Home and Away: Notions of In-betweenness in Tanika Gupta's *The Waiting Room*

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Abstract:

When faced with feisty Priya, heroine of Tanika Gupta's The Waiting Room, one cannot help but feel that ghosts on the stage have come a long way since Hamlet's gloomy father. Gupta's unlikely ghostly heroine dominates the play and all the characters in it, breaking a great many traditions as the plot develops. This article argues that Gupta's play presents a mode of cultural in-betweenness, offering alternatives to dichotomous pairs such as biography/fiction, East/West, life/death and tradition/modernity. In-betweenness as used and presented by Gupta serves as a means to criticise and reduce the ethnically limited reception and perception of British-Asian women's writers today.

> Well, I've been ranting and raving about this for years: (...) they put you in a box. You don't call Tom Stoppard a Czech writer or Harold Pinter a white Jewish writer, so why do we have to be called either women writers or Asian writers? For years I had been resisting writing plays that are only about Asian people, and writing plays about arranged marriages and all the rest of the clichés. I think that if you are a writer you should be allowed to write whatever you want. (Gupta in Sierz 266)

1 Tanika Gupta's *The Waiting Room* (2000), staged at the Royal National Theatre in London, winner of the prestigious John Whiting Award, traces the story of Priya Bannerjee, a 53 year-old female Indian immigrant to Britain, and a ghost to boot. Chronicling the period around Priya's death, the two-act play follows its heroine as she lingers in the world of the living, rights her wrongs and makes her peace before she finally transcends into the titular waiting room, a non-denominational version of heaven.

2 With a female Asian character at its centre, and a female British-Asian woman playwright behind the scenes, the labels of "woman writer" or "Asian writer" Gupta so resents seem hard to shake and to thus once more confirm the binary oppositions that inform colonial discourse (cf. Childs et al. 217). One is either a woman writer or a writer, an Asian writer or a British writer. But this article argues that *The Waiting Room* offers much more than a reading limited to the writer's and the protagonist's gender and ethnic identity. While there was "no place for inbetweens" (ibid) in colonial discourse, *The Waiting Room* is deliberately postcolonial in its approach. As Chris Weedon points out in *Identity and Culture,*

> Recent fiction by British women of South Asian descent suggests that Britain is not only multi-cultural but is reshaping notions of culture and identity, producing hybrid forms that draw on both so-called 'ethnic' and white British identities, cultural forms and practices. (114)

The Waiting Room continuously produces and reiterates hybrid forms out of dichotomies such as (auto)biography/fiction, India/England (as representations of East and West), life/afterlife and tradition/modernity. Elements and characters can be moved from one category to the next, and their identity is formed with and by this fluidity.

In-between: (Auto)biography and Fiction

3 Tanika Gupta's first play, *Voices on the Wind*, is a dramatic retelling of a part of her family history. It focuses on her grandfather's brother, Dinesh Gupta, who was a member of the Bengal Volunteers, a group striving for Indian independence. Hanged at the age of nineteen for shooting a high level government official, Dinesh Gupta was seen as a martyr by his Indian and as a terrorist by his English contemporaries (cf. Sierz 261). It was his story Tanika Gupta sought to explore decades later. *The Waiting Room* too draws on Gupta's family history, but moves from the genre of biography into that of autobiography.

4 The obvious similarity lies in the ethnic background of both the writer Gupta and the characters she created for the play. Both have a Bengali Indian background, both live in England. Like Priya's children, Tara and Akash, Tanika Gupta was born in England as the daughter of immigrants. “I'm quite interested in that middle-class, Indian generation of people who, like my parents, came over in the early sixties,” Gupta shares (Stephenson and Langridge 117), and makes Priya, Firoz and Pradip members of this particular age group and social class.

5 But the key parallel between the play and Gupta's life lies elsewhere. “I fictionalized my father, making him a woman," Gupta to Sierz (263). Like Priya, Gupta's father died from a sudden stroke at the age of 53, and his death and the ensuing funeral rites find representation in the play. “It was quite weird because suddenly all these Hindu relatives appeared, with ritualized weeping and wailing, and leaving out glasses of water for the soul on its journey,” Gupta reminiscences (ibid). Before the play's three male characters enter the stage, it is only inhabited by the props and an unmoving Priya in her casket, but the grieving acquaintances set the scene, as “we hear the wailing and crying of several Indian women – high pitched and feverish” (TWR 11). Once the men enter, Pradip, Priya’s widower, begins to put glasses of water on surfaces all over the room. The perception of these events as “weird” was passed on from playwright to character as Akash, Priya's son, is positively irate with the wailing acquaintances and shows scepticism when his father carries out the water ritual. The implementation of Indian funeral rites presents a stark contrast to the middle-class English setting that is established and is a first instance of cultural hybridity in practice.

6 Other than using her father's death as the blueprint for Priya’s character, the main element of fictionalisation lies in giving Priya's ethereal guardian the shape of Dilip Kumar, who is a famous Indian actor. It is swiftly made clear that all the immortal soul and the ‘real’ person have in common is their looks: the real Dilip Kumar is still very much alive and plays no part in Priya’s journey.

> **Priya:** So who in buggery are you? Dilip Kumar's not dead. I saw a film with him in it last week and come to think of it – he was fat and bloody old. (TWR 23)

The immortal soul has a personality that is completely separate from the real Kumar and only wears his skin, so to speak. At the end of the play, the immortal soul moves on to take the shape of another iconic figure for the next person he will guide into the afterlife. This time, he is set to become Elvis Presley. By using Presley as the next shape of the guardian and therefore as a means of comparison, Gupta cleverly explains Kumar's importance in Indian popular culture to those in the audience who may not be aware of his cultural relevance.

7 Even without any knowledge of Gupta's personal background, the play offers a direct connection to 'the real life' by turning a real person into a character of the play, mixing the real and the fictional and creating one of the many instances of in-betweenness.

In-between: India and England

8 As mentioned in the opening paragraphs, India and England are here not only understood as countries themselves, but as representations of East and West. Given the play's multi-ethnic background, notions of immigration, home, and identity, and thus, overarchingly, postcolonialism invariably form an important part of the play. As David Punter points out in *Postcolonial Imaginings*, “the issue of what is and what is not postcolonial is a complex and open one” (11). *The Waiting Room* features aspects of the postcolonial in the diasporic nature of the Priya's and Pradip's settlement in England (all acquaintances of theirs that are mentioned throughout the play seem to be of Indian heritage, there is no-one with an English name, which creates the impression that they move largely in an Indian environment in England) and, in a subtler manner, in Priya's teasing that Firoz, as a man of the East, is now going to conquer the West “with his prehistoric camera” (TWR 65). This reversal of conquest, however ironically meant by Priya, is something that is only possible once postcolonialism has been established as a critical mode of thinking.

9 The Bannerjee family's identity is tied to both Britain and India: while Priya and Pradip live and work in the UK, and seem to own no real estate in India, their mother country

still plays an important part in their lives. Priya especially had made plans to show Tara her home country.

> **Tara:** She was going to take me back to her birthplace in Benares and then we were planning a tour of South India and all the temples. (TWR 28)
>
> **Priya:** As we agreed, we'll start of in Delhi. Shop 'til we drop. And then head off to Benares... I'll show you the little house where I was born. […] Just us girls, eh? No men. Get away from this ghastly winter and enjoy the sun on our skin. (TWR 30)

Showing Tara, whom Priya feels especially close to, her birthplace and the country where she spent her formative years was important to her. While Priya had other plans that she could not bring to fruition (such as continuing her academic career), the journey back to her roots was only rendered impossible by her untimely death. In *Away – The Indian Writer as an Expatriate*, Amitava Kumar proposes that "Indian writers, through their writing, repeatedly make their way back to the Indian subcontinent" (xiv), and this certainly applies to Gupta with regards to *The Waiting Room*.

10 While the parent generation is tied to the geographical and metaphorical spaces of India and England, the child generation is furthermore connected to continental Europe. Priya's daughter Tara is a 21st century embodiment of in-betweenness and hybridity: a Briton of Indian descent, now living in Paris, she returns from a business in Cairo to attend her mother's funeral. She is a fictional representative of a British-Asian generation that has "swiftly acquired a high level of bi- and indeed multi-cultural competence, such that they […] are able to act and react appropriately in a wide range of differently ordered arenas" (Ballard 203). This wide geographical distribution creates a setting that is not only diasporic with regards to the parent generation, but also transnational with regards to the children's generation, thus effectively taking the growing trend of international mobility into account. It further shows that families with a history of emigration/immigration are not only tied to two places, namely those of origin and destination, but that the origin/destination dichotomy is refuted as an absolute. Instead, through the character of Tara, a globalised and normadic lifestyle finds representation on the stage.

11 This is in keeping with Kumar arguing that "the writers in the diaspora are a product of movement," and as such, "they embody travel" (xvii). This statement can be applied not only to the writers themselves, but also to the characters they create. Tara, about whom her father complains that she is always "off in some country with an unpronounceable name" (TWR 43) and – in a more mythical way – Priya are characters who are moving from one

place to another, showing that the journey of life (and afterlife) is never truly over.

12 It is interesting to see how the practicalities of travelling have changed for the generations: where Priya's first journey from India to the UK required spending weeks on a ship, Tara is able to make the journey from Cairo to England within two days. The advent of airplanes has made travelling faster and easier, thus supporting the international lifestyle of Tara and Firoz while at the same time giving Priya the possibility to visit her expat daughter with relative ease. Pradip on the other hand seems more rooted in England, and wary of another big journey. He has fully arrived at his destination and unlike his late wife, is more reluctant to accept his daughter's move abroad. Priya's appreciation of Tara's lifestyle contrasts sharply with Pradip inability to understand why Tara wants to leave the country he himself immigrated to decades earlier.

13 This ties in with another key question raised by Amitava Kumar, namely "how (...) the writer of Indian origin living abroad, which in the most cases means living in the West, negotiate[s] longing and belonging?" (xvi). On the level of the writer, longing and belonging is negotiated by establishing an Indian-British ethnicity for the characters in *The Waiting Room* and by having them negotiate longing and belonging for India. Pradip is initially not portrayed as seeking to return to India, but does carry out Indian and Hindi rituals after his wife's death. He has brought his Indian heritage with him to the UK, alleviating the need to physically revisit his mother country. Towards the end of the play, he resolves to return Priya's ashes to India and to scatter them in the Ganges, thereby creating the feeling that he wants his wife to come full circle geographically and culturally. Priya on the other hand longed to visit India with her daughter before her death, thus passing the connection to the country on to the next generation. Overall, the longing for the country of origin is present, both in Priya and (through her death) in Pradip, but the sense of belonging to England is stronger. Both Pradip and Priya have made the UK their home, and are unwilling to leave it permanently. Ironically, this is precisely what Priya has to do in death. The physical spaces of first India and later England have therefore been turned into temporal spaces, which must be travelled through and left behind to make room for the next destination.

14 The play also negotiates the spaces of India and England linguistically. According to Weedon, "language is central to racism, colonialism and notions of identity and hybridity" (106). Even though all characters in *The Waiting Room* are of Indian descent, be it in the first or in the second generation, the main language that they converse in is English, occasionally enriched with Bengali terms of endearment and address. Staging the play in English is of course also a question of practicality that is linked to the target audience. While Gupta is

bilingual and fluent in both Bengali and English, the same cannot be presupposed for her audience and it would be a daring move (both critically and financially) to stage a play in another language than English at the National Theatre. Still, the use of English as the predominant language in a play centred around an Asian-British family already develops a mode of cultural hybridity.

15 Returning once again to Gupta's concern about being critically limited as a writer because of her ethnic identity and her reluctance to write “plays that are only about Asian people” (Gupta in Sierz 264 ff.), the character composition in *The Waiting Room* must be re-examined. All characters are located in the in-between, drawing on both cultural circles simultaneously, and thus afford casting opportunities to actors with precisely this background. All roles are deliberately designed for Asian-British, rather than 'only' British actors. This is in keeping with Gabriele Griffin's assessment (outlined in *Theatres of Difference*) that Asian and Black women writers' works often tend

> to have significant numbers of roles for Black and Asian female characters, sometimes all-female casts, which gives women from those communities – frequently socially and culturally marginalized, especially in theatre – significant cultural space, in terms of performance opportunities. (11)

In-between: Life and Afterlife

16 Leaving the geographical spheres of England and India behind, Priya embarks on her life's very last grand journey, but moving on life to afterlife is a difficult process with many rules. As Dilip explains to Priya,

> it is *I* who have come to – shall we say instruct *you*. We have certain formalities we have to go through. Certain procedures that we must follow.
> *Dilip produces a piece of paper from his pocket and runs through it with his finger.* (TWR 21)

So while there are no papers that need to be signed, no passports that need to be shown, the entry into the afterlife has requirements so complex and specific that even an immortal soul has to write them down. The humour of the situation is lost on Priya, who, at this point, is still more concerned with ferociously denying her death.

18 She is caught between life and afterlife, between her old self and the new self she can be reborn as (TWR 22). Entering the afterlife figures as a second – and in this case – permanent immigration. Where, during her first immigration as a young girl, she was accompanied to England by Firoz, it is now Dilip who acts as her guide. From a feminist point of view, it seems questionable that Priya is portrayed as needing male assistance on

both of her two decisive journeys, but the reasons necessitating said assistance differ significantly. Firoz accompanied Priya on her way to England because Pradip believed she needed a chaperone, whereas Dilip has to provide actual guidance because the journey cannot possibly be made without his instructions. So assistance is really only needed in one case, namely the latter one. Once her body is burned, Priya can embark of a number of smaller journeys into the dreams and memories of her loved ones, thus slipping in and out of past and present at her will. She is no longer bound by temporal linearity, so when she slips into Firoz's dream, she *is* back on the boat taking her to England, no guides necessary, instead of simply remembering being there. Death therefore frees her from both social conventions and geographical and physical restrictions.

18 But Priya's new-found freedom is not without limits: in order to enter the titular waiting room, she has to revisit the darker moments of her life as well. Her eternal guide Dilip is needed to make sure that she does so and thus helps her attain spiritual and mental equilibrium. Dilip's importance for the play cannot be stressed enough, as he is not only needed to propel the plot forward, but also carries a heightened metaphorical importance. It has already been stated that the immortal soul in the shape of a real person is a representation of the reality/fiction dichotomy. But the character is not only a representation of in-betweenness, but rather its embodiment. Lacking a name or body of his own, he always resorts to borrowing that of another. He is constantly in flux, a shape determined by those he is sent to guide. Dilip, who could be anyone the deceased wishes him to be, mentions "Buddha, Mohammed, Jesus Christ, Lord Krishna" (TWR 24) and "Elvis Presley" (TWR 103) as other people whose shape he might take, and explains that he comes "dressed as" a person the deceased will look up to and admire. For Priya, this means the actor Dilip Kumar, but not in his contemporary, real life version, but rather as the man in younger years, attractive and at the height of his fame. The immortal soul in the guise of Kumar makes his first appearance clad "in a western suit in the style and cut of the 1940s", illuminated by "a halo of light" (TWR 20). He is thereby not only connected to past times, but also to religion. The halo is a common motif in both Hinduism and Christianity, and it soon becomes clear that in the great beyond, no specific religion comes to play. This is directly dealt with in the text, when Dilip takes on angel-esque characteristics:

> *Dilip glides down from above, sporting a huge pair of black wings on his back.*
> **Priya:** What's with the wings?
> **Dilip:** *(proud)* I saw them in a film once.
> **Priya:** A bit too symbolically Christian wouldn't you say?
> **Dilip:** Up there in the waiting room we simply exist. It's a great relief to free oneself

from the shackles of the gods and prophets. (TWR 60)

The afterlife is therefore at the same time a multi-religious place that utilises religious symbols as stylistic devices as well as a place without religion and belief at all, since it is more centred on therapeutically making peace with oneself rather than being forgiven by a deity. Immortal souls can take any shape or form, and religious concepts of hell are, according to Dilip, who is the play's voice of spiritual authority, “rubbish” (TWR 80). Instead, hell is a psychological space, but one that can be avoided if the deceased have learned from their mistakes (cf. ibid).

19 Dealing with grief is another issue that is used to present a mode of in-betweenness and hybridity. While it is usually understood as a sentiment attributed to the living, *The Waiting Room* also negotiates it on the level of the deceased and thus breaks not only with death/life, but with the aligned active/passive dichotomy as well. Priya, surprised by her demise, is unable to cope with it, thus mirroring the desperation and pain of those she leaves behind. As mentioned previously, Gupta drew on her own experiences to create the emotional landscape of *The Waiting Room*:

> So this [The Waiting Room] was based on my own father’s death, and it’s a typical thing where you have something quite traumatic happen to you and as a writer you find a way of dealing with it. (Gupta in Sierz 262)

The way of dealing with it on the level of the main character seems like a blueprint of Kübler-Ross' famous five stages of grief. Kübler-Ross, a Swiss-American psychiatrist, wrote *On Death and Dying* after starting a then revolutionary programme of psychological assistance and interviews of patients with terminal diseases in the 1970s, chronicling the stages they went through while they came to terms with their impeding death. The five stages are denial & isolation (Kübler-Ross 31), anger (40), bargaining (66), depression (69), and eventually acceptance (91). While pop psychology today also uses Kübler-Ross's model to describe the grieving process of the surviving dependants, its origin rests in the experiences and attitude of the dying. Priya, however, has to undergo the stages posthumously because her death was so sudden. The second Priya ‘wakes’ in the first scene, she is in denial, completely unwilling to conceive of herself as dead. Instead, she tries to reach out to her family as if she were still alive, trying to interact with them and ignoring the fact that they are ignorant of her presence. Upon being confronted with her own corpse, Priya enters the anger second stage, and it should be noted that this is a stage she constantly reverts back to until she transcends into the waiting room at the end of the play. She tries to bargain her way out of death, insisting that she is “trying to find a way to come back,” and that she needs “just a

little more time" (TWR 36), but her bargaining leads to nothing and in an irreversible act, her body is burned, sending Priya into a deep depression. Only when she revolves her difficulties with her son in a dream-like sequence in which the living and the dead reunite for a magical, brief sequence, is she able to fully accept her death and thus figuratively dies a second (and final) time. Priya, who (for the most part of the play) is forced to take on the role of a passive spectator, has finally undergone a process of active catharsis while watching the events of past and present unfold.

20 By having Priya undergo Kübler-Ross' stages, the effect is that she is not so much dead as (like the subjects of Kübler-Ross' study) in the actual process of dying. A voice is given to the ultimate voiceless: the deceased. Priya's story can be heard, her wrongs can be righted.

In-between: Tradition and Modernity

21 The play develops its position between tradition and modernity on two levels, namely in the arenas of gender and ritual. While Akash's and Firoz's scepticism of the funeral rituals mirrors Gupta's own experience, Pradip embraces the traditional rites and tries to act them out. He places drinks all across the room because "the soul gets thirsty" and they "must make sure she has water" (TWR 16). According to Parry's *Death and Digestion: The Symbolism of Food and Eating in North Indian Mortuary Rites*, the thirst is related to "the parching experience on the funeral pyre" (618). Akash is "unconvinced" (TWR 16), and Firoz mocks the custom by saying "if any of that water disappears, we should inform the local Hindu temple committee" (TWR 26). This shows that the adherence to rituals is not located on a generational level: Firoz and Pradip are the same age (both are 60), but their positions differ significantly.

22 Priya seems to be more aligned with Pradip's position. She positively recounts Akash's first rice ceremony (cf. TWR 90) when she tries to connect with her son. She is also shown as being genuinely afraid of hell. Religion, interpreted as a traditional element of a person's life style, is contrasted with an urbanite lifestyle. Pradip and Priya embody religious traditions, while Akash and Firoz reject them. This conflict comes to a climax when Pradip demands that Akash "put a live burning coal in her [Priya's] mouth" (TWR 18), and he refuses to do so. Neither father nor son is willing to commit this act of perceived violation, even though Pradip sees the necessity of it, as the coal will "set the burning of her body in motion" (ibid). Firoz calls the custom "barbaric", and in a surprising turn of events, only Tara is strong enough to enact it.

23 While Pradip is portrayed as wanting to make sure that everything is done right and behaving in the socially and religiously expected manner, his convictions and grief come to a collision when he cannot attend his wife's funeral because, as Firoz notes with compassion, “he's not in a good way” (TWR 35). In a reversal of roles between father and son, it is now Akash who wonders about outward-appearances and wants everyone to adhere to the funeral rules. This shift is continued when Akash prepares Priya's favourite dishes for the funeral dinner, another rite mentioned by Pradip, but carried out by his children. But Pradip's sudden and strict adherence to tradition and religion is questioned even by his own daughter, who incredulously points out that he is “not even religious” (TWR 41). Pradip does not elaborate on his beliefs, but simply states that “these things must be done properly” (ibid). It remains open whether he only acts out the rites because they are socially expected, because he wants to do right by his late wife or because he himself finds comfort in them.

24 Tara, who assumes some of her father’s responsibilities in the funeral rituals, and generally acts like a self-assured and assertive young woman with a promising career, nevertheless felt ill at ease revealing her sexuality to her mother, instead hiding her lesbian relationship from her. As Schlote points out in *Either for Tragedy, Comedy, History or Musical Unlimited. South Asian Women Playwrights in Britain*, “traditional gender roles and the concepts of of *izzat* (honour) and *sharam* (shame), in particular, continue to be determining factors in British Asian women's lives” (74). Tara's position is difficult: while her mother assumes that she “changes boy-friends like socks” (TWR 29) but does not seem to be overly concerned by this, her father nags her to get married:

> **Pradip**: I'm probably not long for his world either now. It would be so comforting to leave knowing that you at least were married... There's no one special?
> *Tara shakes her head.*
> *(hopeful)* But there is someone?
> **Tara**: No – not really. *(Tara looks away, very uncomfortable.)*
> **Pradip**: Your mother was very proud of you.
> **Tara**: I know.
> *Beat.*
> **Pradip**: But I want to see you settled. (TWR 43)

This reversal of traditional and stereotypical gender roles, wherein it is usually the mother who worries about the daughter's marriage, and the father who wants to ‘keep his little girl’ unmarried, shows just how much the Bannerjee family is caught in the web of tradition and modernity. Pradip evokes memories of *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mrs Bennet, who constantly frets about getting her daughters married. But while Mrs Bennet's motivation is the wish to ensure her daughters’ economic security, Pradip just wants Tara to fulfil the traditional roles

of her gender. He rejects her lifestyle, and when he says that he wants her settled, he refers to both a social settlement in terms of marriage and a local settlement that would see her returning to England. Despite her successful career as an environmental lawyer, something that Priya was intensely proud of, Pradip would rather see his daughter married and near him, even at the expense of her career.

25 His emotional blackmail creates tension in their relationship and causes Tara to keep her distance. It may not be too far from the truth when Pradip accusingly questions Tara's nomadic lifestyle and says: “Sometimes, I think you do it to avoid me” (ibid). Tara can be free of paternally imposed gender roles and expectations in Paris, and perhaps it is that freedom that makes her so reluctant to visit her family in the UK. Freedom in her choice of partner and sexuality is tied to the geographical distance from her parents. Weedon points out that

> generational differences are intensified for second generation South Asian women by the experience of growing up in British society where gender norms and expectations are not only different, but also in conflict with parental values. (110)

But is this really specific to daughters of first generation immigrants? The already mentioned similarity to *Pride and Prejudice* serves to show that this kind of conflict is a very universal one. It is related to the constant development of gender roles in general rather than to the development of diasporic gender roles in particular. Whether it is Lizzie Bennet who refuses to marry Mr Collins despite her mother's wishes or whether it is Tara who does not want to twist her identity to embody the heteronormative, traditional mode her father envisions for her, the basic gist is the same. Individual freedom for the second generation of women is portrayed as being imperative.

26 But Tara is not the only female character who defies traditional gender roles. Priya, who so longed to continue her B.A., looks back on her life and summarises

> I was a housewife. An educated one – but still a housewife. I cooked, I cleaned, I made up rules, no shoes to be worn in the house and no phone calls after midnight. Not exactly a great offering to humanity. (TWR 100)

While Priya was not able to live the way she wanted to, she encouraged a more modern lifestyle for her daughter by ensuring a good education and then rewarding Tara's success as a lawyer with visits to Paris, positive encouragement, and the prospective journey to India. Akash, on the other hand, who failed to fulfil his mother's expectations of a successful career, received his share of nagging and belittlement before their reconciliation towards the end of the play. Fundamentally unable to communicate with his mother, Akash was convinced that

Priya disapproved of his choice of girlfriend, when in fact, Priya felt just the opposite way.

> **Tara**: I never forget the way she [Tasleema] stood on the table at Shukla's wedding and sang that song!
> **Akash**: She was completely legless.
> **Tara**: Yeah but she went up at least ten points in Ma's book.
> **Akash**: Did she?
> **Tara**: Oh yeah. Ma said she had spirit. Which means she approved.
> **Akash**: *(incredulous)* She liked Tasleema because she got slaughtered and stood on a table and sang a song?
> **Tara**: She liked Tasleema because she could see she made you happy... said she was a bit fat, though. (TWR 83f.)

Priya, who was – despite her own classification as a housewife – anything but conventional, appreciates the same unconventional streak in her son's girlfriend. Unconventionality is what makes Tasleema a suitable partner for her son. Priya's own character and unfulfilled desires are passed on to the second generation of women in the play, ensuring she lives on. While Tara inherits her ambition, her joie de vivre can be found in her son's ex-girlfriend.

27 Furthermore, Priya seems to be the antithesis of the graceful Indian woman audiences have been introduced to in the popular Bollywood films. Her first words on the stage include "oy", "crater face", and "inch dick" (TWR 17) and instead of wearing the traditional clothing, a sari, she appears in a "track suit-type outfit" (TWR 16). Priya fights her way through the first act, not only verbally, but also physically. In scene three, she engages Dilip in a fist-fight when he tries to pull her away from her body prior to its cremation. Priya "smacks Dilip hard on the jaw" (TWR 37), violently rejecting any notions of female passivity. Already, expectations are broken, and gender roles subverted. But Priya's (masculine) aggression is not all that sets her apart from the female stereotype Gupta can be argued to be writing against. The life-long relationship Priya entertained to both Pradip and Firoz also falls into this role defying category. Priya met both Pradip and Firoz at the same time while they were all studying in India, but there was no instant attraction since the two men did not even notice Priya.

> **Priya**: D'you know – I had seen them both around the college. Always together they were like Laurel and Hardy. I must have walked past them with flowers in my hair at least ten times.
> **Dilip**: They never noticed you?
> **Priya**: Not even a backward glance.
> **Dilip**: Which one did you have a crush on?
> **Priya**: To be honest – both of them. (TWR 78)

There was no room for a woman between Pradip and Firoz until Priya decided to "bugger up both their lives" (ibid) by marrying Pradip while sleeping with his best friend. Unknowingly,

Firoz fathered Priya's first daughter Chand, a little girl that died prior to the play's beginning. Pradip was aware of this two-fold treason, but stayed with Priya regardless. Interestingly, he also never cut Firoz out of his life, and the friendship continued despite the betrayal. With Priya dead, the omniscient Dilip asserts that "in their frail years to come – they will look after each other" (TWR 81). Chronologically speaking, the first important relationship of the play has been mended. While the marriage of Priya and Pradip initially restored the heteronormative order that was threatened by the two men's deep bond, it is once again subverted by an ending that leaves the two together.

In-between: Two Sides of Every Coin

28 In *Theatres of Difference*, Gabriele Griffin analyses trends in contemporary British-Asian women's playwriting, and identifies the following themes:

> female agency, the status of women within their communities both historically and currently, mother-daughter relationships, female friendship, domestic violence, female experiences of and perspectives on relationships such as abandonment by males, misplaced romantic ideals within heterosexual relationships, and, last but not least, female experiences of migration. (12)

While some of these themes take centre stage in *The Waiting Room*, a focus on the female experiences, so often expected in the context of women's writing, is not given. Not only is the mother-daughter relationship explored, but also that of mother and son, which is much more conflicted and extensively dealt with. Priya, who wants to visit Tara in a dream, is convinced by Dilip to visit Akash instead. These visits are painful but necessary, as fixing the relationship to her son is the last act the deceased Priya has to accomplish before she can move on.

29 It is one of the play's strongest features that relationships are never just presented from one perspective (meaning the female one), but also always from the other (male) one as well. One is invited to feel for Akash as much as for his sister, for Pradip as much as for his dead wife. This way, as much as the characters are in-between, so is the audience. Gupta's work makes great efforts to portray both sides of every coin and conflict, achieving a great level of complexity that surpasses the limitations of the labels "British-Asian" and "women" writer. Griffin identifies these labels as "simultaneously and diversely claim[ed] and question[ed]" by the writers (11). But the questions remain: how does ethnic background figure in contemporary playwriting, how relevant is it to the stories that are being told? An answer may be found in the words of Asian-American playwright Velena Hasu Houston:

> What is an Asian American playwright? Easy answer: an Asian American playwright is a playwright is a playwright is a playwright. (…) What is an Asian American play? It is a play written by an American citizen of Asian ancestry. However, the subject matter of Asian American playwrights is not limited to Asian American topics." (in Schlote 67).

This statement about Asian-American playwrights applies to Asian-British playwrights as well: while a certain degree of ethnicity automatically features in the creation and reception of the plays by virtue of the writer having that background, it does by no means provide a limiting framework as far as the play's themes are concerned. It is drawing on matters of the supernatural and of death that establish a non-ethnically limited centre for the play. Ethnicity, still a contested point among the living, is no longer important once their world is left behind. Gupta's version of the afterlife is a place where religion (so often inextricably linked to ethnicity) no longer plays a role. All emphasis is on the individuals, their relationships, histories, and mistakes.

30 Gupta has explained her reluctance to have her plays classified as Asian plays because "that assumes that only Asians would want to see" them (Gupta in Sierz 262). Consequently, instead of neatly fitting under the label of Asian women's writing, the play explores a permanent state of cultural, physical, and temporal in-betweenness, dancing on the thin line between comedy and tragedy, and by dealing with the great and final equaliser of death, creates not only plenty of instances of hybridity, but also, finally, of universality.

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