



The Truth About True Love

[Gurjit Sandhu](#), ã 2000

Living

Now and in memory

Now and in destiny

Now in the written

A gentle rocking back and forth

Back and forth

Always

Remembering stories

In the midst of stories

A middle daughter story

In this in-between place, of living then and now, now and then, and straining to see what lies ahead, exists a space where I am searching for the story of self. It is as if I am back in the old family Buick, stuck in the middle with my sisters, *vudiand shoti*, on either side. Pitha determined in his driving to get *there* faster than the last time. Matha's distant gaze overlooking lane dividers, highway, and mountains, reaching memories that carry her away. Soft breath released and shaped between faithful lips couples hymns floating out of the tape cassette, her only existence in this car.

I push myself up on the palms of my hands, craning my neck left or right to catch glimpses of the world whirling by. Fast and furious images become blurs of colours, making me dizzy. I grasp Pitha's and Matha's seats and pull myself forward to look out the front window. We never seem to get *there* and the seatbelt resists and resents my curiosity, digging deep into my stomach. I maintain this uncomfortable stretch hoping to see something new. That is until Pitha or Matha or both scold me for not sitting in my seat.

Flopping back, I look for stories hidden in the folds and cracks of the burgundy velour and vinyl interior. Listening. Hearing only Matha's murmuring and the motor running. Quietly, carefully, I turn around on my piece of the backseat, lay my forearms upon the ledge, and place my chin where hands overlap. Watching the road we have just traveled, the sights just seen, the now moments suddenly becoming the past, hold me still. And still hold me.

Write in the Middle

Nestling into a seductive space that invites remembering, reflecting, and writing, I find comfort in the gentle rocking that takes me back to the past, eases into the present, and forth to the future, only to repeat itself. As

rhythmic as breathing. Again I am looking out the back window and see my life as moments sewn into and out of the fabric of Matha's life. Leaving her womb, learning to walk, walking to kindergarten, biking to grade school, driving to high school, and flying away to university, and this time it is Matha quietly and carefully stealing glances in the rear view mirror. I imagine some of her distant gazes reaching and remembering the stories of a middle daughter.

D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly discuss the backward forward aspect of narrative research in terms of temporality. Backwards moves the inquiry from the present to the past and back to the present, whereas forwards moves the inquiry from the present to the future and back to the present. Clandinin and Connelly further explain this as

[t]he three-dimensional space in which [...] research is situated creates an ongoing sense of dislocation as she moves from a remembered past in one place to a present moment in another, all the while imaginatively constructing an identity for the future. (55)

Researching narrated experiences requires a synchronicity of understandings in past, present, and future thought, where each moment informs the next and is informed by that which proceeded. The ongoing dialogue of travelling in time and place, past and future, shapes the present story.

Clandinin and Connelly suggest that fragments of memory are stitched together to create the story she tells in the present: "as [she] slide[s] backward and forward temporally, it is clear that [she] stay[s] rooted in a place" (60). Past guides the future and future possibilities are anticipated in light and in spite of those memories. Past and future are then linked together as a recreation of the present.

A back and forth narrative inquiry is layered with multiple temporalities (Clandinin and Connelly 56). The participant articulates her own experiences in the past, present, and future. The players included in each of her shared experiences have their own pasts, presents, and futures. This third person's temporality may not be the same as that of the participant. As researcher, I also inhabit a temporal dimension, meeting myself in the past, present and future. The story I write now is about past research that was present at the moment of interaction with participant. Time is a complex character that refuses one script, one costume, one part.

Articulating the back and forth of narrative requires finding a place to weave 'now and in writing' together, to capture the 'gentle rocking' as transitional as opposed to fixed. According to Clandinin and Connelly, a narrative inquirer needs

[t]o write about people, places, and things as becoming rather than being. [Her] task is not so much to say that people, places, and things are this way or that way but that they have a narrative history and are moving forward. The narrative research text is fundamentally a temporal text – about what has been, what is now, and what is becoming. The writer must find ways to write a text that is "in place," not abstracted but placed. (146)

I have included specific memories, research reflections, shared narrative, advertisement, excerpts from my journal, and reconceptualizations of data to write a text where past and future once more play together in the present.

The participants in the research I draw upon are twelve young South Asian Canadian women. Each woman's reality is articulated through diverse and different stories. Realities of multiple social, cultural, historical, and geographical worlds influence how each woman negotiates an identity for herself. Writing about the construction of identity and the multiple possibilities that emerge requires a language and (re)presentation that speaks of multiplicity. Laurel Richardson's show and tell text *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life* layers, weaves, and combines different genres to represent her lived experiences. Not only is the content of each of her essays the focus, but also the form in which voices are presented is equally important. By applying her mixed genre approach, this text becomes a space for better approximating and reflecting the voices of participants and myself.

Each section of the writing is a vehicle for advancing an analytic, all the while moving with the flow of the text towards an understanding of South Asian Canadian female identity. To categorize stories as disjointed and distinct or linear and causal becomes a complex task. Dennis Sumara, Brent Davis, and Rebecca Luce-Kapler explore stories as revealing events in and of themselves, but stories also "elaborate and fold back" (17) on other events, so that "each part is included not so much to add more detail, but to compel re-interpretation and elaboration of what has already been written, thus giving rise to new interpretive possibilities" (18).

'trust the writing,' she said
'trust the writing?' i thought
'trust the writing itself,' she repeated
as if
'itself' clarified the matter
but i trusted her
and i started to write
in the middle
at the margins
on the lines
in between the lines
trusting the writing

Sumara, Davis, and Luce-Kapler use the image of fractals to visualize and conceptualize the complexity of literary moments as sites of possibilities (3). Fractal geometry exists beyond the linear and ordered structures of formulaic, planar, and grid geography. Relationships are not straightforward and predictable, but detailed and patterned. So that moving back forth amongst different levels of inspection provides complex illuminations of self-sameness and imbeddedness, elaborating and folding back. Sumara, Davis, and Luce-Kapler state that

fractal geometry presents an alternative to the often unquestioned

assumption that complex phenomena can be reduced to root causes. There are no "simplest level" in a fractal image. Each is as complicated as the one that preceded it and the one that follows it. (7)

Emerging in the connections amongst the various levels, pasts and presents and futures, are patterns of self-sameness. However, the patterns are not necessarily determinable, rather they are revealed in the process of folding and unfolding. "What fractal geometry brings is not a renewed effort to colonize the disorderly, but an appreciation of the universe as complex, every unfolding, self-transcending, and relational" (Sumara, Davis, and Luce-Kapler 8). Employing this conceptual framework of fractals creates multiple possibilities writing, reading, and interpreting text.

Blending and blurring genres and fractals together is centralized in this research. Genres become fractals so that one form of presenting story has unfolded from another and yet other pieces unfold from it. The different details that each piece is able to provide narrate a story patterned with complexity. Each story folds and unfolds into other stories, spoken in one genre over another to best represent and reveal the text as meaningful. Our voices, including tone, rhythm, cadence and content, need to find a way into the writing. The writing becomes a political space where the contents of our stories speak of gendered roles, cultural negotiations, expectations, resistance, acceptance, and desire. How do I interpret and write about our stories? How do I present the voices I seek to represent?

Van Manen claims that hermeneutic phenomenology research is "intrinsically a textual or writing activity" (234). van Manen further explains that writing is both the method of the research and becomes the research (236). In other words, as the writer writes, she is not only creating the text, she is recreating herself. As writer, I produce a story pieced with participant memories, personal memories, and reflections upon memories. Going back and forth between remembering, writing, reflecting, rewriting, rethinking, and revising reveals layers of personal truths that shape each of the participants, including myself. The shape the writing assumes constructs the space where participant voices are heard, which voices are heard, and how each voice is heard.

Writing becomes a site of possibility, an "as if" that works in multiple ways with, through, and beyond the text. What such a contingency does is broaden the possibilities for experiencing, acting, understanding, and creating. (Luce-Kapler 267)

Rebecca Luce-Kapler explores the possibilities folded into the writing process and product as means for understanding and coming to understanding self. Writing delves into possibilities of being. As I write, I recreate my research participants and myself. The text itself is a possible representation and is by no means complete. It is also invites multiple interpretations. Imaging writing as a possible interpretation of the data and a source for possible interpretations reiterates the idea of fractals.

According to Matha, though, "that which is written", *likhia vah*, refers to destiny. Each spirit, each body, has a life course written for her. Individuals should accept experiences as fate, as an act of Wahaguru, the Great Spirit. The written is unalterable, unerasable. The script of each life is written in the stars. Anita Rau Badami sprinkles this idea into her text as, "the movement of those distant points of light [...] affect the lives of us mortals" (203). Each written with purpose, so that as the soul reads, the body is directed to action. "Everything that happens, no matter good-bad, is always good," Matha offers. How could that which is written by the hand of Wahaguru possibly be bad?

Imagining myself as writing and having already been written exposes some of the complexity of negotiating

my being, my identity, amongst worlds.

The Me

I am

unknown

and unheard

still

I pursue my word.

I am a

brief

sentence

where verbs alone preach

but with no noun

how far is my

reach?

Narendra K. Sethi (Lal 517)

Out of My Hands

This middle one, this one that I could give piara, love without feeling shame, love without the sympathetic, worried, and disappointed gazes of sisters, mothers, and grandmothers, love because she was only daughter number two. Now it is I who gaze upon her from afar with sympathetic, worried, and disappointed eyes.

Two years ago, she was a gulab, my rose that had been the envy and desire of so many good homes. That restless look in her eyes and the sensuous rhythm of her body gave me hope that she would someday soon come and sit by my feet, lay her head in my lap, and whisper that she was ready to travel the woman's journey.

Five years ago, I should have listened. Five years ago, her Pitha was

right. He knew that it was dangerous for his izzat, for his honour, a risk to generations upon generations of a strong family name to allow his daughter to stay in our home any longer. It was time she followed her destiny to a husband's home.

Eight years ago, she was the first in this family to go to university.

She wanted to be a veterinarian. She asked if she could go to university. She had asked to go to the high school that was further away to avoid all of the other Indian kids. 'Didn't want to be distracted by their rude ways,' she explained.

Thirteen years ago, she was the age I was when I was married by my parents hands. I remember this one asked her Pitha if she would always be 'his little boy'. A quiet girl who knew where eyes should look and which voices shouldn't be heard.

Thirteen years ago, I saw no problems. Eight years ago, I was pleased that she had learned to ask for things, respected the decisions of her Matha and Pitha. Five years ago, I made the mistake of asking for time. Two years ago, I failed to see what losing my daughter looked like. Today, it is out of my hands.

Out of my hands" and therefore not able to be changed, not able to be written or rewritten. Succumbing to that which is written. Accepting an unalterable destiny. When I was still silent, Matha would interpret the text that was already written for me. She would read to guide my understanding and knowledge of things. Eventually, the text takes over and she is no longer able to manipulate the meaning. As an adult, I become that eager child, learning to read and insistent upon reading by myself. Matha has no choice, but to release that which is written to me. How is Matha's belief of a destiny negotiated with the multiple visions I encounter every day? With visions of autonomy and self-determination? Destiny and autonomy are worlds that I occupy independently, simultaneously, and contextually.

In neither case, do I feel that I am completely independent and in control or a passive marionette. Situational and contextual constructs shape events and experiences. Obliging, reacting, or resisting to the constructs, writes the stories that tell of who we are. I wonder about my role in the research. Am I the author of the text or do I merely scribe, as an instrument, that which is already written? Or, do I encounter myself somewhere in between the folds?

These in between places exist in the folds, in the tandem of past, present, and future. These are transitional spaces between what the body experiences and what the body comes to know. Young South Asian Canadian women find themselves negotiating identities in these folds amongst multiple worlds. These worlds, as identified by Kauser Ahmed, include relationships developed in school, occupation, leisure-time activities, religious affiliations, and family (40). Each world contains assumptions dictating appropriate thought and behaviour.

Ahmed found that young South Asian Canadian women

experience a pull to define themselves in terms that conform to American cultural norms of dress, language, and attitudes. At the same time, these adolescents feel a powerful demand within the family to retain traditional South Asian behaviors and values. (1999 41)

The desire to seek approval from family and from peers often causes stressful complexities in negotiating an identity. Understanding self and identity in this complexity increases the risk of anxiety and confusion.

Sangeeta R. Gupta discusses her personal experiences of trying to find a place for herself as an immigrant in the midst of incompatibilities between two cultures, South Asian and American. Gupta describes growing upon "on the edge of two, often conflicting worlds" (11) where she had "one foot planted in the traditional world of [her] parents [and] the other rooted in the world outside the front door" (11). Her journey towards negotiating an identity is found in the reconciliation between cultures.

The understanding she brings to reconceptualizing her position is valuable to the discussion of South Asian Canadian female identity, however, it is simplistic. Two worlds, South Asian and American, limit the possibilities for imagining an identity. The in between places I have mentioned refer to multiple possibilities arising within folds where cultures merge, the merging of horizons in different and diverse ways.

Although gender roles present unfair and prescribed conditions for females in Canadian and South Asian cultures, Paul A. S. Ghuman focused upon the South Asian immigrant aspect and found that for women enveloped in these cultural frameworks, ascertaining a voice is often difficult. " They must learn to cope with their parents' orthodox and traditional views, which favour boys in all walks of life," Ghuman states (208). He goes on to explain that as South Asian immigrant parents attempt to make sense of the values, attitudes, and beliefs of a new and overwhelming culture, one that promotes individuality and independence, they find comfort in knowing and maintaining the practices of their cultures of origin (208).

Often this translates to fewer liberties for daughters as parents attempt to monitor and reduce cultural contamination (Ahmed, 1999; Gupta, 1999). Cultural contamination would encompass experiences and understandings foreign to parents, resulting in a xenophobia. However, for the daughters of these immigrants, making sense of the cultures they encounter in daily interactions, means accounting for the dominant culture. Ahmed's findings reveal that young South Asian American women

sometimes live two different and separate lives and engage in relationships that are kept hidden from their families. Girls who do attempt to manage both worlds describe living with constant guilt and a sense of fracture in their lives. (45)

Negotiating an identity that is meaningful and representative of our lives is a difficult task. The multiple cultures that infiltrate and affect our lives each have an influence on shaping our identities. Some of the cultural influences are conflicting and others are more complementary.

The in between struggles of my life are evident in practical and conceptual realms: in between Canadian and South Asian, tradition and modernity, selfishness and guilt, family and individual, home and distance (emotional and geographical), reproduction and resistance, marriage and education, romantic love and arranged marriage, wife and career, writing and the written. For some, these may not seem to be in between, but for my participants and myself these are problematic in between.

Perhaps the most dominant in between in our discussions revolved around dating and romantic relationships. On the one hand there was the desire to experiment and date, and on the other, a need to please our parents. South Asian American parents tend to reject and fear ideas of women dating. Women are expected to uphold the virtues and values of "Indian-ness." Dating exposes daughters to contamination, both of body and mind.

Recognizing that they must account for the host culture and the impact it has upon daughters, parents have negotiated an in between for arranged marriage. Parents seem to be giving some consideration to their wishes. Daughters appear to have more say, more voice, in the process. Women feel as though their needs are being considered and parents feel as though tradition is being maintained. The compromise is clearly evident in popular matrimonial advertisement. Seeking and requesting marriage proposals in advertisements have filled newspapers for decades and are now found on electronic websites. A tangled web of traditions, expectations, obligations, technology, modernity, family, and independence.

The following two matrimonial advertisements are typical examples of postings.

Jat Sikh Girl, FEMALE, 25, Ht 5'4", Non-Veg, Sikh-Jat from Punjab, resides in Canada, Never Married

- Looking for Jat Sikh match for my daughter. She is 25 years old and completing B.Sc. in Computer Engineering. She is smart, intelligent and caring girl who believes in family values. The boy should be professionally qualified and should have sense of humor. Serious responses only.

Jat Sikh Girl, FEMALE, 25, Ht 5'7", Non-Veg, Sikh-Jat from Punjab, resides in Canada, Never Married

- Want a qualified Jat Sikh match for a tall, smart, fair complexion girl. Education: B-Ed. Working: Teaching in residential Public School. Father: Retd. Air force officer. Mother: House wife. One Brother: Working as Marketing Executive with renowned company. Boy must be good looking, from respected family, non-drinker, non-smoker, and preferably a professional. Please respond with recent photo.

Both of these advertisements are a close approximation of the type of advertisement my parents might have

purchased in their search for an appropriate match for this middle daughter. A suitable request. There is a harmonizing of compromise and order, tradition and modernity. The marriage expectations and requirements are clearly spelt out. It is obvious that there is consideration for the demands of the woman and the requirements of the parents. The in between is not so easily settled for me. Especially not in fifty contracted words. There are still gaps (of disappointment and desire) in my story.

Hand–Me–Down History

Great narratives shape the behaviours and values of social and cultural groups. Indian master narratives of respectable love tell us about great loves, ideal loves, and loves that that could never be achieved in today's crumbling society. Master narratives remind of us an alluring past that embraced morality. Women were virtuous and voluptuous, beautiful and behaved. Unless, of course, they didn't know any better. Through stories retold on television, in books, in film, and from grandmother to granddaughter, master narratives are repeated and filter into our daily lives. The story of Sohni Mahwal is one such example.

Cross your legs and join me here on the green shag carpet at Nani-ji's feet. Not in a childhood moment, but as you and I are today. If it makes you more comfortable, lean one side against the brown velour sofa upon which Nani-ji takes comfort. She won't mind. She'll appreciate it if you help me nup her legs, but please be careful to avoid her knees. Decades of squatting before a hot clay stove, pounding cow dung into patties for fuel, and beating clothes clean on the sides of the River Sutlej never caused her any pain. It was the few years of picking strawberries for UI stamps, staining fingers blood red, that caused her joints to ache and become rigid in resistance. She'll lose herself in memories, so I hope you don't mind if Nani-ji pats your head or stokes your hair as she feels her way back into a dislocated and disenfranchised body. Her words will walk us on a soft, dusty, dirt path where the Punjabi hava blows the ageless story of Sohni Mahwal over fields, waters, and into hearts.

Nani-ji removes the thick, heavy Canadian glasses, constant and weighted; foreign lenses through which she is forced to live. Foreignness that becomes clear and so she if forced to see, denying her wish for Canaada-Shmaada to remain distant and distorted. Slowly Nani-ji rubs her eyes to remove the dreamy look and whispers, "Sucha piara," true love.

Sohni Mahwal is a story of forbidden love, true love, and lovers wronged. Sohni was a young and beautiful woman of the khatri caste. A lineage of trusted potters. Stories of her flawless fair skin, long dark hair braided with respect and innocence, bold brown eyes, and lips full of unknown temptations were carried by the Punjabi hava to villages near and far. The fullness of Sohni's hips and breasts simultaneously told the tale of a wealthy home and a fertile future.

One day, the young Raja Mahwal came through the town. He was a collector of well crafted pottery and went to see the potter. The potter was out of town, but his daughter Sohni was gracious enough to assist Mahwal. Upon finding each other's eyes, the young hearts realized a pleasure they have never imaged. Sucha piara. Mahwal's havali was located on the other side of River Sutlej where there were fewer folk. The lovers-to-be agreed it was safest to meet on Mahwal's side of the river. "Sohni did not know what it was this thing that made her so happy and so sad," Nani-ji continued, "so, poor girl, decided it was best to tell no one." Not knowing how to swim, Sohni stole a perfect pot from her father's collection used this as her float to traverse the water.

Her father, a perceptive and cautious man, noticed a change in his daughter. Her eyes and body imbued with passion. Fearing tarnish to the family's izzat, the potter quickly arranged for his daughter's marriage. Sohni

begged, pleaded, and wailed while clinging to her father's feet, but the rishtha was final. Sohni was married. However, her love for Mahwal endured.

The night became her dark sari of disguise, while the stars were transformed into divas lightening a path of love. Leaving the confines of her husband's family into the freedom of her lover's arms, became a regular and sustaining ritual. While Mahwal anxiously awaited Sohni's arrival, he caught and prepared fish for every meal they shared. "Sucha piara is no ghundha-khum, no dirty-dirty. This girl didn't know too much. Only good-good," Nani-ji interjected. "Eat together and know dil da piara, love of the heart. That's it."

One night, Sohni's sister-in-law became suspicious and followed her through the night. Discovering Sohni's secret and distraught by her brother's misfortune, the sister-in-law devised a plan. She replaced the perfect pot with a porous imitation. The following evening, as Sohni silently slipping out of her husband's bedroom, he sneezed. When exiting the haveli, she managed to trip. On her way to the river, a sleeping dog turned his ears towards her. Meanwhile, Mahwal for the very first time was unable to catch any fish for their meal. As Sohni attempted to repeat her faithful journey, the porous pot failed and the River Sutlej embraced the young lover as her own. Sohni drowned screaming the name of her sucha piara. Mahwal, unable to bear the thought of living without Sohni, joined her in the river, sealing their fate in death.

Nani-ji's warm touch on my neck brings me back to a body bound by the same desires and dreams, expectations and emotions, silences and secrets of Sohni.

Sohni Mahwal is a master narrative about the woman's story. It is a story for women to experience the pleasures of love that are realized in the heart, but pleasures that are not to be realized. Sohni is a body to enjoy, she offers escape, but she forbids us to stay. Her story is a double-edged sword:

on the one side woman, unknowing, individual, isolation, romance,
body, lies, secrecy, desire;

and on the other father, knowing, family, protection, obligation, soul,
honesty, respect, destiny.

Jerome Bruner states that one of the roles of a master narrative is that it must "relate to what is morally valued, appropriate, or morally uncertain" (50). As such, social norms expressed in the form of timeless stories are maintained as truths transcending and existing through time. Master narratives also exist, as Robert Fulford suggests, as a cycle for understanding and perpetuating tradition (31). Pieces of master narratives become imbedded and rewritten in local personal stories and histories. The back and forth with master narratives and personal histories exists where one informs the other, moving back in time to predict the future, to shape the present.

Fulford proposes that "story links us to ancestors we can never know" (x). If this association is accepted, then in between the lines of Sohni Mahwal's story is a story written about Matha and Nani-ji. The way in which Matha or Nani-ji spins her story to me, tells me something about the woman who is narrating. There is a biography just beneath the surface, behind those dreamy eyes.

My memory of Nani-ji's story is re-shaped and re-membered through my own experiences, secrets, and distances. At the same time is impossible to read with only my eyes. As Joanne Braxton says, "I read every text through my own experience, as well as the experiences of my mother and my grandmothers" (qtd. in Probyn 83). Our stories are experiences lived as geographically, linguistically, and historically different lives

and still the same emotional rivers are flowing within, between, and around us. This is emotional work. Exhaustive, exhilarating waves that wash up generational truths and lies upon the shores of women's lives.

When I initially thought about Nani-ji's telling of Sohni Mahwal and how it had trickled into my understanding of woman and tradition, my first instinct was to find the true story. Nani-ji was old and perhaps her version wasn't quite accurate, I told myself. But it still sounded right, the way I remembered. I uncovered K. S. Duggal's text, "Folk Romances of Punjab." It contained the story of Sohni Mahwal and other stories with which I was raised. Stories about women and love and consequence. Although Duggal's stories are rich with detail and description and contain the same themes, they are not Nani-ji's stories. Duggal's version of Sohni Mahwal does not account for the bad omens or the same River where Nani-ji washed the laundry. Duggal's version is not what I remember.

The true story, I realized, was the story stitched with patches from Matha's and Nani-ji's lives. The story that held meaning for me, the story that embraced me, and touched my soul was the truth. A story as old as Nani-ji, as angry as Matha, and as confused as I offers truths that shape my identity.

Nani-ji's memories of Sohni Mahwal, perhaps heard when she sat at her Nani-ji's feet *nup*-ping an old woman's legs, is a story that has meaning in her lived experiences. A story that she retells to shape my future. My memories of Sohni Mahwal are remembered alongside my lived experiences. Anthony Paul Kerby's account of remembering as a memory of the past is an

understanding [...] mediated and made possible through our history. We have no transcendental standpoint from which the past may be seen without the interference of "subjectivity" (the present). This means that there never was such a pristine or finished meaning to the past: a supposedly "true" meaning that we ought now to recapture or coincide with, that we might once and for all pin down. In matters of the past we cannot escape the historicity of our gaze and our interests. (31)

Kerby's definition encourages the listener of the story to interpret along lines of personal history and identity which, for example, are shaped by stories past and present, of Matha and Nani-ji. Self and identity are woven into and frayed from the fabric of master narratives.

I am reminded of a passage from Anita Rau Badami's book *Tamarind Mem* that captures my feelings about memory and truth:

She sat in the verandah of a house with bougainvillea and morning-glory and jasmine and spun stories out of warm yellow sunshine, honey-bee murmurs, the flash of a kingfisher's wing. She reached out into thin air and drew out imps; she clapped her hands and dancing girls and jugglers swirled and tumbled on the floor.

A little girl sat before her, open-mouthed, and demanded, "Is it true, is it real?" "Everything is true, and everything is false. It is storyteller and the listener who decide what-what is what," said Linda Ayah. (58)

What I remember from Nani-ji's story shapes my understanding of self and gives me a better understanding

of how some of the women in my family have come to understand themselves. What does Sohni say to me about the strength and determination of a woman and what she will do for love? What does she say to my mother about the inevitable consequences of resisting obligations? What does she say to Nani-ji about the risks of leaving the known, the land to which one is tied by generations? The story may hold different truths for Nani-ji which may not have been the interpretations her Nani-ji had intended. So truth does not lie in Duggal's story or in the story I remember and write from Nani-ji's telling, rather it lies in the meaning that each of us draws from the stories that we hear, read, retell, and use to shape our lives.

I wrote a letter to Sohni not long ago as I impatiently looked out a front window of the Spirit of British Columbia ferry. Crossing the Georgia Straight from Vancouver to Vancouver Island to meet a *friend* that held my heart and passion for something more. Wanting to get there faster and hoping to see something new.

February 18, 2000

Dear Sohni:

How foolish am I

To take this Georgia Straight

As my River Sutlej?

Are those your arms

Frantic

Flailing

Ruthless

As the wind

Slapping me in the face?

Are those your last breaths

Rising falling

Rising falling

Cradling this vessel?

And those screams

In the wailing of seagulls

Your cries for Mahwal?

A heart feels

Desire

Defiance

Dishonour.

In which thora do I fair?

Memory takes me back to the trip across the Georgia Straight. It is an individual memory I have of a specific moment. A moment that is remembered because of a shared story now becomes a moment to share. Memories and moments folding into each other and unto themselves. Sumara, Davis, and Luce-Kapler employ this folding complexity as a conceptual tool so that "[t]he part is not simply a fragment of the whole, it is a fractal out of which the whole unfolds and in which the whole is enfolded" (10-11). Narrative inquiry in the folding and unfolding gives rise to possibilities of interpretations, possible meanings, possibilities of truths.

A Letter from Mother

Again, my mother's letter has come.

I receive it eagerly, yet read

every line with a guilty welcome.

For each word becomes an awkward question mark,

her dreams about me refuse to change,

the horizons of her hope are never dark,

though I have grown different and strange.

A chaos it seems - empty tea-cups, carelessly thrown

cigarette ends; books lying in a wild fashion,

several indulgences I have sought and know,

a wild forest-fire of youthful passion.

Yet mother's letters will be the same,

untouched by despair, and with each one

my anguish will become a living flame.

N. C. Mahashabde (Lal 287)

Telling the Tale Today

Body of Evidence

In my 18th year, my behind is too big.

Once a well-toned Levi's advertisement ass is now a cottage cheese billboard spectacle.

I consider investing in a "WIDE LOAD" banner and flashers.

In my 22nd year, the sit-up tightened flatness of my stomach is accessorized.

A delicately embroidered

ivory and gold sari

rests low on the curves of my waist.

Through the sheer draping

mother's eyes widen

at the gentle glittering of a 24 karat naval piercing.

In my 12th year, I am all legs.

Skinny, metabolism overdrive, hairy, and clumsy giraffe legs.

Mrs. Gilbert says I'd be perfect for long jump,

if only I didn't trip all the time.

In my 9th year, skin a shade of "go back where you came from" brown.

In my 23rd year, beautiful boy kisses the hollows of my collarbone and claims them as his.

In my 19th year, shoulders become more stiff, tense, and angry

with every touch of his jealous and controlling massage.

My shoulders scream for big guy to leave.

In my 16th year, I cannot fill A bra. I wish for breasts.

In my 17th year, the doctor says my scarred and stretch marked knees are weak

from growing too quickly and that years of basketball have worn away the cartilage.

He wants me to stop playing.

I play.

In my 11th year, long longing fingers are entwined with Michael's callused fingers.

I think we will get married.

In my 21st year, my secret tells me the olive and almond tones of my skin

glow in his mind when we are apart.

In my 20th year, braids are abandoned and I get my first real haircut.

Father is furious.

In my 6th year, big, beautiful eyes are never bold.

I know people by their shoes.

In my 24th year, five year old Tyler runs his tiny hands over my winter time legs.

He tells me they feel like his daddy's face.

As researcher, I had asked myself why I was interested in this research, working with young South Asian Canadian women to develop a better understanding of identity. Why this topic? Why not athletics, body image, or realistic fiction (all areas which interest me)? I had become increasingly aware of understanding how gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and ability affected how I read and wrote. I had anticipated questions such as: Who speaks? For whom? How is participant included? How is researcher included? Through which form? I did not, however, expect this research to be about my mother and me.

Whenever I write about the secrets written on my body, the stories that emerge are written to my mother, include my mother, or about my mother. I write myself into being almost as if she were sitting across the kitchen table as I work. Silent, waiting, waiting.

The stories are not always so obvious. At a glance they may appear boring, bland, predictable, 'like the folds and cracks of the burgundy velour and vinyl interior.' But there are stories hidden. Stories emerging. Years of stories of being in between. Sohni stories. Knowing and not knowing. 'So poor girl decided to tell no one.'

I find my own stories in conversation with the young women who participated in this research; the women who courageously explored their negotiations of a South Asian Canadian identity. Twelve South Asian Canadian women participated in the research, either during group discussions or individually in conversation with me. We shared our lives and experiences and found places where our experiences overlapped and provoked memories. Memories laced with themes of marriage and mistake, honour and disgrace. I had thought that sharing my stories and including myself in conversation with participants would create a comfortable and open space for participants to also share their stories. I had not expected to learn about myself, recreate myself, and find myself in the midst of their stories.

And So the Story Goes

Writing about remembering the old Buick, Matha's prayers, Nani-ji's Sohni Mahwal story, or my body as evidence of years past, makes meaning of the lived experience. Richardson describes the experience of writing the research as a method of discovering self (88). I would also contend that in between the lines of writing and reading that which is not included reveals truths about the writer.

The lived stories of today are embroidered with personal pasts and shared pasts that look to the future. Past and future finding each other in a gentle rocking embrace that we call present. The moments we remember, the memories to which we attribute meaning and understanding, shape our identities and write themselves in

our personal texts. Finding ourselves through the writing we accept, the writing we resist, and the resistance that we write. Narrative inquiry is about trusting the writing itself, process and product, as we recreate and rewrite ourselves.

The master narratives of *sucha piara* amongst Punjabis are real romances. Similar stories of innocent lovers and forbidden loves are being rewritten on the bodies of young South Asian Canadian women in contemporary texts. The irony, though, is that when the stories of past and present are not interrogated, the veils safely in place, the themes tease audiences with heavy breath and intimate embraces. It is when the fabrics of the narrative are tugged and torn with inquiry, the tale suddenly becomes one of deceit, dishonour, and inevitable consequences. The truth of true love is that she adorns the clothes of a kerli.

Rivers of marriage and fallen women also run through Arundhati Roy's novel *God of Small Things*. Velutha, an untouchable, and Ammu, a woman of small aristocracy, fall in love with one another. Their love is a story about a "little boat that crossed the [Meenachal River] night after night, and who was in it. The story of a man and woman, standing together in the moonlight. Skin to skin" (242). Ammu would cross the river "[t]o love by night the man her children loved by day" (193). A tragic end unfolds because of the obligation Velutha's father feels as an untouchable to disclose that which should not happen to Ammu's mother. "His son and her daughter. They had made the unthinkable thinkable and the impossible really happen." (242).

The themes are again repeated in Anita Rau Badami's text *Tamarind Mem*. Saroja is the wife a railway officer. Although, she has not learned to hold her tongue like a good-good wife, she has obeyed by staying home to raise their daughters while her husband went away on special duty trips. No family allowed. "Rules are rules," her husband stated (44). Over the years she masters the art of knowing when to speak (177). She finds love in her husband's absence. The tragic end of her lover is suspicious. We later learn that the fate of her own marriage was one of consequence. Her sharp tongue and knowledge were a risk to the family. There are stories imbedded within stories and sewn together in *Tamarind Mem*.

Master narratives are found simmering in between the lines of lived experiences and contemporary texts. The stories are envelopes for knowledge and traditions. What-what a woman needs to know without knowing too much. Searching for meaning in the folds and crack of stories creates a space to imagine possibilities, to image what is to know and un-know, of recreating ourselves. Fold and unfolding places to discover self. Imagining possibilities to write ourselves into being.

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(1989): 232-253.

Italicized texts flushed to the right margin are excerpts from my journal entries, memories, and reflections

prior to data collection and during the research process, of which I am both participant and researcher.

²Older one.

³Younger one.

⁴Father.

⁵Mother.

⁶That which is written.

⁷In the Sikh religion, Wahaguru is the Great Spirit.

⁸Love.

⁹Rose.

¹⁰Family honour and respect.

¹¹Maternal grandmother.

¹²Massage by repeatedly pressing down with both hands.

¹³Wind.

¹⁴True and pure love; an act of devotion, not desire.

¹⁵Potters.

¹⁶Home, inclusive of verandah and courtyard, typical of wealthy families in Punjab. Usually two stories high and designed of more permanent materials.

¹⁷Commitment to marriage.

¹⁸Small oil lamps made of clay.

¹⁹Dirty deed.

²⁰Heartfelt love.

²¹Some Punjabi folk believe that sneezing, tripping, and the turning of a dog's ears are ill omens.

²²Clay vessel used for the transporting and storage of water.

²³Specifically, I refer to Elspeth Probyn's book *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies*.

²⁴Chameleon

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