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# LOCATING GENDER IN DIASPORIC SPACE: PRETTY *DESI* GIRL 'DREAM' VERSUS GENIUS IMMIGRANT WEIRDO 'REALITY' IN NIKITA LALWANI'S *GIFTED*

**SUSWAGATA CHOWDHURY**
Junior Research Fellow, Department of English and Modern European Languages,
University of Lucknow, Lucknow, U.P., India.
Email: suswagatachowdhury79@gmail.com

**SUSWAGATA CHOWDHURY**

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**Abstract**
Gender as a socio-cultural construct has a key role to play in shaping diasporic sensibility since women in Diaspora are often considered as cultural custodians while men are deemed responsible for the negotiation with outside world. Such normative gender assumptions often dictate the trajectory of individual immigrant experiences especially when women's body and sexuality are controlled in order to reinforce the traditional gender ideology characterised by power differences. Investigation of the diasporic experiences of the women is of paramount importance in order to comprehend the 'gendered' nature of Diaspora because it is mostly the women who have to inhabit contested transnational spaces while negotiating dual sets of gender ideology in terms of both the homeland and the host land culture. The responsibility of cultural preservation and continuation bestowed on women by hegemonic interpretations of gender roles impedes and limits their pursuits and enterprise in Diaspora. Imposition of conventional notions of gender roles on second and later generation immigrants is likely to affect the process of identity construction as they negotiate the duality of cultural experience in home and the world. This paper aims to study the role of traditional gender ideology and its intersection with social class and immigration status in the formation of diasporic identity so far as second generation immigrants are concerned. Analysing Nikita Lalwani's*Gifted* as primary source, the paper is an attempt to locate gender in diasporic space in order to understand its function in shaping the everyday experience of women in flux.

**Keywords:** Gender, Ideology, Diaspora, Femininity, Performativity.

"...gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time- an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts." (Butler 519)

The gender identity which is, as Butler argues, 'performative' in nature should not be considered from temporal perspective only; the spatial aspects of such gender performativity also need to be explored, as spatial location plays a key role in the formation of gender relations, subsequently

dictating gender performances. If gender is regarded as socially and culturally constructed, as opposed to sex which is considered as biological in nature, the society or culture of a particular geographical sector must have a significant role to play in the gender politics of that sector. The "social values attributed to biological acts" (Nayar 89) aid to perpetuate the socially formulated and culturally validated gender performances that determine male as masculine and female as feminine. Again, if the continuous performances that constitute gender are contextual in nature, the gender itself is also contextual rather than a predetermined category as its meaning too hinges on the time, location, and the cultural configurations within which it is performed. (Nayar 91) Helene Cixous, in her celebrated essay "Sorties" has also maintained:

> The (political) economy of the masculine and of the feminine is organised by different requirements and constraints, which, when socialised and metaphorised, produce signs, relationships of power, relationships of production and of reproduction, an entire immense system of cultural inscription readable as masculine or feminine. (232)

This postmodern, post-structural perception of gender as repeated reproduction of a defined routine or repeated citation of a sign within a particular milieu calls for 'anti-essentialism' because woman's as well as man's desires, needs, gender identity and the performance needed to produce this identity are moulded by socioeconomic background, religio-political circumstances, educational and cultural experiences. Thus, instead of being universal, gender and its meanings are local, demanding and depending on unremitting performances and their relation to other performances. (Nayar 92) As gender plays a pivotal role in shaping individual identity, both in terms of one's self-perception and the way an individual relates to the others (Tyson 108), this performative aspect of gender, is a crucial factor to be considered while investigating negotiated identities within diaspora. Discussing the implicit dangers of essentialised rendering of gendered diasporic experiences, Sandhya Rao Mehta argues:

> The multiple ways in which gender is situated within the discourse of the diaspora in contemporary studies point to the need to privilege individual experiences and specific contexts over generalised portrayals of gendered diasporas. (Mehta 10)

Diasporic experiences of an uneducated woman of working-class background from the remotest part of South Asia, belonging to an orthodox, religious family is bound to be different from her educated, upper-class, urban, liberal or pseudo-liberal counterparts. Gender ideology nurtured by these women would also vary from each other because of the situational differences both in home and host countries. Whether the women will defensively hang on to the "traditional gender ideologies where family and procreativity are valued over individual self" (Jackson 105) or try to renegotiate inherited cultural values depends on their location within diaspora after the socio-cultural shift followed by the dislocation. Since the ideology of gender is produced and reproduced in cultural practice, (Barrett 169) the paradigmatic shift in that practice is considered as of paramount importance in reviewing the gender performativity within the diasporic space. While the first generation women tend to cling to the traditional gender ideology when faced with overwhelming changes and challenges of their new home, (Sacheti 134) for the second generation immigrants, acceptance of the so called traditional gender relation that they are expected to follow, is much difficult as a result of their lack of firsthand experience of the cultural practices of the country, supposed to be their 'home.' Trapped between a "negotiator of the external world" (Jackson 105) father and "custodian of traditional culture" (Jackson 105) mother, these second generation immigrant children sometimes find it difficult to conform to the socio-cultural imperatives for perpetuation of traditional gender ideology. Nikita Lalwani's *Gifted* follows similar struggle of a maladjusted second generation immigrant Rumi, as she attempts to negotiate and reconcile her individual and gender identity while simultaneously combating multiple marginalisation as a "coloured" (Lalwani 3) "awkward" (Lalwani 45) "math-nerd" (Lalwani 238) immigrant "weirdo." (Lalwani 96)

Rumika Vasi, the only daughter of an Indian migrant family settled in Cardiff, is diagnosed as a "gifted child" (Lalwani 6) at the age of five for her exceptional ability as a mathematician. The title *Gifted* is ironical since Rumi's gift soon becomes her curse as she is placed under perennial surveillance, with her life being scrutinised and micromanaged at every level. Again, her gifted qualities make her stand apart from the rest of her classmates resulting in her subsequent dislocation in school despite her intense desire to fraternise. As Rumi grows up, the chief concern of her parents, especially her mother is her "lack of femininity, her awkwardness." (Lalwani 45) Much to Rumi's own distress, her distinction from the girls of her age grows visible, as she steps into adolescence. The mortification that follows induces inferiority complex in teenage Rumi as she begins to dread her 'unusual' divergence from the accepted gender norms that her mother advocates: "'Pathetic', thought Rumi. 'She is right, I am a Weirdo.'" (Lalwani 96) Her mother, Shreene firmly believes that Indian environment would have a positive impact on Rumi's upbringing and blames her deviation from the familiar gender codes on their resettlement in "this country [that] has messed everything up." (Lalwani 45) According to her mother, Rumi's lack of feminine qualities is nothing but another evil influence of the decadent white civilisation that has corrupted Rumi's young mind, making her become "like the *goré.* The white people." (Lalwani 45) Shreene herself finds her increasing obsession with Rumi's physical perfection or lack thereof confusing and hypocritical in nature considering her own enragement against such 'cliché' (Lalwani 46) as she perceived them, in her premarital life. Yet, her own reiteration of such "archaic warnings" (Lalwani 45) stems from her pervasive insecurity as a migrant woman who is unable to negotiate the traditional expectations and contemporary realities of the settled land culture. (Kaur 68) Though it is difficult to tell how Rumi's 'womanliness' would have turned out if her family did not migrate to the United Kingdom, her mother's persistent apprehension of the potential rejection, Rumi might face when it is time for her marriage, betrays Shreene's own misgiving of rejection from the host land society if she tries to get too closer. Monbinder Kaur has pointed out that "diasporic subjects are carriers of a consciousness which provides an awareness of difference and this sense is a basic aspect of self-identity for diasporic subjects." (Kaur 70) When this awareness of difference becomes too prominent, the growing self-consciousness hinders the process of assimilation making it impossible for the diasporic individual to 'belong', to make a home away from home. Shreene's fear of 'not belonging to anywhere' is manifested in her fear of the same fate for her daughter: "She feared her daughter would be rejected...she would become a joke- asexual and foreign; like a eunuch, neither this nor that, neither here nor there." (Lalwani 47)

Rumi's inability or unwillingness to conform to the accepted codes of traditional gender ideology rekindles Shreene's trauma of dislocation, made conspicuous by her dread of being rejected, of being "neither here nor there." (47) Her fear of 'foreignness' intermingles with her aversion to the queerness that her daughter displays by her apparent non-observance of the desired ideals. This anomaly too is foreign, hence threatening. For Shreene, her daughter's lack of femininity does not underscore her inherent masculinity; rather it is tantamount to lack of sexuality, rendering her a 'eunuch' as a result of her failure to abide by the predefined gender norms that operates within the discourse of heterosexual matrix. Farahani defines this heterosexual matrix as "an apparatus that identifies intelligibility of sex, gender and sexual norms and sexual identity." (Farhani 111) Farahani further argues,

> Without the intelligibility and governed acceptability of the heterosexual matrix, any articulation of sex and gender would be incomprehensible, because the gender identities are embodied within the heterosexual matrix. (111)

The eunuch, therefore, as a transgression of heteronormative ideal of gender and culture is deemed unintelligible and unacceptable according to this matrix. It does not signify any sexual identity but lack of it. Such asexuality is much more dangerous since it cannot provide the security of a

stable sexual or gender identity. Feeling threatened by her daughter's anomalous, non-normative, subversive gender practice, Shreene, a faithful conservator of native value system believes that as a mother it is her "responsibility to steer her and show her how to be a girl, an Indian girl at that." (Lalwani 47)

Concept of this 'Indian girl' signifies certain role, deportment, behavioural norms, codes of conduct that are culture specific. Their diasporic state necessitates the preservation of 'Indianness' in the gender formation and practice of the later generation female immigrants who, in turn, will carry on as "the repository of desi culture." (Dasgupta 78) The concepts like 'honour' 'shame' are central to the development of a 'proper' Indian girl, an obvious ramification of the "heightened sense of fear about the corruption of the female body and...values of middle class morality." (Banerjee 170) V. G. Julie Rajan's argument in this context is worth mentioning: "since the wellbeing of the community is dependent on the proper sexual behaviour of South Asian women, a restrictive nexus of shame and honour tempers their sexual expressions." (95) Shreene is horrified when Rumi tells her about her biology lesson in sexual intercourse. She vehemently insists Rumi to "forget science" (Lalwani 81) and does not relent until Rumi agrees to admit that in India "that is not how babies are born. Only white people have sex." (Lalwani 81) Shreene is equally appalled as Rumi asks for a bra because a decent Indian girl should not think about such obscene things. To Shreene's great disappointment, Rumi's mode of speaking too lacks the required propriety and modesty that might qualify her as an Indian girl. Her lack of 'Indianness' is equally alarmingly like her lack of 'womanliness' because both of it suggests her departure from what might be considered "proper and customary...correct and normal in the traditional framework of South Asian Society." (Julie Rajan 95)

Rumi, on the other hand, does not know how to live up to her mother's expectations. Socially awkward and painfully self-conscious from an early age, Rumi is unable to fit into the role of a 'proper girl.' On one hand, her "gawky gait, thick glasses, her generally antisocial behaviour" (Lalwani 47) unsettles her mother who is concerned for her lack of Indianness; on the other hand, her typically Indian appearance in school, complete with "the shiny wardrobe of Indian synthetics" (Lalwani 17) heightens her 'otherness' subjecting her to further humiliation. "They made her feel useless. Not just the popular ones, but all the girls in her class." (Lalwani 16) Her unusual talent further distinguishes from her classmates rendering her a genius immigrant weirdo. Amidst Rumi's increasing social and emotional alienation, her only solace is the fleeting memory of the trip to India. The country that is supposed to be her home infuses her with a romantic sense of belonging since it is an only place that treats her like "a little *maharani*" (Lalwani 34) instead of the "gifted weirdo." (Lalwani 209) The emotional connection Rumi felt with her country of origin during her nine day trip is further strengthened by the bollywood films she becomes obsessed to. Even though she cannot understand Hindi, these romantic movies inculcate a certain longing in Rumi; she aspires to become the pretty *desi* girl of the screen. In the movie theatre "she recognised India...and was hugged by the desire to run into the screen and live among it." (Lalwani 57) India, for Rumi, symbolises an escape from playground politics and academic rigour; it is a place where she is wanted, even desired. The unusual game she wants to play with her two male classmates implies her yearning to be desired as a woman. She proposes a role-playing, a game she calls "Let's Pretend" (Lalwani 85) where she is having an extramarital affair; her husband discovers her cuddling another man. In fight that follows, one of them dies. To forget the reality of her social ineptitude and subsequent dislocation, Rumi forges an imaginary world where she is "pretty, self-assured," (Lalwani 149) where men fight and die for her, a romantic dream she associates with India, inspired by movies from Bollywood. Unable to fit into the accepted gender norm either by Indian or Western standards, Rumi realises the impossibility of such dreams in her own world, within the confinements of classroom and home. She is filled with hope when an opportunity comes to provide her with an escape from the painful reality of social ostracism. She believes that the chess tournament

she is about to participate will "provide some kind of alternative universe, with her as leading lady: intelligent, sophisticated." (Lalwani 99) To emphasise her 'ladylikeness' Rumi is dressed in "shocking pink....the outfit is completed with pink jewellery...pink eye-shadow and lipstick borrowed from her mum's room." (97)

Discussing gender performativity within the bounds of culture, Butler has maintained, "...to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to the historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign...." (Butler 522) Rumi's mother laments her 'womanliness-less' because the familiar signs that will confirm her adherence to gender-specific practices are significantly missing. Rumi's reluctance to apply "gram flour and yoghurt" (Lalwani 45) to her face or use "Fair and lovely...for radiant fairness" (Lalwani 172) affirms her failure to comply with that 'historical idea of woman,' an Indian woman, for that matter, leading to Shreene's exasperation: "What is wrong with you? Kya problem haiteremein?" (Lalwani 94) The only cultural signs, as Bulter has called them, Rumi knows that might render her feminine, are wearing pink or applying heavy make ups. Soon, she recognises her blunder: misreading the context. What might have qualified her 'pretty' in some other context, make her an object of ridicule in the chess tournament that was supposed to provide an alternative universe. The mocking glances, indistinct taunts, shocked stares make her realise that her attempt at becoming a 'woman' has ended in disaster and she is again 'out of place.'

During her second trip to India, Rumi's desire of the desirability is realised but not in the way she had imagined. As soon as she lands in Delhi, she discovers the shift in her position. She is no longer a socially awkward girl living "in the margins of school society" (Lalwani 99); as an exotic girl, she is subject "to the net of interest that surrounds her [and] scattered male gaze." (Lalwani 157) Her yearning to be a refined lady is rekindled when she apprehends that the attention she has received is the result of her 'foreignness' than her 'womanliness.' The much-anticipated India trip cannot fulfil Rumi's expectations. The romantic illusion that she might rediscover herself in her country of origin and unearth her inner femininity is shattered. The easy muliebrity of Indian women, as she perceives them, calls attention to her own struggle to attain that womanhood. Rumi finds her cousin Bunny an ideal representation of the 'pretty *desi* girl' she herself aspires to be. The stark contrast of their general attributes intensifies Rumi's own insecurities:

> Speaking to her was like looking into a dirty mirror. Somehow the very enchantment and grace of her movements, the lucid conviction of her speech, the proud purity of her mind combined to present you with a shabby and much murkier picture of yourself. (Lalwani 163)

Her inability to negotiate her gender identity in the conventional framework of native background exclude her from the traditionalist Indian society; the inferiority complex and self-consciousness that follows, lead to her social alienation excluding her from the culturally pluralist host society. Aparna Rayaprol has argued, "Gender identity is an important dimension of both the first generation's efforts at cultural reproduction as well as socialisation of the second generations." (Rayaprol 137) The struggling nature of her gender identity not only hinders the process of her assimilation but its impact on the development of her ethnic and national identity is noticeable. Gender nonconformity makes it impossible for Rumi to perceive herself as an Indian woman; deeming herself unfit to act as the boundary marker of the racial community like her mother, (Gopinath 18) Rumi turns towards her host nation. Her entry to Oxford opens up a new possibility where renegotiation and reconciliation of gender and national identity seems feasible. For Rumi, Oxford appears to be "the first gate" (Lalwani 147) for her escape. "She would be free." (Lalwani 147) Admission to Oxford can relieve her from the perpetual surveillance as well as the pressure of being 'proper Indian women.' However, as a female descendent of a first generation immigrant family, she can never truly escape the burden of being responsible for the "biological reproduction of nation" (Yuval-Davis 66) The dichotomy of her Oxford life underscores her ideological struggle within national and cultural frameworks: "Rumi

worked slowly to separate herself into two different people, with two exclusive sets of personal characteristics." (Lalwani 199) At home, she seeks to assuage "diasporic anxieties" (Kosnick 125) of her parents by continuing the previous pretensions of cultural conformity while Oxford remains the much desired getaway from diasporic responsibilities. Unusual indifference of Mrs Mukherjee, Rumi's legal guardian in Oxford, lifts up the residual burden of compulsive formalism. Free from the overwhelming obligations of traditional gender codes, Rumi sets out to explore the manifold possibilities West has to offer. Her shouting vulgar slangs before mirror, at the middle of night on her very first day at Oxford, indicates the sudden effusion of hitherto repressed desire of gender transgression. During her stay at Oxford, Rumi ventures to violate every possible facet of normative gender expressions "as though she was a fantastical creature coming to life, her body hostage to some devilish djinn that had taken possession." (Lalwani 190) Her protest against the gender policing, she has been victim of, is expressed through her bizarre makeover, unusual clothing and unnecessary use of prohibited words. In her hopeless attempt to rise above the current status of 'gifted weirdo' Rumi finally enacts the most daring deed of her life: she gives up study altogether. But the academic failure does not guarantee an escape from the cultural encumbrance. Rumi's rebellious outbursts culminate in her running away from home to seek official help. Her devastated parents are informed that Rumi "felt abused by her experience and needed to stay away for her health." (Lalwani 271)

The naturalisation of normative gender practices within the diasporic community, as a means of cultural preservation, hinders any acknowledgment of the abusive nature of such impositions. Commenting on this gendered nature of Diaspora where woman is forced to act as the bearer and transmitter of native values, Nadje Al-Ali has asserted:

> Gender relations, however, are at the centre of diasporic cultural constructions of social identities and collectivities where women tend to constitute their symbolic 'border guards.' Specific codes and regulations around women's dress code, mobility, general comportment and sexuality delineate 'proper women', constructed as carriers of the diasporic community's 'honour' and the intergenerational producers of its culture. (120)

Shreene's trepidation regarding Rumi's exceptional bearing can be ascribed to her own sense of failure as a cultural custodian. As a first generation immigrants, who are often considered as "carriers of a consciousness which provides an awareness of difference," (Kaur 70) Shreene cannot relinquish her need to sustain the residual values of 'back home' that require a well defined gender practices to be followed in order to accommodate the cultural changes without any significant loss of 'Indianness.' Rumi's inability to conform to these practices makes it even more difficult for her to negotiate the cultural hybridity that accompanies the diasporic legacy. Established standards of gender hierarchy in a diasporic community are meant to ensure the women's role as "broker of cultural tradition." (Mannur 35) In order to perform individual agency outside this gendered structure, the accepted codes of gender dynamics have to be destabilised. Rumi's decision to leave her family demonstrates her ultimate rebel against the persistent efforts to indoctrinate her with conventional codes of traditional gender ideology. Her resolution as well as its fulfilment is both challenging and transformative in nature as it not only denotes an escape from the cultural imposition that she views as 'abuse' but from her gendered location within the patriarchal hierarchy that her parents promote.

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**Brief bio of Corresponding author:** The author has completed her masters in English literature from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata and is currently working as a Junior Research Fellow in the department of English and M.E.L, University of Lucknow. Her areas of interest include Diaspora Studies, South Asian Literature, Gender Studies among others.