



Bodies in Motion

By Mary Anne Mohanraj
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Introduction

Like the sweet heat of a curry pricking your tongue or the bursting radiance of bougainvillea, the short stories in Mary Anne Mohanraj's gorgeous debut collection, *Bodies in Motion*, will delight your senses and your sensibilities. Linked by the thread of kinship, these stories trace the lives of two generations of two families living on the cusp of disparate worlds: America and Sri Lanka. Through them we see just how the emigrant-immigrant ebb and flow shapes lives and the bonds of family.

Mohanraj writes effervescent prose, distilling intimate moments to reveal the tug-of-war between generations and gender as modernization comes into conflict with centuries of tradition. Sensual and honest, the stories chronicle love, ambition, and spiritual and sexual quests of mothers and daughters, fathers and sons. *Bodies in Motion* promises to be a collection you will come back to, again and again.

Questions for Discussion

STRUCTURAL

Bodies in Motion is a novel-in-stories, a form in which linked stories resonate with each other, offering overlapping characters and scenes. How does this form compare with short story collections you've read in the past? With novels? What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the form?

Mohanraj has said that she chose this structure because she didn't want to just write a novel about one marriage (arranged or not); she hoped that with twenty different stories, she would be able to offer a more complex depiction of the range of Sri Lankan-American experience. She was concerned that as one of the first Sri Lankan-Americans writing in English, her depiction of Sri Lankan culture might be taken as overly authentic and authoritative. When you read work written about a different culture, do the characters in the story shape your understanding of that culture? Are there negative or limiting elements to an understanding derived from fiction?

CULTURAL

Does your knowledge of the author's cultural background affect your willingness to believe in the authenticity of the characters they describe?

How do the repeating motifs over generations == concern with marriage, sexuality, parental approval, individual desire == affect your understanding of these topics? In this book, you see a grandmother, a mother, a daughter all struggling with similar difficult decisions. Do their different cultural circumstances, their differences in time and space, noticeably effect their choices? Why or why not?

SECRETS

Bodies in Motion weaves secrets through the stories; there are difficulties that the characters do not discuss with each other == sometimes difficulties they can barely admit to themselves. Lakshmi waits almost two decades to reveal the truth about Raksha's death; Himali and Ashok lie to the government and the people meet in America about their marriage; Aravindan cheats on his wife, and fails to hide it from his favorite daughter. How do these secrets shape the people who hold them? Is it more important to keep secrets which might hurt the people you love, or to be honest with them? Are there limits to how much honesty you would want yourself? In what situations would you rather not know the truth?

What are the consequences of secrets on a family over generations? How would it affect you if you discovered that a cherished relative of an earlier generation had had an affair, or committed a violent crime?

At times in this book, parents make demands of their children that they cannot live up to themselves: Sundar pushes Kuyila into an arranged marriage even though his own has not been successful, and Lakshmi pressures Chaya to marry, though her own marriage was disastrous. Does this seem hypocritical to you? Understandable? Should parents have higher hopes for their children's lives than for their own? What kinds of pressure does that put on children? Especially if the children never learn how unhappy their parents actually were?

GENDER

One of the common tropes in modern South Asian-American fiction, especially that written by women, is that of the brown woman who leaves her abusive brown husband for a white man. Why do you think that trope is so common at the moment? Does it reveal anything about the authors? How are the men in this book depicted? Can you make any generalizations about their role?

Most of the protagonists in these stories are women, often facing difficult sexual choices. Mangai, Leilani, and Roshan all experience queer sexuality; Kili, Chaya, Roshan and Minal become involved with white people; Shefali encounters sexual violence; Minal faces an unplanned pregnancy. In today's America, do you feel that men face the same difficulties as women do in the sexual arena? Do they face the same consequences?

In "Mint in Your Throat", Shefali is sexually assaulted == but Joseph faces a different kind of sexual coercion. Do you think Shefali realizes what she is doing to Joseph? Does Joseph realize? Is it possible for men to be raped by women, or coerced? Is it possible for men to admit it, if they are?

SEXUAL

Do you think there is a movement towards a more open sexuality over the course of generations in these two families? If so, what do you think the consequences of that will be? What is gained by a more flexible approach to sexual mores? What is lost? Do you think the third generation, coming of age at the end of the twentieth century, will be happier than their parents or grandparents?

One could claim that many of the characters in this book are obsessed with sex; do you think their level of involvement with sexuality is typical of most people? Should sexuality have such a prominent place in their lives? Would they be happier if they just stopped paying so much attention to it and focused on their work or families?

WAR AND VIOLENCE

Another strong thread in this book is that of violence; the shadow of the Sri Lankan civil war hangs over both families, dividing some and bringing others together. Has war or civil unrest affected your own life, or that of your family or friends? Post-9-11 there was a sudden increase in weddings in America; in what ways might decisions about love or sex be affected by societal violence?

GENERATIONAL

Many of second and third-generation characters in these stories seem relatively unaffected by or unaware of the 'troubles' back in Sri Lanka. Born and raised here, Chaya, Shefali and Raji's prime concerns have far more to do with their own lives than with those of relatives 'back home'. Is this a natural progression, or evidence of self-centeredness on their parts? How closely should immigrant children stay involved with their parents' or grandparents' homeland? Is it important to continue to (or learn to) speak their language? To understand their history? Or is it better to assimilate as completely as you can, to become comfortably American?

About the Author

Mary Anne Mohanraj was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka but has spent most of her life in the United States. After graduating from the University of Chicago, she earned her MFA at Mills College in Oakland, CA. She is a visiting professor at Vermont College and a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Utah, specializing in post-colonial literature and creative writing. She lives in Chicago, Illinois.