast between Nelson and Bill, the hustler, reveals the racial fracture in the multicultural fabric of America. For Ali, Bill represents 'all the physical attributes of physical beauty' (220). Like Richard, Bill is a Latino with an 'unjaded demeanor' (220). Although he is a hustler, Ali does not find any sign of 'contrived sexuality' in his eyes (220). Unlike with Nelson, there is an absence of animal imagery when Ali describes Bill. Their sexual encounter lacks the immediacy of the sexual act between Ali and Nelson. Instead of pursuing him, Ali wishes to 'elicit his desire for me' (228). Significantly, Bill exposes the racial fissures of American multicultural discourse. He has a tattoo on his arm, 'a derivative of Swastika,' which signifies his hatred of black people (241). As part Mexican and part American-Indian, Bill shares a similar history of oppression and displacement to that of the African Americans. However, he considers them in a frame of competition for equal rights where black people figure as obstacles. For him, the 'black monkeys' with their 'sorry-ass problems' always 'have more than we'll ever get from this country' (242). His racist comments place white America at the centre of rival ethnicities. Thus, the novel demonstrates that even though the multicultural bars of Los Angeles symbolise the entire multi-ethnic nation, the centrality of whiteness remains undisturbed by its absence in ethnic rivalry.

The queer diasporic subject's interaction with the racial binary uncovers the fractures within a marginalised position. Ali's reaction to Bill's pejorative remarks reflects and reinforces his own racial bigotry, similar to, as I mentioned above, the coalitional bonds with the feminine that appear embedded in patriarchal logic. The novel critiques Ali's biased position by making his attempts to counter Bill as failed propositions. Moreover, when Bill suggests the repatriation of all black populations to 'go back to where you came from,' Ali remains composed even though this comment infuriates him (242). As he says, 'And I felt ashamed because the same remark coming from Bill, from someone I was sexually attracted to, didn't compromise my desire for him' (242). Over the course of time, Ali even becomes convinced of the validity of Bill's reactionary position: 'Bill's prejudice, I justified, even in all its repugnance, revealed an honesty that deserved both admiration and pity' (243). The mixed feelings of 'admiration and pity' make Bill's comments excusable and acceptable to Ali. Ali's endorsement of Bill's position reflects and reconfirms the conventional paradigm of black-as-inferior in South Asian cultures. His ultimate rejection of blackness is secured when, in an attempt to forget his loneliness, he urinates on a black man in a bar. As he reflects upon all his 'emotional betrayals,' he urinates and 'splashes over this boy's dark skin as he beats himself frantically' (280). Although figured as a voluntary act demanded by the black boy, Ali associates it as an act of revulsion: 'Dear God, What am I doing? What have I done?' (280). Even though, for Ali, this is an act of misdirected vengeance on past lovers, it is surely an expression of his contempt for blackness as well.

The ending of the novel portrays Ali as the tragic figure of Bollywood films who remains solitary even though he craves for love. Two key events at the end of *Ode to Lata*, however, signal a move away from the over-arching thematic concern of longing in the narrative. First, shortly after Ali's resignation, 'a new, vibrant young woman who had just emigrated from India took over the post of South Asian coordinator' of the support group *Saath* (284). Given Ali's barely disguised misogynistic position throughout the story, the appointment of the 'vibrant young woman' to his post signifies the novel's way of challenging such prejudice. Simultaneously, on an invitation from the group, Ali finally decides to get himself tested for HIV. This positive step mirrors his ultimate redemption from longing for Richard and is reinforced by his life-affirming realisation: 'Alone, perhaps, but not bitter. Never bitter. I want

to continue to feel desire because I want to continue to live' (284). These incidents point to the several ways in which Ali comes to terms with absence and desire of not only Richard but also of home and his 'gradually disappearing' family (283).

In this essay, I have outlined the significance of locating the South Asian queer diasporic subject at the centre of debates about ethnicity, home and nostalgia, race, and diaspora. My interpretation of Dhalla's novel has departed from conventional readings of both queerness and diaspora to involve the complex matrices of race and ethnicity, which appear essential - even though they are invariably diminished - to the construction of queer diasporic identity. It has explained that the subversive possibilities of certain regimes of representation can repeat the norms of other forms of exclusion and a coalitional politics of subordinated identity categories is a crucial exercise, but a critical assessment of such alliances is equally relevant.

Dhalla's novel problematises male queer diasporic subjectivity whereby the simultaneous repulsion of, and attachment to the mother and to the country of origin function in parallel to other exclusionary practices. It complicates those singular readings of diasporic identities, which privilege the linear narrative of geographical displacement over and above other affiliative formations. Moreover, cultural products, like Bollywood, that become interstitial to queerness and diaspora replicate the dominant norms of racial hierarchies. I have highlighted the need to reassess such cultural practices by paying attention to their exclusionary effects. As I have argued, if *Ode to Lata* offers the recuperation of Bollywood as a queer cultural export for the diaspora, then it posits this diasporic queerness against stereotypes of black identities found in Bollywood. Concurrently, the articulation of queer male diasporic subjectivity invariably materialises through a literal erasure of female sexual desire. In this respect, male queer subject positions collude with heteronormative/nationalist ideologies.

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