

“DAUGHTERS OF GUJARAT IN THE DIASPORA”: IMMIGRANT WOMEN, IDENTITY AND AGENCY IN NATAL

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Abstract

Through the narrative genre the author examines issues of identity and agency amongst 15 Gujarati Hindu immigrant women who arrived in Natal (South Africa) between 1943 and 1953. The aims of this article are three-fold: Firstly, through the narratives the author seeks to highlight the many socio-economic challenges that immigrant Indian women faced in the diaspora. Secondly, issues of identity are examined in the context of “home” and “belonging”. While the author argues that Gujarat, their place of birth, is no longer perceived as their “homeland”, it plays an important role in constructing immigrant women’s ethnic identity. Thirdly, the article explores notions of agency and argues that given their personal, economic and social circumstances, Gujarati Hindu women were able to negotiate new roles for themselves within the household. Migration generated new challenges within the traditional household which resulted in some women exercising more agency than others. By examining notions of agency, this article seeks to dispel the myth of “passive”, “docile” Indian women, devoid of autonomy in their lives. It hopes to add to the current theoretical debates on immigrant women, agency and identity with reference to Gujarati speaking Hindu women in South Africa, a relatively unexplored area of research.

Keywords: Gujarati women; immigrants; identity; agency; Indian; diaspora; ethnicity; narratives.

Stelutewoorde: Gujarati-vroue; immigrante; identiteit; bemiddeling; Indiese; diaspora; etnisiteit; verhale.

1. INTRODUCTION

Migration and the settlement of Indians in the British Empire in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a key feature of British imperial history. The abolition of slavery prompted the British to seek alternative sources of cheap labour, hence the indentured system. This resulted in the large scale immigration of men and women to various parts of the British Empire: South Africa, Mauritius, Surinam, the Caribbean, Fiji and East Africa. In Natal, South Africa, women of Indian descent arrived in two streams: indentured and “passenger”. Indentured women came under the contractual system, and were subjected to strict working and living conditions with limited freedom of movement as part of harsh plantation

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life. They mainly came from Southern India as well as some parts of North India and were predominantly Tamil, Telegu and Hindi speaking Hindus. “Passenger” Indians were men and women who arrived as “free” Indians, under normal immigration laws, and were not subjected to contractual labour. They were mainly Gujarati speaking Hindus and Muslims (Hiralal 2009:81-83). Gujarati speaking Hindu immigrants arrived in South Africa in the late 1890s. Many arrived as single men; their main port of entry was Durban. Gujarati Hindu women began arriving at the turn of the century, mainly as sponsored immigrants. In Natal, as elsewhere, Gujarati Hindu immigrant women not only displayed resilience in the midst of adversity, but played a pivotal role in retaining and maintaining their regional and religious identity in the diaspora. It is this experience in the diaspora that the author wishes to explore via their narratives.

“Diaspora”, the movement – forced or voluntary – of people from their homeland and their dispersal across the globe, has gained increasing currency as a theoretical term in academia over the past two decades (Oonk 2007:9-11). As diaspora studies developed, critical feminist perspectives began to theorize the gendered dimensions of the migratory process and its relevance in understanding differentiated notions of women’s agency and identity (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 1998; Gray 2004; Hole 2005; Jain 2006; Rostami-Povey 2007; Jain 2010a, 2010b; Jahan 2011; Glaswer 2012; Silverman 2012; Hewmanne 2012; Hiralal 2013). Scholarly works on ethnic minorities and their experiences in the diaspora are not only testimony to the burgeoning interest in the subject, but also highlight the increasing number of women writers researching from “within”, sharing similar religious, ethnic, class and diasporic trajectories (Rayaprol 1997; Hardill and Raghuram 1998; Sinke 2002; Khan 2002; Puwar and Raghuram 2003; Hussan 2005; Radhakrishnan 2005; Costa-Pinto 2007; Hajratwala 2009; Jahan 2011; Glaswer 2012; Silverman 2012; Hiralal 2013). These scholarly works have made significant contributions to debates on both the diversity and complexities of women’s diasporic experiences, in the context of race, class, language, generation, religion, identity, sexuality and women’s agency, as well as exploring homogenized notions of “South Asian” and “Asian women”. These works not only privilege women’s experiences, but also aim to challenge social narratives of women as oppressed and subjugated, thus assigning female agency. For example, Avtar Brah (1996) argues that women are perceived as the embodiment of culture and tradition in both the homeland and the diaspora, and that the simplistic stereotype of docile, submissive Asian women under the dominance of traditional Hindu patriarchy needs to be challenged. Gayatri Gopinath (2005:5) observes that “all too often diasporas are narrativized through the bonds of relationality between men”.

More specific to this study are scholarly works that have drawn attention to the experience of Gujarati Hindus in the diaspora (Crewe and Kothari 1998; Meththa

2001; Hole 2005; Ramji 2006; Mattausch 2007; Hiralal 2009; Hiralal 2013). For example Hasmita Ramjis’ (2006) *Journeys of difference: the use of migratory narratives among British Hindu Gujaratis*; Elizabeth Hole’s doctoral dissertation “*Neither here, nor there - An Anthropological Study of Gujarati Hindu women in the diaspora*” (2005) and Emma Crewe and Uma Kothari’s *Gujarati migrants’ search for modernity in Britain* (1998) have explored diasporic experiences of Gujaratis in the context of colonialism, historical trauma and globalization, notions of “belonging”, the “homeland” and the construction of ethnic identities. While Crewe and Kothari’s work is significant in terms of understanding ways in which gender relations have been negotiated through diasporic experiences, it homogenizes the diasporic experiences of Gujaratis, thus masking the complexity and diversity that exist within the community in terms of religion, caste and class. In her thesis, Hole engages in a comparative study of Gujarati Hindus in Sweden and the United Kingdom. She examines their lives through the lens of the familial, communal, public and ritual roles they play as bearers of the Hindu tradition and their sense of “belonging” to their “homeland”. Her study is important in that the comparative material reflects how some Gujarati Hindu women in the diaspora deal with everyday predicaments. The author’s recent article, “Immigrant sisters organising for change – The Gujarati Mahila Mandal 1930-2010”, focuses on the formation of voluntary organizations by immigrant women. It argues that these organizations not only played an important role in sustaining ethnic cultural and religious identity, but also served as a platform for empowering women (Hiralal 2013).

In this article the author employs personal narratives (Babbie and Mouton 2001:283-284) to document and analyze the experiences of Gujarati Hindu immigrant women to Natal. Two factors generated scholarly interest in this subject. Firstly, being a descendent of a Gujarati Hindu immigrant family, the author have listened to many narratives, not only describing life in “our gaam (village)”, but also about family matriarchs, a certain aunt or grandmother or a widowed female who displayed strength in character and who wielded great influence over the men in their family, by being “domineering”. Utterly intrigued, as a researcher, the author sought to explore the power of family matriarchs, at a time when Indian society was largely patriarchal. Secondly, there is a lacuna of information in South African historiography regarding the migratory experiences of “passenger” or free Indian women to Natal. While there has been a growing body of literature around indentured Indian women (Sheik 2003; Badassy 2005) the histories of Gujarati Hindu and Muslim women have yet to be fully analyzed and documented (Klein 1987; Mayat 1981, 1990; Coovadia 2001; Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2003; Hiralal 2009). This is important, as the Indian community in South Africa arrived under two different types of migration. One was the indentured labour system and the other the “passenger” migration system. Their differentiated immigration status not only

elucidates the different historical contexts of their arrival but also reflects their diverse migratory experiences (Hiralal 2013). It is these migratory experiences that the author wishes to explore and document. Bhana's review of Indian history in Natal highlights the need for more work to be done on "popular" history to "find the voices of the people" by focusing on issues such as "family life, disputes, leisure time, diet, marriage, divorces, song, music, folktale...areas in which more research can capture the lives of ordinary people" (Bhana 2003).

Moreover, in South African historiography, studies of immigrant women have largely focused on the contemporary period, notably the post-apartheid era. The lives and experiences of women from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Somalia, Nigeria and Rwanda have been the subject of many studies (Gasa 2007; Kihatso 2010; Jinnah 2010). Traditional analysis has often focused on victimization, with women as passive participants in the migration process. Migrant women are often perceived as subjugated, the victims of traditional patriarchal structures, as prostitutes, liquor traders, subjugated labourers and victims of colonial oppression, devoid of agency. However, recent research studies have sought to assign agency to women in the migration process (Jain 2010; Kihatso 2010; Jahan 2011; Silverman 2012; Hiralal 2013). Whilst the current focus in existing literature on women and migration is not necessarily inappropriate, historical accounts of immigrant women's experiences are lacking, especially those of Indian descent. This article seeks to address this limitation.

Via the narrative genre in this article the author seeks to "find the voices" of Gujarati Hindu immigrant women through an analysis of gender, identity and agency, and their role in the diaspora. The interest of this study lies in exploring how respondents define "home" and "belonging", the degree of attachment with the "homeland" and how this changes through the migration process (Hall 2003; Lowe 2003). The article also examines notions of agency. The term "agency" has been contested and theorized in new and variegated feminist scholarship (Kihatso 2010; Jain 2010; Jahan 2011; Silverman 2012; Hiralal 2013). Agency is constructed here as "the capacity of women to make their own rational choices or decisions" (Jain 2006:2312). This study argues that Gujarati Hindu women were able to exercise agency, due to certain personal and economic factors that resulted in women negotiating new roles for themselves within the traditional household. It argues further that the variation in patriarchal attitudes allowed some women in the household to negotiate their roles more than others. Thus gendered relations are neither monolithic nor static, but should be understood in the context of both the cultural and economic elements within which they interact. By examining notions of agency, this article challenges the popular image of Indian women in the sub-continent and the diaspora as being marginalized and passive (Chetty 1991). This research will also add to the historiography of Indians in South Africa, in particular

the diasporic experiences of Gujarati Hindu women - a field that to date remains unexplored.

2. METHODOLOGY

This article utilizes life histories (Babbie and Mouton 2001:283-284) to investigate issues of agency and identity. It is particularly useful when investigating an understudied group or a topic in its infant stage. The field of life histories and narrative analysis has grown in various disciplines (Reissman 2000; Watson 2003; Ewing and Allen 2008). While life histories have been critiqued in terms of their approaches and methodology – including methods of data collection, the use of language and the influence of the gender of both informants and collectors - others have argued that they are a “significant genre for representing and analysing identity in its multiple guises in different contexts” and that they allow for the unravelling and understanding of “personal experience and meaning” (Atkinson 1997; Reissman 2000; Ewing and Allen 2003). The life history approach provides in-depth insight into the lived experiences of women, and elucidates the voices of “silenced women” (Ahmed 2003:43).

In order to obtain a comprehensive background and insight into the lives of these women a survey study was conducted on 30 individuals. Survey work provided the author with an opportunity to locate life histories in the historical context, a preliminary outline of their lives, and to develop interviewing skills, in terms of mannerisms and proper behaviour amongst the study groups. It also provided an opportunity to assess the individual households which the author was likely to encounter. Of the 30 women only 15 were identified to be part of the assessment. Their ages ranged between 72 and 81 years and they reside in Durban. At the time of the interviews five of the participants were married, while ten were widows. All the participants were born in Gujarat and came from villages located mainly in the southeastern part of Gujarat. Three participants originated from Kholvad, one from Sorbarparadi, one from Kosamba, three from Kathor, one from Santham, two from Thaveri, two from Gandevi and two from Jalalpor. The women came from varied castes groups: Brahmins (priests), Mochi (shoemakers), Darji (tailors) and the Kanbis and Kolis (agricultural groups). They also had varying socio-economic backgrounds. Some were very wealthy, whilst others came from middle income families. Three of the participants were friends and lived in close proximity to one another. All 15 of the participants arrived as sponsored spouses. At the time of their arrival in Durban, their spouses were either businessmen or worked as shop assistants and salesmen in the retail trade.

Interviews were conducted in Durban, in the respondents’ homes, between 2007 and 2009. A snowball technique was used to locate participants. The author

chose to speak to older women, who had resided in Natal for 50 years or more, and who had lived long enough to formulate ideas of “belonging” and “home” in their present location. Participants were located through social network groups and personal contacts. Life histories were collected through semi-structured interviews (Babbie and Mouton 2001:288-289) lasting two to three hours. The aims of the research were explained to the informants at the beginning of the interview. All the women were very cooperative and participated voluntarily in the study. Permission was obtained to record the life history interviews. None of the respondents felt uncomfortable about the interviews being tape recorded. Only the first names of the respondents were cited for reasons of anonymity. Key questions raised in the interviews centred on the women’s early life in Gujarat, education, their experience of migration to Natal, religion and married life. Interviews were conducted in both English and Gujarati. The author also played the role of a participant observer (Babbie and Mouton 2001:293-295) in order to gain deeper insight into the social milieu of the women’s lives. This included observing and participating in cultural and religious functions. Furthermore, the author participated in informal discussions with community members in many different social settings, such as weddings, religious meetings and cultural functions. The data collected for this study were audio-taped on a digital recorder, transcribed, translated and analyzed. A constructivist approach was used in data analysis. What follows is an analysis of the life histories constructed from the conversations with and observations of the research participants; this documents the issues of identity development and notions of agency amongst Gujarati Hindu immigrant women in Durban. The data reveal that while the 15 women do have commonalities, in terms of their places of origin, language and religion, the narratives reveal that “in every woman, there is a history waiting to be told” (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2003:1).

3. EARLY LIFE IN GUJARAT

The 15 participants in this study came from the region which is presently known as Gujarat. However, in the late nineteenth century Gujarat was politically fragmented. The northern and eastern parts of Gujarat consisted of several princely states. Various districts in central and southern Gujarat, namely Ahmedabad, Broach, Kaira, Kheda and Surat, were under direct British rule. On 1 May 1960, the state of Gujarat was established which included Saurashtra, Kutch, and the state of Bombay (Mukadam and Mawani 2007:8). Located on the northwest coast of India, Gujarat is renowned for its rich cultural and economic history. Gujaratis are known for their entrepreneurial spirit and the commercial networks that have arisen out of this. Given its strategic location, it has for centuries established trade links with communities in East Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. Alongside Indian

indentured immigration, many Gujaratis emigrated as “free” or “passenger” Indians in search of economic opportunities to North America, the United Kingdom, East and South Africa (Mukadam and Mawani 2007:6).

The narratives of the women reveal varying aspects of rural life and gendered relations in Gujarat in the mid-twentieth century. The villages in the narratives were often described as “gaam”, undeveloped, with poor roads and “no electricity”, where people “drew water from the well” and used the “ox and wooden plough” for farming. Village life was “hard work”, with men working the land, while women attended to domestic duties. Agriculture was the primary occupation of many village folk, with the main cash crops being groundnuts, cotton and tobacco. Kanthabhen, born in Santham and 81 years old at the time of the interview, described her daily life in her village:

“Half past five, six o’clock must up (get up)...make breakfast and then go to school...like that....11o’clock I come back... afternoon I must go back... school finished at 5 o’clock. Parents cooked....and then we eat...if we had lesson to do, we did our lesson...and when lesson finished, what other work (housework) needed to be done we did.” (Interview Kanthabhen, 29 March 2007).

The narratives also reveal that, to a very large extent, women’s status in traditional Indian society was culturally determined and socially constructed. This illuminates interesting aspects of female literacy, in particular the discrepancy between male and female education. Women were disadvantaged, not only by poor economic resources but also by the practice of seclusion or “purdah”, “arranged marriages”, and the emphasis on domestic labour in most villages education was free, but not compulsory. Village schools were government funded, and children began their academic career at the age of five and left school at the age of 17 (classes I to VII). The medium of instruction was the local language, Gujarati. Higher education was confined to colleges and universities located in the cities. Of the 15 respondents only one had completed level VII. For example, Padmabhen, 80 years old, born in Kosamba, engaged in part-time work prior to marriage, to sustain the family income. She was employed at the local government school to teach Gujarati. She said: “I got paid 50 rupees a month to teach....life was very hard then” (Interview Padmabhen, 5 November 2008). Others were forced to leave school once their marriage proposal or “nakki” was confirmed, or when they reached puberty. They were perceived as young girls and confined to the domestic realm. Young girls were discouraged from engaging in higher education for two reasons. Firstly, it conflicted with patriarchal notions of gendered roles, and secondly, it would result in the movement of young girls to the cities, living outside their natal home prior to marriage, which was unacceptable at that time. As one respondent stated:

“There was no need to educate ourselves...we were not allowed to work after marriage at that time...not allowed to go out...girls were protected...scared they would get spoilt” (Interview Manjulabhen, 18 August 2009).

Thus the purdah system or seclusion restricted women’s social and economic mobility and confined women largely to the domestic sphere. It also signified respectability, given the importance that was attached to women being chaste and pure. Women’s honour and the need to protect the family reputation were of utmost importance. Arranged marriages were another mode of protecting women’s honour. All the respondents claimed their marriages were arranged. Family members – parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents – played a vital role in choosing the prospective spouse. One respondent stated: “We had no choice to choose our husbands, it was chosen by the parents...they check the background of the families out...” (Interview Devibhen, 6 December 2008). Arranged marriages were devoid of courtship with most respondents stating they “only met once” and “I had no idea what kind of person I was marrying or getting engaged to”. Nuptials were performed within a month or two of the marriage proposal. Caste played a significant role in the choice of spouses. Nirmala, 75 years old and born in the village of Kathor, elaborated on its significance:

“Caste was very important ...we never use to mix with other Gujaratis...You got to marry in your caste...You see... they all got their own routine ...system...cooking styles, way of life, everything...it becomes very hard to adjust to that...They also used to believe if it is in your own caste...you adjust fast...” (Interview Nirmalabhen, 18 August 2009).

Caste is a hierarchical social system (Nadkarni 2003:4783-4785) based on hereditary occupations commonly practised in India. An individual’s social status is based on their hereditary occupation. The four main groupings were the Brahmin (priests) at the helm, followed by the Kshatriya (warrior caste), the Vaishya (commoners, trading and artisan caste) and, at the bottom, the Sudra (agricultural labourers). This system was mainly confined to Hindus. The Gujarati Hindu community in Natal comprised of several caste or “*jati*” groupings which assumed the following hierarchical structure: the Patels and Desais belonged to the Brahmin caste; followed by the Sonis (gold and silversmiths), the Mochi (shoemakers) and the Dhobi (washermen). The hereditary division of labour was not rigid. Many Indians of “passenger” origin engaged in occupations that were outside their caste description. For example, Gujarati Hindu males belonging to the Dhobi caste group did not always adhere to caste occupations. A few engaged in the laundry trade, while others took to hawking fruit and vegetables and serving as accountants in large Indian firms (Hiralal 2009:82-84).

4. “MY FIRST TRIP ABROAD”

Crew and Kothari have argued that “gendered cultural rules and practices very directly shape migration...for Gujarati women who, unlike men, nearly always move residence on marriage, migration from their parent’s home is inevitable” (Crew and Kothari 1998:15). The narratives in this study echo similar trajectories. All the women respondents stated that *matrimony* facilitated their primary migration outside their natal homes. As one respondent stated:

“It was not (my) first trip to South Africa...it was my first trip to Bombay....I did not see Bombay in my life...it is only 100 miles from Valsad to Bombay” (Interview Kanthabhen, 29 March 2009).

Another respondent described her emotional state prior to her embarkation to Natal:

“I was crying, crying, crying...all the time...right to Bombay....could not eat....I never went out (I never travelled outside Bombay before)...I did not like it....I went with big people (accompanied by elderly people)” (Interview Manjulabhen, 18 August 2009).

Thus for all the respondents, the journey to Natal represented not only their maiden voyage abroad, but also their maiden voyage outside their natal villages. All the women complained of being “sea-sick”. Shantibhen, 80 years old and born in Kholvad, was 19 years old at the time of her embarkation to Natal. She described her experience on board the *Kampala*:

“I felt sea-sick all the time....I could not eat ...told my husband ...to get a couple of slices of bread...I put some butter on it...first time I eat a proper meal after eight days when I landed in Mombasa” (Interview Shantibhen, 17 February 2009).

The narratives of the women about their formative years in Gujarat reflect the patriarchal nature of Indian society, with constraints placed on women’s social mobility, sexuality and economic independence. However, migration prompted a new scenario, highlighting women’s transition from domestic seclusion to more visible roles in the public sphere, and their capacity to initiate change resulting from personal and economic factors.

5. THE ARRIVAL OF “PASSENGER” INDIAN WOMEN

The arrival of Gujarati women as sponsored immigrants was a common migratory pattern amongst Indians of “passenger” status and represented a small section of the total Indian population. It affected primarily Gujarati speaking Hindus and Muslims. The initial phase of Gujarati migration to Natal from the 1880s onwards was predominantly male. On arrival most immigrants were met by family and friends who provided them with employment and accommodation. During their stay in Natal, many made periodic trips to India to reconnect with family and friends. The desire to attain financial security and the immigration restrictions imposed

on Indians, were some of the factors that hindered family immigration to Natal. Moreover, rather than marrying locally, Indians of “passenger” status would send for their wives left behind in India or return to India to marry within their religious and caste groups (Hiralal 2009:84-86). For example Makan Naran, a Gujarati Hindu, arrived in Natal in 1896 from Surat. He later established a laundry business in 1908, at 168 Gale Street in Durban. His wife, Tapi Makan Naran, only joined him in Natal in 1916 at the age of 31 (Hiralal and Rawjee 2011:21-22). In her book, *A treasure trove of memories*, Mayat comments on women who were left behind in Gujarat:

“Like so many in the villages, they had to be content with husbands commuting from South Africa every other year. They were left behind to take care of the family estates; to look after the aged ones who were reluctant to leave the security of home and environment and to see to the education of the young ones since the facilities in South Africa were rather limited. The entire lives of these women were centred on the comings and goings of their husbands and sons” (cited in Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2007:22).

The arrival of “passenger” Indian women was facilitated by the immigration laws after 1910. For example, the Indian Relief Act of 1914 allowed for the entry of only one wife and the minor children of a domiciled Indian (Joshi 1942; Mesthrie 1987). Family migration was facilitated by the Indian Relief Act 22 of 1914 and later the Cape Town Agreement of 1927 (Joshi 1942). The number of women and children increased steadily as the following statistics reflect: 1914:53; 1915:115; 1916:137; and 1917:108. By 31 December 1940, the total number of new immigrants i.e. wives and children, to Natal and the Transvaal totalled 2212 (Report of the Asiatic Inquiry Commission 1921; Union of South Africa, Report of the Indian Colonization Enquiry Committee 1933-1934; *Indian Views* 17 February 1941; Mesthrie 1987:18; Hiralal 2013:07). Thus Gujarati immigrant women arrived as sponsored immigrants to colonial Natal at the turn of the century, as part of a family migration movement. However, by the mid 1950s, the Nationalist Government had placed restrictions on the arrival of brides from India which made it difficult for Indians to marry abroad. This forced many Gujarati speaking Hindus and Muslims to seek spouses locally within their own linguistic, religious and caste groups. This ban was only relaxed in the early 1990s due to the political changes in South Africa.

The 15 women participants arrived in South Africa in the 1940s and early 1950s. South Africa, at the time, followed a policy of *apartheid* (separate development of the races). The four racial groups, Whites, Indians, Africans and Coloureds were assigned separate amenities (education, transport and recreational facilities) and residential areas. For example, the Group Areas Act of 1950, split racial groups into different residential areas in any given town or city (Hiralal 2007:103) Thus on arrival the women had to adjust to a new socio-economic political environment. Almost all the women respondents spoke about the hardships

of initial assimilation and acculturation. They had to learn to communicate in English and *isiZulu* and interact with local White, Coloured and African residents.

The women interviewed for this study married into varying socio-economic backgrounds. Of the 15 respondents, two married into wealthy, established families; their spouses ran successful wholesale businesses in central Durban and were actively engaged in community welfare work. The spouses of three women were engaged in retail trade on a small scale, whilst the remainder of the spouses worked in small-scale retail family-orientated businesses, as shop assistants or managers. On arrival most of the women lived in central Durban, which was the hub of Indian trade. They were housewives and engaged primarily in domestic chores, rearing the family and taking part in cultural and religious activities.

6. “HOME” AND “BELONGING”

Here the author attempts to explore how the respondents define “home” and their sense of “belonging”, by examining the degree of ancestral links with their place of origin and its links to the construction of their ethnic identity. Diaspora studies have questioned the essentialist notions of identities – religious, gendered and ethnic – and the enduring “myth of return” (Hardill and Raghuram 1998:255) to the “ancestral homeland” among immigrants (Klein 1987:68; Hole 2005).

In her analysis of Gujarati Hindu women in Sweden and the United Kingdom, Hole argues that “the homeland” conjures up nostalgic memories of the “better past” to which they long to return. She states that: “Their shared experiences and backgrounds also make a sharable desire of return...they are longing to return. “This urge to return to their homeland means that these women will “never truly settle” and therefore are “neither here nor there”” (Hole 2005:324). Ramji’s (2006) analysis examines the homeland as an important variable in creating a distinct ethnic identity and in understanding the Gujarati Hindus’ relative success in the diaspora. Fieldwork findings conflict with Hole’s analysis of sense of “belonging”, but concur with Ramji with regard to the importance of place of origin in defining ethnic identity. Zuleikha Mayat’s (1990), *A treasure trove of memories: Reflections on the experiences of the people of Potchefstroom*, explores conceptions of home in multiple settings, for example in India, and in Potchefstroom. This is illuminated by drawing on her family history; her grandparents arrived as “passenger” Indians and settled in Potchefstroom in the 1880s.

In this study all the respondents displayed *no strong attachments* to their place of birth. The respondents’ subjective historical memories towards their place of birth and their adopted country, are important in gaining insight into the ways in which they construct notions of “home” and “belonging”.

Vijubhen, 73 years old and born in Jalalpor, stated:

“No, I do not miss India....after two or three years staying here ...so used to this place.I gave birth to three children ...so I am interested in my children....I do not want to return to Gujarat....I am happy here....South Africa is my home....life is better here” (Interview Vijubhen, 15 August 2009).

Another respondent, Devibhen, 72 years old and born in Gandevi, expressed similar sentiments:

“Missed parents....No, I do not want to go back to India...They do not have a system like we have here....so used to our facilities....My mother and father are no longer there...nobody there...my family is here, my husband’s family is here...I like living in South Africa....My family is here, my house is here....my big son is here, my daughter-in-law is here. ...if your family is here...it becomes your home” (Interview Devibhen, 6 July 2009).

Another respondent, Indirabhen, 74 years old and born in Taveri, stated:

“I did yearn to visit India....to see my father, mother and all...but no money to go....Was mother of six children four boys and two daughters....How can I go?...Husband earning in the shop was less....but Durban is my home...it is my husband’s home....Whatever you do...wherever your husband is ...is your home” (Interview Indirabhen, 9 April 2009).

The narratives also reveal how *their place of origin* played an important role in constructing their ethnic identity and in defining group consciousness, solidarity, their work ethic and their relative success in the diaspora. One respondent stated:

“Wherever the Gujarati goes he takes his tradition with him...his skills with him...We are very hardworking people...you see there is a Gujarati saying ...*Na pochera vithia poch kavi ja na poche kavi thia poche Gujarati* (where the sun does not go, the poet goes... where the poet cannot go the Gujarati will go).... You go to any part of the globe you find the Gujarati got his tradition, his culture, his language.... It is in his heart...he cannot let it go” (Interview Padmabhen, 5 August 2009).

Thus the narratives reveal a new subjectivity that has been a direct result of their migration – changing notions of “home”. The women feel a sense of “belonging” to their adopted country, South Africa, as opposed to Gujarat, India. The degree of attachment or ties with Gujarat, their place of birth, has waned over time and space. Their place of birth is an important determinant in terms of their “roots and origins” (Radhakrishnan 2003:121) and understanding “where they have come from” (Radhakrishnan 2003:123) in constructing their ethnic identity. In fact, *apartheid* to some extent provided these women with an opportunity to reinforce their ethnic identity (Jain 2010:52). They “carried out balancing acts ‘between new and old countries, cultures, religions and languages’” (Jain 2010:52). However, strong family ties, a more settled life and modern amenities and the new political dispensation in 1994 were important factors in redefining their sense of “home”.

All the respondents view themselves as “South Africans” and do not wish to relocate or settle permanently in Gujarat. However, Gujarat acts “as a powerful base for understanding the characteristics and attributes they saw themselves as possessing” (Ramji 2006:707). They expressed their ethnic identity in terms of their language and religious backgrounds. Over time, Gujarat has become a geographical affiliation, “an imagined community” (cited in Hall 2003:241). Thus

the identities of these immigrant women have changed over time. These findings concur with Stuart Hall’s view that identities are, “fluid and constantly negotiated in the ‘interaction’ between individual and society” (Hall 2003:236).

7. AGENCY AND MIGRATION

Recent studies on gender, agency and migration have shown that immigrant women were not passive victims, lacking in autonomy, but, on the contrary, exercised agency in the diaspora (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 1998; Shadbolt 1998; Hole 2005; Rostami-Povey 2007; Costa-Pinto 2009; Jain 2009; Hiralal 2013). When women are represented within the “passivity” model in the migration process, “either their motivation is not explored, or it is often supposed to be identical to that of their father or husband” (Crewe and Kothari 1998:16). In her study, Rostami-Povey examines how Afghan women, “devised ways of coping with life under most extreme forms of coercion, uncertainty and other constraints”, devising strategies to challenge patriarchal domination. For example, many women used the *burqa* and hired a *mahram* (a kin) (Rostami-Povey 2007:297) to continue their secret social and political activities, thereby challenging “predefined spaces of confinement and silence” (Rostami-Povey 2007:296-298). Crewe and Kothari’s study has argued that migration was not necessarily “driven by men”, that the decision to marry was often mutual and that “mothers and other female relatives were often involved in finding marriage partners” (Crewe and Kothari 1998:16). Hole examines agency in the context of spiritual empowerment. She argues that while religious roles amongst Gujarati Hindu women are clearly gendered, this does not imply that “gendering always is to the women’s disadvantage”. Certain religious ceremonies, rituals and festivities, are part of the women’s sphere, making them “drivers”, while the position of men is “largely that of observers” (Hole 2005:298).

In this study, women’s agency is perceived in the context of its historical and cultural specificities. Hindu society was highly patriarchal, with women confined mainly to the domestic sphere. The patriarchal interpretation of Hindu texts and philosophy defined women’s identity in relation to male identity thus “closing off any possibility of women forging independent identities” (Nair 1998:520). This led to the concept of *stridharma*, whereby an ideal Hindu woman was one who was chaste, docile, loyal and humble. She was seen as the guardian of the home and a preserver of her culture. In the marital home, a dutiful wife was one who practiced *pativrata* and who worshipped her husband “regardless of his worth or character, as if he were a god” (Nair 1998:53). As one respondent stated: “I was taught if you die...you must die in your husband’s home but not in your parent’s home...After marriage the parents feel proud if you die in your husband’s house” (Interview Nirmalabhen, 18 August 2009).

In negotiating their traditional roles, the respondents were influenced by the differentiated socio-economic milieu in which they found themselves. This does not imply a lack of patriarchal control within the Gujarati Hindu family for the period under review. On the contrary, it was firmly entrenched, with many families being highly conservative and strict adherents of “arranged marriages”, the *purdah* and the caste system. Nonetheless, the narratives reveal women’s *capacity to initiate* changes within this gendered framework. They challenged traditional notions of female labour patterns and behavioural attitudes: they managed business enterprises, challenged the patriarchal authority of the elders, devised creative ways to sustain family incomes and played an active role in community upliftment. These activities transcended domestic confinement. Migration “causes shifts in the individual situation and the social setting that open up opportunities for new forms of autonomy” (Costa-Pinto 2009:9). Thus Gujarati Hindu women were not passive or docile social actors who accepted this defined gendered status.

For example Kalavathie, 79 years old and born in Kathor, arrived in Natal in 1947 on board the steam ship *Khandalla*. Her husband was a South African born Indian, who ran a small shoe store in central Durban. At the age of 24 she joined her husband in their business and described herself as the “backbone” of the family enterprise. She explained:

“With my husband I tried to improve the shop... was in partnership...not working out... took to alcohol, could not get him out of that.... Husband’s health was not so good....I took my big son out of school ...went (as) far as standard 8...My sons and I used to work in the shop....I did shoe repairing, bicycle repairs, and brought the business up” (Interview Kalavathie, 23 April 2009).

She added:

“I had to make major decisions, in the family...how to run a business...what we made ... what we have lost....So how we are going to come out of it...I sit with my two sons and discuss... We discussed together...my husband...was still living...He will not come in the picture...he was more interested in his friends and his drink...you know. ..I was like the man of the house” (Interview Kalavathie, 23 April 2009).

This example shows how personal experiences led to women taking control of their lives. Moreover, their economic contribution to the home was not only visible, but contributed immensely to its survival.

Another respondent, Manjulabhen, 73 years old, recalled her attempts to supplement the family income:

“I learnt how to sew...cook fancy dishes...how to bake...I used to make duvet covers and sell, did lots of sewing to bring us up. I also make and sell papad, pickles, ...because we were not rich at all....Our poverty was bad....we were very poor...had to work hard....I was also a midwife...how to deliver a baby....I used to do home remedies, gardening....I used to plant chillies, dhania, papadi” (Interview Manjulabhen, 18 August 2009).

Damyantny, 72 years old, recalled how she negotiated part-time work with a local Indian boutique to earn an income:

“I did my own shopping...I used to supply a lot of saris to Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. I had a deal with *Jayshrees*, *Shrimatis* and *Enen's*. I used to buy and sell (saris) and they used to give me commission. I used to select saris...post it to them (customers)...When the money comes...that's how I get commission ...I never asked my husband for money... for myself...My husband used to say I am very independent” (Interview Damyanthybhen, 1 July 2009).

Another respondent, Latabhen, explained how she, as a daughter-in-law, defied traditional notions of female behaviour and verbally challenged the head of the household, her father-in-law, during a family argument:

“I never used to hear swearing in my life and I used to hear it from here [her in-laws house].... They used to swear (at) each other all the time....One day my father-in-law was eating and my sister-in-law said something...and he said *marisasu* (my mother-in-law)...I was taken aback...I thought being a father to tell a daughter like that...My blood did boil...and I said Bapa (referring to her father-in-law)...how can you swear (at) your daughter like this ...is she your mother-in-law? From that day my father-in-law stopped swearing....I challenged him...I was a very daring person” (Interview Latabhen, 15 July 2009).

In order to understand the different forms of patriarchy within the household questions were framed around the sexual division of labour and women's sexuality. One respondent described her husband's resentment of the *purdah* (seclusion) system during the early days of their marriage:

“In those days we were very backward...we used to wear cotton saris, covered our heads. I covered my head. I could not dish out food and go in front of my father-in-law...had to cover my head. When you open the door you have to cover your head...as a sign of respect....you got to....Any man come in the house you can't come and sit and talk with open head...My husband used to never like it...he used to always come and pull it from the back....He did not like it...One day my father-in-law came to me and said...he (husband) does not like it....stop it then...so I stopped it” (Interview Indirabhen, 9 April 2009).

Another respondent stated:

“In those days we had a business....in partnership between the brothers....They increased another business and all that...ran short of manpower...and then my husband saw that at my mother's house, the women also go to shop and work ...then he ...call me to the shop...because I got knowledge of shop life ...I was the first one to go to the shop...I serve customers, write the tickets down for the shoes...stand in for my husband when he goes to bank” (Interview Kanthabhen, 29 March 2009).

She added:

“My husband supported me to go to college...but the head (father-in-law) of the family says no...you can't go against...He wanted me to go and study further or more...but my father-in-law did not allow it” (Interview Kanthabhen, 29 March 2009).

These narratives reveal that patriarchal relations varied across households. Some men supported their wives' entry into the labour market, their attempts at educational empowerment and their resentment of the *purdah* system. Such non-traditional attitudes held by Gujarati Hindu men did not impact on the masculine identity of these men. Thus not all Gujarati Hindu men were determined to keep women in constant subservience. I argue here that patriarchal relations cannot be perceived within an essentialist framework; they are not immutable entities

(Westwood 1988:6), but are constantly reconstructed and are specific to particular historical periods.

8. CONCLUSION

This article represents a pilot study of Gujarati Hindu women who came to South Africa in the mid-twentieth century. It is based on the life histories of 15 women. The small sample size means that this study lacks generalizability. However, despite this limitation, the study gave women an opportunity to share their experiences as immigrant women. Using the life histories method, the author sought to capture the voices of this group of women whose histories remain substantially unexplored. The intention was to view these women in the context of their assimilation experiences on two levels: as Gujarati women in an already established Gujarati community and secondly, as Indian born women who had forged a new life in South Africa. This research is in its formative stage. The voices of the women that contributed towards this study provide a glimpse into their negotiated roles within the household and their notions of “home” and “belonging”. Further research on these issues will help to illuminate the migratory experiences of Gujarati Hindu women in the context of livelihoods, state intervention and immigration controls, gender violence and collective organization.

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